

# Ten Tough Questions and Answers about Christianity

## 1. Is there really a God?

Recent polls show that as many as 96 percent of all Americans strongly believe in the existence of a God who is holy and perfect, and who created the world and rules it today. But is there really a God? You cannot prove that God exists, at least by normal scientific methods. If it's beyond our five senses to examine, then we can't use science to either prove or disprove. But think about it, no one has ever seen love, yet we all know it's real. No one has ever smelled freedom, but it exists. The key is to look for evidence that would support whether or not it's reasonable to believe in the existence of God. Christians believe that such evidence exists in abundance.

For example, the leading hypothesis for the beginning of the universe is the "Big Bang" theory, which maintains that at one time all matter was packed into a dense mass at temperatures of many trillions of degrees. Then, roughly 4 billion years ago, there was a huge explosion. From that explosion, all of the matter that today forms our planets and stars was born. The great cosmological question is "What caused the Big Bang?" Even more important, where did the matter come from - you can't have something come from nothing!

Dr. Robert Jastrow, professor of Astronomy at both Columbia University and Dartmouth College, director of the Mount Wilson Institute and manager of the Mount Wilson Observatory, and for twenty years director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies, made the following comment in regard to the Big Bang:  
"Now we see how the astronomical evidence leads to a biblical view of the origin of the world.

"But there's far more than "cause and effect" to consider, there is the great order and design of the world as well. Imagine you came upon a space shuttle sitting in the middle of the desert. You could reason that it came together by chance through a chaotic sandstorm. But your initial thought would likely be that someone made it and placed it there. Buildings imply an architect, paintings suggest a painter. There is design in the universe, so it's reasonable to assume that there is a Great Designer. The alternative is that infinite time plus chance, in the context of chaos, created incredible order and purpose. This would be akin to having the software for the latest windows application result - by chance - from an explosion in a computer warehouse.

Physicist Stephen Hawking once told a reporter that "The odds against a universe like ours emerging out of something like the big bang are enormous...I think clearly there are religious implications."

And so do Christians.

The debate is hardly academic. More consequence for thought and action flow from this one question than any other question you can raise.

## 2. What is God like?

Most of us have a picture of God in our minds that we have drawn, usually based on a series of ideas, feelings and past experiences from our life. Christianity presents a picture of God that is both unique and compelling, but it may be a picture that's very different than the one you've drawn before.

### The Cosmic Cop

Some images of God portray Him as some kind of "cosmic cop," a Being whose mission in life is to catch us doing something wrong in order to punish us.

There's no doubt that Christianity presents God as one of justice and truth, right and wrong, but the Bible also teaches that God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love (Psalm 103:8). The Bible contains countless references to God's tenderness, His patience, His sensitivity to our weaknesses, and His desire to be our Friend.

### Santa Claus

Some images of God seem to portray Him as a celestial Santa Claus, a grandfatherly type who smiles at everything we do, and then pats us on the head while giving us whatever it is we want. This is a picture of God that's safe, comfortable, convenient, warm and fuzzy -- regardless of how we live. According to the Bible, this is every bit as distorted as seeing God as the "cosmic cop." Instead, the Christian faith presents a God who is to be taken very, very seriously.

### A Big Man

Some pictures see God as little more than a "big man," a John Wayne figure that is like us, only more. But while God is a Person and is personal, He is not an advanced human being. Instead, the Bible says that "God is spirit" (John 4:24), who is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Timothy 1:17). While the Bible often uses physical imagery as a literary device to discuss the personality of God, He is not made of flesh and blood. His nature and being goes far beyond a superhuman version of us.

### The Force

Finally, some ideas picture God like the "force" in the Star Wars movies, seeing everything as God. Therefore God is not "He," or even personal, but an "it." The Bible does teach that God surrounds and guides the universe, and that God is present everywhere; He is Spirit - but that's where the comparison ends. The very basis of the Christian faith is that God is a Person, and wants to be in a personal relationship with each one of us.

### The Real God

A man once expressed to his Christian friend the frustration of many spiritual seekers when he asked, "Why doesn't God make it clear - why doesn't He just come down and make His existence conclusively known, letting everyone know exactly who He is and what He is like?"

His friend's answer surprised him:

"He did. That is why Christians believe that Jesus is so important."

### **3. Why is Jesus so important?**

...Why are Christians intrigued by a lone historical figure from the distant past? This question is particularly pressing when you consider that His life didn't seem destined for greatness. He was born into poverty, living in an obscure village. He didn't go to high school or college. He never visited a large city. In fact, he never traveled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He was only 33-years old when the tide of public opinion turned against him, prompting even His closest friends to abandon him. He was then turned over to His enemies and was nailed to a wooden cross between two criminals. While He was dying, His executioners gambled for His clothing, the only property He had on earth. After he died, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of an acquaintance. Yet almost two thousand years have come and gone, and today he is arguably the central figure of the entire human race. Why? It begins with His life.

#### **Why His life matters**

Christians believe the life of Jesus matters first because of who he was - God in human form - which was Jesus' claim for himself (for example, see John 8:48-59; 10:36; 14:6). Second, His life matters because of how he lived. As God in human form, He lived a perfect life and gave us the best picture of how life ought to be lived. Finally, His life matters because of what he taught. Christians sense within the teachings of Jesus an authority and truth that isn't found anywhere else.

#### **Why His death matters**

Christians believe that the death of Jesus matters because it was in our place. Sin in our life is serious business, and separates us from God, leading to eternal, spiritual death. Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sin so that we wouldn't have to. Through the sacrificial death of Jesus, our relationship with God can be restored and spiritual death can be avoided.

#### **Why His resurrection matters**

But Jesus' life and death pales in comparison to why Jesus matters the most to Christians - after His death, the Bible maintains that Jesus rose from the dead. This is what the celebration of Easter is all about: the resurrection of Jesus, which gives Christians the ability to trust in Him, have a new beginning in life, experience power for living, and look to the future with hope. As the Bible teaches, "Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we've been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven" (1 Peter 1:3).

## **4. Does Christianity work?**

Scott Peck opened up his best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*, with three profound words: Life is difficult. And he's right - it is. And many seekers begin their spiritual search not for the discovery of truth, but for the discovery of coping strategies, for survival, for a way to make it through another day. As one man said to me, "I need to know whether or not it's true, but I also need to know whether or not it works."

Christianity begins its practical relevance for the human life with the life of Jesus, a working, compelling model of how life is to be lived. By enacting what we ought to be like, he showed who we were meant to be.

Christianity also has the most relevant, comprehensive handbook imaginable in the Bible. And what it has to say is relevant to every aspect of life, such as marriage, parenting, relationships, finances, business, self-image and family life.

Also, Christianity offers us power for living. And we need power - not only to endure the stress and struggle of life, but to experience lasting, authentic life-change in the areas of our weaknesses.

Finally, Christianity can make a claim to work because of its astounding track record in the lives of millions of Christians throughout time and history.

## **5. Aren't there many ways to God?**

What is to be avoided is a spirit that persecutes someone for their differing beliefs, or denies them their religious freedom. But this spirit of tolerance is very different than believing that all points of view are equally valid. Ultimately, the question is whether or not we believe in truth. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, except through me!" (John 14:6, LB). Not a way, a truth, or a life, but the way, truth and life.

And this idea marks the Christian faith. In the book of Acts, we read the apostle Peter proclaiming that, "It is by the name of Jesus Christ... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:10, 12, NIV). While there may be an initial shock to this outrageous claim, it should not be dismissed simply because there are so many other religions and religious ideas.

While there are many from which to choose, they differ radically from each other, and choosing where to place your spiritual trust is neither narrow-minded or intolerant.

Truth exists, and it matters. If all roads do not lead to God, then our spiritual search will lead us to the scandalous reality of one way. Christians believe that way is through a person -- Jesus Christ.

## 6. How does someone explore Christianity?

There's nothing more important than your spiritual search. Christianity, as the world's largest religion, deserves anyone's serious attention. So how do you go about authentically exploring Christianity?

First, decide that you're going to maintain an open mind. This doesn't mean the blind acceptance of whatever you explore, just an openness to what might be discovered. To authentically seek means that you have a healthy balance between solid investigation and a willingness to accept what you find.

Second, determine what it is you're looking for, and make sure it's fair. Most seekers would say that they're looking for a relationship with God so that they can order their lives accordingly. And that's fair. But we don't always stop there. Sometimes we tack things on to our search that are not fair, such as "I want whatever I find to solve all of my problems -- instantly." A relationship with God certainly addresses our problems and helps us with them, but never promises to instantly remove them. Another unfair expectation is to expect what you find to compliment your lifestyle instead of change it. Since our deepest needs and issues are spiritual in nature, we should expect our search to lead us to the deepest corners of our life.

The third step is to check out the source documents of the Christian faith which are found within the pages of the Bible. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written by over forty authors over a period of several hundred years. Christians believe that the Bible is where God reveals truth about Himself which could not otherwise be known by ourselves. When you do this, make sure you start off with a modern translation. Also, it is often best to start your reading off with one of the four biographies of the life of Jesus, which would be the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John (named after the men who wrote them). After that, go to a book like James, which will give you a taste of what patterning your life after Christ looks like. Then read the first book, Genesis, and get some answers to some of the foundational questions of human existence in light of what you've learned about Christ. After you get those three read, jump in wherever you want.

A fourth suggestion is to be sure you focus on the identity of Jesus. He really is the heart of the Christian faith. And finally, find a church that will let you start where you are as you explore the Christian faith. In other words, find a church that will let you come as a seeker and will attempt to serve your seeking process. This will let you talk firsthand with folks who are Christians. Listen to their stories, raise your questions, enter into a dialogue with them about their faith. Grace Community is just such a church!

## **7. How come some Christians are such hypocrites?**

The media has been deluged with stories of ministers who have been charged with molesting young children, church leaders who have embezzled funds from church accounts, and pastors caught in adulterous affairs. Scores of religious celebrities and leaders have been exposed in recent years for sexual or financial impropriety. But it's not just Christians that disappoint, but their institutions. As a result, more and more seekers are saying, "Spirituality, yes. Church, no."

When those who claim to follow Christ are immoral, inflexible, strange, uptight, unloving, judgmental or hypocritical, it casts shadows on the faith itself. And when our experience with the Christian community involves being bored, or even worse, burned, it is tempting to walk away from Christianity altogether. Yet disappointed people who continue their exploration of the Christian faith have often done so by reminding themselves of the following spiritual truths:

While somewhat trite, the phrase, "Christians are not perfect, just forgiven", is important to remember. What is behind many -- not all, but many -- charges and accusations against the character and integrity of Christians is the demand for perfection in the life of anyone who claims to be a Christian and urges others to consider Christianity as well. But an authentic Christian is not someone who is perfect, just someone who has come to God for forgiveness and a relationship. Despite their imperfections, Christians should not stand in the way of your relationship with Christ.

## 8. If God is good, why is there so much suffering?

The Bible teaches that God is all-powerful, able to do anything he wants. The Bible also teaches that God is thoroughly good. Yet bad things happen. Some people wonder why, if *"All choices come with consequences, or they were never really choices."*

God is good and all-powerful, He lets bad things happen. Since they do happen, maybe you think that either God isn't good or He isn't all-powerful.

The Bible teaches that God made us to love us. Because of this, God gave us the freedom to respond to that love, or to reject it. Love is meaningless unless it is freely given and freely received. The first use of free will, according to the Bible, was by the first humans, Adam and Eve. They made the purposeful choice to disobey God and remove themselves from his leadership. Each of us, like Adam and Eve, has used our free will in ways that have reflected rebellion and disobedience against God.

All choices come with consequences, or they were never really choices. The decision to reject God's leadership altered God's original design for how the world would operate and how life would be lived, ushering in sin and evil as well as the consequences of sin and evil. Theologians have termed this "the fall," and point out that we now live in a "fallen" world.

God is not the author of sin and suffering -- we are. God let us choose, and we did. Even though it can be used in a way that rejects His love and can have terrible consequences, God has determined that the gift of free will is worth it. Could God step in and stop the consequences of our choices? Yes, but He doesn't, for to do so would violate our free will, and the violation of free will would end the possibility of a true relationship between us and God.

So where is God in the suffering? Right in the middle of it. He's in grief over how free will was used to reject Him. That's why he has invested Himself in the process of healing the wounds that have come from our choice, by entering into the suffering process with us in order to lift us out of it. Jesus on the cross was God entering into the reality of human suffering, experiencing it just like we do, in order to demonstrate that even when we used our free will to reject him, his love never ended.

God could wipe out all evil and suffering this very day. But if at midnight tonight God decreed that all evil would be stamped out in the universe, not a single person would be here at 12:01. God's hope is that you'll instead be given the time to search, and that your search will result in an authentic relationship with Him. So the real question is whether you, as a seeker, will allow the reality of pain and suffering to drive you away from God, or to Him.

## 9. How do I become a Christian?

Let's say that you have found in Christ what you are looking for. You're ready to enter into a relationship with God through Christ. What do you do then? The Bible points to four simple, but very important, steps. You need to admit that you are, quite frankly, a sinner in need of a savior. No rationalizations, no cop outs, no excuses or qualifications. The first step toward becoming a Christian is total honesty and self-awareness of being a sinner before a holy God. The second step is that you must realize that you can't save yourself by your good works, salvation is a free gift. The third step is to come to the message that God has given in the Bible, with belief.

The message of the Bible is that Jesus was God in human form. God Himself became a man so that we would know what to think about when we think of God. As a man, Jesus lived the most perfect life ever known. Then He died, and was raised from the dead -- to take away the sin of the world, and to become the savior of all people. Which leads to the fourth and final step.

After you have admitted your sin, and acknowledged that you cannot save yourself, and received the message of the Bible in belief, you then reach out and receive the gift of what Christ did for you through his death on the cross, by faith alone. You should have been on the cross -- I should have been on the cross. But God, in His love and mercy, chose to provide a way out. That gift was the forgiveness of our sins through the full payment of our sin penalty, which opened the door for us to be restored relationally with God.

At the end of your search, when you come face to face with Christ, there is one and only one question that must be answered: will you believe, and then receive the gift of salvation and a relationship with God through Christ?

Saying "Yes" is just one prayer away. If you would like to do that, here is how you can pray: first, begin by admitting to God that you are a sinner. Then tell him you want to be forgiven for those sins. Next, tell him that you want to receive Christ as your Savior and as the one who paid for your sin.

Finally, thank him for doing it! If you pray that prayer, and really mean it - if you come to Christ for salvation - then you've become a Christian. Bells and sirens may not go off, but something miraculous and of eternal significance has taken place. Your life will never be the same.

## 10. Is the Bible reliable?

First, the Bible was endorsed by Jesus. Today, a book's credibility is often bolstered by "blurbs" written on the book jacket by a famous person or an expert in a particular field.

Their credibility is used to establish the book's credibility. For the Christian, there's no more credible figure in history than Jesus, and he threw his entire weight behind the Bible (see Matthew 5:18; John 10:35).

Second, the integrity of any ancient writing is determined by the number of documented manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts we have to examine. For example, there are less than ten existing copies of the ancient manuscripts of Plato which are available to study and compare in order to determine the accuracy and quality of the transmission of his writings throughout the years. The oldest of these manuscripts is a copy dating about 1400 years after it was originally written.

When it comes to the Bible, there are over 5,000 handwritten manuscripts in the Greek language in support of the New Testament alone that help us ensure the accuracy of its writings. Many of the earliest copies are separated from the originals not by 1400 years, but by only twenty-five to fifty years. Simply put, the Bible is the most dependable ancient document in all of history in terms of textual credibility.

Third, the Bible has been supported at every juncture by archaeology. Sir William Ramsay of Oxford University, regarded as one of the greatest archaeologists ever to have lived, concluded upon his own examination that the writers of the Bible are historians of the first rank that should be placed along with the very greatest of historians. So overwhelming was the support of the archaeological evidence that Ramsay eventually became a Christian.

The historical integrity of the Bible also extends to the Bible's record of such things as the teachings of Jesus. Recent evidence has determined that such biblical records as the gospel of Matthew are truly firsthand eyewitness accounts written as early as 50 AD, as opposed to layers of stories and traditions that were added over a kernel of Matthew's actual writings throughout history. The Bible is the most reliable document imaginable, and can be read by the spiritual seeker with confidence.

