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## Is Christianity Rational?



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*HAT IS FAITH?" ASKED THE SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHER. A YOUNG* boy answered in a flash, "Believing something you know isn't true."

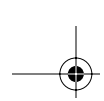
It's not surprising that many investigating faith and Christianity define it this way is. In reality, many Christians overtly or secretly also hold this view. For twenty-five years I've been asking this question in college and university discussions across the country. The average student of higher education might give the same answer as the boy. It may be couched in different terms, but the idea of self-deception and unreliability is usually there.

In these student sessions I describe in simple terms the definition of faith given in the Bible. Then I ask for questions from the floor. The responses are eye-opening.

### **Don't Kiss Your Brains Goodbye**

Seekers will quizzically remark that the sessions have been helpful





because for the first time they have heard a down-to-earth, concise summation of the Christian message. The convinced Christians at times say they are relieved to hear the Christian story coherently defended in the open marketplace of ideas. They see they haven't kissed their brains goodbye in becoming believers!

We live in an increasingly sophisticated and educated world where new choices compete for our attention. Unknowingly, our certainties become diluted with attractive indulgences and our belief systems wobble. This kind of world heightens our need to know *why* we believe and examine the truths to support that belief. What truths do we live by?

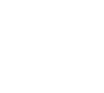
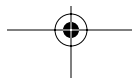
On the important question of whether Christianity is rational and can withstand scrutiny, we begin with the widely misunderstood word *faith*. Three thoughts come to mind.

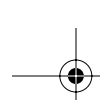
*We all use faith every day.* It is quite impossible to avoid using faith—even setting aside religious faith. We have faith in the doctor, faith in the grocery store, faith in the person who asks us for a date. We even have faith that the train will arrive to take us to work or that the mail carrier will bring our paycheck. The scientist has faith in the scientific method learned from previous scientists, assuming they were honest. Faith then is simply trust; we must exercise at least some measure of faith in order to interact meaningfully with the real world.

*Faith is only as valid as the object in which it is placed.* Trust an untested food, an unqualified doctor or a dishonest person, and the faith is not valid. A sad example of misplaced faith is the story of a young student who told me that his girlfriend had long been dating another man and would soon marry him. Faith may be well intentioned but the object unproven, rendering the faith useless. Meager faith placed in a reliable object, however, will bring results. For instance, if you have weak faith in thick ice, the result is nonetheless positive: the ice holds your weight regardless of your strength of faith.

**No opinion poll is going to make God go away.**

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*Testing the reliability of objects of faith is rational and certainly advisable.* Wisdom leads us to investigate and know the true facts of any object of our faith. If a clock is wrong, we adjust it. It's the sensible thing to do.<sup>1</sup>

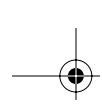
### **Examine Our Prior Thinking**

These few examples of faith help us see it as a normal part of our lives. From there we turn to examine as objectively as possible the rationality of the Christian faith. Objectivity is inevitably colored by *our prior thinking* about Christianity. What facts do we know about it? Do we view it as rational or irrational? Relevant or irrelevant? In those student sessions their prior thinking was glaringly obvious by the questions they asked. Some questions had to do largely with lack of information, others with misunderstandings of the basic content of Christianity. There were always penetrating questions and “why” enigmas brought with deep earnestness.

One's prior thinking is a key factor. “What you think you know can hurt you” was the title of an article in the *Chicago Tribune*. “A little knowledge can turn out to be harmful to your financial health” was the subtitle, listing fifteen or more examples of befuddled thinking common to investors, like “I try to save money by going to the store every time there's a sale.” Too little knowledge of what the Christian faith is all about might also be harmful. In what areas have we been crystal clear about true Christianity and where have we been befuddled in our thinking?

Another cloud to faith, in addition to our prior thinking, is our “emotional quotient” or E.Q., as it is called. Whether our heritage is the United States or some other country, there may have been both erroneous or obnoxious examples of practicing Christians who have turned us off. Our E.Q. may go through the roof if we even hear the word “Christian.” Granted, we all have emotional hang-ups of some kind, but awareness of them does help. On the other hand, we may have had zero contacts with Christians or Christianity, no information and no hang-ups. In either case, the





more we can comprehend our own origins of thinking and feeling, the more objectively we will be able to consider the “case for Christianity,” as C. S. Lewis put it.

Biblical Christianity has very specific, comprehensible bases. It is not an esoteric religion. Its content is not concealed in vague symbols, says scholar R. C. Sproul. When someone tells you in a hushed whisper that the meaning to life is “one hand clapping,” that’s esoteric, according to Sproul. This is not what we know as a rational basis for thinking. Certainly it is not the idea we intend to convey by “rational thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

Any number of religions might claim spiritual experiences that may approximate ours. From the time of nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to today, from outside Christendom to within, we are being told God is dead. Ethical humanism is having stronger appeal. Julian Huxley’s *Religion Without Revelation* is a good example of the approach that claims God is dead. Pluralism has taken over with modern communications in making the world a neighborhood. We are likely to hear:

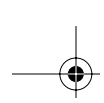
1. All religions are equally valid.
2. Contradictions between religious systems are fully acceptable.
3. Absolute truth does not exist.

### **Christianity Tested Objectively?**

Analytical philosopher Antony Flew states that to the person who is searching, religious assertions *incapable of being tested objectively* are meaningless. He illustrates from a graphic tale told by John Wisdom:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed wire fence. They electrify it. They





patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* could be both smelled and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the skeptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"<sup>3</sup>

Evangelical scholar John Montgomery comments on the story. "In Christianity we do not have merely an allegation that the garden of this world is tended by a loving Gardener; we have the actual, *empirical entrance* of the Gardener into the human scene in the person of Jesus Christ (John 20:14-15), and this entrance is verifiable by way of his resurrection."<sup>4</sup>

### A Rational Body of Truth

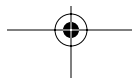
Too often the Christian faith is not considered seriously, merely looked upon as one of a number of truth claims and not seen as built on any verifiable truth. Faith and superstition look like partners.

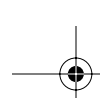
However the opposite is true. The Bible itself stresses the importance of revealed rational processes. Jesus stressed this to his disciples, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart . . . and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). The whole person is involved in putting our faith in him: the mind, the emotions and the will. The apostle Paul described himself as "defending and confirming the gospel", for example, giving an apologetic for his faith (Philippians 1:7). All of this implies a clearly understandable message that can be rationally understood and supported.

**Belief doesn't  
create truth.**

**Unbelief doesn't  
destroy truth.**

**Christian faith  
goes beyond  
reason but not  
against reason.**





An unenlightened mind is one never exposed to the truth of God, but enlightenment brings satisfying comprehension when based on a rational body of truth. Every one of us from childhood to adulthood needs reasons and explanations. Tell a child he'll get burned if he touches a hot grill. Only then can he make the choice to touch or not touch. But he has been enlightened. So it is for us. Enlightenment comes from knowledge of the primary Christian truths.

The Christian faith is always equated with truth. And truth is always the opposite of error (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). People who have not yet believed are called by Paul as those who "reject the truth" (Romans 2:8). It follows that these statements would be meaningless unless there were a way to establish truth objectively. If there were no such possibility, truth and error would, for all practical purposes, be the same. The root question is, does absolute truth exist? One clear evidence is given us.

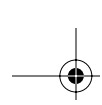
### **Creation Makes It Plain**

Creation itself, the apostle Paul states logically, gives all people enough knowledge to know there is a God. In Romans 1:19 he states, "God has made it plain to them." God is easy for anyone to see; he is not hidden. Paul then tells us to look at the creation. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities . . . have been clearly seen." He goes on to say God's two major qualities are equally evident, "*His eternal power and divine nature*" (Romans 1:20, emphasis added).

From this small, yet potent, verse it is explained that God expects us to believe in him based on comprehensible evidence. He gives us intelligent and logical reasons. He is saying, "Look at the natural world, even the universe or your own body and you will have ample evidence for belief in a Creator." The "handiwork," the uncommon masterpiece of the divine Creator, tells us of his meticulous care and sustaining activity in his creation.

His "*eternal power*" is not an easy phrase to wrap our thinking





around. Bill Hybels gives us a glimpse.

God knows everything. No questions can confound Him . . . but this knowledge extends even farther than today's events. God knows how all things work. Think about that. He has all the complete knowledge of all of the mysteries of biology, physiology, zoology, chemistry, psychology, geology, physics, medicine and genetics. He knows the ordinances of heaven, as well as the reasons and course for the sun and the moon and the clouds.<sup>5</sup>

We could say this gives a definition of *infinite*, not *finite* as we are. Furthermore, God knows the big picture of every facet of our personal lives.

### Seeing the Big Picture

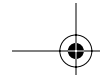
This fact heightens our incentive to explore some answers to how we fit into "the big picture" from God's horizon. Why are we here, living in this family and at this place? Does it matter what choices we make and what we do each day? How did we happen to be in this country and not some other? What will happen when we leave this life?

Volumes have been written on the "why" of our existence, hence it is not a new question. It is something we all ask at some time or other. In his bestselling book *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking sums up his lifetime of research and thinking by asking one question. After concluding his ideas on the "what" and the "how" of the universe, he says (seemingly with longing), "Now if we only knew the why, we would have the mind of God."<sup>6</sup>

Could it be such personal "heart" questions, or may it be a sense of emptiness and loss that provokes such questions from many? One longtime movie actress aptly described it as a "hole in the soul" that started her seeking. The essence of God's picture for us in the Bible is to give us the answers. We need not stay in the dark. There is every evidence God wants us to know the answers.

C. S. Lewis explains, "It is easy to say we believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as we are merely using it to wrap a box.





But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. You would really want to first discover how trustworthy that rope was.”<sup>7</sup>

**Moral Smoke Screens**

Our understanding can be unknowingly hindered by moral smoke screens, overshadowing the intellectual revelation of God and darkening our understanding. The moral pull can be intractable, insatiable, unwilling to go away. In some cases, the true issue is not that people cannot believe—it is that they “will not believe.” Jesus was straightforward about this as the root of the problem when talking to the highly religious Pharisees, the legalistic rulers

**If morality is only “feeling derived,” who makes the rules? If Christianity is only “feeling derived,” it leads to absurdity. Faith involves mind and heart.**

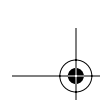
of his day. “You refuse to come to me,” he told them, “to have life” (John 5:40). Jesus then goes on to say that when a moral commitment is made, it brings understanding to the mind. It even brings resolution to intellectual roadblocks. “If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17).

Alleged intellectual problems are often a smoke screen covering moral rebellion. As the poet Emily Dickinson put it, “Fail in an instant, no man did. Slipping—is Crash’s law.”

Another digression I’ve heard is, “If Christianity is rational and true, why is it that most educated people don’t believe it?” The answer is simple. They don’t believe it for the same reason that most uneducated people don’t believe it. They don’t *want* to believe it. It’s not a matter of brain power, for there are outstanding Christians in every field of the arts and sciences. Belief is ultimately a matter of the will. And God has given us starting evidence with creation.

A student once told me I had satisfactorily answered all his questions. “Are you going to become a Christian?” I asked.





“No,” he replied.

Puzzled, I asked, “Why not?”

He admitted, “Frankly, because it would mess up the way I’m living.” He realized the real issue for him was not intellectual but moral.

John Stott struck a balance when he summarized how to explain the Christian story: “We cannot pander to a man’s intellectual arrogance, but we must cater to his intellectual integrity.”

### **Doubt Strikes Terror**

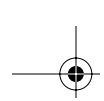
Even committed Christians question their faith and wonder if it’s true. Doubt can strike terror to the soul and be suppressed in an unhealthy way. Those who have grown up in Christian homes and in the Christian church find it easy to doubt the authenticity of their early experiences. From their youth they have accepted the facts of Christianity solely on the basis of confidence and trust in parents, friends and pastor. As the educational process develops, there is a reexamination of how much of their early teaching they own for themselves.

Such an experience is healthy and necessary to make our faith virile and genuine. It’s nothing to fear or to be shocked about. At times when I travel to new places, I tend to ask myself, looking at unfamiliar streets and people, “Little, how do you know you haven’t been taken in by a colossal propaganda program? After all, you can’t see God, touch him, taste him or feel him.” And then I go on to ask myself how I know the God and Jesus Christ of the Bible is true. I always come back to two basic factors:

1. the objective, external, historical facts of the resurrection
2. the subjective, internal, personal experience of Jesus Christ that I have known in my own life through serious surgery and hard career decisions

When a person, young or old, begins to question and God seems far away, doubts should be welcomed as a way to grow. A Christian can help by welcoming the honesty and openness, creating a cli-





mate where a person feels free to “unload” and express doubts. If not, a person can be driven underground, even turned away by someone with a high shock index, implying that a good Christian would never doubt. The questioner feels judged harshly. They aren’t stupid. Sadly, I’ve seen some who have met an unloving response, quickly shift gears and mouth the party line. But it doesn’t genuinely come from the heart. When they are out from un-

***Does the human spirit need faith in God?***

- Does a car run on soda water?
- Does a tree need roots?
- Does your soul feel empty?

der pressure to conform, they shed their faith like a raincoat because it has never become their very own.

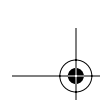
Doubt and questioning are normal to any thinking person. Rather than express shock, listen to the questioner and, if possible, even sharpen the question further. Then an answer can be suggested. Unflinchingly we can discuss problems, because Christianity centers on the One who is Truth, and scrutiny is no threat.

**Don’t Hit the Panic Button**

For any of us, if we don’t find an answer to a question immediately, we needn’t hit the panic button. We can keep searching, crystallize the question and check out books specializing on seeming unsolvable questions. It is improbable that anyone thought up, last week, a question that will bring Christianity crashing. Brilliant minds have probed through the profound questions of every age and have ably answered them.

Full answers to every possible question may allude us. We are not God! He hasn’t fully revealed his mind to us on every conceivable query. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). This is not a cop out! God gives us more than enough information, however, to have a solid foundation under our faith and life. Christianity is based on *reasonable* faith.





If the thought of checking out a mountain of evidence overwhelms you, don't panic. In the college and university setting the audience may be composed of 98 percent agnostics. After a while, it became possible to predict the questions that would generally be asked in the course of a half-hour question period. The questions may vary in wording, but the underlying issues were the same. This consistency was a great help to know the major questions and where to sharpen my own knowledge, and how to shape the thoughts in this book.

### A Doubter's Response

Doubters have been known to see where troubling issues lie. After hearing answers to their questions, a decision is the next step. To make no decision is to decide against the Christian position. Continued doubt in the face of adequate information means not to give up but to keep seeking and eventually you will be rewarded. "Christianity is not a patent medicine. It claims to give an account of facts—to tell you what the real universe is like. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest person will want to believe it. However, if it is true, every honest person will want to believe it. . . . All right, Christianity will do you good—a great deal more good than you ever expected!"<sup>8</sup>

We can be assured our genuine seeking will be rewarded. In the following pages we shall spotlight some answers to the commonly asked questions and get the facts straight. You can believe it, for Christianity is true and rational. Jesus gave us this encouragement: "I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

### For Further Reading

Clark, Kelly James. *Philosophers Who Believe*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Johnson, Phillip E. *Reason in the Balance*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995.

———. *Objections Sustained*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998.

