

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part I – The Kingdom of God

Key Questions:

- What is the purpose of the Universe? What is mankind's purpose – why are we here?
- Is there a God, and if so, can we know what God is like?

Introduction – Terminology and Worldviews

Christianity

Christianity is a system of belief that makes certain claims about the nature of truth. It is an all-encompassing system that impacts the individual's beliefs about this life and the after-life. Worldwide, there are more people who would identify Christianity as their religion than any other.

Christian

A Christian means literally someone who follows Christ (Jesus). There are many people who call themselves "Christian" simply because they are born in a country or into a family with a Christian heritage, but this does not really make them a Christian. To be a true Christian implies a personal response to the claims of Jesus.

Bible

The Bible is the book that the Christian faith is based on. It is not actually one book, but a collection of 66 books written by over 40 different writers over a period of 1500 years in three different languages and in various locations. These books are historically accurate records. Although these books are very different in style and content, they add together to make one story. Christians believe that the Bible is God's word (that it contains His truth) and that it is the only authority for us to follow.

Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ (Jesus is a personal name; Christ is a title meaning "God's chosen one") was born in modern-day Israel (at that time it was part of the Roman Empire) in around 4 BC and died near Jerusalem around 33 AD. He was a great teacher, and it is reported that he performed many miracles, especially healings. His teachings attracted a popular following, but were opposed by some of the ruling elite of the Jewish people. They plotted Jesus' death, and persuaded the Roman governor to execute him by crucifixion (being nailed to a wooden cross). His followers claimed that He returned to life within three days of his death, and despite great opposition they spread the message about Jesus across the Roman Empire and later across the world.

Church

A local church is literally a group of Christians who are committed to meeting together in one place. The word is also often used by people (although never in the Bible) to describe buildings where Christians meet.

View of the World:

1. **Atheism** (e.g. Marxism)
There is no God
2. **Agnosticism** (e.g. Confucianism)
We cannot know whether or not there is a God
3. **Pantheism** (e.g. some eastern religions)
"God" is not separate from the Universe, but is an impersonal force in everything
4. **Polytheism** (e.g. Hinduism)
There are many gods who have power in certain places or areas of life
5. **Deism**
God is personal, and separate from the Universe. He created the Universe and set it in action, but He does not intervene in the created world and cannot be known personally
6. **Monotheism**
There is one personal God who created the Universe, but He intervenes in the world in miraculous ways and can be known in a personal way by human beings.

View of self:

We are purely physical, results of evolution, limited to this lifetime

We should just get on with life in this world as we can't know what lies beyond

We are spiritual as well as physical – we need to get in touch with "god in us" or in tune with the Universe

We are spiritual and must coexist with the gods or spirits. We should do what is necessary to keep them at peace.

We are spiritual and should worship God, but this is an impersonal experience. The spiritual and physical are different areas of life – religion and science are parallel

We are spiritual and physical, and we can experience God in a personal way. God's truth is absolute and should direct how we live our lives (physical and spiritual)

Christianity is Monotheistic. It teaches that God is personal and can be known – in fact He is always revealing Himself to human beings (see Page O.12 for a summary of the ways in which God speaks to mankind). The Bible is the story of God's

relationship with human beings. Because Christians believe in one creator God, they also believe that truth is absolute (rather than relative) – that there are some truths about life and the Universe that are true for all people everywhere at all times. The purpose of these studies is to examine the claims of Christianity by studying the Bible. Then we will be “truly educated”, and will be able to make our own decision about the claims of Christianity

Genesis Chapters 1 and 2 – God and Man

The Bible is really the story of God and man, and to understand its message we need to realise what God is really like. The very first verse in the Bible begins with the words, “*In the beginning God ...*”. The Bible does not try to prove that God exists – rather it opens with a statement that He does exist. The first two chapters of the first book (Genesis) tell us what God is like and how He intended the Universe to operate. One key verse in Genesis 1:27 says, “*God created man in His own image*” – in other words man has a quality that is different from any other animal God created which enables him to know and worship God. There are similarities between God and man, but also important differences:

GOD	HUMAN BEINGS
Is eternal, invisible separate from the universe <i>"In the beginning God..."</i> (Genesis 1:1)	Are physical, limited to time and part of the universe <i>"the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground"</i> (Genesis 2:7)
Is the creator <i>"... created the heavens and the earth ..."</i> (Genesis 1:1)	Are consumers (use what God has made) <i>"... they will be yours for food"</i> (Gen 1:29)
Is personal and rational <i>"God saw all that He had made, and it was very good"</i> (Genesis 1:31)	Are personal and rational <i>"The man gave names to all the livestock"</i> (Genesis 2:20)
Exists in relationships in community <i>"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'"</i> (Genesis 1:26)	Are made for relationships and community <i>"It is not good for the man to be alone"</i> (Genesis 2:18)
Is the life-giver <i>"In Him was life, and that life was the light of men"</i> (John 1v4)	Are living beings <i>"God ... breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being"</i> (Genesis 2:7)
Is king over all <i>"The LORD reigns. Your throne was established long ago; You are from all eternity"</i> (Psalm 93:1&2)	Are the stewards of the king over the earth <i>"... let them rule ... over all the earth"</i> (Genesis 1:26)
Blesses and gives to man <i>"God blessed them"</i> (Genesis 1:28)	Are created innocent in relation to God <i>"The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame"</i> (Genesis 2:25)

God's plan (the theme of the Bible)

The Universe as God created it was a place of order and harmony – **God looked at it and said it was perfect** (Genesis 1:31). There was no suffering or death in the Universe. Man knew his place within this system, and there was perfect harmony in every area of his life:

1. Harmony with God as His King – innocence before God in obedience to His commands

God gave four commands to the man and woman. Three were positive:

- Multiply (Genesis 1:28)
- Subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28)
- Eat every seed bearing plant (Genesis 1:29)

Only one was a command **not** to do something:

- Do NOT eat from the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* (Genesis 2:17)

2. Harmony with one another – the husband and wife together

- Man and woman were designed to be a team together in doing God's work (Genesis 2:23)
- Marriage was planned for God as the basis for human society (Genesis 2:24)
- The man and woman had perfect innocence with each other (Genesis 2:25)

3. Harmony with the universe – man ruling over nature with the “mandate of heaven”

- Eating the fruit of the Tree of Life – therefore living forever
- Ruling over the fish, birds and land animals (Genesis 1:28)
- Appreciating nature for pleasure and food (Genesis 2:9)

So, human beings were created to live with great freedom, but within the limits of obedience to God as their King. God gave the first humans great freedom with many privileges and choices, but He gave them one rule that did not permit them to eat the fruit of one tree. This rule was intended for their good, but it also gave them a choice whether or not to obey God as King. God has created human beings with the ability to choose to follow Him or to reject Him. The plan of God is to have a group of people who would obey His rule and live in the place He provided for them. This is what is known as the **Kingdom of God**, and can be summarised in one simple sentence:

God's people (harmony with one another) living in God's place (harmony with the universe) under God's rule (harmony with God) enjoying God's blessings

Key Lesson: God founded His Kingdom through Creation

God is a spiritual personal being who created the Universe. He created mankind to know and love Him.

God's Kingdom means God's people living in God's place under God's rule enjoying God's blessings.