

*WHAT
CHRISTIANITY IS*



This pamphlet sets out, as simply as possible, the basic beliefs all Christians share.

BELIEF IN GOD

Christians believe in God. That's basic. But so have most people throughout history. The vast majority of the human race has always believed that the world was made by God, or by a number of gods. It seems obvious.

The ancient Jewish King David wrote a song about it. It is Psalm 19, and it begins, "How clearly the sky reveals God's glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next."

BELIEF IN THE BIBLE

But God has revealed himself not only through what he has made. He has also revealed himself through the Bible. If we tried to work out what God was like only through what he has made, we could miss out on a lot of things. It's like trying to understand a person only through their cooking or gardening or welding or sewing. We could learn many more things about them if they spoke to us or wrote us letters. In the Bible God does exactly that: he speaks to us.

In the first book of the Bible, called Genesis, we meet the God of Creation: "In the beginning God created the universe". From the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, the same message recurs. "Our Lord and God! You are worthy to receive glory, honour and power. For you created all things, and by your will they were given existence and life." (Rev 4:11). This quotation tells us how we ought to relate to him. He made and rules the Universe, which includes us, and he deserves our worship.

BELIEF IN GOD'S AUTHORITY

When God made the human race he made us to rule over Creation, under God's own authority, by God's own standards. (You'll find an account of this in Chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Genesis.) Since God is loving and just and merciful, the human race was supposed to rule over the Creation in love and justice and mercy.

God is good. God made a good world. Look at it. Look at a clean beach, look at an unravaged

mountainside. Listen to a bird sing, catch the glint of light on the morning dew beading a spider's web . . . you will see how good it is.

But mankind said, "We reject your authority over us, we will run our own lives our own way without God." We made a power grab. It was not enough to have the world, we also had to have our own way.

Our rebellion has led to the horrors we see on the television news. In rebelling against God, who is the source of life and love and light, we brought death and pain and darkness into the world. And God, who is perfectly just, perfectly loving, condemns us for it. We have asked God to leave us alone. The danger is that he will. Forever.

BELIEF IN GOD'S MERCY

Paul wrote to a group of Christians in Thessalonica, that God will ". . . punish those who reject God and who do not obey the Good News about our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from his glorious might" (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

The only light in this darkness is that God's nature is also perfect love and perfect mercy.

BELIEF IN ONE GOD, THREE PERSONS

Christians believe that God is one God, three persons, eternally bonded by love. We call the persons the Father, the Son (or Word), and the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament, in the Gospel of John we are told that God created the universe through his Son (or Word). "Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him" (John 1:1-3).

John goes on to tell how the Son became human in the person of the man Jesus in order to save the human race who had rebelled against their God. "The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son" (John 1:14). John here is speaking about Jesus of Nazareth, whose disciple he was and whose messenger he became.

BELIEF IN JESUS

For thirty years after his birth, Jesus lived an ordinary life. He was a human in every way, with human temptations, physical weaknesses and emotions. He was also God in the flesh come to express God's love for the world in an astonishing act of sacrifice. Though human like us, Jesus lived under God's rule. He did not act in rebellion against his Father. He alone, of all humanity, did not deserve death.

But he died on a Roman cross at the hands of his own creation. Unjustly, he took the rebellion of the world on his shoulders. He died where we should have. The cross was our place, and he took it.

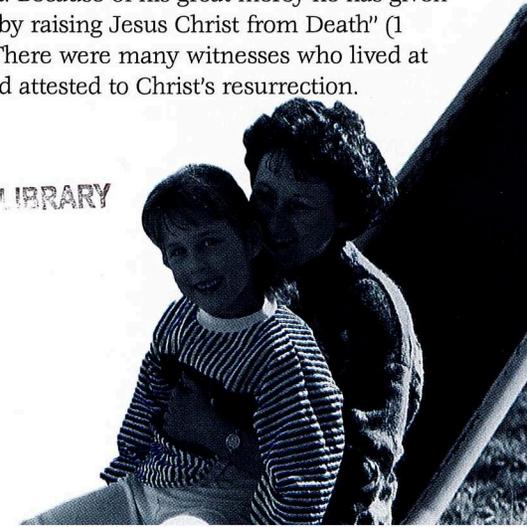
BELIEF IN ETERNAL LIFE

If it had ended there, and been a history of creation, rebellion, and the coming of God in the flesh to buy amnesty for us by sacrificial death in our place, it would still be a very dark story. But God is not about death. God is about life. Life in all its abundance.

On that first Easter, when Jesus hung on a cross for our forgiveness, he changed the whole ballgame. It started on the day we commemorate as Good Friday. Jesus was nailed on a cross, pronounced dead by a Roman army execution squad and entombed. On Sunday, the tomb was empty. Death could not hold him. The Word through whom the world and all life was created had defeated death.

Simon Peter, the fisherman and disciple, later wrote, "Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he has given us new life by raising Jesus Christ from Death" (1 Peter 1:3). There were many witnesses who lived at the time and attested to Christ's resurrection.

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THE CHOICE IS SIMPLE

The disciple John put it with great simplicity. "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not have life but will remain under God's punishment" (John 3:36). It's a question of whom we serve. Ourselves or the God who made us.

One way to live is to serve ourselves, to reject God's authority over us, to make up our own rules as we go along, whatever the cost to ourselves or other people. But doing it our own way, we die. For eternity.

There is another way. To accept the reality of God and that we are not in charge of the universe, or the world or even our own little bit of it. We cannot make the grass grow or a chicken hatch. We can't grow one hair on our heads.

We submit to the authority of Jesus. We put our trust in the fact that he died and rose for us. Then we are forgiven. We are no longer rebels against God, but have returned to that pre-rebellion status of being God's children by adoption. And the child of the eternal God has eternal life. It's hardly a choice, is it? Death or eternal life?

FOLLOW THESE STEPS

If you choose to come in out of the cold, stop being a rebel and accept reality, then certain things follow.

1. Talk to God. It's called "prayer". We've all done bad things, ask forgiveness. Ask for change so you don't just go out and do them all over again. We do that every day, because every day we start out afresh and fall on our faces. Humans are like that.
2. Trust Jesus. That's called "Faith". We trust him because he died for us, and rose for us, and gave us joy, and peace with God, and life in all its fullness.
3. Follow him. Model your life on his, submit to him as your ruler.
4. Make a commitment. Start with a prayer. One like this perhaps. "Dear God, I know I'm not worthy to be called your child. I don't deserve your gift of eternal life. I'm guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you, I need forgiveness. Thank you for sending your son to die for me so I can be forgiven. Thank you for raising Jesus from the dead so that I can have new life. Please forgive me and change me so I can live with Jesus as my Lord and master.

Amen."

The person who can say that and mean it is a Christian. That's what a Christian is.

5. Start growing. Keep on praying. Read the Bible: you might start with *Luke*, then read on into *Acts*. Find a church where they explain how to live the Bible's way. Meet other Christians, tell other people why your life has changed.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ALONE

Sometimes it seems as if you can't do it on your own. Relax. You're not expected to and you're not on your own. Before he was crucified, Jesus promised his followers that the Holy Spirit would help them. "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit who reveals the truth about God" (John 14:16-17).

Christians have Jesus as Lord and Saviour, the Holy Spirit as helper, comforter and guide, and the Father always caring for them with love. They know God is not only for them, he is in them, with them and over them forever.

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