

Introduction to Christianity

The Gospel

The most fundamental decision mankind has the power to make is whether or not they would serve God if He exists. For those who don't care, the existence of God is a pointless debate; for those who *do* care it leads to purpose in life.

The gospel is simple: As humans we all fail, so no relationship involving humans can last without forgiveness.

When we forgive we accept the damage caused by another because we care more about them than the damage they have done. Blaming anything or anyone for the damage that we have caused is merely a form of denial. We cannot proceed until we have squarely faced the reality of our own failures.

When Jesus was crucified He took damage for the sins of us all upon himself, so we could enter into a relationship with God. This makes a relationship with God possible for all who would individually choose it – with the non-choice being rejection.

This choice we either make or ignore, determines our eternal destiny.

Where the Bible came from

This collection of ancient documents was compiled over a period of at least fifteen hundred years. Its authors included tribal leaders, kings, farmers, warriors, prophets, scholars, prime ministers, and at least one world ruler. Some of the writings recorded oral traditions from yet earlier centuries, and some were based upon documents of still earlier origin.

It was the tradition of the ancient Hebrew scribes to count the characters in a new copy, and locate characters in the one-quarter, one-half, and three-quarter positions of the document. The characters at these positions were then compared with those in similar positions within the original. If the numbers and characters did not match in all cases, the new hand-copied manuscript was burned.

So precise was this scholarship that when a copy of the book of Isaiah was discovered which had been written three hundred years before the earliest find to date, the match was still exact. The New Testament, though not under the meticulous supervision of the ancient Jewish scribes, has likewise been found to be incredibly accurate.

The events of the included history, names of places, kings, and key characters etc. have been confirmed by literally hundreds of contemporary documents, and also by overwhelming archeological evidence.

Bible Overview

The Bible consists of two major sections, commonly called “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” These are usually packaged together in one volume – although the New Testament is sometimes available by itself.

“Testament” is another word for “covenant.” The old covenant between God and man understood that man was incapable of being perfect, and therefore incapable of fellowship with God. To get around this problem an animal was taken, symbolically loaded with a man’s sins, and killed for these sins in place of the man. This left the man ritualistically pure, and therefore able to relate to God.

Killing an animal in itself isn’t going to impress God, but these sacrifices indicated a recognition on the part of man that he was impure and could not get to God on the basis of his own righteousness. It also gave man an awareness of the life-and-death seriousness of sin, and of his dependence upon the blood atonement for his relationship with God.

While for man’s part these sacrifices reflected the understanding and sincerity of his heart towards God, they were tied to the yet-future sacrifice of God’s own Son – the ultimate and only effective blood

atonement. None of the animal-based blood atonement of the Old Testament would have had any significance before God if it had not been prophetically tied to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

The New Covenant – the new basis for man’s relationship with God – is now based upon the historical fact of God’s ultimate sacrifice. There is now no more need for the ritual of killing an animal for the sake of one’s sins. To do so now would be blasphemous, in that it would declare that the blood of Jesus was adequate.

Man still relates to God through recognition of his own sins, and of his dependence upon God’s forgiveness. Now however, he recognizes that the sacrifice has already been made, and accepts his own part in it. He enters into a relationship with God by acknowledging his sin to God, and accepting the sacrifice of Christ as the basis of purity. The relationship that begins in this manner is what Christians are speaking of when we use the term “born again”. Such a starting point begins life’s ultimate and greatest adventure.

Anatomy of the book

The Old Testament makes up about three fourths of the Bible. It chronicles the path of man’s relationship with God up to about 450 B.C. The New Testament begins a little before the birth of Jesus and carries the account to approximately the end of the first generation of Christians. Both of these volumes are laced with prophecies that extend into and beyond our present time.

The first five books of the Old Testament cover the dawn of creation through the establishment of Israel as a nation after their exodus from Egypt. This set is referred to variously as the Torah, the Pentateuch, the books of law, and the books of Moses. Within this group you will find the foundations of civil code that have served many nations in the thousands of years since that time.

The next group of books (Joshua through Ester) cover this history to the time when the Jews returned to Israel after their seventy years of captivity in Babylon in about 450 B.C.

These are followed by literature, songs, and poetry (Job through Song of Solomon).

Finally, we have the books of Isaiah through Malachi, which are the words of the prophets from the time Israel was ruled by kings until after they returned from Babylonian captivity.

The first four books of the New Testament are accounts of the life of Christ by four very different people. They frequently overlap, but there are also the types of differences you would get from people viewing the same event from different parts of a crowd. You will also find different levels of detail, and different events considered noteworthy by the various writers from different backgrounds. There are also varying sequences for some things, since two of these books were written many years later, and are partially organized by subject rather than by chronology.

The book of Acts provides early church history, from the ascension of Jesus into heaven until the death of the apostle Paul.

From there we get into various letters – or “epistles”, to use a more churchy term. These were written to navigate the early church through cultural conflicts and other hazards, and to encourage and guide in the practical implementation of sound doctrine. To this day they remain relevant to churches of *all* cultures and denominations.

The book of Revelation relates information given by God to the apostle John. John was an old man at the time, and the Roman government had sentenced him to finish his years working in a coal mine on an island called Patmos. This revelation was in the form of a sequence of visions interspersed with instruction and explanations. Although some of the content related to then-current situations, most of it pertained to future events.

Fundamentals

The Bible is blunt. Its characters are portrayed in merciless reality, with no more selective respect than an earthquake. Extreme defects are revealed among its greatest heroes – adultery, murder, cowardice, and hypocrisy are among them. The Bible confronts its readers the same way. The deepest secrets of the heart are laid bare without alarm or fanfare. Failures are not blamed or excused; they are simply recognized and managed. The Bible demands reality, and guides its readers into the power to live in reality. This power takes the form of both rational insights and supernatural guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Fundamentalism accepts the Bible as written, along with its assessment of human nature. This assessment is perhaps best stated in Jeremiah chapter seventeen, verse nine: “The heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick: Who can understand it?”

The spiritual consequence of this condition is that of a monumental barrier between mankind and God. There can be no relationship between the two while this status of sin remains.

The ancient sacrifices represented man’s acknowledgment of his condition (or of specific acts of wickedness) and the acceptance of God’s forgiveness. By presenting a sacrifice, a man was accepting full responsibility for his guilt without excuse or blame. He also recognized and accepted that this sin resulted in separation from a perfect God. The animal – most commonly a lamb – represented an innocent and perfect soul, devoid of sin. The sins of the man were ritualistically placed upon the animal, and then the animal was slain, receiving a death sentence for sins that it had never committed. The petitioner, having had his guilt-debt paid, was now free to communicate with God.

These sacrifices were in turn symbolic of the then future sacrifice of Jesus Himself. Jesus’ ministry was introduced by the pronouncement of John the Baptist: “Behold the lamb of God, which takes away the sins of the world.” When Jesus was crucified, the veil of the temple was ripped from top to bottom, declaring that the sin barrier between God and man had been eliminated. God had both provided and accepted this sacrifice.

All that remains now is for people to accept it on an individual basis. The form of this acceptance is similar to that required in previous times: (a) A desire for a relationship with God (b) Acknowledgment of disqualification because of sin. (c) Accepting sin-free status before God, based upon Jesus having been sacrificed in the petitioner’s place.

These basics define the core doctrines of Christianity, and separate it from other religions. Because the theme of blood atonement is so ingrained throughout the scriptures, there is little opportunity for disagreement among honest scholars who actually study them.

The nature and identity of Jesus is perhaps the clearest point of separation between Christianity and the many imitations. The Bible declares Jesus to be the agent by and through whom all things were created – whether physical or spiritual. Although the mechanics of this boggle the mind and spawn various theories, Jesus is repeatedly portrayed in the Bible as an integral part of God. All other religions employ a different Jesus, who is less than the unique expression of the power behind the universe. The more typical departure is to make their “Jesus” some form of prototype, concept, ascended, or super human.

Beyond these issues (i.e. the acceptance of forgiveness through the sufferings of Christ, and the identity of Christ), there are many things about which less clear information is given.

Those lesser issues have resulted in variations in institutional practices, as Christianity has blossomed and grown in an endless variety of cultures over the past two thousand years.

Reading carefully

No document in history has been stretched, lied about, and generally abused as much as the Bible. It has been distorted to justify everything from the Spanish Inquisition to help clothe naked animals, both

sides of the American Civil War, the conquests of Charlemagne, and the Reformation. Extreme stretchings in more recent times would include things like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses.

Most of these abuses can be sorted out by whether or not the "Jesus" they use complies with that which is clearly and repeatedly taught in the Bible. This is a *very* – if not *the* most – important guide in separating doctrinal trash from treasure: "What does the Bible say?" Although there are many verses that clearly define Jesus as the absolute ruler of the universe through whom it was created, I will offer only three quotes here. I'll leave it to the reader to study further if there remains any doubt:

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being.

Colossians 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation: 16 for by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or rulers, or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

Hebrews 1:2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the world.

The Bible is the straight edge by which all valid doctrines must be compared. If it says something once, it is true, but there may be historical or cultural factors in play that could significantly affect our understanding and the intent of the author.

Essential doctrines will be visible throughout the history and cultures referenced in the Bible. Such repetition clarifies the essence of these teachings.

Jesus describes the kingdom of Heaven as seed planted in a field, as a hidden treasure for which the field containing it is purchased, and as leaven mixed with flour. Such varied examples clarify and provide more rounded comprehensions of the subjects at hand. The Gospels for instance, were written by four very different people with different perspectives on life, and they were written at different times. Two of them were partially arranged by subject, rather than as rigid chronologies.

Another important practice in understanding the Bible is context. Why was something written? What was the surrounding discussion within which it occurred? What was the over-all theme and intent of the book in which it was found?

The safest way to evaluate a doctrine is to compare it with what other verses in the Bible say, rather than relying upon the opinions of conflicting theologians. Education is a good thing, but we need to remember that the Pharisees were also great theologians.

Also consider is what the Bible does not say. As Christianity has blossomed among the countless and ever changing cultures of this world, various regions may impose restrictions upon themselves that are not specifically outlawed by the Bible. Sometimes this is very wise. I fellowship with one group that forbids the consumption of alcohol. Some of them have histories of vulnerability to this substance, and we have chosen to refuse alcohol for their sakes and our own. We need to be careful what we may judge or impose upon others. Some have dress codes; some have dietary concerns; some have sacraments or special holidays; some have political passions different from our own. Love, embrace, and be at peace as much as possible.

The gift of time

God has given humankind the power to choose to love or not love, and yet he has granted us eternal life. How can this be? In the scope of eternity people who are free to choose their feelings and actions would eventually do and think everything it would be possible to do or think.

So God has given us both free will and eternal life by limiting our free will to the outset of our eternal destinies. We can stand in gratitude that we only have these options for a given period of time. When the music stops, our decisions with regard to God are cast for eternity.

But we are only human; what if we stumble? When we fail, there is no power in hell that can keep us down if we choose to repent and get up (see Romans 8:11). Also consider **Romans 8:38** “**For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**”

