

## WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW (I): INTRODUCTION & WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS

What does this series aim to achieve?

It aims to give those who label themselves “Christians” a basic understanding of what they should know and what Christianity is, based solely on the fundamental concepts that the Bible teaches us. This series aims to educate, empower and vitalize the willing disciples of Christ so that they can enhance their own understanding *and then* minister to others by spreading the good news.

The theme of this series is “faith seeking understanding.”

### I. The Crisis

In the 2008 [American Religious Identification Survey](#) (ARIS), 76% of Americans self-identified as Christian and 34% identified as “Born Again or Evangelical.” 15% of those polled identified as atheist, agnostic or having no religious preference. Significantly, ARIS determined that the challenge to American Christianity “does not come from other religions but rather a rejection of all forms of organized religion.”

In the same year, the [Pew Research Center](#) conducted a poll that found that, among American Christians, 52% believed that “at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.” Furthermore, of those in this majority, 80% could “name at least one non-Christian faith that can do so.” Only 29% of those polled believed that “my religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life.” Six percent of the respondents did not know who would achieve eternal life or refused to answer.

Last year, the Barna Group and the American Bible Society completed a report called “[The State of the Bible](#).” According to this report, four out of five adults (81%) said that morality was on the decline and nearly one-third (29%) cited *the lack of Bible reading* as the primary cause. The study also revealed that, among American adults:

(i) 81% considered themselves “highly, moderately, or somewhat” knowledgeable about the Bible, yet 43% of this group was unable to name the Bible’s first five books. (This number rose to 69% among Protestants.)

(ii) 88% said their household owned a Bible, but nearly half of adults (46%) read the Bible *no more frequently* than two to three times a year.

(iii) A significant number of people believed that the Bible *was silent* on the following issues: pornography (34%), gambling (23%), same-sex relationships (21%) and the repression of women (24%).

(iv) Half (50%) “agreed strongly or agreed somewhat” that the Bible, the Quran and the Book of Mormon were all different expressions of the *same* spiritual truths.

All of this information points to one disturbing conclusion: Biblical illiteracy is rampant and people don’t know what they think they know, nor do they understand what they believe. This is a crisis of insurmountable proportions, considering what’s at stake.

To this I add my own perception that one of the greatest threats to modern Christianity and those *within* the church is religious pluralism (resulting from Biblical illiteracy) and the greatest threat to those *without* is syncretism. Both of these subtle, seemingly innocuous and voluntary forces have managed to do more damage than any army, evil despot or oppressive power in the contemporary era. The modern Christian spends a lot of time wavering between two opinions and has consequently become numb to God and sin, apathetic and, thus, incapable of taking a firm stand for Christ.

## **II. What Does This All Mean in Practical Terms?**

People may say that they believe in God, but that does not necessarily mean that they have an understanding of who God is and what God says. For this reason, this series has three goals in mind:

(1) To bring clarity to those who do not know Christ using an unbiased, free and widely available means. In this way, the series will share with them the basic facts about Christ, the Bible and Christian doctrine. No matter who they are, where they are or what they already believe, they will have unrestricted access to this knowledge at any time.

(2) To combat Biblical illiteracy among those who are somewhat familiar with the Bible, but have not taken the time to sit down with the Word, study it, reflect upon it and become dedicated students of it. The term “Christian” can mean many different things in modern society and this series will challenge believers to scrutinize what they already know and what they think they already know about the Bible. Faith should be grounded in timeless Biblical truth and all believers must consequently have a clear and comprehensive understanding of *what* they believe and *why* they believe it. This is an issue that transcends the emotions and requires earnest, deep and honest introspection.

(3) To nurture *fides quaerens intellectum* or “faith seeking understanding.” Some people think they can figure God out on their own without consulting *the* authoritative source. Thus, for them, the ultimate truth is not based on external authority but on internal intuition. Emotion is a part of the human experience, but we must engage reason and intellect *in pursuit* of God in order to deepen and expand our understanding of the One Whom we serve.

Belief always comes first and ultimate wisdom is always revealed, never acquired. While the Christian walk is much more than a mental exercise, it certainly is a mental challenge.

The fact remains that details need to be learned, principles mastered, truths discerned and stories told correctly. This is why, in the *Proslogion*, Anselm said, “I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.”

I hope to reveal that God is a God who transcends race, gender, nation, creed or any other category: A God of one tribe, one race, one culture, one ethnicity, one people or one geographic area is not in fact God, but a construct developed to serve ideological ends.

Now, are there problems in the modern church and with Christians? Of course. The church is an institution that can help people *and* that can harm them. The world often uses the followers of Christ as a barometer for religion’s validity, but they should look at Christians through a different lens. It is *because* we are all imperfect and in need of help that we need the grace and strength of Christ in order to work through our human failings. When I walk into an emergency room, I expect to see the sick and when I walk into a gym, I expect to see the out-of-shape. This doesn’t reflect the deficiencies of the institutions, but the fallibility of human nature.

One must understand that God works through messy and complicated human experience in order to produce a flesh-and-bones intimacy with our reality. This intimacy doesn’t shy away from tough problems, but works through them. It is for this reason that the Bible depicts love, mercy, grace, family, triumph, peace and liberation, as well as murder, genocide, rape, lust, incest, oppression, social and economic injustice and war. Hence, the Bible is powerful and enriching *because* it’s about real life and tells us about real people with real problems and issues. Love is very messy and the Bible is a love story about a caring Father who incessantly chases after His fallen creation in order to bring them back to Him.

Reading the Bible daily and engaging in an intimate relationship with God is one of the only ways to develop *your* own faith and understanding. One of the greatest dangers in the modern world entails allowing someone else to give you his or her theology and passively accepting it as true. This is not to trivialize tradition or to dismiss orthodoxy. In fact, any bold leap forward in the Christian walk is not a revolutionary shift away from the Bible, but an earnest look *back at* the Scriptures—in order to move forward, we must first go back. The issue, then, isn’t *whether* we ought to honor tradition. Rather, we should determine *which* tradition will give us life and is therefore worth our total being and complete submission. That tradition is the Bible, the Word of God.

This is a critical step for each person to take because every person who seeks to know the Word must become a disciple of the Word. Education drives knowledge and this praxis requires discipline, focus, determination and strength. Fragile, unintelligible and unexamined beliefs will lead to weak disciples, weak dedication, weak religion and a weak church.

Doctrine means a belief or a set of beliefs that an institution teaches, whereas theology entails the study of beliefs and the study of the nature of God. The root source of all Christian doctrine is the Bible. However, some groups may not accept the Bible as a whole, may emphasize one part or may de-emphasize another. Different denominations will therefore tend to have different traditions and there is nothing inherently wrong with any of that. However, Jesus did not intend for the church to inflict spiritual tyranny on believers while burdening them with the yoke of the institution, nor did He intend for a superstructure of man-made elements to keep people away from Him. Accordingly, the approach we will be taking is that the Word of God is divinely inspired and written by humans through the power and revelation of the Holy Spirit. We do not intend for the doctrine that we teach to serve any ideological end. Rather, we want it to be as true to the *Biblical* tradition as possible and to take each subject and accept it as truth, cognizant that this truth comes in the context of the Bible as a whole. The whole must form the basis for the interpretation of the part and not vice versa. This online series will certainly touch upon theology, but future, more advanced series will speak of it in greater detail.

### **III. What Is Christianity?**

The simplest answer boils down to two words: Jesus Christ.

What Christians should know is that Christianity *is* Christ, Who *is* the centerpiece of the entire Christian faith. Salvation is possible because of Christ. He is the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity and He represents God's atonement of all of our sins so that we (humankind) can reconcile with God and restore a proper relationship with Him.

Christians should know that God created us out of His abundance and *not* out of a lack or need. He defined His ownership and dominion over everything by giving it all away.

What Christians should know is that Christianity is the final and ultimate narrative of *how* and *why* we all began. Our beginning was not some impersonal, random event that resulted from nothing, but the direct result of God's divine and conscious decision to bring light, life and order into our universe.

Christians should know that Christianity gives the most comprehensive explanation of who we truly are. It is the source of our legitimate identities as sons and daughters of God, formed in His image. It also satisfies, through Christ, the eternal yearning that we have to worship and to fulfill the deepest, most sincere, most fundamental desires of our being.

Christians should know that Christianity reveals to us that the world we live in is not the final testament of our existence. Because of sin, it is a temporary and highly imperfect representation of what was previously flawless. Christianity points directly toward Christ and His example for us of how to live in accordance with God's commands.

What Christians should know is that one of the pillars of the Christian faith is the Bible. The Bible is more than a book and is God’s divine word, revealed to humans through verbal plenary inspiration. The Bible is what God wanted us to know, learn and understand about Him, not as a means to deter or hinder us, but so that we would live our lives abundantly. We are the creation and He is The Creator; he did not give us these rules and regulations in malice. Rather, he sought to protect us, just as a loving father instructs his son and guides him away from harm.

What Christians should know is that God is just and merciful and that there is a constant tension between these two qualities. Because God is perfectly just, He can’t simply say “Never mind” to sin. That would contradict His nature and diminish His character. Despite our actions, mercy triumphs over judgment. God’s love compelled Him to incarnate as a Man (Jesus) for our sake—that is, in order to reconcile with humanity by re-creating creation and turning the corruptible (humans) back into the incorruptible, God required nothing less than His own substance. By willingly sacrificing Himself, He saved all of us.

Christians should know that John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Christians should know that Luke 19:10 says that Christ came into this world “to seek and to save that which was lost.” This has two implications. First, *seeking* is an active, engrossing practice that looks towards others instead of working against them. Secondly, those involved in *saving* must, at the very least, have a basic understanding of the subject matter on which they’re ministering.

Christians should know that Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” Without the light of Christ and without the Bible, we are doomed to dwell in darkness, confused and alone with no one to guide us. It is *only and irrefutably* through Jesus Christ that anyone can walk in the light, back toward God.

Christians should know that, in John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

What Christians should know is that the concept of the Trinitarian God of the Bible is a unique truth claim. This distinguishes Christianity from other ideologies, religions and forms of spirituality.

What Christians should know is that on multiple occasions, Jesus Christ said, “I am God.”<sup>1</sup> Period. There is no grey area, no question and no doubt. No other (legitimate and sane) leader of a major religion has ever claimed to be God. This bold truth was so powerful that Jesus willingly died for it. To avoid death, all He would have had to do was recant his statement, but He never did. He died for the truth.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 14:61-64, John 10:30-33, 36-39.

Christians should know that God loves humanity very much. Thankfully for us, however much we curse Him and reject Him, God plays by His rules and not human ones. So no matter who you are or what you've done, your Heavenly Father will never turn His back on you. You are His child, formed in His image and destined to conquer darkness with the light and to boldly proclaim your new Christ-centered identity. This in no way diminishes the destructive power of sin, nor does it eliminate disobedience. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, grace is not "cheap." It is costly—involving Christ, repentance, the cross, discipleship and suffering. This is why, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer says, "With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."

#### **IV. The Importance of Understanding What You Know, What You Believe and Why You Believe It.**

We live in an increasingly pluralistic world where "truth" no longer has any objective value and depends on what "feels" right or seems to move us the best. There is certainty in Christ; that is a real-life, tangible incarnation of truth. It is so real and genuine that you can touch, feel and get splintered by the cross on which He was crucified. This isn't a truth for me alone; it is meant for you too. Indeed, it is *the* Truth that does not change under pressure. It invites you to take a look for yourself and embrace the life-giving power that is the Bible.

For as long as I can remember, I've known *about* Christ and *about* the Church. However, it was only when I immersed myself in the Word that I truly began to hear. As a consequence, from hearing came faith and from faith came understanding.

I love and follow Christ because He met me in a time of strife and used the crisis to show me that all the knowledge I had amassed, all the wisdom I thought I had and all the "security" I had acquired were formless and void. They were unable to yield any dividends beyond the present, provide comfort beyond the temporal and satisfy my internal yearning for something that transcended my reality. Make no mistake, I didn't experience a miraculous "shining light" followed by a perfect existence. Rather, my Christian walk is a slow, persistent, day-by-day process and I experience incremental changes in my pursuit to be more like Him. It is a continual process of regeneration that transforms me from the person I am into the person I know I can be, empowered solely by the Holy Spirit, through Christ, to the Father.

I hope you will join me on this journey. May God bless you in your Bible study and in your walk with Him.

If you already have a church home, I wish you many blessings. If you do not yet have a church home and live in the area of Queens, NY, feel free to join us at the Deeper Life Christian Fellowship ([www.dlcfc.org](http://www.dlcfc.org)) in Richmond Hill. Join us for worship and fellowship in person or via our weekly streaming sermons.

If you have any questions, feel free to write us at [dlcfc@gmail.com](mailto:dlcfc@gmail.com). Be sure to put WCSK (yes, all caps) in the subject line. You certainly are not alone. Why not have a “coach” for your Bible study?

We look forward to hearing from you!

*Dr. C. H. E. Sadaphal*

#### **Additional Resources to Help You Get Started:**

Free Bible Online: [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com) (Any version you desire).

The Bible on your Tablet or Smartphone: The Bible App from LiveChurch.tv, Logos Bible, or the Olive Tree Bible App.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

Mark Driscoll, *On the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Mark Driscoll, *On the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).