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Leading Christian Thinkers
Defuse The Belief-Blockers Of Our Time

Bible Studies for Ashfield Presbyterian
ashfieldpresbyterian.org.au

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Episode 1: Suffering*

Series Introduction

Atheists and genuine seekers regularly put up several topics as challenges to the Christian faith. This series will explore 9 of those topics. The aim of this series is to address these belief blockers. While each topic is separate in itself it will be helpful to you and the group if you come for the whole series.

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Read the following three quotes:

How can you believe in God in a world of suffering? (Craig Keener)

You often hear people say if there's an all-powerful God and He's all loving, there wouldn't be any suffering. And that kind of makes sense because if there was an all-powerful God, He could end suffering. If there were an all loving God, it sort of makes sense that He would end suffering. (John Dickson)

If we're saying as Christians that actually God is all powerful, that He's omnipotent, He can step in and do whatever He likes. He can stop suffering if He wants to. And yet He chooses not to. I think for some people it's a really understandable concern to question whether or not that God is worth trusting. (Vince Vitale)

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GOD'S EXISTENCE

If there were an all-loving God, it sort of makes sense that He would end suffering. But we don't know that for sure. How do we know? The philosophers have worked this through for centuries. How would we know that a God of infinite wisdom could not have loving reasons for allowing pain to continue? So you can't use suffering to disprove God's existence. (John Dickson)

Read Genesis 1:1, Psalm 136:1-16, Acts 17:24-29

Q1. What do these verses suggest about the Bible's view of God? Discuss God's key attributes.

Q2. Which of God's attributes does suffering call into question? Discuss.

* **NOTE: Thank you to John Hopping, Associate Pastor at Reedy Creek Baptist Church, Gold Coast Queensland who prepared these Bible studies for his church.**

HUMAN FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

Genesis 1:27-31; 2:15-17; Psalm 8:3-9

Q3. When God says the world and humankind were 'very good', what should we understand by this?

Q4. Humans were created as God's image bearers. What do these verses imply about human freedom and responsibilities?

HUMAN REBELLION

Genesis 3:14-19; Exodus 34:6-7.

The Universe God made seems to have been without suffering & death. However human freedom has enormous risks with dire consequences when abused. Freedom and love go hand in hand.

If our choices are to be serious choices, if they're really to be open to us which way we choose, we're going to choose badly sometimes and people are going to suffer. And that is the first reason of why there's suffering – because God has given free will to people and that's a blessing. But the suffering is an unfortunate consequence of the blessing. (Richard Swinburne)

Q5. What are the consequences of human rebellion on our relations to God, each other and the world?

Q6. After the fall can we say that 'everything happens for a reason'? see Luke 13:1-5 Discuss.

THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

Job 2:1-10; 40:1-8; 42:1-6

Q7. Did God explain to Job 'why' he suffered? Discuss. What conclusions did Job come to about God and his suffering?

JESUS AS IMMANUEL (GOD WITH US)

Isaiah 53:1-6 John 1:1-3, 14, 18; Hebrews 2:16-18

Q8. What do these verses tell us about Jesus and suffering?

Q9. Does the fact that Jesus suffered greatly help us when we are suffering?

It's the fact that God entered into this world in the person of Jesus, suffered betrayal from friends, physical torture, injustice and eventually crucifixion. That for me is not so much the answer to the question of suffering but it tells me what God is like. God entered the world and did that for me. He knows my pain, not just because He's all knowing but because He's experienced it first-hand. And I can cry out to this God with all of my doubts, with all of my anger and know that He is that kind of God – not distant in the corner of the universe, watching us or mocking us, but here with us, suffering with us. And that makes the

difference. I can trust Him with all the other stuff because I know what His heart is like. His heart is like someone who would give Himself for me. (John Dickson)

NB Jesus not only suffered with us he suffered for us: to deal with our rebellion and sin. Romans 5:8-10. His death and resurrection are the platform for hope and abundant living. John 10:10

SUFFERING HAS NO PLACE IN GOD'S NEW CREATION

Revelation 21:1-4, 2 Peter 3:8-9

Q.10 Describe the 'new heavens and the new earth'. What will become of suffering?

NB The human longing for suffering to end is an inner residual of being created in God's image. Therefore one of the great dilemmas facing Christians when it comes to suffering is holding in tension God's sovereignty and his love. If God is all-powerful and all-loving why is there still so much suffering? The answer is 'eschatology' (a theology of the future). God will finally and fully remove it one day. And one reason for holding back this final curtain is to allow for more people to repent and follow Jesus.

SUFFERING CAN DRAW US NEAR TO GOD

Lamentations 3:19-23; Psalm 13:1-6; 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

Q11. Prayer is one of those vital, yet deep mysteries of human life. Why is prayer helpful? Discuss.

Prayer doesn't come easy for me. But it was during that time that I really began to understand intercessory prayer. I knew people were praying for me and I couldn't get through a day without those prayers making a difference in my life. (Stanley Hauerwas)

SUMMARY

1. Suffering is a 'mystery' - why God allows it and only intervenes sometimes
2. Suffering was never intended to happen and is a result of human actions (sin) – we live in a fallen world where bad things happen
3. Jesus suffered with us and for us to show us how loving God is.
4. Suffering will be removed in the new creation – thus we have hope
5. Some suffering has the positive outcome of producing character, patience and empathy in us

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Episode 2: The Bible

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Is it reasonable for a person in the 21st Century to base their life on the Bible? Many people today consider it foolhardy to base one's life on such an ancient, outdated book. Atheist Richard Dawkins calls the Bible: *'a chaotically cobbled together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly to each other, spanning nine centuries'*.

Why does such an ancient book still matter? The bottom line is that the Bible has been radically changing people's lives – not just their habits, or the way they dress, or what they say, or the way they treat people, but their hearts, their hopes, their entire beings – for thousands of years. And that continues to happen, no matter how much the world changes.

'True, the grass withers and the wildflowers fade, but the word of our God stands firm forever.' Isaiah 40:8

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WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21; Jeremiah 1:4-9

Let's say there is a God. It wouldn't be surprising at all if that God would be able to communicate to us. And how would such a God communicate to us? Well one not so surprising way would be through some kind of written text.... So I'm not at all surprised that there is something like the Bible. (Ard Louis)

Q1. Read the above passages in several Bible versions (if possible). What makes the Bible unique?

JESUS & THE APOSTLES' VIEW OF THE OT

Mark 7:5-13; 12:28-31; Luke 24:44-47; Acts 3:21-26

Q3. A careful reading of the verses above reveals that Jesus and the Apostles believed 'what' about the Old Testament?

Jesus and the Apostles quoted Scripture authoritatively as 'the word of God' and believed it to be a revelation from God and about God and His ways given under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They accepted its history as true, its miracles as real events, its prophecies as being faithfully fulfilled, its ethics as important and its eschatology (view of the future) as reliable and hope-inspiring.

PETER'S VIEW OF PAUL'S LETTERS

2 Peter 3:14-16

Q4. How did Peter describe Paul's writings and to which other writings does he compare them?

The New Testament looks beautiful and any Roman historian will tell you that they're written incredibly close to the time period. So we have Paul's letters which date to within 20 years of Jesus. We have the Gospels that are being written in the 30 to 60 year period after Jesus. Even our latest New Testament document, which many say is John's Gospel is written in the mid '90s - that would be 65 years after Jesus. Even our latest New Testament text is still closer in time to Jesus than our best source for Emperor Tiberius, the man who ruled the world at the same time. (John Dickson)

MIRACLES

Mark 5:21-43; 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-20;

Q5. What types of supernatural miracles are found in the Bible?

Q6. Which one is the most important and why?

To me it comes down to the question of how open-minded are you? Have you closed your mind to the possibility of a god existing, of miraculous interventions? If you have closed your mind to even that possibility; you have an a priori commitment to the idea that there not miracles, then you're going to bring that assumption onto the Bible and you're not going to even consider those claims. So my question to a sceptical friend is, on what basis have you closed your mind? What evidence is there for that materialist worldview? Are you willing to at least be open? (Amy Orr-Ewing)

THE RELEVANCE OF THE BIBLE TODAY

Psalms 33:6-9; 119:9-11, 105; 2 Tim 3:16-17

Q6. Is the Bible relevant today? Why and How?

Q7. What are the various purposes of the Bible? List as many as you can.

It is like other books in that you can read it in the normal way you'd read a book but it's special because of the kind of message that it carries. It claims to put you in contact with (the one true) God. (Greg Clarke)

I'm not at all surprised that there is something like the Bible and so I really treat it as God's revelation to us. I think it makes perfectly coherent sense that there would be something like that. Now I've also experienced it in my own life. I think empirically the Bible is true and trustworthy, and so that's how I read the Bible. (Ard Louis)

Trusting the Bible changes your life, transforms your life. If you start to believe the teachings of the Bible – things like that God loves you, that Jesus Christ came into the world to die for your sins so you could have peace with God, that the world's got a structure and a plan and it's going somewhere. These are things that lighten your heart. They change your direction in life. They give you focus, they give you hope. The Bible is a life-changing book and one of the problems with reading the Bible is you can get really cold about it. You can get analytical.

You can just read it out of habit or looking at it for academic reasons. But you won't do it for long because it keeps hitting you. The story of Jesus keeps hitting you and the hope that you find there keeps hitting you. The true message that you are loved by God - little you, little me, loved by God so much that He reached into this world and grabbed hold of you. That's the kind of book that you just keep coming back to. (Greg Clarke)

The Bible witnesses to the struggles of the people of God to be 'holy' in an unholy world; and a 'light' to a dark world. The people of God described in the Bible help us today in our struggle to be 'holy' and live as we ought. *"So while the Bible does not give us specific answers to all of life's problems it offers us an authority to make choices informed by the model of the people of God, especially Jesus."*

DOERS OF THE WORD

Matthew 7:24-27 James 1:22-25: 2:8.

Q8. Discuss how Christians can be 'doers of the word' not just hearers. What's the difference?

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Episode 3: The Supernatural

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Atheists like Richard Dawkins call the Bible's miracles 'fairly tales'; and imply that anyone with an ounce of commonsense would completely dismiss even the idea of supernatural events out of hand. Miracles are only for the uneducated, gullible or simple-minded to believe.

Of course the Bible does have many supernatural events: creation out of nothing; the flood; the parting of the Red Sea; manna from heaven; the Sun standing still for 20 mins; Jonah being swallowed by a giant fish; Jesus walking on the water; raising the dead; healings; exorcisms; and many others. Even today, many people across the world claim to experience miracles and a spiritual dimension to life.

Is it reasonable for us to believe in miracles and supernatural events? How do we answer those sceptics who deny all aspects of the supernatural? This is topic 3.

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OUR WORLD VIEW MATTERS

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 17:16-33

Our worldview or ideology is very important. It determines how we look at, assess and react to our environment. It helps us answer the big questions: who am I? why am I here? is there a spiritual dimension to life? etc Our worldview is the overall perspective from which we see ourselves and others, and how we interpret the world around us. It is determined by our beliefs, what we consider real, true, important and possible and how we perceive the world. A worldview or ideology with a god or gods in it (religious) will be very different to a worldview without any gods(atheistic).

Q1. Describe briefly the worldview presented in the two passages.

The above passages are written from a Biblical worldview perspective. They're directed against various alternative worldviews of the peoples surrounding the writer. In the Bible God is the Eternal One. Creator, Sustainer and Saviour. Time, space and matter were created by this all-powerful God. This differs markedly from the Persian & Greek worldviews where time, space and matter are eternal. For Christians, Jesus is the Risen Lord and death is not the end. This age will end in judgement and life is best lived in a positive relation to God. God's supernatural intervention should not be considered unexpected or irrational.

Q2. What today are the alternative world-views in Australia when it comes to miracles?

- i. **Atheists:** that small but growing % of people, like Dawkins, who offer a purely materialistic and rationalistic view of the universe where there is no god and no

possibility of any miracles or supernatural events. Following David Hume, who argued that violations of the natural laws of the universe are impossible, they therefore dismiss supernatural events as logically impossible.

- ii. **Agnostics:** those who live as if the universe is closed. If god exists he is irrelevant and doesn't much interfere in our daily lives. A larger % of Australians fit into this group. They '*don't know*' about miracles and usually ignore any spiritual side to life until suffering, loss or death personally confront them.
- iii. **Vaguely Religious.** These include the new-agers, horoscope readers, spiritualists, other religion observers and some who tick the Christian box. These people are 'vaguely' open to miracles and a spiritual dimension to life.

To me it comes down to the question of how open-minded are you? Have you closed your mind to the possibility of a god existing, of miraculous interventions? (Amy Orr-Ewing).

The first thing to get clearly established (in a Christian world-view) is that the natural order itself is sustained by God and kept in operation by God, and I think there are good arguments for that. That is to say, that God is not just at work when things behave oddly (miracles). God is at work when things behave regularly. (Richard Swinburne)

EYEWITNESSES ARE DISCOUNTED

Mark 4:35-41, John 20:30-31, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8

David Hume claims there's no credible eyewitnesses for miracles. But even in his own day there were people who claimed to have experienced miracles and he simply dismissed their credibility because 'of course' we know that miracles don't happen.' So (the problem is) it's a circular argument." (Craig Keener)

Q3. In Mark 4:35-41 Jesus calms the storm. What is the reaction of those who were there? (See also the onlookers' reactions in Mark 1:25-27; 2:10-12; 5:15-16; 6:48-52; 7:36-37) Would they have been 'credible' witnesses? Why or why not? If we were there, how would we have reacted?

Q4. In John 20:30-31 the writer claims that Jesus performed many 'signs' (miracles) that are not recorded in his book; What are some of the 'signs' in John's Gospel and who witnessed them? (See also John 2:11; 4:54; 6:14; 7:21) Why are these 'signs' important?

Q5. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 Paul reassures the Corinthian Christians that their faith in the risen Lord Jesus is solidly grounded. How does Paul do this?

When I was first searching for God and first investigating the Christian faith, part of it was that I wanted to see that this was a miracle that had a public nature to it, that people had seen, that there was evidence in history that could testify to it, and this is something which I think is really unique about the central miracle of the Christian faith, about the resurrection. This is something that Christians claim many people saw, and that the text of the New Testament claim that many people saw, and that we can go back to those historical documents and date them. (Vince Vitale)

MIRACLES ARE UNPREDICTABLE

Matthew 12:38-42, John 20:24-29

Q6. We all want to see a miracle; it would be both exciting and scary. So why does Jesus warn us against the seeking of miracles/signs?

Miracles by definition are not predictable. I've had some people say "Well why aren't there more of them in medical journals?" And of course there are a few but you don't have a lot of them in medical journals because scientific journals deal with what is replicable. That's what science is supposed to deal with. I mean it's good that science deals with that. But human relationships are not always replicable. We have to use a different approach to understanding when we look at human relationships and how much more when we're dealing with a God of infinite knowledge and infinite wisdom. In my own life, my wife and I had been through seven miscarriages and other things. Saying that God does miracles doesn't mean that miracles happen all the time. And in fact the Biblical understanding of miracles...miracles are just a foretaste, they're just a sample of the promise of the future of God's Kingdom where there will be no more tears, no more death. It's just to let us know that God loves us in the meantime. (Craig Keener)

MIRACLES TODAY

John 14:11-14, James 5:13-18

Q7. What do these passages suggest about miracles happening after Jesus had returned to his Father?

Q8. What is the relationship between prayer and miracles?

I believe that this (his healing) is purely a miracle that God has done. God is beyond all science and He created us and He can do anything that He wants. I also honestly believe that the doctors did a fantastic job. But when medical science failed, God who is a master of impossibility came through. (Sean George)

I have a very firm belief that if you open your heart a little bit to God, He'll do the rest. (Mike Willesee)

SUMMARY: What to say to a sceptic of miracles

- i. Are you even open to the idea of miracles or of God existing?
- ii. There are lots of credible eyewitnesses to the key Bible miracles; e.g. Jesus' resurrection
- iii. Today there are many credible, wise and well-educated people who have personally experienced or witnessed a miracle or God's supernatural intervention.
- iv. If a God existed it's not surprising that he might intervene in His creation. Experience tells us this happens; miracles happen – we just have to trust His wisdom as to when and why.

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Episode 4: Religious Violence

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Does religion and the Christian faith in particular, cause or condone violence'? Christopher Hitchens and many other 'new atheists' claim that religion is the root of all evil and violence. They claim that to believe in God (or gods) turns many good people into violent people. In Christianity's case they point to some of the terrible events in church history to show how great evils have been done in Christ's name. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is attacked as an ancient text that occasionally encourages and regularly condones violent practices. Is this the case?

How do we answer people who suggest that Christianity promotes violent?

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ACKNOWLEDGING THE PROBLEM

Q1. Are there examples of 'so-called' Christians encouraging war and violence?

I would say it's undeniable that religion is often associated with war and with violent activity. Since most human beings over history have been religious it would be weird if it wasn't associated with war in some way. But the idea that it's caused (war), that's a little bit more difficult to establish. Often religion is a pretext for galvanizing a country behind a certain agenda that a politician or a King might have. Or it might be that we as a group of people want to establish our identity against the other nations and so we use religion in order to do that dirty work really. (Michael Jensen)

I feel ashamed. I own up to the fact that Christians have done terrible things and they've done them in the name of Christ. There's no avoiding that. (John Dickson)

However 'The late Christopher Hitchens wrote a book called 'God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything'. And yet this flies in the face of the 20th century where between three men and three nations – Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Mao-Tse Tung – 100 million people lost their lives, and they were not motivated by religion.' (Karl Faase)

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND VIOLENCE

Deuteronomy 7:1-6; 1 Samuel 15:1-11

Q1. Why does God command the extermination of all the Canaanites & Amalekites?

There are a few passages in the OT, like those above, that seem to give divine sanction to the extermination of some other nations who lived near Israel. Why?

- i. In earlier times these nations had behaved wickedly, including engaging in child-sacrifices, oppression of the poor, violence for power and corruption (see for e.g. Amos'

condemnation of Israel's neighbours Amos 1:3-2:5). **They'd been warned.** As with the city of Sodom - their punishment was just.

- ii. The 'purity' of Israel was at stake. If these pagan nations were not removed and they mixed with Israel then their evil practices would increasingly influence the people of God. Instead of being a 'holy nation' and 'kingdom of priests' to the surrounding nations, shining God's light, the Israelites would find themselves becoming more and more like these pagan nations. This was potentially undermining God's good reputation. See e.g. Amos 2:6-8 'they profane my holy name'
- iii. A case can be made that the few examples of extreme violence were at 'critical' moments in Israel's history and were the 'exception' rather than the rule. Therefore these events are **historically specific** and are not-to-be-repeated moments in Israel's history. Most often in the OT violence is descriptive not prescriptive: the writers describe what happened but don't condone or encourage it.
- iv. It should be noted that God knew Israel would fail to remove all the Canaanites from the land and gave instructions on how they were to live together with the Canaanites.

The first thing is that not everything recorded by the Bible is approved of by the Bible. For example when the Bible is being written and a rape is recorded, people look at that and say, 'Look at this violent, horrible book.' Well, the Bible is not condoning rape in that context. This is a historical document which is recording what happened. (Amy Orr-Ewing)

GOD CARES

Leviticus 19:9-10, 32-34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Psalm 146:5-9; Isaiah 1:14-17

Q2. What 'feel' do these passages give about God's attitude to all people and to violence?

Now if he (Christopher Hitchens) is going to come back and say, 'Well belief in God poisons everything,' I would want to take him to visit Mother Teresa in Calcutta and see what belief in God has motivated a woman like that to do. Or introduce him to a historical figure like Wilberforce who, motivated by what he read in the Bible, was inspired to see an end to slavery, the buying and selling of human beings. Or we could come up with countless other examples like Martin Luther King, motivated by what he read in the Bible, to pursue a Civil Rights agenda. So in the face of that I think it's quite hard to argue that belief in the Christian God poisons everything. It doesn't poison everything. It might poison some people. (Amy Orr-Ewing)

JESUS DECLARES HIS VIEW OF VIOLENCE

Matthew 5:43-47; 26:51-54. Luke 9:51-56

Q3. How would you describe Jesus' attitude to violence?

I think if you ask me directly of what I feel about (violence in Christ's name), the first thing I'd want to say to you I'm utterly ashamed of it, utterly ashamed that the name of Christ was ever associated with religious violence. But I think it's very important to explain why I'm ashamed of it. Because people who take up weapons, whatever they are, to defend Christ or his message are not following or obeying him. They're disobeying him. (John Lennox)

JESUS DECLARES HIS MISSION AGENDA

Luke 4:16-21 Matthew 5:1-12; 11:28-29;

Q4. What is Jesus' attitude to all people, especially those facing violence or enmity?

And then if you start to think about the history of charity in the Western world, no responsible historian could deny that the West enjoys widespread charitable services and enjoys the spirit of charity and care for the poor entirely because of the influence of Jesus on Western culture. These things did not exist in ancient Rome or ancient Greece. They were gifts of early Christianity to Western culture. And now, thank God, atheists can do just as good things as Christians. That's fantastic! (John Dickson)

NB When Jesus died on the cross He actually absorbed all the violence, injustice, evil and sin in His own body. He was the recipient of dreadful violence so that violence would not ultimately win. His way is reconciliation and peace between humans and God and among humans themselves. While God's wrath is powerful and arose because of human sin it was turned aside at the Cross. Every knee will bow to Jesus, not by Him being violent, but by His authority as the risen Lord.

VIOLENCE IS NOT FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Isaiah 60:15-18; Jeremiah 22:3 (see again Matthew 5:43-47)

Q5. What is God's call to his people in these passages?

'The church caters for sinners as well as for saints and there are many within the fold of the church who have inadequately understood or inadequately reacted to the foundation teaching of Jesus on this matter.' (Richard Swinbourne)

Q6. Is 'religion' to blame in violent places today? What usually causes wars?

There was a religious element to it (the Northern Ireland conflict). The problem was that you have two extreme groups who by their behaviour show they hadn't a clue what Christianity is about but they used religion as a very convenient way of stirring up the temperature of the trouble. (John Lennox)

WHAT TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO BLAMES CHRISTIANS FOR WARS AND VIOLENCE?

- i. There have been a few followers of Christ who have caused wars and violence. But they haven't really understood the real, non-violent message of Jesus – to love even one's enemies.
- ii. There seems to be good reasons for the rare divinely sanctioned 'wars' in the OT.
- iii. Overwhelmingly the Bible reveals that God is a god of peace, justice, reconciliation who loves all.
- iv. Jesus' followers are to be non-violent 'peace-makers' whenever possible.

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Episode 5: Exclusive Faith

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Most people in the world today are religious. Adherents of the Eastern religions, Hinduism & Buddhism, would say that there are many roads leading to enlightenment or to the divine. In western nations which are becoming increasingly secular, pluralistic and multicultural, the idea of absolute truth or exclusive faith is becoming more and more unpopular. Christians, however, have traditionally claimed that Jesus is the **only way** for a believer to have a relationship with the one true God. This claim is said to be intolerant, arrogant or even bigoted because it assumes that all other religions and worldviews are wrong.

Is the Christian claim to exclusive faith and absolute truth reasonable, or is it arrogant and dangerous? Is the claim that Jesus is the only way to God judgemental and dismissive of other faiths? How do we answer those sceptics who say all faiths ultimately lead to the same place?

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PLURALISM TODAY

2 Timothy 4:3-5

Q1. What is pluralism? How is it revealed today?

Q2. Are there similarities to the people Paul says will arise to confront Timothy?

In many western countries today pluralism and relativism have become the default positions of many. They argue that all the differing beliefs and worldviews have a limited picture of truth and can't therefore claim an exclusive position: 'That is your belief or point of view, not mine.' Thus right and wrong become relative to a particular situation and culture. All points of view are considered equally valid. The Christian claim to an exclusive knowledge of the path to God and absolute truth is rejected as arrogant.

IS IT ONLY CHRISTIANITY THE MAKES EXCLUSIVE CLAIMS?

Isaiah 45:18-23

Q3. What amazing claims does Isaiah make about God, the world, salvation, truth and revelation?

Three of the major world religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam (and many of their sub-branches) make exclusive claims. In different ways atheists, agnostics and pluralists also make exclusive claims. Actually, to make a claim about anything has, as its corollary, that this claim is true and the opposite is untrue.

'If something is true then other things must be false. Every single major world religion, even atheism, the lack of religion, is exclusive.' (Michelle Tepper)

DO ALL PATHS LEAD TO THE SAME REALITY?

John 1:1-4, 14, 18; 14:5-11; Phil 2:5-11; 1Tim 2:1-7

Q4. Discuss the implications of these passages. What are they claiming about Jesus?

You can hinge our certainty (that there is only one way to God) on one verse in the Bible. Jesus makes this claim. He says, 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' And though it's one statement, there's lots of things that weave through Scripture that point to this idea that Jesus, being God himself, fully God and fully man is the way to God because he is God himself. And so He claims that since He is God, He's our pathway to God, He's God come down so that we can finally have a relationship with God. (Michelle Tepper)

Q5. What things are unique about Christianity?

While creation out of nothing, monotheism, the sovereignty of God, divinely given morality and the need for salvation from sin are vitally important in Christianity, they are also vital to other religions (e.g. Judaism & Islam). It's Jesus' **incarnation, cross and resurrection and the saving hope they create** that's unique to Christianity. All paths do not lead to the same reality. Any path or ideology that does not have Jesus Christ as Lord at its centre will not lead to the one true God or to his true salvation from sin or eternal life.

(When thinking about who God is, for Christians) there's a wonderful sentence from Robert Jensen's Systematic Theology— "God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having first raised Israel from Egypt." Now that gives the bottom line. So you don't start with a generalised conception of God and then you think 'well we just share that with a lot of people'. (Rather) you start with, 'God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having first raised Israel from Egypt' (Stanley Hauerwas)

There is one thing that's unique about the Christian faith that matters today for the person that you meet at Starbucks...it's hope. I think that's what's unique about Christian faith. (Mareque Ireland)

DO ALL RELIGIONS ULTIMATELY TEACH THE SAME THINGS?

Acts 4:8-12

Q5. Do all religions, when followed sincerely, teach the same things?

'We should look carefully and thoughtfully at what the religions teach because it's just wrong to suggest they all teach the same thing. They just don't. I mean it's disrespectful to all religions to say that they're all kind of pathways to the one reality. They teach very different things. So for a few examples – Islam has very different teachings about Jesus to Christianity. Judaism has a different teaching about Jesus to Christianity. You're going to find differences in areas of morality. You'll find differences in understanding of history, differences in the character of God. And so you have to be thoughtful about other religions and look at what they actually say about God, the world and humanity; and compare and contrast them, and then make your call on which one you think is closer to the truth.' (Greg Clarke)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE TOLERANT?

Psalms 101:5; 1 Corinthians 5:1; Revelation 2:2; Colossians 4:5f

Q6. Discuss 'tolerance' and 'intolerance'. What is a Christian response to the claim that we are 'intolerant'?

Although pluralists promote the idea of tolerance as a great virtue it is by no means clear what that means. They don't want to appear 'judgmental' so they accept as many differing ideas and behaviours as they can and devalue the idea of absolute truth or clear moral rules. However this actually becomes a fuzzy, lazy, intellectually sloppy position which they can't maintain. Even they usually don't tolerate murder, rape, incest, fraud, slander, theft and so on. There's a deep inconsistency in pluralism.

And it's no help for them to claim that everything is ok as long as it doesn't 'harm' anyone. Then we have to try to define 'harm' and it too becomes different for different people: what 'harms' me may not 'harm' you. Hitler believed he was doing the world a favour by getting rid of the 'harmful' Jews of Europe. Should that be 'tolerated'?

Rather tolerance is surely about respecting, engaging, and treating with compassion those with whom we disagree. It is not intolerant per se to believe in one way to God or that there are moral absolutes. It very much depends on how Christians present their faith to the wider world. Jesus' attitude to people is the model of humble intolerance. He stood for truth, justice and compassion for the poor but loved even those who refused to embrace his instructions e.g. Mark 10:21-23.

WHAT ABOUT THE TEACHINGS OF OTHER RELIGIONS AND WORLDVIEWS?

Acts 17:16-31

Q7. What was Paul's model when engaging with people of other beliefs?

Without ever compromising his exclusive claims about the creator God who raised Jesus (e.g. vv.18, 31) Paul acknowledges the Athenian's religious piety vv.22-23 and quotes affirmingly from their poets, v.28. Since all humans are created in the image of God it's not surprising that they retain a capacity to teach some insightful things about life, spirituality and the world. Christians should be like Paul – engaged with the wider world to find link-points to learn from (and to build upon in order to present the gospel message in culturally sensitive ways). Most of the major religions have some helpful teachings. However they have no ultimate offer of true salvation and eternal hope – that is found exclusively through Jesus Christ.

SUMMARY - WHAT TO SAY TO A PLURALISTS AND/OR THOSE WHO QUESTION 'EXCLUSIVE FAITH'?

- i. There are huge inconsistencies in the pluralists view – but not in the Christian faith.
- ii. All religions and worldviews have 'exclusive' claims. They are all different. We must choose wisely.
- iii. Tolerance is about humility and dialogue not the rejection of truth or exclusive faith.
- iv. Jesus is central – he is the world's one true Lord who loves us and can be loved by us.

SHARING & PRAYER

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Episode 6: Church Abuse

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

When it happens, church abuse, especially of children, is horrific and deplorable. Critics of the Church point to the sexual abuse scandals as a huge reason to call the Christian faith into question.

The ongoing Australian Royal Commission into child sexual abuse has uncovered case after case of broken trust, attempted cover-ups and gross system/organisational failure within the Church, especially the Catholic Church. This has left many critics and victims of abuse feeling like they can no longer trust the Church or its message. The Church's own moral teaching is about protecting the most vulnerable so when abuse happens the Church has been called hypocritical and worse. To many this is the number one blocker to Christian faith. The vast majority of people deplore this kind of abuse and are rightly shocked at the Church when it happens. This is a major belief blocker.

WATCH THE DVD

Q1. What is your reaction to the stories told in the DVD?

JESUS AND CHILDREN

Mark 10:13-16

Q2. Why did the disciples rebuke the parents for bring children to Jesus? What did his response indicate about his attitude to children?

Any reading of the Gospels, however quick, would leave even the toughest critic with the distinct impression that Jesus would never have tolerated abusive behaviour towards anyone, let alone a child. He would have advocated a severe self-sentence rather than 'cause one of these little ones to stumble'. See Luke 17:1-2.

Q3. Mahatma Gandhi, leader of the non-violent independence movement in India famously said, 'I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.' What do you think he meant?

Q4. Could abuse by a church leader prompt someone to argue that faith in Jesus is a sham and the Church full of hypocrites? How would you respond?

After realising that he had been sexually abused by a Pastor as a boy Dale Kuehne said:

"What I can say is that I never equated that pastor's actions with Jesus Christ and I never equated it with the church. And so while I can understand why people would be angry at the church and angry at God for these things that happened to me or to anybody else, this is not what God wants. This was an abomination. When the Scripture speaks about hell I have no problem with hell. Maybe I should but I don't..."

He adds, *"But the reality is that it's never changed my understanding of the fact that I need God, that this world needs God and this world needs Christ. For all of us that are in the midst of this, we do need to find a way forward because it just eats us alive. I'm not shaking because I'm cold. I want to come to the place where I forgive because I'm the one that's suffering until I do. But I probably would beat up the pastor if I ever had the chance. And it would probably give me more delight than it should. And I need to let it go. I don't know how yet but I need to let it go. It's not going to do any of us any good to beat up on God and beat up on Jesus when they're our only hope."*

STAY AWAY FROM ABUSIVE PEOPLE

Proverbs 5:1-9 Ephesian 4:17-24

Q5. What advice is given in these passages about godly behaviour?

JESUS AND HYPOCRITES

Matthew 23:23-32, Mark 7:5-8, 17-23.

Q6 What is hypocrisy? What was Jesus' attitude to hypocrites? How does it operate in churches today?

Q7. What should we do if we discover a case of child abuse in our church?

'I think that you should always be involving the police... They've got to face up to their crimes. They've got to face up to their accusers. They got to take the penalty for whatever that may be. And I think forgiveness is at the end of the process, not the beginning. There may be forgiveness - there is for the worst of us. But it's not to be given lightly. And I think forgiveness can follow from repentance, a change of life. (And) reparation, which is saying now what can I do for the victim or the victims, because often there are many victims.'
(Patrick Parkinson)

'The church must adopt a zero tolerance attitude to abuse within its ranks. Speaking truth and seeking justice for victims is now a vital ingredient of the Church's attempts to reconnect with the community and win back people's trust.' (Karl Faase)

JESUS AND FORGIVENESS

Matthew 18:21-35; Luke 23:34, Colossians 3:12-14.

Q8. How does forgiveness operate for an offender and a victim of abuse?

Reparation and repentance are key ideas when considering how to deal with an offender. Forgiveness must be hard-edged and robust for offenders. For forgiveness to happen they must honestly face up to their wrongs, repent and seek reparation for the victim(s). Truth must be revealed and justice must occur.

'I think one of the big issues has been forgiveness. That's one of the great things about Christianity – that whatever you have done, however badly you have lived – there's the possibility of being forgiven. There's that possibility that your guilt can be taken away. But at the same time it's a bit dangerous when you say that to an offender who hasn't repented, who hasn't changed life, who will continue to do these things. There's a big difference between remorse and repentance. Remorse is when you feel sorry about something.'

Remorse is what happens in the back of a police car. Repentance is when you agree to change your life and turn around and not do it again. Christ demands of us repentance, not remorse.' (Patrick Parkinson)

The Christian message is a message of forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. Even the worst of sinners is loved by God and Jesus died to deal with all sin. As the hymn *Amazing Grace*, written by John Newton, an abusive slave-trader, reminds us: *'Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see.'* Victims can, and should for their own sake, forgive repentant offenders – as God forgives us all.

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO CLAIM 'CHURCH ABUSE' CALLS THE WHOLE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE INTO QUESTION?

- i. 'In that situation I just want to say what I have said: 'I'm so, so sorry that this occurred under our watch and it's a terrible evil.' (Keith Kondie) Be repentant for church abuse.
- ii. All organisations dealing with children have some offenders. Sadly the church does also.
- iii. All such abuse is not Christian. Jesus abhorred violence and abuse.
- iv. All sexual abuse should be reported to the police and appropriate Church authorities.
- v. Offenders can change, can repent, and when reparation happens can be forgiven and reconciled to God and to a victim. That may take a long time to happen.
- vi. Jesus forgave those who abused him. Luke 23:34.

SHARING & PRAYER

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Episode 7: Science & God

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

We live in a 'scientific age'. Today in Australia science is honoured as representing what is logical, verifiable and repeatable, whereas 'faith in God' is portrayed in some circles as irrational and superstitious. New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and naturalists claim that science has removed all need for belief in God, and religion is no better than fairy tales (like Santa Claus). Sam Harris even adds that *'There is a price paid whenever an eminent scientist pretends that there's no conflict between science and religion.'* Is he right or wrong? The New Atheists, like Harris and Dawkins, claim that no sane, intelligent person can believe in God and they try to pit science against God.

On the other side, mathematician Dr John Lennox says, *'a simple observation on the history of science shows that it exploded in the 16th and 17th centuries in Western Europe in a theistic context ... and the best summary of it is again C.S. Lewis, "Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a Law Giver." So the basic stance is this – that far from belief in God being a hindrance for science, it was the motor that drove it.'*

WATCH THE DVD

GOD THE CREATOR

Genesis 1:1-5, 21-26; Psalm 19:1-5;

Q1. What do these passages teach us about God?

'The main memory for me was that sense of wonder of actually knowing the God who knows how those things work already and being a scientist is actually discovering the work that God has already laid out and made. Not only that but you can actually know the Person behind it.' (Sharon Dirckx)

Creation is **one colossal doxology (cry of praise)**! We see the glorious presence of God in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat! God reveals Himself through creation as there in the place where we work and play, live and love. The whole cosmos is drenched with sacred (special) significance. Life is shot through with God's presence. It is charged with God's grandeur. This vision of reality ought to enable us to see Him in everything and prompt us to a life of joy, worship and gratitude!

Q2. What popular worldviews does Genesis 1:1 deny?

1. "In the beginning God"-- denies Atheism & Naturalism with their belief of no God & natural causes.
2. "In the beginning God"-- denies Polytheism with its belief of many gods.
3. "In the beginning God"-- denies Humanism because God, not humans, is the ultimate

reality

4. "In the beginning God created"-- denies Fatalism with its doctrine of chance or Karma.
5. "In the beginning God created"-- denies Dualism because God was *alone* when he created
6. "In the beginning God created"-- denies Eastern religions where time rotates (Hinduism Buddhism)
7. "God created heaven and earth"-- denies Pantheism because God transcends that which he made.
8. "God created heaven and earth"-- denies Materialism which asserts the earth can be exploited.

Q3. Time, light, matter and space seem to have been created by God 'in the beginning'. What might a Christian scientist want to say about these things?

(Dr John Lennox) *"Can Faith and Science Coexist?" ... Indeed, one of my main reasons for believing in God is that we can do science. The mathematical intelligibility of nature is evidence for a rational spirit behind the universe. If we take the atheist view, then rationality dissolves."*

GOD THE CREATOR AND MORALITY

Q4. Discuss 'God the Creator' as the basis for the moral instruction in each case?

i. Colossians 3:9-10, James 3:9-10

ii. Romans 13:1-2, 6-7

iii. Romans 14:19-23

In each passage God as Creator (and humans as his image-bearers) is the basis for the instructions given: i. not lying to each other; ii paying taxes to governments God established; iii not eating certain food, even though it is God's good gift, because it will cause a fellow-believer to fall. Paul and James imply that at creation humans were invested with a moral conscience that can be appealed to. Marred as it is by sin it still operates; and, after conversion to Christ, can be renewed for ethical behaviour.

"There is something very deep intrinsically inside of us that's moral. If you assume what's called naturalism, there is no God, then you have to somehow explain why those moral instincts correlate with the true moral facts about the world. And that's a very difficult thing to do. I think people who don't believe in God, ie naturalists, need to come up with a much better explanation for why our moral sentiments correlate with moral reality...They haven't to my satisfaction done anything close to coming up with a good argument for why moral instincts correlate with moral reality." Ard Louis

NATURALISM/ATHEISM V BELIEF IN GOD

Psalms 8:3-9; Romans 1:20

Q5. How might a naturalist explain the apparent design of creation and human intelligence? In contrast how do the above passages describe creation and humanity's place in it?

“Either human intelligence ultimately owes its origin to mindless matter; or there is a Creator. It is strange that some people claim that it is their intelligence that leads them to prefer the first to the second.” Dr John Lennox

Q6. What is the basic purpose of science? What is religion’s basic purpose?

“Science has purchased its great success essentially by the modesty of its ambition. It only seeks to answer one fundamental question about the world – how do things happen? What’s the process of the world? Religion is concerned with asking another sort of question – the why questions, like is there something going on in what is happening? Is there meaning and value and purpose in the world?

And science, when it’s true to itself, has bracketed it out and you need both in science to understand what’s going on. My favourite example is the homely one, natural to an Englishman, of a kettle boiling in the kitchen. I put on my scientific hat and I say the kettle’s boiling because burning gas heats the water, et cetera, et cetera. I take it off. I say I want to make a cup of tea. Would you like to have one? I don’t have to choose between those two answers. They’re both true and in fact if I’m to understand the mysterious events of the boiling kettle, I need both answers. I need both the insights of science and the insights of religion.” John Polkinghorne

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO CLAIM ‘SCIENCE’ CALLS FAITH IN GOD INTO QUESTION?

- i. Science and Faith are not in conflict because they are answering different questions.
- ii. Faith in an intelligent Creator is more reasonable than faith in naturalistic explanations for the cause and design of the Universe.
- iii. Naturalism/Atheism have no solid basis for morality; faith in God reveals His will does have a solid basis for morality.
- iv. More satisfying answers to life’s ultimate questions such as ‘who am I?’ ‘why am I here?’ ‘what’s wrong?’ ‘Is there a God?’ ‘Is there an afterlife?’ etc, are given by Christianity rather than Naturalism.

SHARING & PRAYER

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Episode 8: Homosexuality

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Today we live in the aftermath of the 1960s sexual revolution. There is a significant change in community views about sexual morality including homosexual behaviour. An active gay lifestyle is becoming increasingly accepted and, in some circles, actively celebrated and promoted. The push for gay marriage to be accepted has gained momentum and has been adopted in a number of Western countries.

Historically the Church has taught that homosexual sex is contrary to Biblical teaching. This stance has come under increasing community criticism. The Church is now being regularly branded 'homophobic' by critics. This topic is extremely sensitive and opinion, even within the church, is quite diverse. It raises many issues about human identity, sexuality and the definition of marriage. Critics note that the traditional teaching of the Church is turning many people away. With so many political parties and countries changing their view on this matter should the Church also change? How should Christians respond?

WATCH THE DVD

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF HUMAN IDENTITY, MARRIAGE & SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

According to most surveys of Western countries about 3-4% of people consider themselves gay, i.e. their 'orientation' or 'predisposition' is homosexual. Another 1% consider themselves 'bisexual', i.e. are open to both a heterosexual or a homosexual orientation. That does not mean these people are actively engaging in homosexual sex. An orientation is neutral when it comes to God's will. God doesn't speak against 'a predisposition' but against certain behaviour. Christians should be careful not to judge a sexual predisposition. With God's help Christians who consider themselves as having a 'gay' orientation may live a celebrate life just as other single Christians are instructed to. In some cases orientation can change.

THE BINARIES OF GOD'S CREATION

Genesis 1

Q1. How many complementary pairs are listed in Gen 1? (see e.g. vv.1, 2, 4, 5[x2], 6, 10, 14, 16, 18, 20, 27)

There are a great number of 'complementary pairs' listed in Genesis: heaven & earth; formless & empty; light & darkness; day & night; morning & evening; sea & sky, land & ocean; sun & moon; plants & trees; fish & birds; and at the climax – humans as 'male and female' v.27

Q.2. What might this 'complementary pairing' suggest in terms of human identity?

BIBLICAL MARRIAGE

Genesis 2:18-24, Matthew 19:4-6

Q3. How does this passage describe a marriage? What are the purposes of a marriage? Matt 19:4-6

While everything is declared 'good' in Genesis 1, according to v.18 of Genesis 2 the creation of the man alone' is 'not good'. God remedies this by creating his complementary partner, 'Eve', to overcome his 'aloneness'. Eve is a 'suitable' partner in that she is the same yet different. She 'suits' him and is a 'helper' for Adam, made from his rib so as not to dominate him nor be dominated by him. He celebrates Eve's arrival v.23 and v.24 notes how a marriage begins: by 'leaving' one's parents, being united to a suitable helper and enjoying a 'one flesh' relationship for sexual fulfilment and procreation. All of these qualities are intended as happening between a man and a woman, not between two men or two women.

THE OLD TESTAMENT & HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY

Genesis 19:1-5, Judges 19:22, Leviticus 18:21-22, 20:13

Q4. What do these passages say about homosexual behaviour?

In Gen 19:1-5 (& Judges 19:22) wicked men attempted a homosexual rape and, in Sodom's case, as a result of this and other widespread wickedness, God destroyed the city. Jude 7 affirms this same strong condemnation of sexual 'perversion'. The other passages call male homosexual acts 'detestable'. These passages suggest that homosexual acts are contrary to human identity.

THE NEW TESTAMENT & HOMOSEXUAL ACTIVITY

Romans 1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 1 Timothy 1:9-10

Q5. What do these passages say about homosexual acts?

All of these passages take a similar stance to the OT. Homosexual and lesbian sexual activity are contrary to human identity, as God created it, and forbidden. In Romans 1 it is a behaviour of those who have '*exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped created things rather than the Creator*' leading to '*an exchange of natural sexual relations for unnatural ones*' v26. In the Corinthian passage Paul calls both 'male prostitutes and practicing homosexuals,' 'wrongdoers' along with several other abhorrent behaviours.

'BIG SINS OR LITTLE SINS?'

Q6. In some Churches homosexual behaviour is singled out as particularly evil? Do the NT passages do this?

Homophobia is rife in some churches. However in the NT passages homosexual behaviour is listed alongside many other sinful behaviours, including greed and lying. Christians are called to love and to welcome all people, as Jesus did. Acting out fear or hatred in violence or abuse is never Christian.

IDENTITY ISSUES: NATURE V NURTURE OR PREDISPOSITION.

Q7. Is someone 'born' with a homosexual orientation?

“When we look at sex research today what we do know is that there is no gay gene. However what we do think, that there is for some people a predisposition to same sex behaviour or same sex attraction. Now, that is a clear difference from predetermination. In other words, you are disposed to, but you have a choice as to, how you behave. Now, there is just as much evidence if not more that social issues and environment, such as poor parenting, absent father, childhood sexual abuse, the environment in which kids are brought up – that these things influence sexual orientation. So nature/nurture we’ve still got both issues involved.” Patricia Weerakoon.

‘IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY’ IN CHRIST AND CELIBACY

Q8. How should single Christians define their identity? Is an active sex life part of that identity?

*“What I really believe in the deepest part of my being is that we live in a time in which people have come to define themselves by their sexual orientation, their sexual attraction. And my belief is that’s not at the very heart of who we are. We are human beings, male and female, made in the image of God, and loved by God.”*The truth of the matter is that while we are in a very sexualised culture and we see sexuality as a right; the reality is that sexual relationships is not what makes us happy. ... And what we all crave is love. What we all crave is relationship... friendship. We crave deep, abiding relationships that go over a long period of time in which we are loved for who we are and we love another for who they are.”
Prof Dale Kuehne

What we need is to first and foremost see our identity as in Christ and a part of His family. It’s in His love and the love of His body for singles that they can be accepted, supported, transformed, renewed and, when necessary, forgiven. Then they must take up their cross and live a celibate life with Jesus’ empowering.

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO SAY THE CHURCH’S ATTITUDE TO HOMOSEXUALS CALLS IT INTO QUESTION?

- i. Sexual predisposition (orientation) is not a sin: heterosexual or homosexual. Homophobia is wrong.
- ii. Human identity is first and foremost as made ‘in God’s image’ not our sexuality. In Christ we are deeply loved and have the basis for rich relationships and love to enable us to live as God has shown us.
- iii. The Bible clearly maintains that homosexual behaviour is contrary to God design for us and forbidden.

SHARING & PRAYER

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Episode 9: The Irrelevant & Obsolete Church

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

The Church across the Western World has experienced significant decline in the last 100 years. In Australia in the 1950s about 44% attended church regularly (at least once per month). Now that figure has declined to about 17%. In the UK 150 years ago 50% attended regularly; now it's less than 7%. In the Australian community the perception is that the institution of the Church is virtually irrelevant, certainly outdated and becoming obsolete. Also these days there are plenty of people who see the decline of the traditional church as a natural evolution away from the authoritarian, moralistic and superstitious institution towards a more rational scientific understanding of reality. Many feel the Church will eventually die out as the older members pass away.

WATCH THE DVD

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH

JESUS IS BUILDING IT

Matthew 16:13-20;

Q1. Discuss what Jesus meant by 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it'.

As Jesus promised, *"The reality is that Christianity remains vibrant and engaging for large sections of the population. The life and teaching of Jesus continues to enthrall those who connect with Him and His message."* Karl Faase

Q2. Will the Church decline into non-existence?

Throughout its history the Church has gone through serious periods of decline only to be renewed, reformed and reinvigorated. As noted above in the West overall the Church has declined. But this trend is now slowed and pockets of growth are occurring. In the city of London there has been a significant increase in church attendance; up 70% since 1996. And today in many parts of the developing world, notably Southern Africa, South America and Asia the Church is booming. In China, South Korea, and Tanzania, for example, the Church has experienced enormous growth over the last 30 years. The implication of Jesus' promise is that the Church will always exist and, in many places, be vibrant and growing.

JESUS AS HEAD OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 11:28-30; Colossians 1:15-20

Q3. What do people crave today and how can Jesus provide the answers?

Many people in the West are spiritually hungry for meaning in their lives, for a purpose to engage them and a hope for the future to inspire them. Jesus offers these and much more. He is 'God-incarnate' come to live, die and rise again; so becoming Head of His body, the Church. As the risen Saviour and Lord He offers us the opportunity to be reconciled with our Creator and join His family. As Head of His body He offers us the source of life, vitality, guidance and nurture. So while many people in the West are experiencing a high standard of living with abundant possessions they are also expressing deep anxiety and dissatisfaction. Jesus is the true answer they seek. Jesus works through healthy churches.

A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Acts 2:40-47, Deuteronomy 6:1-13

Q5. What are the important characteristics of the Church as described in Acts 2.

This passage is foundational for any healthy view of the local Church. As the gospel is preached (by Peter) 3,000 respond to God's call and are added to the Church in Jerusalem (evangelism and baptism). Then these new believers need to grow so they listen to the Apostles teaching (discipleship), they share life together (fellowship), they share communion, rejoice and pray together (worship); they share possessions and finances (good works); they met in larger and smaller gatherings (services and life-groups); and they impacted their wider community (social action & care). Each of these characteristics are vital for a healthy, growing Church.

Q3. Historically the Church has responded to decline by reforming and transforming itself to meet new challenges and opportunities. How is that happening today? What can change? What shouldn't change?

Worship is essential to human beings. That doesn't change. Nor does the Gospel message; that the one true God, the Creator, who first raised Israel from slavery in Egypt has raised His Son, Messiah Jesus, from the dead to be the world's only Lord and Saviour. However ways of sharing the Gospel, expressions of worship, styles of fellowship, mid-week gatherings, music and singing, service, and social action within the wider community will vary greatly depending on the circumstances and opportunities.

"I'm really excited about the future of the Church because Jesus is alive and Jesus is at work right across the world." Nicky Gumbel.

A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL COMMUNITY

Colossians 3:9-17; 4:2-6; Luke 10:25-37

Q3. How should church members treat each other and outsiders?

'Love' is the key to any healthy church: love for God and love for neighbours. This neighbour-love must overcome all aspects of discrimination; all racism, gender inequality, class distinctions and ageism. While it is OK for a local church to 'target' a certain group for evangelism, e.g. children, it isn't ok to exclude others who are outside the target group. As Paul says, 'make the most of every opportunity' towards outsiders vv.5-6.

“Christian communities bring together people from all kinds of backgrounds and experiences and call them to unite in love, focussing on caring for each other and people in need. When it operates at its best the church offers a unique, vibrant and transforming community that remains enormously attractive and compelling.” Karl Faase.

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO SAY THE CHURCH’S DECLINE CALLS IT INTO QUESTION?

- i. The church will always have a positive future because it is grounded on the promise of Jesus. It may not be so in some places but abundantly so in other places.
- ii. It’s true that in the West the church has declined in the last 50 years. But in that same time frame it has grown significantly in many other parts of the world.
- iii. A healthy growing church, like that in Acts 2:40-47, will be characterised by love, for God and others, and have a strong focus on building up the body and mission.
- iv. The Church is better equipped and, in many cases, is doing better than the wider community in meeting people’s deepest needs.

SHARE & PRAYER

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Episode 10: Towards Belief

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

"My hope for anybody that watches this series is they come to a place of belief and recognise that they can be confident in what they believe. (Cristian faith) is not a flaky idea; it's not kind of weak resignation to something that's intellectually fragile. This is firm foundations of belief that you can be confident in, that you can hold your head up in any community, in any space and say, 'Yes, this is what I believe,' and we trust that the whole series of Towards Belief has been people coming to a place where they're firm in their faith, firm in their belief and sure of their future. That's my hope." (Karl Faase)

WATCH THE DVD

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF FAITH

John 20:30-31; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; Hebrews 11:1-3

Q1. How would you, from the above verses, describe 'Christian faith' to a non-believer?

The Apostle John explicitly tells us why he wrote his Gospel: to encourage 'faith in Jesus', God's Son, based on the evidence provided earlier and, by so believing, receive new life in His name. The Apostle Paul says that the Gospel he proclaims, with its central claims about Jesus' death and resurrection, is based on solid evidence; eyewitnesses (500+) and the fulfilled Scriptures. In Hebrews 11 we are reminded that 'faith' has many concrete 'heroes' in the Old Testament who witness to God's reality and dependability, assuring us that we can be confident to trust God. Therefore Christian faith is not 'blind stupidity' (as Dawkins argues) but is focused on trusting Jesus as the risen Lord based on reliable evidence, eyewitnesses and wise commonsense.

"Every one of us knows that for trust and loyalty to be worthwhile they must be based on evidence... The Gospel of John ends with the statement of its purpose. "Many other things Jesus did in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that believing you might have life in his Name." In other words, John said, 'Look, I've selected this material. This forms the basis in order that you might believe.' So belief here is central in the OED definition of faith, that is, trusting where there's evidence." (John Lennox)

COME FOLLOW ME – JESUS' PERSONAL CALL TO FAITH

Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 11:28-30; Galatians 2:20

Q2. What does following Jesus require?

Jesus invited Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him. This required a personal commitment from each of them...

i. to put certain things aside (their previous careers as fishermen) and

ii. to trust the new life-direction Jesus was offering.

It was a personal decision to 'follow Him' into an unknown future but was solidly grounded on who Jesus is. As Paul says: *'this life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.'*

"I was studying philosophy at the time so I began to be attracted to this Christian faith but it was really important to me not to throw my mind out the door and just take a step of blind faith. So at that point I started to search. That took a lot of different forms. It took looking into the evidence and finding myself really impressed with some of it. I started to read the New Testament for the first time in my life...Over time I just found myself really impressed with the integrity with which Jesus lived. I thought that the life He lived was the most beautiful life that had been lived and that He was worth following." Vince Vitale

"I don't know if I came to a decision that Christianity was the right religion but I came to the decision that Jesus was the only way; that every other religion seemed to tell me how I could hopefully access God's acceptance and love. And the message of Jesus was that there was no way to earn God's love and earn his favour but to simply accept a favour and a love that was already coming my way. And that's the beautiful thing to me about Jesus. Every religion was me chasing after God and the message of Jesus was God chasing after me." Erwin McManus

FAITH & THE BIBLE

2 Timothy 3:14-17, Psalm 119:105

Q3. How does God's Word strengthen our faith?

The Bible has lots of ways to support and strengthen our faith. As God's Word it is vitally important to keep Christians on track in their theology, morality, mission and worship. Paul reminds Timothy that it is the Scriptures that made him 'wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' because they are God-breathed (i.e. from God through human writers) and useful for guidance, and many other important things.

The Bible shows us a God who, in the words of Karl Faase, *"is like a loving parent who longs for a relationship with His children. Unlike the picture some people have of an angry, accusing deity, the God of the Bible is full of mercy. Not only does He desire to forgive us and be in a relationship with us but, as the life of Jesus clearly shows, He is willing to pay the ultimate price on behalf of each of us."*

There are millions of Christians throughout history who can testify to a personal encounter with God through the devotional use of the Scriptures. Their faith is renewed, redirected and enhanced through daily Bible reading, prayerful reflection on the selected passage and resulting action. The Psalms are excellent for this.

WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR DOUBTS?

Mark 9:14-29

Q4. In this story Jesus accuses the people of 'faithlessness' v19 and focuses on the father's uncertainty vv.22-23 adding that *'everything is possible to the one who has faith'* v23. Why does Jesus focus on 'faith'? What should such faith look like?

Regularly Jesus is surprised at people's lack of faith. They have been with Him and should have realised that God was working powerfully through Him. Instead they are uncertain and unbelieving. Even His disciples seem to have dropped the ball, as it were, and taken God for granted by failing to 'pray' when confronted with the evil spirit in the boy. Faith is 'relational' – it has a personal object, God or Jesus.

Q5. We all have doubts at times, how can they best be overcome?

For the father in this story faith is hard. After the disciple's failure he isn't sure that Jesus will succeed. He is living in that shadowy world between half-faith and half-doubt where he is not fully confident he can trust Jesus. Again Jesus redirects the father's faith towards himself. *'Everything is possible for the one who has faith (in me)*. Then later he reminds the disciples that they failed because they needed to *pray* v.29. These two things: i. looking to Jesus in faith and ii. prayer, are vital in overcoming doubt.

SUMMARY: WHAT TO SAY TO THOSE WHO SAY THAT TODAY FAITH IN GOD IS IRRELEVANT?

- i. Christians can be confident in their faith because Jesus is utterly dependable and true.
- ii. There is still a hunger for faith among a significant number in the Western world. It is just untrue to claim that faith is becoming irrelevant.
- iii. The search for a meaningful life and hope shows that people are open to Christian faith, particularly if some of their 'belief blockers' are overcome.
- iv. Doubts are part of life but can be overcome by steadily looking to Jesus and an openness in prayer; *Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief*'.

SHARE & PRAYER