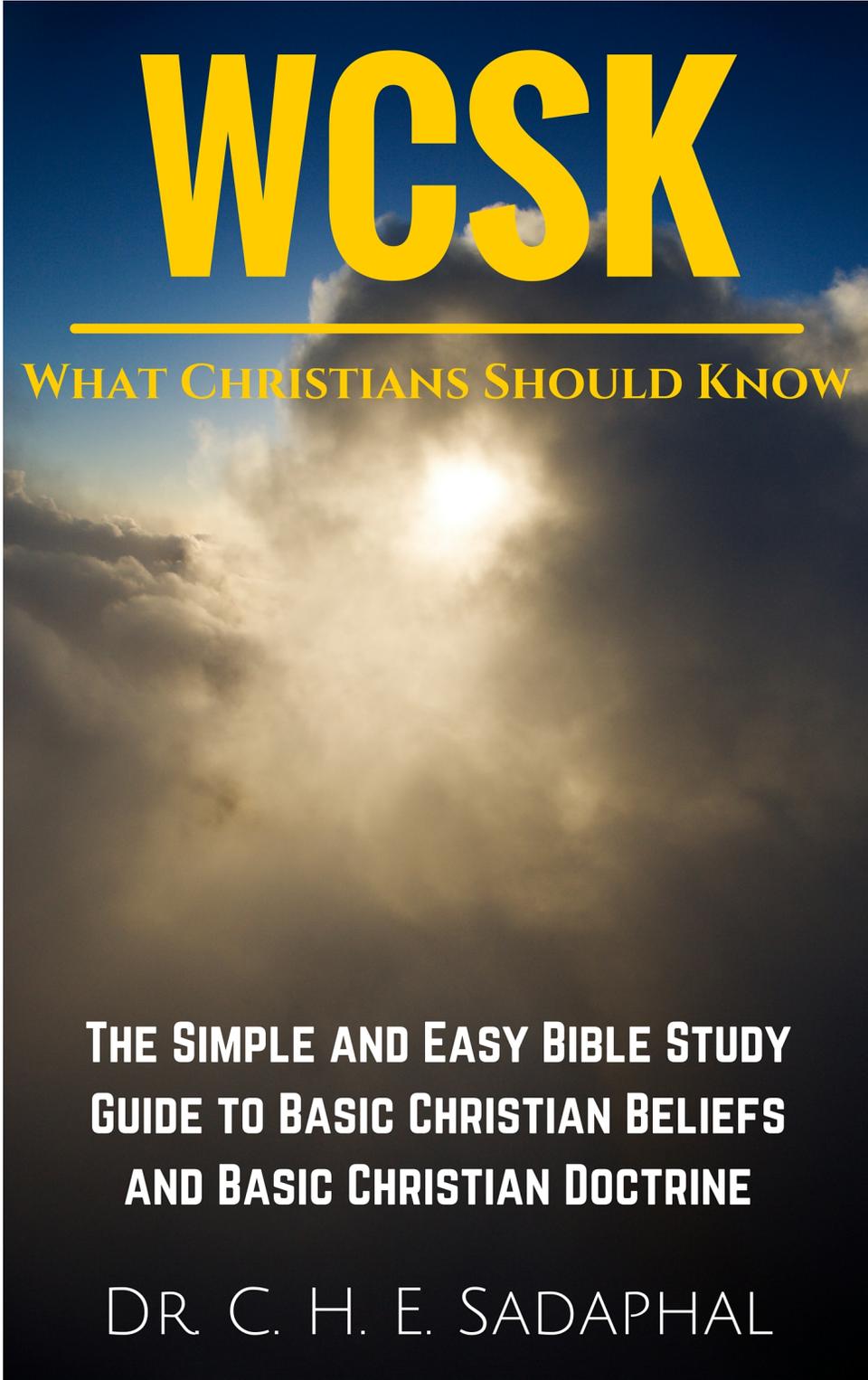


# WCSK



WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW

**THE SIMPLE AND EASY BIBLE STUDY  
GUIDE TO BASIC CHRISTIAN BELIEFS  
AND BASIC CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE**

DR. C. H. E. SADAPHAL

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*To Nigel Elisha:*

*I strive to be good so that you can be great.*

## **Preface**

In the book of I Kings, we are introduced to the prophet Elijah for the first time. This legendary figure arrives on the scene at a bleak time in Israel's history. Drought and famine have struck the land, forcing even the wealthy to scavenge for food, much like dogs. The king and queen blatantly defy God's commandments and openly sanction the worship of false deities. Those deities include the alleged gods of rain and agriculture.

during a time of no rain and starvation. God is trying to tell the people something, but they choose not to listen. As a result, God calls Elijah to serve as His human instrument to turn the people away from apostasy and back toward Him.

It is for this reason that we find Elijah atop Mt. Carmel in I Kings, chapter 18. The people of Israel are gathered there to see a showdown among the gods. On one side stands Elijah—he alone stands for the one true God. On the other side are 850 prophets of false gods. At stake is the heart of the nation of Israel. The wager centers on who can call out and receive an answer from heaven. If the false prophets receive an answer, then their gods win. If Elijah does so, then god really is God—Jehovah or Yahweh; the God of the Bible; the God of Israel; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On top of the mountain, in the midst of the confrontation, Elijah then asks one of the most powerful questions in the entire Bible to all those looking on: “How long will you waver between two opinions?” (I Kings 18:21a, NIV).

Although Elijah was outnumbered; although he was mocked and ridiculed; although he lived on the fringes of society; and although he was regarded as “out of touch,” “antiquated,” and “backward,” he stood for truth and had a single-minded dedication to the LORD. Elijah couldn’t help himself because his name literally means, “My God is Yahweh.” He acted based on his God-given identity, so no matter how “unpopular” the truth was, he stood firm *in* the truth. Elijah fully understood that when you live in a world that doesn’t honor God, you will be misunderstood and labeled in derogatory ways. Turning toward God and resistance actually go hand in hand, and although the messenger is human, *the message* is omnipotent.

Elijah represents all those in modern times unafraid to stand for the truth in a world full of opinions. Just as the prophet did, we find ourselves fighting an uphill battle in which many so-called religious leaders have adopted a more “digestible” version of the gospel to attract followers and secure secondary gain. Moreover, just as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel did in the time of Elijah, many in positions of power and authority now openly sanction syncretism and half-truths to formalize their power and solidify loyalty. These clever individuals need not preach heresy—they simply substitute for the whole truth a vacuous, Christ-less form of subjective “spirituality” in which faith has become what *I* want to believe. What is said from the pulpit therefore is indistinguishable from what is said in a corporate boardroom, at a self-help seminar, or at the paid conference of a motivational speaker. Subsequently, in contemporary America, *spirituality* is on the rise, while *Christianity* is in steep decline.\* This situation comes as no surprise; at our core, we are not physical beings trying to adapt to our spiritual selves. We are image bearers of God, spiritual beings attempting to adjust to the physical world. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has placed eternity in our hearts, so it is no wonder that humanity endlessly searches for something bigger, deeper, and more meaningful.

American spirituality is built upon the foundation of *me*, but a house of faith built upon the foundation of self will not stand. In this house, God must compete for my attention and provide personalized incentives. If His performance falls short, I simply move on to the next idol. Rules become nothing more than burdensome inconveniences and a threat to my rugged individualism.

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\* In fact, the [Pew Research Center](#) reports that the share of adults in the United States who label themselves Christian has declined since 2007 from 78.4% to 70.6%. This represents a decline of about 5 million adults and affects nearly all major Christian traditions and denominations. At the same time, the amount of those “unaffiliated” with any religion has *increased* nearly 7% since 2007 to number a total of 56 million people. This figure represents roughly 23% of adults. In other words, in 2015 in America, roughly 1 out of every 4 adults is either an atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.”

Accordingly, before Elijah goes down in history as a great prophet who turns the people's hearts back to God, those in power label him a "troubler," an instigator, and a bothersome menace. Similarly, in the twenty-first century, if you're not willing to be "controversial," then you're not willing to stand for God and His Word. The Bible shows clearly that obedience to the LORD has always been a countercultural choice in direct opposition to the status quo. Moses fought against the obsession with inhumane and endless production in the Egyptian economic system, Micah warned that exploitation of others in climbing the ladder of success would bring judgment and ruin, and Jesus informed the religious "authorities" of His time that the accepted interpretation of the Scriptures was a perversion of the truth. Subsequently, in 2015, Christians squabble over many extraneous things, failing to realize that sound doctrine is *the* fight always worth fighting.

Herein lies the problem with subjective religion and multiple opinions: when you spend so much time hopping from branch to branch, you begin to lose focus on *your* real opinion. Accordingly, you become numb both to sin *and* to God. This numbness leads to apathy and the inability to take a firm stand on anything, which is exactly why evil can casually say, "Whatever..." to the question, "How long will you waver?" The response in the text says, "But the people said nothing" (I Kings 18:21b, NIV).

Furthermore, Elijah didn't ask his famous question to atheists. He didn't ask agnostics. He didn't ask any group you might consider "sinners." He asked *Israelites*. He asked a people who knew God, who were aware of God's law, who had a national identity exclusively because of God, and who were living in a land promised to them by God. The story of Elijah isn't an indictment of all those "heathens" who do not know Jesus. It *is* an indictment of those who label themselves Christians or who are members of Christ's church. Throughout the Bible, God always judges those who know Him first, *and then* He deals with those on the "outside." Before we accuse others of anything, we ought to look at the person in the mirror first and foremost. Otherwise, we have promoted ourselves to the position of deity.

A person who refuses to waver between opinions has an unchangeable Christian identity firmly rooted in Jesus Christ. This Christian refuses to compromise, is unafraid of the trouble and challenges that come with transformation, and boldly proclaims that Jehovah is God in a world that is apathetic to sin, responsibility, and accountability. This identity is a fixed point of reference in a world full of confusion; it is the persistent, pervasive, all-encompassing force that steers a person's mind, thoughts, words, and actions. Identity always *precedes* behavior; all action stems and *proceeds from* this core sense of self, and that self is formed in the image of God.

For those who have been wondering what happened with Elijah, well, God allowed him to win the showdown. The LORD sent down fire from heaven and revealed the true God, bringing everyone to their knees in recognition of the Almighty. As for the false prophets, they were all destroyed.

At the end of the day, neither God nor the Bible needs to be defended by any human being, but susceptible humans need protection against the malicious vipers that purposely pervert, exploit, distort, and capitalize on the Word of God. Jesus never intended for spiritual tyranny to burden the souls of His sheep, nor did He ever intend for His "shepherds" to enslave all those He set free on the cross.

*What Christians Should Know (WCSK)* is meant to guide you into and along the path of Christ and humbly attempts to mimic what He did for people: to liberate them. It is designed to empower *you* to read, study, understand, and become familiar with the incarnate Word of God for yourself. By knowing and understanding the truth, you will never succumb to false doctrine or the notion that "sort-of-the-truth" is *the* truth. As it says in the beginning of the *Didache*, "There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways." Anything other than Jesus Christ leads to death. *He* is the path of Life.

WCSK aims to begin the process of transforming *believers in Christ* into *disciples of Christ* as they walk that path. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make *disciples* [emphasis added] of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, NASB). *Matheteuo*, the Greek word for *disciple*, is very interesting because it simultaneously implies an inner role as a pupil and an outward role as a teacher. By implication, to teach well, *you* must first have an ironclad grasp on the subject matter.

What if people came up to you in the street and asked, “What do you believe, and why do you believe it?” Could you answer the questions? What if they wanted you to explain to them the basic, core doctrines of the Christian faith? Could you do so? Could you direct them on where to go? What if someone said, “The Bible is too complicated. I need something to guide me”? What if someone wanted to take a step toward Christ but felt unworthy, intimidated, or overwhelmed by “doing church”? What if you desire to do all the “right” things but often feel like the things you hear don’t relate to you or you can’t understand how what’s preached on Sunday actually matters in your life? What if you go through the religious motions because your parents tell you to but have never taken an honest look at it all *for yourself*?

WCSK is a vehicle for individual and institutional change. It is the nutrition for starving Christians who suffer from doctrinal apathy and the proper sustenance of enduring Biblical truth for believers. It is intended to be accessible, practical, and applicable to everyone. WCSK challenges Christians to rethink *what they think they know* and invites all curious minds to discover (or rediscover) the Word of God, challenging our fascination with cultural fads and moralism. The work forces us to reorient our spiritual walk and aims to expand and enlarge the pool of faithful, eager, and willing followers of Christ who have become so empowered, invigorated, and set ablaze that they can’t help but spread the good news to others.

Of all my father’s sermons, my favorite posed one simple question: “Is your salvation secure?” On the Day of Judgment, the only person to be held accountable before God for all your wrongdoing is *you*. There will be no excuses, no scapegoats, and no loopholes. It is for this reason that we must never, ever take our walk of faith lightly but rather with the full recognition of the depravity of sin and the irrevocable consequences of leading a life without Jesus at the center. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13, NASB).

I sincerely hope you enjoy and are enriched by the lessons.

May God richly bless you and guide you in your studies.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Dr. Charles Haddon Elijah Sadaphal  
April 2015

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

### **The Five Core Doctrines of the Christian Faith**

#### **I. Introduction & What Christianity Is**

#### **II. Who God Is**

#### **III. The Bible**

#### **IV. Creation & Sin**

#### **V. Jesus Christ**

#### **VI. Covenant**

#### **VII. Grace & Stewardship**

#### **VIII. The Church**

#### **IX. Regeneration**

#### **X. Worship**

### **The Five Core Doctrines of the Christian Faith:**

- 1. There is one God, yet God is three distinct Persons, each of whom is fully God: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit.**

- 2. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man in one person.**
  
- 3. Jesus bore the penalty of sin in His death, He was a substitute sacrifice for us all, and that substitution atoned for humanity, thereby reconciling us back to God.**
  
- 4. Jesus was crucified and died on the cross, and on the third day, He rose from the dead.**
  
- 5. We are saved by grace alone and through faith in Jesus Christ alone.**

## **CHAPTER 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.” The theme verse is Titus 2:1: “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.”

All scriptures are taken from The New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Further, Biblical references are examples and are in no way

exhaustive. The series *What Christians Should Know* (WCSK) also is not a complete reference but is meant to provide basic beliefs, principles, and doctrines of the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

## 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.

In 2014, 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.

## 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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.

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<sup>1</sup> “Proslogion,” St. Anselm Institute, last modified May 6, 2015, accessed June 24, 2015, <http://www.stanselmstitute.org/files/AnselmProslogion.pdf>

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 I 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. I do not intend for the doctrine that I teach to serve any ideological end. Rather, I 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.

### 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 mainstays 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>2</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.

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 dismiss obedience. 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

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 14:61-64; John 10:30-33, 36-39

inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

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

In the modern world, “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.

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<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 59.

## CHAPTER II: WHO GOD IS

What Christians should know is that in order to live an obedient life and enter into a relationship with God, one must have a comprehensive understanding of who God is.

In contemplating God, a logical first question to ask is, “Does God Exist?” Once that uncertainty is successfully addressed, the next question to ponder is, “Who is God?” The focus of this lesson will be on the second question, assuming that all of us have already taken the path in favor of theism, have been illuminated in support of the truth, and now would like to learn more about Whom we serve. In order to address the first question, I will direct you to “For Further Study” at the end of this chapter.

The first place to start when talking about what Christians should know is God. After all, that’s where the Bible starts. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning, God ...”

Thus, all Christians should be able to answer the question, “Who is my God?”

As with any other relationship, the closer two people become, the more each gets to know about the other. It is important to realize, however, that God can be known, but this feat is not accomplished strictly by human means, but is part of the revelation of God *to us*. So, a person sitting alone in a room in deep thought won’t be able to “know” God—He *cannot* be known through human wisdom alone.<sup>4</sup> The first requirement is an earnest desire to know, and then comes engagement with the Scriptures, where true knowledge of God is to be found. Any attempt, then, to understand God without referencing the Scriptures will lead to suppression of the truth, futile thinking, and darkened hearts.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, in Matthew 11:27 Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom *the Son wills to reveal Him*.” Romans 1:19 says, “Because that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident *to them*.” (In both verses the italics are mine.)

With this idea also comes the recognition that we, as temporal human beings, cannot ever *fully* grasp God, because He is greater than us and eternal. This makes sense because we are the creation, so of course there will be concepts and attributes about Him that are beyond comprehension. This is why in Isaiah 55:9, God speaks through the prophet and says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” The Psalmist says that God’s “greatness is unsearchable,”<sup>6</sup> His “understanding is infinite,”<sup>7</sup> and the LORD’S “knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain it.”<sup>8</sup> In I Corinthians 2:11-12, the apostle Paul says, “Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.”

There is a tremendous wealth of information about who God is in the Bible. The Bible teaches us that God is love,<sup>9</sup> light,<sup>10</sup> Spirit,<sup>11</sup> just,<sup>12</sup> omnipresent,<sup>13</sup> omnipotent,<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 1:21

<sup>5</sup> Romans 1:18-21

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 145:3

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 147:5

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 139:6

<sup>9</sup> I John 4:8; John 3:16, 17:24

<sup>10</sup> I John 1:5

<sup>11</sup> John 4:24

<sup>12</sup> Romans 3:26

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 23:24; Psalm 139:7-10

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 19:26; Luke 1:37; Psalm 24:8, 115:3

omniscient,<sup>15</sup> eternal,<sup>16</sup> wise,<sup>17</sup> timeless,<sup>18</sup> merciful,<sup>19</sup> holy,<sup>20</sup> blameless,<sup>21</sup> self-existent<sup>22</sup> (meaning God is un-causable, or in reference to His *aseity*), righteous,<sup>23</sup> infinite,<sup>24</sup> personal (Jesus Christ), invisible<sup>25</sup> (but God did assume visible form, or theophany, as in Genesis 18), knowledgeable,<sup>26</sup> truthful,<sup>27</sup> faithful,<sup>28</sup> good,<sup>29</sup> peaceful,<sup>30</sup> slow to anger and patient,<sup>31</sup> the Creator,<sup>32</sup> graceful,<sup>33</sup> jealous,<sup>34</sup> wrathful,<sup>35</sup> willful,<sup>36</sup> blessed,<sup>37</sup> beautiful,<sup>38</sup> sovereign,<sup>39</sup> and unchangeable.<sup>40</sup> God's whole being is inclusive of all these attributes, and He is simultaneously and equally all of these things.

In particular, God's omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience all reveal that He exists in a different way than we exist, and that very existence surpasses what we can deduce from the rules of the natural world. He is qualitatively different from us.

The word "unchangeable" means that God's character, promises, being, and purposes were, are, *and always will be* the same. This is the reason why and how we can trust in Him always—He will be good, truthful, perfect, and just eternally. He may, however, change *His response* dependent on particular circumstances. For example, in the beginning of the Book of Jonah, God intended to destroy the evil city of Nineveh because of the extreme wickedness of its people, and He sent Jonah to tell the people that judgment was coming. In response to Jonah's prophecy, in chapter 3, the text says the people of Nineveh believed God, fasted, and turned from their evil ways. In response, Jonah 3:10 says that God *relented* (in Hebrew *nacham*, meaning to be moved to pity, to have compassion, or to suffer grief) and subsequently did not harm the city or the people. So, God did not change in being both just and merciful, but He did change what He intended to do based on the situation and also consistent with His unchanging character. Other examples of God changing His mind include the successful intervention of Moses on behalf Israel's apostasy (Exodus 32:7-14) and adding 15 years to the life of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:1-6).

Many of God's attributes are not shared (e.g., omnipresence), but others are shared with humankind in a limited way simply because we are finite creations whereas

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<sup>15</sup> I John 3:20; Jeremiah 1:5

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 90:2

<sup>17</sup> Romans 16:27

<sup>18</sup> Revelation 1:8

<sup>19</sup> Psalm 145:9

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 19:2; Isaiah 6:3

<sup>21</sup> Psalm 18:30

<sup>22</sup> John 1:3; Revelation 4:11; I Corinthians 8:6

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 145:17

<sup>24</sup> Revelation 4:8

<sup>25</sup> Exodus 33:20; John 1:18, 6:46; I Tim 1:17; I John 4:12

<sup>26</sup> Job 37:16

<sup>27</sup> John 17:3

<sup>28</sup> I Peter 4:19; II Samuel 7:28

<sup>29</sup> Acts 14:17; Romans 12:2; James 1:17; Psalm 107:1

<sup>30</sup> II Thessalonians 3:16; Philippians 4:6; I Corinthians 14:33; Galatians 5:22

<sup>31</sup> Romans 2:4; Nahum 1:3; Jonah 4:2; Numbers 14:18; Colossians 3:12

<sup>32</sup> Genesis 1:1; I John 2:15-17

<sup>33</sup> Romans 3:23-24; I Corinthians 15:10

<sup>34</sup> Exodus 34:14

<sup>35</sup> Exodus 32:9-10; Romans 1:18

<sup>36</sup> Jeremiah 29:11; I Thessalonians 5:16-18; Psalm 40:8; Ephesians 1:11; I Peter 3:17

<sup>37</sup> I Timothy 1:11, 6:15

<sup>38</sup> Psalm 27:4

<sup>39</sup> II Samuel 7:28; I Chronicles 29:10-13; Genesis 50:20

<sup>40</sup> Psalm 102:25-27; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17

He is infinite. These shared characteristics include truthfulness, love, holiness, being just, and being merciful. So while at best, I may be somewhat merciful some of the time, God is perfectly merciful all of the time.

What Christians should know is that one of the exclusive truth claims of Christianity is that God is *both* an unlimited deity *and* a personal deity.<sup>41</sup> Meaning, not only is He “that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought,” but He is also intimate with reality, most perfectly embodied in the Incarnation of God as Man in Jesus Christ (more on that in Chapter 5). Other religions may construct a god who is unlimited but not personal, and others may construct one who is personal but not boundless.

God also is independent of humanity and doesn’t need us for anything.<sup>42</sup> Yet, in view of all of God’s marvelous attributes, people are often confused because there are some things God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie,<sup>43</sup> He can’t go back on his covenantal promises,<sup>44</sup> He can’t deny Himself,<sup>45</sup> He can’t be tempted, nor does He tempt anyone.<sup>46</sup>

When I say that God doesn’t need us, it’s not meant to depress anyone. What that does mean, then, is that because He lacks nothing, the creation of our world and humankind came out of God’s abundance. He didn’t make us to fill a void, and after we have all passed away, *God will still be*. And He had meaning and purpose in creating us, so our existence was not a roll of the dice or a mishap one day in a heavenly lab. God delights in His creation,<sup>47</sup> created us for His glory,<sup>48</sup> and did so in a totally free and voluntary act, which had been predestined according to His purposes.<sup>49</sup>

God is a Spirit, and is therefore *sexless* and without human form. Hence, when I repeatedly refer to God as “He,” that doesn’t mean God is male (although Christ was a man); rather, it is a human word and concept used to denote a relationship. In fact, a myriad of anthropomorphic<sup>50</sup> terms are used throughout the Bible to describe God so as to use our own language to illustrate a point. God is referred to as a shepherd (Psalm 23:1), father (32:6), and physician (Exodus 15:26), while also seeing (Genesis 1:10), walking (Leviticus 26:12), remembering (Genesis 8:1), and wiping away tears (Isaiah 25:8). Examples of different emotional states include grief (Psalm 78:40), love (John 3:16), wrath (Psalm 2:5), and pity (Psalm 103:13). The Bible also refers to God’s face (Exodus 33:20) and His finger (Exodus 8:19) and ears (Psalm 55:1). In a similar light, God is compared to a tower (Proverbs 18:10), a lion (Isaiah 31:4), a rock (Deuteronomy 32:4), and the sun (Psalm 84:11). With all of these things in mind, the way in which God chose to reveal Himself in relation to us is by the name Father. This is why when asked about how to pray, Jesus says in Matthew 6:9-13 to address God as “Our Father who is in Heaven.”

This does not mean that God is a person in the same way that I have four limbs, get up, drink tea, and then drive to work. Rather it means that God is personal and is therefore not a remote, impersonal power.

## **Essential Doctrine #1: What Christians should know is that the principle of the Holy Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of**

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<sup>41</sup> Isaiah 45:21

<sup>42</sup> Acts 17:24-25; Job 41:11

<sup>43</sup> Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2

<sup>44</sup> Psalm 89:34

<sup>45</sup> II Timothy 2:13

<sup>46</sup> James 1:13

<sup>47</sup> Isaiah 62:4-5

<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 43:7

<sup>49</sup> Ephesians 1:11-12

<sup>50</sup> In other words, describing God in human terms.

**the Christian faith, and it is one of the exclusive truth claims of Christianity.**

**What Christians should know is that there is one God, yet God is three distinct Persons, each of whom is fully God: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit.**

Also, because each member of the Trinity is fully and equally God, then one is no better than the other. Keep in mind that the word “Trinity” is never, ever, mentioned in the Bible. The word was applied by humanity in order to describe a principle pervasive in the Scriptures that is located in *both* the Old Testament and the New Testament.

A more academic and formal definition is that God is an infinite spirit that is One with an undivided *ousia*, or essence. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all of the same *ousia* (*homoousia*) but God has distinct instances of a given essence. Each person of God is *relationally distinct*, but they have a mutually interpenetrating unity, or what is often referred to as *perichoresis*, a type of divine dance with interlocking partners. Allow me to break all this down and make it very plain.

So, the Trinity is One God. Deuteronomy 6:4-5 says, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” Also, Deuteronomy 4:35 says, “To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him.” Isaiah 43:10 says, “You are My witnesses,” declares the LORD, “And My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.” I Timothy 2:5 says, “For there is one God.”

But aren't there other gods? Jesus says in John 17:3, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Deuteronomy 32:17 says, “They sacrificed to demons who were not God, to gods whom they have not known, new gods who came lately, whom your fathers did not dread.” For millennia, people have been worshipping and sacrificing to false deities that are *not* supreme, that are *not* the One True God, that are *not* the Trinitarian God of the Bible. They are imposters.

So, what this means in practice is that Jesus is not the Father. The Holy Spirit is not the Son, and the Father is not the Holy Spirit (you get the idea). Yet all three are God!

The Father is God. John 6:27 says, “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” I Corinthians 8:6 says, “Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him.”

Jesus is God. In John 1 it says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” The Word becoming flesh was Jesus, so “in the beginning” with the Father was Jesus (the Word), who is also God. In John 8:58 Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” Referring to Himself as God, or “I am,” is exactly the same way the Father referred to Himself as God in Exodus 3:14 when God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Titus 2:13 says, “looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” Hebrews 1:1-3 says that Jesus is the exact representation of God the Father: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the

exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.” In John 14:9-11, Jesus said, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.”

The Holy Spirit is God. II Corinthians 3:17-18 says, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.” Acts 5:3-4 reads, “But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.’” In Psalm 139:7, David equates God’s omnipresence with the Holy Spirit: “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to Heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.”

Notably, the Holy Spirit is not an impersonal “It.” For example, in Ephesians 4:30 it says, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” The Spirit can be resisted: “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did” (Acts 7:51). Hebrews 10:29 says, “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?”

The Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of truth,<sup>51</sup> but also the teacher of that truth to believers,<sup>52</sup> and dwells within those believers.<sup>53</sup> In other words, true awareness, knowledge, and understanding of God comes directly from God, and thus, God will never reveal non-truth about Himself to anyone. By implication then, anyone who proclaims something as truth that is contradictory to the Word of God in the Scriptures is not revealing truth at all, but false doctrine. The Holy Spirit, being God with full and complete understanding of the truth, *is incapable* of lying and teaching false doctrine. So, a person who believes that they can live a Christian life filled with what the Bible calls sin does not derive that belief from God.<sup>54</sup> Truth comes directly from God by the Holy Spirit and is therefore never derived from us or what we “feel” on the inside, but is external, objective, changeless, and timeless. We conform to the truth; the truth never, ever conforms to us.

I John 4:8 says, “The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” Understanding the Trinity of God, then, means understanding love. Within the Trinity, there is relationship, friendship, harmony, unity, and happiness. The essence of the Trinity is love. John 3:35 says, “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.” In John 14:31, Jesus says, “I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.” Hence, you and I and everyone, all made in the image of God,<sup>55</sup> were made *from* love *with* love *to* love and *to be* loved, but in order to properly understand and execute this, we need God, which is where our conception of love started.

What Christians should know is that the distinction of God’s persons is important because there is an *imminent* and an *economic* Trinity. The imminent Trinity refers to

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<sup>51</sup> John 14:17; 1 John 4:6

<sup>52</sup> John 14:26, 15:26, 16:12-15; 1 John 2:20, 26-27

<sup>53</sup> Romans 5:5, 8:9; 14-16; 1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 1:13-14; 1 John 4:13

<sup>54</sup> Titus 1:16; 1 John 1:8, 10, 2:3-6, 9-11, 3:6-11, 4:20-21

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 1:27

how God relates to Himself. The economic Trinity refers to how God works in history in order to accomplish various tasks. So, the different persons of the Trinity are distinct as a function of their *relation to each other and the world*. It follows, then, that the Father, Son, and Spirit are the same, and they are made distinct by their relations. So, to Himself God is all the same and imminently works in perfect harmony and unison, but in regard to the salvation of humanity, for example, each person of the Trinity plays a different role to accomplish a task. For example, I Peter 1:2 says, “According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.” In other words, God the Father knew beforehand whom He would save. God the Son came into this world in order to live, die, and be resurrected, and God the Spirit works in and through us to empower us in the Christian path, so that we can be reconciled back to the Father through Christ. Our whole salvation is Trinitarian.<sup>56</sup>

Here’s another way of looking at it. God the Father speaks a word in Heaven. Jesus, the Son, is the Word of God<sup>57</sup> that became flesh<sup>58</sup> and lived with us for a few decades on Earth. After His death and resurrection, Jesus ascended to Heaven<sup>59</sup> after paying the ultimate price for sin,<sup>60</sup> thus creating a new spiritual bridge between the Father and us. (This is why Jesus is so critically important, because without the divine sacrifice salvation would be impossible). Soon after Jesus went up to Heaven, the Holy Spirit came down (Pentecost), subsequently empowering us to manifest the fruits of an obedient life,<sup>61</sup> so that we may one day cross the bridge back to the Father.

Here are some more examples of the economic Trinity. God the Father spoke the universe into existence in Genesis 1, and in John 1:3 it says the Father acted *through* Jesus: “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

The Father is the One who sent Jesus into the world<sup>62</sup> and planned for the redemption of humankind.<sup>63</sup> It is the foreknowledge of the Father that allows only Him to predestine those who will believe and follow Christ.<sup>64</sup>

The Father does not advocate for us before Himself—only Jesus does. This is why I John 2:1 says, “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Christ is the perfect divine mediator. Hence, Hebrews 7:25 says, “Therefore He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.” Notably, *only Jesus*, Incarnated as Man, was rejected by many, suffered and died on a cross, and then was resurrected three days later. Neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit died on a cross.

The Holy Spirit is called a Helper, a distinction apart from the Father and Jesus: “But the Helper,<sup>65</sup> the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”<sup>66</sup> Romans 8:27 says, “He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” In John 16:7, Jesus says, “But I tell you the

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<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 1:3-14

<sup>57</sup> John 1:1

<sup>58</sup> John 1:14

<sup>59</sup> Luke 24:51

<sup>60</sup> Romans 6:23; I John 4:10

<sup>61</sup> Galatians 5:22-23

<sup>62</sup> John 3:16

<sup>63</sup> Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:9-10

<sup>64</sup> Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:2

<sup>65</sup> In Greek *parakletos*, a term meaning one who pleads a case before a judge, a comforter, advocate, intercessor, or legal assistant.

<sup>66</sup> John 14:26

truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.”

The Holy Spirit is also described as distributing gifts,<sup>67</sup> gifting speech,<sup>68</sup> and interceding.<sup>69</sup> It is a unique attribute of the Spirit that regenerates us to give us new, invigorated, spiritual lives,<sup>70</sup> and to empower us.<sup>71</sup>

A fancy way of describing the Trinitarian dynamic is “ontological equality but economic subordination.” Or put more simply, “of the same stuff, but willingly submitting in order to do a job.” To be clear, no member of the Trinity is subordinate, inferior, or non-equal to the other two, but there is deference or voluntary *subordination of will* without ontological subordination. Accordingly, as Wayne Grudem says, “If we do not have ontological equality, not all the persons are fully God. But if we do not have economic subordination, then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another.”<sup>72</sup>

Without question, there is explicit reference to the Trinity in the New Testament, and there are also many implications of it in the Old. For example, in Genesis 1:1 it says, “In the beginning God ...” Here, the word God (*elohim* in Hebrew) is plural, yet words conjoined to this verb in Hebrew grammar are singular so God (plural) *is* and not are. There is a form of speech in Hebrew grammar called “plural of majesty” where referring to a single person in the plural denotes respect, but this method is not used in any other place in the Old Testament. Verse 1 goes on to say, “... and *the Spirit of God* was moving over the surface of the waters” (italics are mine). In verse 2, God famously says, “Let there be light,” and light is often used in reference to Jesus, the Son, when he refers to Himself, as in, “I am the light of the world”<sup>73</sup> and “While I am in the world, I am the Light of the world.”<sup>74</sup> So, within the first few verses of the Bible, we are introduced to the Trinity at work before the world as we know it was born.

Furthermore, Genesis 1:26 says, “Then God said, ‘Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* likeness’” (italics mine). Genesis 3:22 says, “Behold, the man has become like one of *Us*.” The Psalmist refers to more than one person as God in two places: Psalm 45:6-7, “Therefore God, Your God ...”; and Psalm 110:1, where David says, “The LORD says to my Lord; ‘Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’” The first passage is referred to in Hebrews (1:8) but is specifically applied to Christ. The implication of the second passage is that: (A) David is calling two distinct persons Lord; and (B) The LORD could only make God sit at His right hand.

Isaiah 61:1 says, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.” The implication is that the Spirit and the Lord God are distinct. Isaiah 63:10 says, “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.” All three members of the Trinity are mentioned in Isaiah 48:16, where the speaker says, “And now the LORD GOD has sent Me, and His Spirit.” The speaker, presumably the Son, mentions being sent as well as the Spirit. In Luke 4, Jesus reads a scroll that has Isaiah 61 written on it, and then in 4:21 says, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The clearest representation of all three persons of the Trinity at once occurs at the baptism of Jesus. Matthew 3:16-17 says, “After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit

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<sup>67</sup> I Corinthians 12:11

<sup>68</sup> Acts 8:29

<sup>69</sup> Romans 8:26-27

<sup>70</sup> John 3:5-8

<sup>71</sup> Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11

<sup>72</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

<sup>73</sup> John 8:12

<sup>74</sup> John 8:5

of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Here, simultaneously, all three members of the Trinity perform a different function: the Father speaks, the Son is baptized, and the Spirit descends to anoint for ministry.

In Matthew 28:19, Christ tells the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” Jude 1:20-21 says, “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life.”

A proper understanding of the Trinity changes the very way a Christian thinks about life itself, because the Trinity is a relational dynamic, and we, as Christians, are in a relationship with God. The Trinitarian God of the Bible is One already in a relationship with Himself before the creation of the world. As a result, love, which is other-dependent, existed *before* God exerted His power. This distinguishes God as One already in love and fellowship with another before creation from other impersonal unitarian gods who needed to create in order to enter into a relationship. The entire doctrine of salvation is based solely on the Trinity, without which we could not be saved, and through these relationships, we are reconciled back to God—that is, *by* the Holy Spirit working in us, *through* Jesus Christ, back *to* the Father in Heaven.

This reveals that the human experience is intended to be loving and communal; hence, it is not good for individuals to be alone<sup>75</sup> because our lives are meant to be community-oriented, simply because that’s who God is, and we are all made in His image. Furthermore, all three persons of the Trinity are fully transparent, honest, good, and truthful, and this provides a blueprint of how we should live. God is One all the time, without variance and without change, which means His character never changes based on circumstances. He pours out His love and shares His eternal attributes freely and openly, without bounds. There is giving without ceasing and also humility because Jesus, being fully God, voluntarily subjugated Himself for our sake.<sup>76</sup> He redefined power, then, not by using it against us but by emptying Himself for us. Hence, not “My will be done, but your will”<sup>77</sup> and “When you lose your life is when you really find it.”<sup>78</sup> Truly, Jesus, being fully God, submitted to the Father out of love. As a result, there is love without argument, lying, poor communication, disrespect, criticism, or covetousness. In the context of relationship, Jesus knew the Father was equal, but He submitted and obeyed. This reorganizes any misconceptions or pollution from American ideology about how a Christian ought to act in marriages, institutions, friendships, churches, and communities, and honoring one’s mother and father. An ideology that says otherwise, that uses power *for the sake of self*, as in “I am right,” “I will not respect those in authority because I am better,” or “They’re beneath me” is inconsistent with the Trinity and consistent with the world.

What Christians should know is that there have been many heresies regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Even small deviations put you on a path where you end up way off course. There are three main false doctrines.

- (1) God is not One, but many. This is essentially polytheism. Another fallacy is Tritheism, which says that God is three and not One.
- (2) God is not three persons, or He’s *one* actor with three different masks—modalism, for example, says that God remains the same person but changes his face mask depending on what scene of the play is happening on stage. The

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<sup>75</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>76</sup> Philippians 2:5-8

<sup>77</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>78</sup> Matthew 10:39

obvious problem with this ideology can be found in passages like Matthew 3 that show God simultaneously being Father, Spirit (dove), and Son *at the same time*. In the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46), Jesus prays to the Father in Heaven, making the modalism hypothesis impossible.

- (3) Claiming that any member of the Trinity is not equally God. Arianism was a heretical doctrine that was resolved at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Arius, a bishop in the Alexandrian Church, said that Jesus was not God, and was at some point in history created by God the Father. Adoptionism, or the idea that God “adopted” Jesus at some point, thereby making a fully human male His son, is also heretical. For clarity on this matter, please refer to the paragraphs above.

What Christians should know is that God has multiple names, and each pertains to a specific aspect of His deity.

Yahweh is the proper name for God and is what God chose as a label for Himself in Exodus 3:14 when he said, “I AM WHO I AM.” This name emphasizes the covenantal relationship that God has with His people. Jehovah can also be used to express the same meaning, or “the existing One.” Elohim is first used in Genesis 1:1, and this name emphasizes God as supreme over everything, including other false gods. Adonai means “the Lord God” or “Lord of the whole Earth.”

The name of God incarnate, Jesus, means “the Savior of Mankind.” The English word Christ comes from the Greek word *Christos*, which means Messiah or anointed. Thus, when someone says “Jesus Christ,” they are literally saying, “The Savior of Mankind, the Messiah.”

Compound names are also used to describe specific characteristics. For example, Jehovah Jirah means, “the Lord will provide,” as used in Genesis 22:13-14. El-Shaddai (“El,” the root from “Elohim”) means “God Almighty” and emphasizes the LORD’S power.

Names in our world are usually easily explicable: typically, our parents gave them to us, often for specific reasons. There is, however, only one explanation for the name of God in the Hebrew Bible, and it comes from Exodus 3:14-15. There it says, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM,’” and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Furthermore, God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and this is My memorial name to all generations.” The Hebrew root of “I AM” is *’ehyeh* (Yahweh). Furthermore, in this statement, God connects His name to the Elohim of Israel’s fathers. In other words, “Yahweh, the Elohim of your fathers, the Elohim of Abraham, the Elohim of Isaac, and the Elohim of Jacob, has sent me to you.”<sup>79</sup> Gottwald says, “Exodus 3:14 regards the divine name as formed from the Hebrew verb *hyh*, ‘to be.’” If this verb is understood in this simple stem, *’ehyeh* means ‘I will be’ or ‘I am,’ and Yahweh is understood to mean ‘he will be’ or ‘he (always) is.’” The Greek translation of the Old Testament renders *’ehyeh* into “I am the one who (eternally) is.”<sup>80</sup>

What Christians should know and now realize is that the Trinitarian God of the Bible is complex, thought-provoking, and is in no way “simple,” or “easily mastered.” So, the many people in the world who dismiss Christianity as a refuge for the ignorant or a consolation to the intellectually challenged truly reveal that they have no idea of who God is, nor have they ever taken the time to understand sound doctrine. Getting a firm grasp on the Trinity requires earnest effort and discipline on the part of the believer. So if you feel as if you haven’t gotten it yet, do not be discouraged, that’s the normal response!

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<sup>79</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 120.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

It took one of the greatest theologians in history (Augustine) more than a decade to complete his analysis of the Trinity.

### **For Further Study**

Saint Augustine and Edmond Hill, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012). Augustine's theological work on the Trinity has stood the test of time even though it was written more than 1,500 years ago. If you want a good place to start, start here.

Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). A sound guide to Biblical doctrine that will assist any diligent Bible student in their search to know and understand.

## **CHAPTER III: THE BIBLE**

Before I dive into the chapter, I'd like to take a moment to focus your attention on where we're going. People often think the Bible is not relevant to their lives, is out of touch, or perceive it as something too big or complicated to grasp. It's a problem of expectation because people either suppose something the Bible isn't (for example, a roadmap to a stress-free life), or assume little to nothing about it because they fail to realize what the Bible really is.

What Christians should know is that the Bible offers a new way of looking at and understanding the world. This fresh perspective ultimately leads to life, peace, joy, and the completeness so many are searching for.

The Bible awakens a dormant imagination within all of us; this consciously and unconsciously forms our identity and, therefore, determines how we perceive and interact with the world.

Walter Brueggemann labels the Biblical example a *covenantal-historical model* of contemplating our existence and our faith in God. This model implies "an enduring commitment between God and God's people based on mutual vows of loyalty and mutual obligation through which both parties have their life radically affected and empowered."<sup>81</sup> As a result, the meaning of our lives is not rooted in ourselves so that we just get out what we put in. Rather, there is Someone greater than us all, and through grace, despite what we "having coming to us," God trusts in and takes humanity so seriously that in spite of our depravity because of sin, we can all be saved. The Word of God reveals there is something timeless, better, and more powerful than what this world has to offer. The Bible gives everyone a genuine, fresh identity that refuses to allow us to forget who we truly are, demands obedience to expectations, and will not allow us to settle for the false identities the world would have us adopt.

The Bible is much more than a good idea or an ideology that has an alternative end. It is a concrete and unchanging fixed point of reference in an ever-changing world characterized by identity crises, displacement, and burden. From that fixed identity, we

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<sup>81</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible Makes Sense* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 10.

derive our life's mission and calling. The Bible locates us in fellowship with God and therefore in fellowship with other servants of God. Thus, we all belong to a community of believers and all have a responsible and caring family in one another—we are, therefore, not all alone and have definite meaning and purpose in each other *through Christ*. The Bible teaches us that we all have a unique prospect for the future where those in the front will be in the back and those on the bottom will be on top.

As Walter Brueggemann so eloquently says in *The Bible Makes Sense*, “The Bible provides us with an alternative identity, an alternative way of understanding ourselves, an alternative way of relating to the world. It offers a radical and uncompromising challenge to our ordinary ways of self-understanding. It invites us to join in and to participate in the ongoing pilgrimage of those who live in the sharing of history ... The surprises of the resurrection concern the emergence of expected new life in persons, in institutions, in social arrangements. And they come just when we think there are no more reasonable expectations.”<sup>82</sup>

The Bible teaches us that when the world says “No” God says “Yes.” The Bible teaches us that when the world says, “You’re not” God says, “I AM.” The Bible teaches us that when you thought you were destined to be enslaved to death, Christ sets you free to live.

## I. What is the Bible?

The Bible is the Word of God. It is pure,<sup>83</sup> perfect,<sup>84</sup> and true,<sup>85</sup> it is the perfect guide for our lives,<sup>86</sup> nourishes us,<sup>87</sup> and is the lamp that guides us in the darkness.<sup>88</sup>

This Word is a person, Jesus (John 1). The Word is God's speech, for example, when God decrees, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3).

The Word is a personal address to a group of people or to an individual, as seen when God comes down and speaks to Israel gathered at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20. Another example is seen when God speaks from heaven at the baptism of Jesus and says, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

The Word is speech through a human vehicle. Deuteronomy 18:18 says, “I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and *I will put My words in his mouth*, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (emphasis added).

The Word is in written form to preserve it accurately: anyone can refer back to it and inspect it, study it, recite it, use it, and apply it. The written word also makes the Bible accessible to anyone who wishes to read it. In Exodus 31:18, God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets Himself before giving the tablets to Moses: “When He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, *written by the finger of God*” (italics mine). In other instances, people inscribed what God told them. Moses wrote down additional laws God gave him.<sup>89</sup> Other examples of people writing down and inscribing what God had told them include Joshua,<sup>90</sup> Isaiah,<sup>91</sup> and Jeremiah.<sup>92</sup> The Holy Spirit brought remembrance of Christ's

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 20-21.

<sup>83</sup> Psalm 119:140

<sup>84</sup> Psalm 19:7

<sup>85</sup> Psalm 119:160

<sup>86</sup> Proverbs 6:23

<sup>87</sup> Jeremiah 15:16

<sup>88</sup> Psalm 119:150

<sup>89</sup> Deuteronomy 31:9-13, 24-26

<sup>90</sup> Joshua 24:26

<sup>91</sup> Isaiah 30:8

<sup>92</sup> Jeremiah 30:2, 36:2-4

words to the disciples so they could faithfully remember and record what Jesus told them.<sup>93</sup> In his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul wrote, “the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment” (I Corinthians 14:37).

The word Bible derives from the Greek work *biblia*, or book. Essentially, God wrote it by revealing it to human authors (about 40) who faithfully recorded what the Holy Spirit inspired them to write. The words are God’s but the vehicle used to transcribe those words is a select group of humans. This process of divine revelation for Biblical transcription is called *verbal plenary inspiration*.<sup>94</sup> (Note that this term, like “Trinity” is a human construction intended to describe a Biblical phenomenon. The word does *not* appear in the Bible). II Peter 1:20-21 says, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” In addition, because God is truth,<sup>95</sup> He inspired the authors to write what is wholly true.<sup>96</sup>

The Bible is more than a mere book because the Holy Scriptures pre-existed their physical and tangible forms. In essence, the Word of God is eternal and timeless without equal in the realm of human existence. At the start of John’s gospel, the text reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” Further on, in 1:14, it reads, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” “The Word became flesh” refers to Christ. Therefore, in the same way God is timeless and eternal, so is His Word; and if His Word transcends our existence, we ought to pay full attention and listen to what God wants us to hear.

Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the Word as “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit.” Certainly, when God repeats or reiterates a message, we have to pay special attention.

The Bible has 66 books (39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament). The Old Testament (OT) takes us from creation to a time before the coming of Christ, and the New Testament (NT) begins with the birth (0 AD), life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In fact, the first four chapters of the NT are four different perspectives of Jesus, including details about the things He did and the things He said. The NT continues by giving Christians and Christian churches instructions on how to think, live, and act appropriately.

The OT makes up the overwhelming majority (more than 75 percent) of the entire Bible. In fact, the OT has 929 chapters and 23,214 verses. The NT has 260 chapters and 7,959 verses. Keep in mind that the chapters and verses in the Bible are human constructs added in the second millennium simply for organizational purposes. The original writings of the OT were written on papyrus, an old form of paper that often consisted of long scrolls. The original writings of the NT were written on parchment, or specially prepared animal skins. The OT spans a history of thousands of years and the NT spans a history of less than 100 years. The OT is written in Hebrew (some small parts are written in Aramaic) and the NT is written in Greek.

One way to think about the OT is that it describes how God initiated and developed a relationship with humanity. It began with individuals, and then grew into a much larger family and later an entire nation of people. The OT describes a God who establishes a series of covenants with a people who, despite all His warnings, fail to

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<sup>93</sup> John 14:26

<sup>94</sup> II Timothy 3:16-17, Exodus 20:1-17, I Kings 12:22-24, I Chronicles 17:3-4, Jeremiah 35:13, Ezekiel 2:4-7, Zechariah 7:9-10, II Corinthians 5:20, II Peter 1:20-21

<sup>95</sup> Psalm 116:160, John 17:17, Ephesians 1:13-14, Titus 1:2, James 1:18, Hebrews 6:18

<sup>96</sup> I Corinthians 2:12-13, II Timothy 3:16-17, I Peter 1:10-12

follow directions, which results in adverse consequences. Hence, because the people failed to follow commands and were incapable of obedience, a ‘new way’ had to exist. That ‘new way’ is described in the NT, with Jesus.

The Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament, and the NT is concealed in the Old. To understand truly the NT, one must first read the OT, as the NT is essentially a fulfillment of what was said before.

What Christians should know is that the Bible, above everything else, serves as a *theological statement* with a primary aim of revealing exactly Who God is, what He has done, and how we, as God’s servants, are to engage in a relationship with Him.

Thus, while the Bible (or the Scriptures) does proceed through historical events with different people and places, its goal is always to give us *theological* meaning through the context of human history. If you need an exact play-by-play of how the universe went from this to that, you will *not* find it in the Bible, *nor does it claim to provide that information*. If you need to know how the power of Christ’s atoning sacrifice frees you from the grip of sin, you’re in the right place. The Bible contains authoritative truth, but non-contradictory truth can be found elsewhere.

Two Latin slogans summarize this idea. *Sola Scriptura* (“by Scripture alone”) means the Scriptures alone are the highest form of authority. The phrase *prima Scriptura* means there are sources secondary to the Scriptures that allow us to know and understand God better, or guides we can follow, but these guides ultimately are judged and tested by the Scriptures. An example of such guides would be revelation through creation<sup>97</sup> or our consciences.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the Bible is *the ultimate* source of truth by which all other sources are judged, *but not the only* source of truth. This is why I don’t open a Bible if I need to figure out what antibiotic to use to treat a complicated skin infection.

For this reason, when we judge the Bible, we first have to ask ourselves what the book claims to present. Hence, the Bible seemingly lacking a piece of data does not tarnish its reputation. If I need help with my taxes, I don’t open a book on home improvement, nor does this query negate the authority of the latter. If you consult the Bible with a tax question, you won’t find a direct answer, but it will say that God gives humanity intellect and wisdom,<sup>99</sup> and those attributes, being from God and therefore good, can be used to seek and discover other forms of truth.

## II. How can I trust the Bible?

The simplest answer for why you should trust the Bible is because it is the Word of God. The fundamental scripture verse that validates the authority of the Bible comes from II Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” In the book of John, Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken.”<sup>100</sup>

All the OT prophets recorded what God directly told them, either by themselves<sup>101</sup> or through a scribe.<sup>102</sup> The frequent and repetitive use of the phrase “Thus says The LORD”<sup>103</sup> is an example of such revelation. As mentioned previously, the apostle Peter said that in regards to all the OT, “No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own

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<sup>97</sup> Psalm 19:1

<sup>98</sup> Isaiah 30:19-22, Hebrews 9:14

<sup>99</sup> Daniel 1:17

<sup>100</sup> John 10:35

<sup>101</sup> Joshua 24:26, Isaiah 30:8, Ezekiel 43:11, Daniel 7:1-2

<sup>102</sup> Exodus 17:14, 34:28

<sup>103</sup> Jeremiah 22:1

interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”<sup>104</sup>

The Bible, or the Word of God, is tested and tried,<sup>105</sup> and something that is timeless,<sup>106</sup> meaning it is as applicable then as it is now and as it will be in future. The Word can be trusted because it is more than a book; it’s a viable, living organism whose trustworthiness is evidenced by the fact that it changes the person who reads it.<sup>107</sup> Because the Bible is complete and everlasting, it specifically says that Jesus is the final word of God revealed to humanity,<sup>108</sup> no other books are to be written after the Bible’s final book, Revelation,<sup>109</sup> and we will all experience Scriptural silence until the second coming of Christ.<sup>110</sup> Finally, nothing is to be added to the Bible.<sup>111</sup>

In practical terms, this means the Bible is complete, and anyone proclaiming to have something new to add to the Scriptures after the Scriptures were finished is a heretic who contradicts the Bible itself. If ‘god’ allegedly revealed himself to someone and directed them toward new ‘scripture,’ or if a divine messenger revealed new scripture for recital, then both instances are blatant fabrications contradictory to the Word of God.

Here is a very valid question: if human beings “wrote” the Bible, then why should I believe it’s the inspired Word of God and not some fabricated human concoction?

There are actually four ways to answer this question. The first three look around from the inside and help to formalize a Christian’s belief using what he or she has already discovered to be true. The last method looks around from the outside and is purely objective. It not only validates Christianity’s truth claims but can also help the reader disprove many of the so-called “truth” claims of other religions.

(1) The first is to believe the repeated declarations of the Scriptures themselves to be the infallible Word of God, as already mentioned. The *authority* of Scripture pertains to the fact that all of the words in the Bible are God’s words, so to obey those words means you obey God; to disobey those words means you disobey God. Because the Bible is *the* ultimate authority, it claims its supreme authority by its own words because no other authority can exceed it. Moreover, the Bible is *self-attesting* because if it needed to appeal to a higher authority for validation, it could not be *the* ultimate authority.

(This debunks the fallacy that Biblical authority is a circular argument: we believe the Bible *is* the Word of God *because it claims to be* the Word of God, and those words come from God Himself. Of course I believe it’s true, because it’s God Who said it! In the same way, circular arguments are used all the time in the world but are perfectly legitimate. For example, how do you know you are reading these words? Because you’re using your eyes, of course! However, do you not use your eyes to validate what your eyes see? So how do you know it’s there if only *your* eyes see it?)

Thus, when God spoke through a prophet,<sup>112</sup> the human being was being used as a mouthpiece for The LORD Himself. The Bible’s authority is also evidenced in the fact that the Bible has the power to change people for the better, and the Holy Spirit moves people when reading its words.<sup>113</sup> Since God cannot lie,<sup>114</sup> all of Scripture is refined, tested,

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<sup>104</sup> II Peter 1:20-21

<sup>105</sup> Psalm 18:30, Proverbs 30:5

<sup>106</sup> Isaiah 40:8

<sup>107</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>108</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2

<sup>109</sup> Revelation 22:18-19

<sup>110</sup> Revelation 22:20-21

<sup>111</sup> Deuteronomy 4:2, 12:32; Proverbs 30:5-6

<sup>112</sup> Num. 22:38; Deut. 18:18-20; Ezek. 13:1-16; I Kings 14:18; Zech. 7:7

<sup>113</sup> I Corinthians 2:13-14

<sup>114</sup> Titus 1:2

true,<sup>115</sup> and is not only truthful but truth itself.<sup>116</sup> It is impossible for God to lie.<sup>117</sup> Hence, the Bible is *inerrant*, which means it is incapable of being wrong. The denial of inerrancy stems from one of the most dangerous phenomena in our modern world—the rejection of an ultimate, absolute truth in favor of a truth judged to be real only by personal experience.

Furthermore, the Bible has *clarity*, which means that anyone who earnestly seeks to know and understand God’s teachings will be able to follow the Scriptures. In fact, even children can understand the Bible,<sup>118</sup> and it imparts understanding to the simple.<sup>119</sup> Yet, this does not dismiss the fact that some passages of the book are indeed difficult to understand.<sup>120</sup> The reader should be aware, however, that since the Bible is the incarnate Word of God, it requires an open heart and mind to receive the gifts of the book; of course, someone with a closed heart will never be able to fully embrace the Word.<sup>121</sup> The Bible is also *necessary* because without it, we would not know about God, Jesus, faith, salvation, grace, sin, the prophets, the covenants, the gospel, or all the other wonderful things contained within it.

This is why in Romans 10:13-17, Paul says, “For ‘Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!’ However, they did not all heed the good news; for Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed our report?’ So faith *comes* from hearing, and hearing *by the word of Christ*” (italics mine). Thus, it is *necessary* to read the Bible to obtain knowledge of the gospel, maintain a spiritual life, and obtain knowledge of God’s will to live a life that is more Christ-like.

The Bible is also *sufficient* meaning in that it contains everything God wanted us to know. In other words, we don’t need anything else besides the Bible to be saved, trust in Him, and live a life of obedience.<sup>122</sup> This doesn’t mean God can’t add to His words; it means *we* can’t. In the time after Moses’s death, for example, all Israel had was five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). That was sufficient for them *at that time*, and God added to it over time, stopping by the end of the first century. The sufficiency of the Bible is a very important concept for our modern time because it means that *any* problem or question we have has an answer in the Bible. The answer may not be specific to your question, but the timeless Biblical principles satisfy all queries.

(2) The second answer attempts to determine what possible malicious and unifying reason any Biblical writer would have to fabricate a story *to his own detriment*. Moses, for example, who wrote the Bible’s first five books, could have stayed in Egypt and lived the high life as a member of privileged society. However, he believed in a God that led him out of Egypt into a less-than-privileged life, to lead hundreds of thousands of grumblers and complainers in the desert for 40 years, to die before he arrived where he wanted to go. If all the apostles of the New Testament were fabricating a grand scheme, why did they deceive and what did they gain? All the apostles lived lives of ridicule and were killed mercilessly and prematurely. Peter, for example, was crucified upside down. To top it all off, the apostles died for the truth—all they had to do was recant, but they

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<sup>115</sup> Psalm 12:6

<sup>116</sup> John 17:17

<sup>117</sup> Hebrews 6:18

<sup>118</sup> Deuteronomy 6:6-7

<sup>119</sup> Psalm 119:130

<sup>120</sup> II Peter 3:15-16

<sup>121</sup> I Corinthians 2:14, Hebrews 5:14

<sup>122</sup> II Timothy 3:15-16

didn't. All Jesus had to do was say, "I am *not* God" and He would have been left alone, but He never recanted.

(3) In contrast to any other religious authority, the Bible describes people from many different times and in different geographic areas making and fulfilling prophecies all pointing in the same unified direction. It would be easy, for example, for me to state that I went up a mountain, into a cave, or to a field and received 'divine revelation' when I am the only barometer for my experience. But if multiple people unconnected to one another received the same revelation that not only reinforced what others heard but also accurately predicted what would happen hundreds of years in the future and the cost of declaring that word was death, separation from society, ridicule, and anguish, you have to begin paying attention.

There is an internal consistency in that the books of the Bible refer to themselves and other books as authoritative.<sup>123</sup> Jesus repeatedly referred to the OT Scriptures as authoritative and quoted many of them.<sup>124</sup> Also, the Bible repeatedly describes the fulfillment of prophecies often made hundreds of years earlier. For example, David prophesized that Jesus would be crucified hundreds of years before crucifixion existed.<sup>125</sup> More than 500 years before Jesus was born, both David and Isaiah prophesized that Jesus would resurrect from the dead.<sup>126</sup> In addition, hundreds of years before the events came to fulfillment, Zechariah stated that Jesus would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,<sup>127</sup> Isaiah said Jesus's mother would be a virgin,<sup>128</sup> Micah said Jesus would be born in Bethlehem,<sup>129</sup> Hosea said Jesus's family would flee to Egypt,<sup>130</sup> and Malachi predicted that Jesus would enter the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>131</sup>

(4) The fourth approach is both historic and academic. A large chunk of this material is derived from Craig A. Parton's *Religion On Trial*, which is a marvelous book on how to objectively evaluate the validity of different religious truth claims.

Many things can be simultaneously false, but they cannot be simultaneously true given the contradictory claims they make. There can only be one truth, and being able to answer the question, "What is true?" requires the ability to objectively test religious claims with a system that is not derived from the authority you are investigating. *Experience* does not determine truth because some people can, for example, have a "life-changing" and "religious" experience with enough Prozac. Faith *by itself* does not determine truth because it only becomes valid when *the object* of that faith is clarified. What we are left with are the facts, or the "*final arbiters or judges of all competing interpretations.*"<sup>132</sup>

So, most religious *claims* are in fact hocus-pocus because they are not religious *truths*. Why are they not truths? *Because they can't be verified.* It is only Christianity—whose credibility stems from the *historical* events of Jesus's life and resurrection—that can indeed be legally confirmed. The truth claims of Christianity are not only based upon verifiable facts, but those facts do not require pre-existing belief, they will never have

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<sup>123</sup> Joshua 1:8, Daniel 9:2, Ezekiel 14:14, 1 Corinthians 14:37, I Thessalonians 2:13, II Peter 3:15-16, Revelation 1:3

<sup>124</sup> Matthew 23:25; Luke 11:51, 24:44

<sup>125</sup> Psalm 22:16, Luke 23:33

<sup>126</sup> Psalm 16:10, Isaiah 53:10-12, Acts 2:25-32.

<sup>127</sup> Zechariah 11:12-13, Matthew 26:14-15

<sup>128</sup> Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:18-23

<sup>129</sup> Micah 5:2, Luke 2:1-7

<sup>130</sup> Hosea 11:1, Matthew 2:13-15

<sup>131</sup> Malachi 3:1, Luke 2:25-27

<sup>132</sup> Craig A. Parton, *Religion on Trial* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 26.

100% certainty (as is true for the present and history), and its truth remains regardless of whether or not people accept it as true.

In regards to gauging the reliability of the source document of the Bible, we have to look at four independent, first-hand eyewitness accounts at the beginning of the New Testament: the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We will start here because these four books all detail the central truth claim of Christianity: the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who entered into reality being fully God and fully man (more on that in a later). Three tests will be applied: (1) The *bibliographical* test, which determines how reliably the ancient documents have been passed down (e.g., if an original manuscript exists, how many copies exist, and how large is the time gap between the event and the recording); (2) The *internal evidence* test, which explores what the text reveals about itself in order to gauge its reliability (e.g., is the author a first-hand eyewitness or did they have the skill to write about the actual events that occurred); (3) The *external evidence* test, which looks at information peripheral to the document and questions whether that information supports or refutes the document's claims. It is rare for ancient documents to have external confirmatory evidence.

In examining ancient secular writers (e.g., Plato, Homer, and Caesar), the bibliographical test reveals that, "much of what we know of the classical world is built upon the very thinnest of evidential or documentary trails."<sup>133</sup> However, "when we turn our attention to the writers of the four accounts of the life of Jesus Christ that are contained in the New Testament, the difference could not be greater. Even liberal and atheist biblical scholars agree that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the best primary source recorders of the life of Jesus."<sup>134</sup> The point is this: using the same scale, if one were to reject the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as valid historical documents, then one would also have to essentially reject the bulk of the entire canon of Western literature from Ancient Greece to the modern era (including Shakespeare). Application of the internal evidence test to the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John reveals the following: "The consistent conclusion of legally trained trial lawyers over the last 300 years is that this material comes with the absolute best manuscript tradition possible, that it comes on top of the events that it records, that it is highly unlikely to have been forged, and that it contains the type of stylistic and factual detail you expect from truthful witnesses (i.e., liars love generalities while those telling the truth are not afraid of piling on historical particulars)."<sup>135</sup>

The external evidence test locates several non-Biblical historical works confirming both the claims made by writers of the books of the Bible and historical events referred to in the Bible. For example, Papias of Hieropolis (ca. 155) and Polycarp recorded what the apostle John told them directly and stated that the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written by the authors ascribed to them.<sup>136</sup> Eusebius wrote that Paul and Peter died during the Neronian persecution,<sup>137</sup> and there is also archeological confirmation of Pilate's existence by the "Pilate Inscription" found in Jerusalem.

Also, numerous non-Biblical sources locate Jesus (and especially the historical event of the resurrection) and Christians in history. Examples include the writings of

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>137</sup> Eusebius, *Historica ecclesiastica*, Book II, section 25.

Seutonius, Pliny the Younger, and the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, as well as accounts of early Christian martyrs who suffered and died at the hands of historical governments because of the reality of Christ and his resurrection. Several examples can be found in part one of *Readings in World Christian History* and include, for example, The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity, The Martyrs of Lyons, and Ignatius's *Letters to the Magnesians*.

I say all of this to make a very important point: the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central claim upon which the entire Christian faith is based. Without the resurrection, Christianity is null and void. Yet, the objective doubts that can be amassed against Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John illuminate the Bible's power to resist scrutiny. These books are verifiable based on multiple, independent, legitimate historical sources, and their contents not only pass the three tests, but their messages have real and relevant prescriptions that can change lives.

Trusting the Bible means trusting it in a physical, literal, and spiritual sense. This is why Jesus asked Nicodemus in John 3:12, "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" One cannot separate the facts of the Bible from its theology, morals, and teachings. For example, Adam cannot be 'just a myth' because then the doctrine of the inheritance of sin and the downfall of all of humankind is wrong.<sup>138</sup> If Jesus wasn't born of a virgin, then his birth would be no different from that of the rest of humanity; he would be predestined to sin and, therefore, unable to atone for humankind through His death. Christ literally hung on a cross, and his blood literally was shed, and His body literally died and rose again three days later. Without the shedding of blood, there could not be any remission of sin.<sup>139</sup>

### III. How did the Bible assume its current form?

Wayne Grudem says it best: "[T]he ultimate criterion of canonicity is divine authorship, not human or ecclesiastical approval."<sup>140</sup>

The Biblical canon is the list of all the books that belong in the Bible. The process by which books were chosen is called *canonization*. *Canon* means 'measuring rod.'

The OT was written roughly between 1200 BC and the first few hundred years before the birth of Christ, predominantly in Hebrew (some parts were in Aramaic).<sup>141</sup> Although *written* in this time, the composition of the OT spanned thousands of years, and a tremendous oral tradition existed in ancient Jewish society prior to the written texts taking form. In fact, the Bible as we know it today began when God gave His first written laws—the Ten Commandments—on stone tablets directly to Moses to give to the people of Israel (Exodus 31:18). These tablets were regarded as special and authoritative, placed in a very special container (the Ark of the Covenant),<sup>142</sup> and without question were esteemed as the direct work and writing of God.<sup>143</sup> From there, Moses wrote the Bible's first five books,<sup>144</sup> and later other individuals, such as Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, and Isaiah, wrote the other books over time. The OT is the Bible Jesus used because the NT did not exist yet.

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<sup>138</sup> Romans 5:12

<sup>139</sup> Hebrews 9:22

<sup>140</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 68.

<sup>141</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 57.

<sup>142</sup> Deuteronomy 10:5

<sup>143</sup> Exodus 32:16

<sup>144</sup> Exodus 17:14, 24:4, 34:27; Numbers 33:2; Deuteronomy 31:22

The OT books were not chosen randomly but fulfill specific criteria: (1) A prophet of The LORD wrote them.<sup>145</sup> (2) What those prophets said was consistent with what other prophets said.<sup>146</sup> (3) An act of God confirmed the authority of the prophet.<sup>147</sup> (4) What the prophets said carried the authority to influence lives.<sup>148</sup> (5) The community accepted the prophetic utterings as true.<sup>149</sup>

After about 435 BC, there were no further additions to the OT canon. However, within the Apocrypha are books composed after 435 BC. The Jewish community never accepted these books as scripture, and they are not included in the Hebrew Bible (our OT with some organizational differences). They contain some speculation about the end of days, historical accounts, short stories, and advice on how to live life day-to-day. Once Jesus arrived on the scene and raised up disciples, He and the other authors of the New Testament cited the authoritative OT Scriptures more than 295 times,<sup>150</sup> *excluding* the Apocrypha and thus formalizing the exclusive validity of the OT. The Roman Catholic Church *does* include the Apocrypha in its Biblical canon even though the Apocrypha does not claim authority as the rest of the Scriptures do and despite that they proclaim as truth claims that are *inconsistent* with the rest of the Bible.

Historically speaking, Israel did not begin as a people that based its culture or religion on books until the end of the Biblical period. In addition, because Israel was a small yet distinct socio-historical entity, the writers of the Bible's books never had any awareness they were writing an authoritative 'Bible' that would lay the groundwork for a religion. Instead, the OT writers were particularly concerned with communal need and Israelite crises.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, there really has never been any significant debate about what belonged in the Hebrew Bible, or the OT.

The NT is a different story. After Christ resurrected and ascended, Christianity was becoming a 'big deal' in ancient Roman society—after all, this guy called Jesus rose from the dead after being crucified by the powerful Romans and told everyone they could live with Him in heaven. Many apostles were eyewitnesses to Christ and His life, but the potential for fraud, abuse, and self-gain in writing an NT 'book' became apparent. Hence, the canon of the NT was chosen based on several criteria: (1) The authors of books based their writings on eyewitness testimony of the events in Christ's life.<sup>152</sup> (2) Christ's followers accepted them as legitimate, and they revealed how the power of God can change people's lives for the better.<sup>153</sup> (3) What they said agreed with the rest of the Scriptures.<sup>154</sup>

There are exceptions to these rules. Luke, for example, wrote his two books (Luke and Acts) after receiving information from Paul,<sup>155</sup> and after both collecting information from a multitude of eyewitnesses and "having investigated everything carefully."<sup>156</sup> Luke also accompanied Paul on several of his missionary journeys, as evidenced by several "we" passages in the book of Acts.<sup>157</sup> Mark also wrote an NT book, and he received his

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<sup>145</sup> Deuteronomy 18:18-22

<sup>146</sup> Deuteronomy 13:1-5

<sup>147</sup> Hebrews 2:3-4

<sup>148</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>149</sup> Daniel 9:2

<sup>150</sup> Roger Nicole, "New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (London: Tyndale Press, 1959), 137-41.

<sup>151</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Brief Socio-Literary Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009) 57.

<sup>152</sup> John 19:35, II Peter 1:16

<sup>153</sup> Colossians 4:16, I Timothy 5:18, I Peter 3:16

<sup>154</sup> II Corinthians 11:1-6, Galatians 1:8

<sup>155</sup> II Timothy 4:11

<sup>156</sup> Luke 1:1-4

<sup>157</sup> 16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28

information from Peter, who was an eyewitness.<sup>158</sup> Jude was not a direct eyewitness, but was closely associated with James, the brother of Jesus.

The Pseudepigrapha contains books written after Christ's death by authors who either wrote 'gospels' that were false or who pretended to be eyewitnesses when they weren't.

Readers should note that there are references in the Bible to other sources of information, such as the reference to the Book of Jashar in Numbers 21:14. This simply means other written works offer some helpful pieces of information, but they are not part of the Biblical canon. Similarly, I may refer you to a nutrition book to acquire information on sodium intake, but that resource is not the standard of ultimate truth.

If you're wondering after all of that *how* we can trust that we've gotten it right and have reached a consensus on the right book, ultimately faith must rely on God Whom has brought all things together for good to bring His true word to light. God, being a God of love, intends the best for His people, and His words are our life. This is why Deuteronomy 32:47 says, "For it is not an idle word for you; indeed it is your life. And by this word you will prolong your days in the land ..." The Holy Spirit also convinces us in that the present Biblical canon finds validation in historical considerations and through the unified power the Word has on us when we read the Bible.

#### IV. Isn't the Bible self-contradictory?

This is a very important question. The short answer is 'no' because, as mentioned before, God is truthful, He is unable to lie, and He never contradicts Himself since all of His words are refined and tested.<sup>159</sup>

The great theologian Augustine once said, "If we are perplexed by any apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, The author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation wrong, or you have not understood."<sup>160</sup>

God never says anything hastily without thought nor is He divergent from His reliable character.<sup>161</sup> In addition, because God is omniscient, His thoughts are much higher than ours are,<sup>162</sup> and there are many secret things that God knows that we do not.<sup>163</sup> The apostle Peter tells us that some parts of the Bible are indeed "hard to understand."<sup>164</sup>

Finally, the truth is often difficult to digest, and we either reject that truth outright as non-truth<sup>165</sup> or recognize the truth as such but suppress it.<sup>166</sup> Our human perception is limited further by our inability to see the infinite, which Paul describes as looking into a dim mirror.<sup>167</sup> The Bible is a book written on many different levels, and one often finds that the deeper you go, ideas and concepts that originally were in opposition become revealed for what they truly are, eliminating the apparent contradiction. I don't want to casually breeze over this question, so I will expand much more on this in the next section.

Many people assume the Bible is farfetched from the start until something proves it right. The general problem with this approach is that it makes life unlivable. In a

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<sup>158</sup> I Peter 5:13

<sup>159</sup> II Samuel 7:28, Hebrews 6:18

<sup>160</sup> Augustine, "Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon" in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Anti-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

<sup>161</sup> Psalm 12:6, Proverbs 30:5-6

<sup>162</sup> Isaiah 55:9

<sup>163</sup> Deuteronomy 29:29

<sup>164</sup> II Peter 3:15-16

<sup>165</sup> Romans 1:18-19

<sup>166</sup> Romans 1:18-19

<sup>167</sup> I Corinthians 13:9

Biblical sense, many shun what is superficially implausible, say, “That can’t happen,” and use that as ‘proof’ that the Bible is false. The problem with this approach is that all other fields reject it. When I see a patient who has a problem but I can’t figure out what the diagnosis is, that doesn’t mean the person’s faking it (most of the time) or that his problem doesn’t exist. It simply means I haven’t asked enough of the right questions or dug deep enough to find an answer. If scientists gave up every time they encountered something they didn’t ‘get,’ we would all be stuck in the Stone Age. A Bible student, then, follows the same blueprint as an astute scientist—that the unknown is not a contradiction or utterly unexplainable but a worthwhile endeavor that rewards those who faithfully seek, study, learn, analyze, and research.

## V. How do I interpret the Bible?

A seminary professor of mine said that hermeneutics (Biblical interpretation) is about life, and your life invariably affects the way you interpret the Bible. No matter who you are your life experiences consciously and subconsciously affect what a verse means to you. Second, there is a distinct difference between *exegetis* and *eisegetis*. The former involves extracting meaning *from* the text; the latter involves putting your own meaning *into* the text. Whenever interpreting the Bible, always exegete and never, ever eisegete—otherwise, *you* are telling God what *you* think of *His* words. There is always a human temptation to reject what we read because we don’t like what God has to say, which equates to a suppression of the truth.<sup>168</sup> The true meaning of the Bible never changes, but our perception of that meaning does.

The way to approach Biblical interpretation is to realize that it is the inspired Word of God and thus needs to be read literally, but in this literal interpretation, there can be *figurative*, *descriptive*, and *prescriptive* passages. The whole must always interpret the part, so one verse or a part of one verse should never be interpreted out of the context in which it was said. As the saying goes, “A text out of context is pretext.” In other words, when reading anything, always ask yourself what was said before it, what was said after it, and what is the meaning of the text in the context of the entire Bible. *Context determines meaning and the whole interprets the part.*

For example, in Matthew 18:9 Christ says, “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell.” Reading this passage literally yields some frightening conclusions, but in the context of Matthew 18, we see that Jesus is talking about several obstacles one ought to remove in walking a path of obedience. Hence, this is a figurative expression among other figurative expressions. Moreover, we can confirm this is figurative because Levitical law prohibits self-mutilation,<sup>169</sup> and Christ said Himself in Matthew 5:17 that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

I’ve always liked how Mark Driscoll explains principles versus methods. He says, “Be careful not to confuse principles and methods. The principles of Scripture are timeless whereas the methods for obeying them are timely. The Bible allows both a closed hand of timeless truth and an open hand of timely methods. However, great error ensues when the two are confused. For example, Colossians 2:16 commands God’s people to ‘[sing] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.’ This is the timeless Biblical principle. To be obedient we must then develop cultural methods by deciding when the church gathers, who leads the singing, what songs are chosen, how many times each song is sung, what instruments (if any) are used, etc.”<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Romans 1:18

<sup>169</sup> Leviticus 19:28

<sup>170</sup> Mark Driscoll, *On the New Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 42.

Latter revelations also supplant prior revelations. This view of progressive revelation applies because God did not reveal everything He had to say at once, and people's conditions change over time. For example, the Book of Leviticus is filled with prescriptions on what people should do if they sin, and this typically involves a form of animal sacrifice. However, Christ died and paid the ultimate atoning price for all sin for everyone,<sup>171</sup> so these animal sacrifices are no longer needed. Hence, Christ's atonement supersedes the prior revelation.

It is also imperative to understand that although the Bible is the Word of God, He worked through human authors to produce the text, and as a result, each author produced unique flavors of the Bible. This includes authors quoting other humans (for example, poets<sup>172</sup>), and using sad and mournful language (Lamentations). In many books, the author's personality seeps through. Luke, for example, who wrote the third gospel and Acts, was a physician, so he uses very technical Greek and is detail oriented. As a healer, he also writes from the perspective of curing those with (spiritual) ailments. The book of Isaiah is prophetic but is also very poetic.

It is everyone's responsibility to be disciplined,<sup>173</sup> to read and study the Word,<sup>174</sup> allow the Word to guide him or her,<sup>175</sup> memorize the Word,<sup>176</sup> obey the Word,<sup>177</sup> and seek, teach, and share the Word with others.<sup>178</sup>

VI. What's with so many Bible versions?

The best way to read either testament is in the original language, meaning Hebrew for the OT and Greek for the NT. However, this goal may be undesirable for many Bible students, so there are many English versions for you to choose from to assist you.

Literal translations seek to be as faithful to the original language as possible and translate word-for-word without any deviation. In seeking technical accuracy, some poetic or linguistic nuances are lost. These versions include the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the English Standard Version (ESV).

Functional equivalence translations take a broader approach, attempt to convey the main idea of a passage, and are not as particular about single words. Here, words may be added or deleted to express an idea or theme the original language conveys. The most popular version of this type is the New International Version (NIV) and the New Living Translation (NLT).

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) tries to be as literal as possible but also may be free some of the time to make an idea as accurate in English as it was in the original language. The NRSV also incorporates language that is more gender-neutral and uses peripheral information to expand on how it translates the text.

Paraphrased versions emphasize the broad theme of a narrative; as a result, specific words become less important in pursuit of the poetic essence of a passage. Examples include The Living Bible (TLB) and The Message (TM).

A concordance is a book that allows you to look up an English word and find the appropriate Greek or Hebrew word and its definition. A concordance is an invaluable tool for any student of the Bible because it allows you to obtain the true meaning of the text. A concordance won't teach you these languages, but knowing what particular words mean will help you to dig deeper into the text. The gold standard in concordances is

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<sup>171</sup> Hebrews 10:11-14

<sup>172</sup> Acts 17:28

<sup>173</sup> I Timothy 4:7

<sup>174</sup> Luke 2:46-52

<sup>175</sup> Psalm 119:105.

<sup>176</sup> Proverbs 22:17-19

<sup>177</sup> Hebrews 4:15

<sup>178</sup> Luke 19:10, John 4.

*Strong's Concordance*. Many electronic Bibles offer an integrated concordance that allows you to click on any word and view a pop-up of the associated Hebrew/Greek words with definitions and descriptions.

## VII. An Overview of the Books of the Bible

### Old Testament

The OT starts with the words “In the beginning” and ends with the prophet Malachi about 400 years before the birth of Jesus. The OT details the start, development, and continuance of a relationship between God and His people. It moves through history, people, places, and events, but its main concern is how all these things relate to the divine purposes of God.

The main character of the OT is God, and all of the OT points toward Christ. For example, Moses was a mediator who liberated Israel from bondage, as Christ is the mediator between humanity and the Father. Jesus liberated us from sin and death. Isaac carried his own wood in preparation to be sacrificed by his father Abraham as Christ carried His own wooden cross and laid down his life for all of us. The blood of an innocent Passover lamb in Egypt spared the lives of Israel from God’s judgment just as Christ’s sinless and atoning blood produced the perfect sacrifice to save us all from condemnation. Jonah spent three days ‘down below’ in the belly of a great fish to eventually ‘come up’ and ‘save’ the city of Nineveh. Jesus rose from the dead three days later to save the whole world.

The *Pentateuch* (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) is the Bible’s first five books and is also known as the Torah in Judaism. Pentateuch means “five-volume book” or “one book in five parts.” Moses wrote the Pentateuch.<sup>179</sup>

Genesis is the Bible’s first book and, thus, the book of beginnings. It explains how our world and universe began, and how humans, sin, and the plan for redemption began. Genesis details many relationships, such as those between God and the world, God and humankind, and humans and one another. Genesis introduces us to the ‘founding fathers’ of Christianity and highlights God developing a relationship with *individuals and families*, starting with Abraham and ending with Joseph. Here is where you’ll also find the accounts of Adam, Eve, the Garden of Eden, Noah, and the flood. This book sets the tone for the rest of the Bible.

Exodus marks the beginning of a relationship between God and a *nation* (Israel) as its people are liberated from oppression in Egypt through a mediator (Moses). This book lays a theological foundation as God reveals His name (Yahweh), His law, and how He is to be worshipped. The tabernacle, or the mobile sanctuary Israel used in the wilderness, is the single subject to which the Bible devotes the most time. Here, God reveals Who exactly He is so His people can engage in a covenant with Him.

The key theme of Leviticus is holiness. By now God has established a covenant with His people, and He gives them rules and guidelines on how to be holy by distinguishing themselves from the world. Laws on communal operation, sacrifices, and the priesthood are given. (In fact, there are more than 600 laws in the Pentateuch).

In Numbers, Israel moves from Mount Sinai to the border of the Promised Land, but because of murmuring, the Israelites are punished for their sin and forced to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. Disobedience prevented inheritance, but God remained faithful to the covenant He had with His people in spite of their sin.

In Deuteronomy, Israel is outside of the Promised Land and Moses passes away before entering. He transfers leadership to Joshua. Here, the law is repeated to the people

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<sup>179</sup> Deuteronomy 31:24-26

to garner total commitment to and dependence on God to receive a blessing. At the end of his life, Moses uses this book to teach people how to live properly.

### History Books (Joshua through Esther)

Joshua leads the people of Israel into the Promised Land through military conquest. The people cross over the Jordan River and the walls of Jericho fall by God's power.

In Judges, Israel is in the Promised Land but there is no central leadership. Generally, the people are apostate and do whatever they see fit. Yet in a time of crisis, God raises up judges who push back foreign oppressors and restore peace to the people.

Ruth, the main character of the eighth book, is a Moabite woman and the great-grandmother of King David. Ruth is selflessly devoted to Naomi, another widow. In a reflection of God's unceasing love, Boaz marries Ruth, and their offspring fall in the line that bears Jesus.

In I and II Samuel, we see the rise of kingship in Israel, starting with a man-chosen king who fails (Saul) followed by a God-chosen king who succeeds in some areas. David establishes a theocracy and rules from Jerusalem. In his rise from being an unknown to a national hero, David defeats Goliath.

I and II Kings: After King David dies, his son Solomon rises to power and becomes wealthy and wise beyond comparison. Solomon, however, falls into sin, and after he dies, the united Israel is divided into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah). The prophets Elijah and Elisha are introduced, and the book ends when the Babylonians lay siege to Jerusalem and the temple. The Israelites are exiled.

I and II Chronicles are an account of recorded history (especially of kings) to show Israel how badly they behaved, to show them God's covenants still exist, and to encourage obedience.

In Ezra, the exiles return home and begin to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah, the exiles reconstruct Jerusalem's walls.

Esther, the main character in this book, acts as a mediator between the Persian king and the Jewish people to spare their lives and preserve the ancestors that would ultimately produce Jesus.

### Wisdom and Poetry (Job to Song of Solomon)

Job tackles the issue of theodicy and exemplifies the great faith of the main character.

Psalms is the Bible's longest book and has over 100 hymns, laments, and songs of praise, remembrance, and thanksgiving.

Proverbs gives practical advice on how to live everyday life and live it wisely.

Ecclesiastes addresses the meaning of life and explains how to enjoy life. The true meaning of joy and work are also discussed.

Song of Solomon contains poetic love songs written by a man to his bride. This is the Bible's raciest book by far.

### The Prophets (Isaiah to Malachi)

The NT quotes Isaiah about 400 times. Generally, Isaiah examines the dreadful effects of sin and disobedience, and then discusses the ultimate redemption of servants of God. Isaiah repeatedly looks ahead toward Christ.

Jeremiah is the 'weeping prophet.' He recurrently speaks about the punishing effects of sin, prophesizes against other nations, and details a new covenant with God's people in light of their failure to keep the law.

Lamentations is a melancholy book that examines sin and grieves about its destructive power.

Ezekiel is a prophet who spoke to the people from Babylon while in exile. He identifies sin as the cause of Babylonian captivity. He anticipates the return of the people to Judah and their restoration.

Daniel, who also prophesizes in Babylon, is a dream interpreter who is thrown into the lion's den and survives. He sees visions that allude to Christ in the future.

Hosea marries a prostitute, typifying God's faithfulness to His people who continually violate the covenant they have made with Him.

Joel looks forward to a day when history ends and the penalty for sin is paid. He also speaks of a plague of locusts that afflicts the people because of sin.

Amos attempts to call the people to repentance when their faith and obedience waver during a time of economic prosperity.

Obadiah condemns Edom for waging war against the people of God.

Jonah is called to preach to the evil city of Nineveh. The prophet tries to flee from God but becomes shipwrecked before being swallowed by a great fish and spending three days in its belly. Subsequently, the Ninevites see the error of their ways and are saved.

Micah speaks out against the people in a time of great inequality, when the 'haves' make their fortunes at the expense of the 'have-nots.'

Nahum proclaims judgment against Nineveh for harming God's people.

Habakkuk has faith but the people don't, and he speaks to God looking for clarity throughout this book.

Zephaniah confirms that the ultimate penalty for sin is death, yet God remains faithful to the promise to redeem those who believe in Him.

In Haggai, orders to rebuild the temple are given in preparation for Jesus's arrival.

Zechariah looks forward to Christ, attempts to call the apostate to repentance, and has visions meant to encourage the rebuilding of the temple.

Malachi is the last book of the OT and states that John the Baptist will come to pave the way for Christ.

## New Testament

The NT is about everything that happened just before Christ was born, the life of Jesus, the experiences of his disciples, and the events in the early church. The main theme of the NT is the gospel or the good news that Christ has arrived and opened the door for everyone who believes in Him to be saved and have eternal life. Again, the main character of the NT is God.

The Synoptic (or "seeing together") Gospels are four accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus. Each gospel is characterized by the unique vantage point of the observer.

Matthew was a disciple, Jew, and tax collector. He writes to convince fellow Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. Hence, Matthew frequently relies on OT quotations.

Mark was not a disciple but a companion to the disciple Peter. His gospel is the shortest and speaks primarily to a Roman audience. He focuses on Jesus's actions and miracles.

Luke, a gentile, was not a disciple and heavily researched his book from eyewitness accounts. He was a doctor and, therefore, was very precise and detail oriented. He wrote to a gentile audience.

John was a disciple and a Jew. His gospel addresses the Greek-speaking world and goes into great detail about the person of Jesus. While the other three gospels are roughly similar, John stands apart as unique and personal.

Luke also wrote Acts. This book details the happenings of the early church, the spread of the gospel after Christ's ascension, Pentecost, and the conversion of Paul. Here, the Holy Spirit does many wonderful and marvelous things in the lives of believers.

The Epistles (or letters) were written to an individual or a church in a particular city. Each epistle was written with a purpose, and that purpose included to instruct others, correct incorrect doctrine, warn someone, or as a means of praise. Paul wrote most of the NT letters.

Romans is an extremely intellectual and theological letter written to those in Rome. Its aim is to explain the basic gospel and salvation, righteousness, and justification by faith. Essentially, Paul wrote to a church that hadn't received the gospel to describe what exactly the gospel is.

I and II Corinthians are two letters to the church in Corinth that was behaving badly and engaging in immoral behavior. Paul explains what appropriate Christian conduct should be, clarifies any confusion they had about their immoral behavior, and describes what proper interpersonal relationships should look like in the church.

Galatians can be summarized as *by faith alone through grace alone*. Here Paul corrects the fallacy that what we do actually saves us. Galatians says we are justified only by faith in Jesus, through the power of grace. The fruits of the Spirit are detailed here.

Ephesians is not a response to anything, but attempts to give readers a better understanding of the timeless purposes of God. With this understanding and the high standard God has for the church, Paul describes how to fulfill that calling and be the best servant of Christ you can be.

Philippians was written to the church in Philippi to thank it for the monetary gift it sent to Paul. He encourages the church members to stand tall in times of crisis, promotes unity, and warns against those in their midst who wish to spread false doctrine.

Colossians refutes the heresies in the church at Colossae. Many secular ideologies mingled with Christianity, and Paul draws the line between what is true doctrine and what is false doctrine.

I and II Thessalonians was written to the young church in Thessalonica. Paul encourages new converts, inspires those facing persecution, and gives advice on how to live day-to-day. He corrects the false perception that Christ would be coming very, very soon.

I and II Timothy form the first part of the 'Pastoral Epistles.' Paul writes to Timothy who has been left to deal with the confusion that ensues after a church is established and needs some direction and guidance to steer the organization toward health. Church leadership is discussed.

Titus is a letter written by Paul to the man of the same name. He gives Titus guidance on opposition, warns against heresies, and details general instructions on proper conduct.

In Philemon, Paul writes a letter to this person on behalf of Onesimus. He encourages both men to demonstrate Christ-centered love for one another and conduct themselves in a manner befitting of Christians.

Hebrews demonstrates how Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the OT in every single way.

I, II and III John answers the question "How do I know I'm a Christian?" by explaining the life-altering changes being a Christian brings. These three books also debunk heresies.

I and II Peter serve as letters of encouragement and sources of strength for Christians enduring persecution for their faith.

The message of James is simple: faith produces works. In other words, when you call yourself a Christian, you will behave in a way that mirrors your new identity.

Jude is a warning against immoral people, false doctrines, and the power of such dangers to taint the pure doctrine.

Revelation is the Bible's final book, written by the apostle John to encourage believers and warn them to stay away from false or perverse forms of worship. Here at

the end of the Bible is the goal of worship, just as the end of our Christian walk ends in the ceaseless, ordered, bountiful worship of God.

### **For Further Study**

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## CHAPTER IV: CREATION & SIN

The doctrine of creation is important to understand, because it not only sets the tone for everything else to follow, but it also gives all believers profound insight into who we really are ...

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