

# Basic beliefs, and why to believe them

## Introduction

It was G.K. Chesterton who wrote, 'The object of opening the mind, is the same as opening the mouth, it is to shut it again on something solid.' A few years ago Tom Wright wrote a book called simply *Christian*. In his introduction he wrote the following, 'The purpose of this book is to describe what Christianity is all about, both to commend it to those outside of the faith, and to explain it to those inside the faith.' He conceded that this is massive task. I too am very much aware that this will be beyond me and the scope of these studies. What I would like to try and do in these studies is to exhibit, celebrate and display some of what is available in the treasure chest of the Christian faith. This I hope will help believers be encouraged to appreciate their faith, and offer an opportunity to commend it to others outside the faith. I hope that folk will find in these studies some of the moral, imaginative, thoughtful, relational riches of the Christian faith. So that believers can be reassured of what they believe, but also to enable those who are curious of the Christian faith to search even further, and offer a compelling vision that lies at the heart of the Christian gospel

It is hoped that these studies will help you think through what you believe about some of the basic and significant aspects of the Christian faith, and hopefully will be able to help you give a clearer witness to your beliefs

## Study 1

### A reasonable Christianity

#### Introduction

A young boy was asked the question 'What is faith?' His response was 'Believing something you know isn't true'. For many non believers that may well be a how they would define faith. For a believer in Jesus Christ to hold such a view would be tragic. Yet there may be many believers who would hold such a view as the boy. They may not say it in the same words, but the idea of self-deception and unreliably may well be there. As we look at St. Paul's account to the Athenians Acts chapter 17, we can begin to see that intelligent reasoning lies behind the Christian faith. So we do not need to kiss our brains goodbye in becoming a Christian.

## **The big picture**

1. In what situations have you needed answers about the reasonableness of Christianity?
2. Where did you turn for answers to these questions put to you?
3. Culture today offers a broad spectrum of ideas about spirituality. How often have we heard it said 'that's your truth, not mine.' How does this pluralism make your own intellectual understanding of God easier or more difficult to resolve?
4. How does this diverse environment make it easier or more difficult to experience God as a living person in your life?

## **The biblical picture**

Read Acts 17:16-34

5. Describe the situation Paul found himself in when he spoke in Athens [vs; 16-21]
6. Summarise Paul's sermon to the Athenians [vs; 22-31]
7. What steps did Paul take to meet his audience on its own terms?
8. As you talk with people about Christianity, [or listen to other, do the talking], what ways have you [they] found to connect?
9. After Paul's sermon some people scoffed, while others believed. What could account for the different reactions to one sermon?
10. Some of the Athenians were unwilling to accept Paul's talk about the resurrection. What elements of Christianity are difficult for you to accept, understand?

## **Being in the picture.**

11. There seem to be two equally misleading perceptions on the question of whether Christianity is rational or not. The first is to focus solely on experience with God, excluding reason 'Just have faith.' and therefore pushing away the idea that the gospel is a solid basis for faith. The second group places all the emphasis on the mind. Such people tend to argue into believing as they do? Which camp would you tend to be attracted towards the most? And why?

12.1 Peter 3; 5 tells us that we should be prepared to give an answer for the hope that is within us. As you begin to work through these studies, see if you can prepare a list for the hope that is within you.

## Study 2

### The importance of the resurrection of Jesus

#### Introduction

In 1930 a lawyer called Frank Morison set out to discredit Christianity, by proving that Jesus did not rise from the dead. He was convinced that the resurrection was just fable and fantasy. However as he began his research Morison the case against the resurrection was not as easy as he thought. His Book "who moved the stone?" is an account of he became persuaded against his will of the fact of the bodily resurrection.

#### The big picture

1. Many have attacked belief in the resurrection. What explanations have you heard which try to explain away the resurrection?
2. Do you have a memorable experience of Easter worship? What made this experience interesting? What thoughts and feelings stick in your mind?

#### The biblical picture

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-20

3. What words or phrases emphasise life?
4. Which emphasise death?
5. According to verse 3-11, what are the essential elements of the gospel?
6. What proofs of Jesus resurrection does Paul offer[vs. 5-16]?
7. Why did Paul consider the resurrection to be important[ vs. 17-19]?
8. The worldwide spread of the Christian church, and the Bible's witness accounts all grew out of Jesus' resurrection. How do these evidences increase your certainty of the truth of Jesus' resurrection?

#### Being in the picture

9. What implications does the resurrection of Jesus have for your daily living?
10. How would you like to act on your belief in Christ's resurrection claims and in his power?
11. How does your understanding of the resurrection of Jesus help you to continue to give an answer for the hope that is in you?

## Study 3

### The relevance of miracles

#### Introduction

To some the value of a miracle is a quaint way of conveying a spiritual truth, and they are not meant to be taken literally. This view does seem to have a problem with the whole idea of miracle, and goes even deeper for behind it is a question about the whole idea of God. It goes to the very heart of the possibility of miracles. A miracle does two things I feel, it displays God's power and demonstrates God's character. This is something which Jesus discussed with the disciples in John Ch 14.

#### The big picture

1. When you have read or heard of the miracles of Jesus, what reactions have you had?
2. What examples of modern day miracles are you aware of?
3. What reactions do you have to these examples?

#### The biblical picture

Read John 14:8-14

4. What verbs [action words] do you notice in this passage?
5. What do they emphasise?
6. When in your life have you felt the need to ask God for a sign in order to believe or understand?
7. What eye-opening fact about himself does Jesus want Philip and the disciples to understand?
8. How would you react to their situation?
9. What do the miracles of Jesus[ the Son] tell us about his relationship to God [ the Father].vs. 10-11?
10. What are the greater things Jesus is referring to in verse 12?
11. What purpose do biblical miracles fulfil?

## **Being in the picture**

12. Many questions about miracles expose a deeper problem underneath, usually about the nature of *God*. What questions do you have about *God*?

13. C.S. Lewis in his book *Miracles* wrote that Christianity is 'the story of a great miracle. 'In what ways does Jesus miracles authenticate his message?

14. How do the miracles of Jesus demonstrate *God's* love?

## **Study 4**

### **looking at suffering and evil**

#### **Introduction**

The question "Why?" often arises, as in *Why* are some babies born blind? *Why* is a promising life cut short? *Why* are there wars in which thousands of innocent people die?

The classic answer to the problem is either *God* is all powerful, but not all-good, and therefore cannot stop evil; or *God* is all-good, but unable to stop evil, in which case he is not all powerful. The general tendency is to blame *God* for evil and suffering and pass on all responsibility for it to him. However the Bible will not allow mankind such an easy escape route

#### **The big picture**

1. What types of questions about suffering do you find most difficult to answer? *Why*?
2. What kinds of hard questions about suffering have you asked during your life?
3. When have you found it difficult to answer someone else's questions about suffering?

#### **The biblical picture**

Read Romans 8:28-39

4. According to this passage what does *God* do for us?

5. Consider the questions you've raised about suffering. How does vs.28 address these questions?
  6. Have you known of instances in which suffering is unjustly attributed to God? Can you explain?
  7. What issues do the rhetorical questions in vs. 31-35 raise for you?
  8. Describe the specific actions God has initiated for us?
  9. What assurances of God's trustworthiness in the midst of suffering are found in these initiatives?
  10. According to vs.35-39 what cannot separate us from Christ?
  11. How does this knowledge give you courage as you face suffering?
- being in the picture**
12. How can you respond to questions about suffering in the light of this passage?

## **Study 5**

### **Is Christianity unique among world religions?**

#### **Introduction**

Today there is a meeting of cultures, nations, races and religions like never before. The rise of the internet, television, travel, immigration introduce us to many sincere, educated and intelligent people. Some of them are interested in the historical culture of Britain, and especially the Christian traditions that gave birth to the culture. As religious beliefs are exchanged then a question naturally arises as to whether or not Christianity is unique among world religions, or it just a variation on a basic theme running through all religions?

In John chapter 14 Jesus talks to his followers about this very topic.

## **The big picture**

1. When have you faced the question of whether Christ and Christianity is unique?
2. What do you find compelling about the arguments of those who say all religions are the same?
3. What holes do you see in their arguments?

## **The biblical picture**

Read John 14: 1-7

1. How does Jesus, in John 14:1-4 respond to Peter's question in John 13:36?
2. What facts in vs.1-4 would have been comforting to the disciples?
3. What comfort can you draw from these verses in times of questioning?
4. What seems to be Thomas's concern in verse 5?
5. Jesus emphasises three things about himself, that he is the way, the truth, the life  
v.6 Why is each of these significant and non-negotiable in the Christian faith?
6. What does the fact that we cannot come to the Father except through Jesus [ v6 ] tell you about how we should respond to those who say all religions are equal?
7. How does knowing Jesus help us to know God? [ v.7 ]
8. What implications does this verse have for talking to those of other religions, especially those whose god is a distant, unknowable being?

## **Being in the picture**

The three major world religion are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam. Read the following descriptions, and describe what Christianity has to offer each religion

### **Buddhism**

The ultimate goal is to overcome desire by following the eightfold path of enlightenment and achieve nirvana, which is total nothingness and a loss of self

### **Hinduism**

Nirvana is also the goal, but it refers to reunion with Brahma, he all pervading force in the universe which is the Hindu's God. Individuality is lost, but without the total self-annihilation of Buddhism. Nirvana is achieved through a continuous cycle of life, death

rebirth, or the law of karma. If we lead a moral life, then we move up the scale of life with more comfort and less suffering. If we live a bad life, when we move down the scale in the next life.

## Islam

Heaven is a paradise of wine, women and song, but is achieved by abstaining from these things in life and following the five pillars of Islam; repeating the creed, making a pilgrimage to Mecca, giving alms to the poor, praying five times daily, and keeping the fast of Ramadan. There is no possibility of assurance that you will go to paradise.

## Study 6

### Is Christian experience valid outside of ourselves

#### Introduction

To many the Christian experience is completely personal and subjective, and has not objective, eternal and universal validity. The premise behind all this is that mind is capable of infinite rationalisation. Belief in God for some is seen as a mere wish fulfilment. For some it is seen as throwback to our need of a father image. The assumption which is being made is that Christianity is a crutch for emotional cripples who can't make it through life without such a crutch. However Christianity is not induced by belief in unrealities. The song 'you ask me how I know he lives, he lives within my heart' is only half the truth, the other half is that we know he lives because he rose from the dead in history. Personal subjective experience is based on objective fact.

#### The big picture

1. When have you felt that someone was questioning the validity of your Christian experience?
2. Think of a notorious sinner, [ famous person./ personal acquaintance] you have known of. When have you found yourself questioning someone's conversion?
3. Think about your own spiritual journey. What aspects of your experience validate the truth of Christianity for you?



## **The biblical picture**

Read Acts 9:1-31

4. If you were a Christian in Damascus, what about Saul's story would you find surprising?
5. According to vs.1-2, what sort of person was Saul?
6. How do you see God's power at work in this passage?
7. Describe someone you know who is being changed by God's power?
8. Describe Ananias's initial response to the Lord's request[ vs. 10-16]
9. Why do you think he responds in this way?
10. What does Saul do to prove himself to the other Christians[ vs.18-22,28-29]
11. How does the change in Saul affect other people?

## **Being in the picture**

12. How does this passage encourage you to continue to be a witness to those around you?
13. How could you effectively present some of the truths in this chapter to a person who thinks your Christian experience is a fantasy?