

Forward to Basics



*A course of discovery on
Being a Christian*

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A Series of discussions on Being a Christian

Introduction

In designing this series of four discussions for those considering Confirmation and those wanting to examine their Christianity from a bedrock position, I thought about using fictional characters and 'edgy' rhetoric to raise the key issues but in the end I concluded that what people really want is a straight set of challenges which allows them to focus on the issues rather than being diverted by the style in which the issues are presented.

Some people may regard these four discussions as difficult but who said understanding what it means to be a follower of Jesus should be simple? For sure, there are those who live their lives in the womb of a simple, unchallenged faith, but they are not us. 'Simple faith' is not an option, it is a gift of time and place which few of us will receive. Our gift will be the power of witness in a pluralist world and this series of discussions is designed to set us on our way.

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Forward to Basics

1. God

Human beings cannot escape big questions such as:

- Why am I here?
- How did I get here?
- Is it all one, big accident?
- Does life have meaning?

If we look carefully, we can see that all these questions boil down to one issue:

The idea of 'meaning' either implies some kind of intelligence behind our world; or it means that we as human beings try to create 'meaningful' patterns out of the accidents of matter.

The majority of people in every culture choose the first of these alternatives; they believe that the universe, the Milky Way, the solar system, the earth and the things that live on it are not just nested accidents. Faced with the famous question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" most people opt for some supreme intelligence, architect, being; the shorthand word for this is God.

Between 1000 BCE and 500 CE, the world's major cultures, grappling with this fundamental question, all came to accept earthly dependence upon some idea of God. The Jews, who were an obscure, nomadic cluster of tribes, fused elements of neighbouring religions into the unique idea of the one and only, supreme, personal God whom we meet in their Scriptures, our Old Testament. From this, the religion of Islam developed the idea of one God, Allah, but Christians

forged a more complex idea in the Trinity, three persons in one God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier. The second 'Person' of this Trinity was "Incarnated", i.e. became a human being while still being God.

The central attribute of all notions of a God is creativity: God creates and we are creatures. There are also many religions in which God blesses (or, in our word "Sanctifies") the people created; but Christianity is unique in its idea of a "Redeemer".

The general consequences of the creator/created dichotomy for creatures are:

- Worship acknowledging the difference in status
- Thanks for (and sometimes sacrifice of) created gifts.

If the creator is, like the God of the Jews, Muslims and Christians, a personal god, then there are further consequences:

- Sorrow or penitence for being unworthy of the creator
- Supplication, asking for relief from pain or support for a wish.

The uniqueness of the Christian idea of God is in the concept of the Redeemer. Put simply, the Christian doctrine says:

God created human beings so that they could freely love him; but freedom is only possible if it includes the freedom not to love which means that we were created imperfect or incomplete; choosing not to love is the sin of deliberately distancing ourselves from God; in becoming a human, dying for us and rising from the dead, Jesus confirmed God's promise that we can

be made perfect in death by enjoying perfect unity with God.

Because of the distance between the creator and created, between God and humans, the language we use to talk about God is highly approximate, in a different class, metaphorical. This gap creates the concept of mystery. One such mystery is the way in which the life and death of Jesus interacts with our ultimate heavenly condition. We are able to believe what God wants for us but cannot explain why or how.

Now imagine that we have chosen the second alternative of meaning, that we are an accident and that humans make their own patterns:

- Imagine what it feels like to live briefly with no prospect of eternal life in a world which apparently has no design
- Imagine that the only patterns are the patterns we make
- Imagine that we are only accountable to ourselves.

What would the world be like?

By virtue of the meaning of the word, there can only be one God. It follows that all religions point towards the worship of the same God but take different routes.

Are we Christians because:

- It is a better religion than all the others
- We happen to have been born into a Christian family and culture
- We are too lazy to check the options and think of changing

- We are frightened of not being?

Some Christians believe that only Christians are "Saved", i.e. enjoy perfect union with God (Heaven); others believe that only a few Christians, "The Elect" are Saved.

Some Christians believe that because God chooses who is saved, faith in God is vital but how we live cannot earn us any greater possibility of Heaven. Most Christians believe that because Christianity is a religion of love, we must live in a profoundly ethical way.

Forward to Basics

2. Ethics

An ethic is the framework we use for making decisions about our own lives and the way we live with other people and things. Ethics are not necessarily Good or Bad but when people say a decision is Ethical they usually mean that it is a good decision whereas it is simply a decision made rationally from a particular standpoint.

Here are some well known ethics:

- Vengeance - an eye for an eye
- Love or altruism - turn the other cheek; go the extra mile
- Contract - mutual benefit, predictable penalties for infraction
- Utilitarian - the greatest good for the greatest number
- Competitive selfishness - survival of the fittest; everyone for himself
- Individualism - personal autonomy regardless of social consequences
- State control - the collective always over-rides the individual.

We usually live within more than one of these ethics; our private ethic might be love but our public ethic might be utilitarian. We may be free to use our own assets generously but collectively, as a society, we might not agree on generosity but opt for utilitarianism, or even for outright competitive selfishness.

Here are some basic ideas:

- All ethical systems are about boundaries, about what is permitted and not permitted
- Many ethical frameworks, including most of those with a religious background, involve respect for others as equal creatures of the Creator
- Democratic ethics involve a respect for and tolerance of people with different ethics or people who use identical ethical frameworks differently
- The Christian ethic is love.

For Christians, then, the idea of an ethic comprises:

1. *Setting boundaries*
2. *Respecting others*
3. *Tolerating difference*
4. *Making love the top priority.*

Ethics are often confused with codes. Codes are practical rules that result from applying ethics but often people talk of "codes of ethics" and "ethical codes" interchangeably.

Let us now look at our four principles of a Christian ethic:

1. *Boundaries.* We all know that there are degrees of acceptability in the way that we behave and that, no matter how unsatisfactory, lines have to be drawn; there has to be a point at which:
 - A party becomes a nuisance
 - A bundle of cells becomes a person
 - The exercise of power becomes exploitive

- Well intentioned legislation becomes oppressive
- An ardent passion becomes rape.

How do we fix these boundaries?

2. *Respecting Others.* Some Christians believe that God has given them a code rather than an ethic; the Bible tells us what is right and wrong. This makes it impossible for them to respect different ethics or different approaches to the same ethic.

The idea of respect is based on the centrality of the conscience, the liberty of Christians to make their own decisions based on a careful consideration of what love requires. Respect means:

- Imagining the other person's framework
- Imagining the other person's problem, dilemma, disputed boundary
- Assuming the other person operates within an ethic in good faith
- According space for the other to carry out any practical measures that their ethical conclusion requires.

What can we say about people who claim that their ethic requires:

- Racial differentiation between ethnic groups or classes
- Abortion
- High interest money lending
- Same sex relationships?

3. *Tolerating difference*. How far are we our "brother's keeper"?

- Is it our responsibility to promote our ethic or is this our private business * If the latter, what is the role of the Christian as an ethics promoter?

4. *Love*. Christians are the people of love but in an ethical context what do we mean by love:

- Guiding people to the right choice
- Loving unconditionally
- Creating space for difference?

These are all very difficult questions but we are not expected to act alone. Jesus founded a Church to help us.

Forward To Basics

3. Church

A church is a self regulating, consensual body of people who agree to abide by a defined set of principles. People talk about the Labour Party as "A broad church" and the Church of England, spanning Evangelicals and Catholics is certainly a broad church.

What makes us a church is our voluntary agreement, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to:

- Worship God
- Live in the love of God
- Love God
- Love God's creation and created beings
- Provide and receive the solidarity other Christians.

To be in God's church is not an option for Christians; the Christian way is corporate. Going to church expresses the essence of what we are as creatures, created to worship, thank, repent and put ourselves in the hands of our creator.

The Church of God, promised by Jesus and governed by the Holy Spirit, is founded upon two major pillars:

- The Word of God in Scripture
- The Sacraments of God.

The Word of God in Scripture. Our Bible is made up of two parts:

- The Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures (chronicles, prophesy, poetry, wisdom)

- The New Testament, the Christian writings of the Evangelists and first missionaries (chronicles, letters, prophesy).

Some Christians regard the Bible as the direct expression of God unmediated by man, and, therefore:

- Historically accurate (inerrant)
- Theologically specific (inerrant)
- Morally specific (timeless moral code).

This approach elevates code above ethic. It says that interpretation is separate from:

- Scientific knowledge – e.g. creation
- Anthropology – e.g. slavery
- Organic growth – e.g. changing views of priesthood.

It says that the Holy Spirit has ceased to function.

We might expect the Bible as the Word of God to be about God rather than about human concerns, about theology rather than anthropology. We might better describe Scripture as:

- A record of the relationship between the Creator and the Created in the Old Testament; and
- A record of the relationship between humanity and the Redeemer and the Sanctifier in the New Testament.

From our own experience, what kind of help do we receive from the Bible? Does it help us to:

- Know God better
- Live better lives
- Understand the church?

The Sacraments of God. In our first discussion we talked about 'mystery' and the gap between God and human beings. One way of bridging that gap is the study of God's Word in the Bible which draws us towards an understanding of God's purposes for us; but a much more tangible bridge is provided by Sacraments.

A sacrament is simultaneously a sign which we can experience through our senses and the occasion for receiving God's special support (what theologians call "Grace"). Like an icon on a computer, it does what it says it does; it both signifies and performs.

Although Sacraments have mysterious kernels - we know what happens but not how - they are the nearest thing we have as creatures to sharing the being of the Creator.

Most Sacraments are landmarks in our relationship with our Creator:

- Baptism admits us to the citizenship of God as a responding Creature free to love
- Confirmation celebrates our mature understanding of Baptism with the responsibility to bring others to Baptism
- Marriage is the celebration of our physical joy in God's creation as the echo or image of divine love
- Ordination is the marriage of a human being to God

in service to all of God's people

- Anointing is the celebration of a loving life being in preparation for perfect union with God (heaven).

There are two Sacraments which are life sustaining:

- Reconciliation is our deliberate, self conscious commitment to seek closer union with God
- The Holy Eucharist is our deliberate commitment to share in the life of God through receiving the body and blood of Jesus.

Imagine trying to understand the mystery of God without the bridging elements of the Sacraments to mark life events and to sustain us.

Forward To Basics

4. Witness

If we think that God, Ethics and Church, the ideas for our first three discussions, are so wonderful, what is our obligation to witness, to spread the knowledge of what we know to other people? If we believe that our relationship with God changes our earthly experience and promises perfect union with our Creator when we die, is spreading the word:

- A desirable option
- An onerous duty
- An integral part of being a Christian?

We are warned by St. Paul and other early Christian writers not to be teachers unless we are properly equipped, so the obligation on each of us is different; we can't all be preachers. Some of us could not face standing on a soap box and proclaiming the love of God.

There are, however, gradations of Christian witness which we ought to consider:

1. *Know what Christianity means for individuals and the world.* That is the purpose of this short course of discussions; if we claim to be followers of Jesus we need to be able to grasp the essentials. If somebody applies for a job as a nuclear physicist a pass in a physics test at the age of 12 will be inadequate. Christians should not accept that what they knew of God at the age of 12 will sustain them throughout life.

2. *Live publicly as a Christian.* We must try to live in accordance with a code which the Christian ethic of love determines for our life today. If we are asked why we behave in a certain way we must acknowledge the Christian foundation of our behaviour.

3. *Do not deny God.* In our contemporary society God is the subject of mockery and, worse, of indifference. Part of being a Christian is to react modestly, politely but firmly to those who mock, denigrate or attack Christianity. This is not easy; we may feel that we are on firmer ground defending Jesus at our own dining table than defending Him when we are dining out; nonetheless, we need to think about how we reconcile affirming Jesus and maintaining loving relationships.

4. *Affirm God.* There are many highly ethical people who do not affirm God and so Christians do not have an ethical monopoly; nonetheless, our ever present consciousness of God's love for us and our God given freedom to love God should give us the strength to affirm God's purposes for ourselves and all humanity; a Christian cannot compartmentalise being a Christian and being a citizen.

5. *Think what sharing means.* If Christian living makes us so enlivened and enhanced, so much closer to God, what is the obligation on us to share this joyful benefit, in the way that we pass on even such trivial things as restaurant tips and fashion hints?

6. *Braving controversy.* Recently there was a dispute between the Government and the Roman Catholic Church about

whether RC adoption agencies could refuse to place a child with a gay couple. The issue was not whether the Government was right and the church was wrong or vice versa; the issue was whether the secular state's democratic remit should allow it to over-ride Christian codes. As the ethic of the RC adoption agencies was to judge rather than to love, this is not a simple issue but the underlying question is vital for all Christians in a pluralist society.

For most of us, the life experience of mission will not be verbal, it will be practical. Many non Christians provide practical help to people beyond any legal requirement and so it is important not to regard Christian generosity as some kind of monopoly but we must humbly pursue the way of Jesus, quietly and without complaint, prepared to acknowledge the inspiration for our love and the hope we have for all our fellow creatures.

If we are not active, others quite rightly will question our commitment. If we like football we play the game or support a team; if we like local history we examine records or interrogate the landscape; if we are ballroom dancers we practice the steps; if we are aspiring athletes we go into training; if we are committed Christians, we?:

- Worship our creator
- Thank our Redeemer
- Leave ourselves open to the Holy Spirit
- Live the ethic of love
- Give and take within the solidarity of Christ's Church
- Proclaim our good fortune in God and tell others.

After this summary there is a coda which takes us back to the beginning of our first discussion. During Holy Week in 2007, Somerfield, in a press release to help customers, said that it was selling Easter Eggs in commemoration of the birth of Jesus. We are living in a world that does not understand the shorthand of Christianity used for almost 2000 years. We have to go back to the beginning to explain to ourselves and to others what it means to be a Christian.

And take nothing for granted.