

# Faith for the Future



Moving from doubt and deconstruction  
to a believable and active faith

# Faith for the Future

You may have been raised in a christian religious tradition, but now you wonder whether all of it is true. This document is written for you. I hope it helps you constructively face your doubts, find a truthful and believable faith, and be at peace.

If you have no belief, but want to check out what a thoughtful 21st century christian might believe, and why they believe, this booklet can also help you with that.

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# 1. Look after yourself.

## It's OK to question

If we are raised in the christian faith, it is likely we will at first accept without question that the Bible is true. But if doubts arise in our mind it can all become difficult.

We may worry there is no longer any solid ground to stand on and feel uncertain how we can ever resolve the issues. But questioning is how we grow in understanding. Our doubts will likely cripple our faith until they are resolved.

So it is OK to question, and this need not end in disbelief. It can lead to a better understanding of the truth.

## Be at peace

This can be an emotional or difficult time, especially if you have been mistreated or hurt. But there are negative responses that we don't have to take on board.

We don't have to feel disloyal. We are not doubting God, we are doubting some things people say about God. We are seeking truth about God.

So if people accuse us of bad motives, of turning our back on God, we shouldn't accept this or allow that to deter us.

We don't have to submit to christian leaders who try to control us or misrepresent what we are doing. This can become spiritual abuse and we don't have to accept it.

Support is available for anyone who needs it, either from understanding friends or professional counsellors.

Getting to know God in a new way can be an exhilarating experience. Be at peace, and have good hope!

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Be at peace  
and have  
good hope!

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### Religious trauma

Help is available from counsellors trained to treat religious trauma. You can find them online.

## 2. Doubt can be the gateway to a new understanding

Do we NEED to believe?

Why do we need to believe in God and Jesus? Do we REALLY need to go to church and identify as a christian? Can't we just live a good life, and follow the ethical teachings of Jesus without being committed to any belief about his divinity? Wouldn't God be happy with that?

There are several reasons why this may not be the best choice:

- We have all done things we know were wrong. Forgiveness is an important aspect of recovering from feeling guilty. God offers his unconditional forgiveness via Jesus. This is important for our wellbeing.
- If we want to do better in our lives, in terms of our own behaviour, in fighting injustice and caring for people who are suffering in some way, it helps to have motivation, resilience and hope. Jesus and a loving christian community provide great support.
- Jesus offers us life in the age to come.



A loving christian community can provide support.

### It is OK to live with uncertainty

We live our lives with many different uncertainties, e.g. about relationships, career, or right and wrong. These days so much of the old wisdom is being questioned as our culture re-thinks racism, sexuality, gender, and so much more.

The christian church is often slow to react to these trends, and often reacts negatively. But it is OK to be uncertain, as long as we seek to know and live out whatever we know is true.

# Different kinds of doubt

I think there are at least two very different kinds of doubt:

- 1. **Factual doubt:** we doubt some or all of the teachings of christianity, or perhaps the existence of God.
- 2. **Personal doubt:** our experience of God (e.g. unanswered prayer) or of christians leaves us hurt or questioning. These experiences can destroy faith and may lead to factual doubt as well.

These two types of doubt need to be addressed differently. This note tries to address both, but many experiences leading to personal doubt will be helped more via a caring relationship than via anything I can write..

## A good way to question

There are good and bad ways to question our faith.

***Don't be determined to keep believing the same.***

Some people have few doubts and retain their faith untroubled. That's fine for them, but if significant doubts are raised in our minds, stifling them seldom works. The doubts will keep returning, and if we don't address them we will likely become uncertain and passive in our faith and life.

***Don't make it all or nothing.***

Just because we have found some part of our belief to be unsatisfactory doesn't necessarily mean it is **all** wrong. We may feel we want to get right out, but that may be a hasty decision which doesn't treat our doubts fairly.

***Follow truth.***

The key to faith deconstruction and reconstruction is wanting to know the truth, whatever it is. Keep an open mind.

Truth doesn't  
fear questions.  
When tested,  
it will stand.

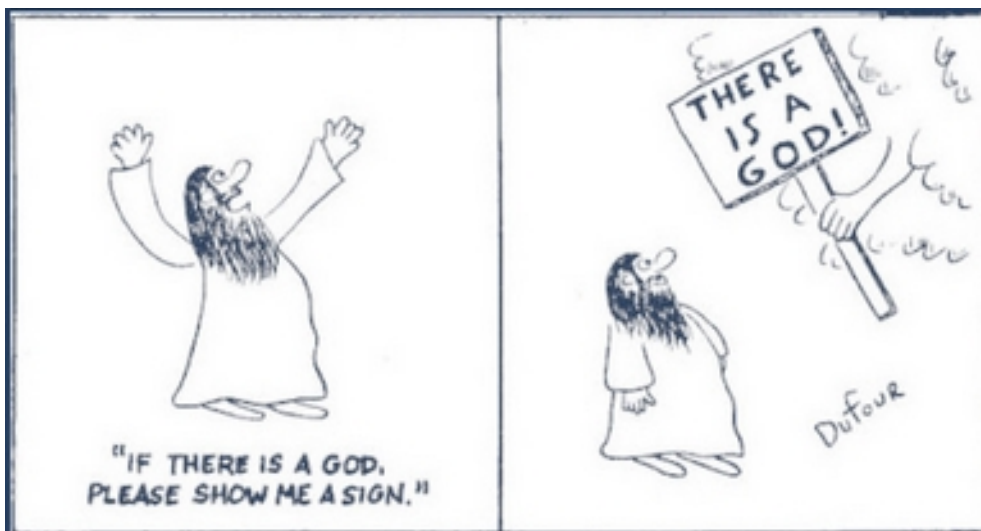
"If God and truth  
seem opposed,  
follow truth - and  
you'll find that  
was where God  
was all along."

## These principles may assist:

- Get information from those who know. Read scientists, philosophers, historians etc, or those who report them accurately. Find web sources you can trust. (There is a list of useful references on page 31.)
- Read both sides of questions so you can judge each viewpoint fairly.
- Discuss with trusted friends. Keep in contact with christian friends while you are making any changes. Don't burn your bridges too soon.
- Pray! If God cares about us, surely we can trust him or her to guide us. If (s)he doesn't care or isn't there, no harm will have been done.



Maybe God has a sense of humour!





### 3. Can I keep on believing?

#### How do we know what we know?

When we start to doubt, we may realise we haven't ever been given clear reasons why we should believe. So let's consider how we know what's true in everyday life.

**Authority** - we trust someone who knows more than we do (e.g. a specialist doctor).

**Evidence** - something conforms to what we know about the world via science or history or observation (e.g. the extreme weather we have experienced lately is predicted by climate science and so is evidence for climate change).

**Experience** - our personal experience is a very direct way of knowing (e.g. an eye witness in a court case).

**Track record** - if something leads to a better world or a better life, we are justified in thinking it may be true (e.g. Nazism often leads to ugly behaviour, so we may reasonably conclude it is likely untrue).

**Intuition** - sometimes we feel strongly that something is right or wrong (e.g. a relationship that needs to end).

**Revelation** - God may reveal truth to us, through scripture or through experience - perhaps a vision or a dream, but more likely via a thought or a new understanding.

There are many different ways to know things - including how we know God.

This is how we make decisions about relationships, careers, and politics. For example, in deciding on a new job opportunity we will do our research (*evidence*), we may seek advice from someone we trust (*authority*) and we may talk to someone who works in that organisation (*track record*).

So in reviewing our faith, we need to consider all these ways of making decisions about what is right and true.



## Is believing the most important thing?

We have been taught that believing is what is of ultimate importance. Believing in Jesus, believing the "right" things about him, believing the approved doctrines of our community.

Now, clearly Jesus wanted us to believe him and believe **in** him, but that wasn't the only thing he said. In a little parable about two sons whose father asked them to work in his fields (Matthew 21:28-31), Jesus pointed out that God prefers those who act rightly to those who speak well but don't act.

In the Bible, deeds matter more than words (James 1:22). Jesus' brother said (James: 2:18) that we can show our faith by our deeds.

So perhaps we need to ask several questions:

- Can I honestly keep on believing?
- Can I trust Jesus enough to follow his teachings?
- Do I think I would live better if I followed Jesus' teaching?

## So where do we start reconstructing?

Obviously we will each start where we first have significant doubts - perhaps hell, or Old Testament killings or something else. I address some of these issues later.

But it is likely that these doubts will lead us to more fundamental questions, which are actually more important. So I'll start with these:

- Is there a God and does he love me?
- Is Jesus really the son of God?
- Is the Bible truly God's Word?



"Would I live  
better if I  
followed Jesus'  
teaching?"





# Was Jesus really the son of God?

This this lead us into three very different questions:

## I. Are the gospels historical?

Can we know if the stories of Jesus are actually historical?,  
There is a wide variation in the views of the best historians.  
But ignoring the extremes, the consensus is:

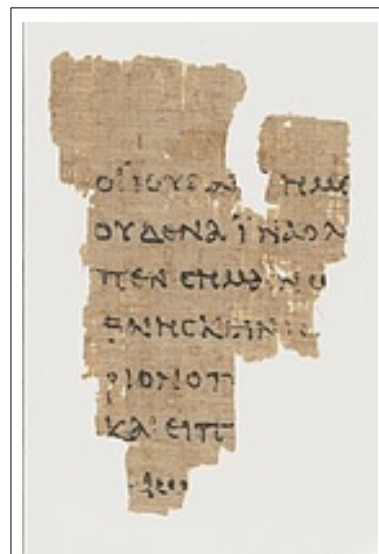
1. The gospels, taken together, are good historical sources for their time.

- they include a number of independent sources (very important),
- they were written not long after the events they describe and so are based on recent orally transmitted eye-witness reports, though of course selected and interpreted, and
- there are so many copies that we can be confident that no major changes have occurred in copying since the originals (even though lots of minor changes have occurred and we can't always be sure what was original).

2. The picture we have of Jesus, his teachings and actions, is largely authentic, though not always exactly as taught by the modern church.

3. Jesus was seen in his day as a teacher (rabbi), healer and prophet. Some saw him as the Messiah (God's promised king who would restore the kingdom of Israel). But Jesus was clear his mission was peaceful and sacrificial, not combative or violent.

4. Historians accept as a historical fact that he was believed to perform miracles and exorcisms. Some believe these stories were legendary, some that they were a natural reality, others a supernatural reality and others offer no conclusion.



A small fragment of a copy of John's gospel, the earliest known New Testament text, and dated about a century after Jesus died, and half a century after the gospel was written. We can thus be fairly confident that John was written in the first century, and wasn't a legendary story written much later.

*The gospels are good historical sources.*

Thus, without any assumption about the inspiration of the gospels, we have a good historical basis for deciding what we can believe about Jesus. We don't have to believe the sources are totally without error to accept that they give us good historical information. The experts can guide us when to be circumspect about information in the gospels.

## 2. Did Jesus claim to be divine?

Jesus was reticent about any claim to divinity or being the Messiah. (Note that in his day, the Messiah was seen as a human king, and "son of God" was a term of high praise but didn't imply divinity.) But he did give hints:



1. **He claimed a special relationship with God**, who he called "my Father" in a more intimate way than any human being can.

*"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."* Matthew 11:27

2. **He acted as God's special agent on earth.**

- He said his teachings had greater authority than the Old Testament Law given by God himself (e.g. Matthew 5:31-32 & Mark 10:2-12).
- Both Jesus and his hearers saw his power to heal and exorcise as a sign of divine authority (Luke 11:20).
- Jesus several times forgave people their sins. To the Jews, this was something only God could do, and they saw Jesus' claim as blasphemous (see Mark 2:1-6).

*"But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."*

Luke 11:20

3. **He told his disciples** they would reign with him in the future kingdom (Matthew 19:28) and that God's judgment of people would be based on how they responded to him (Luke 12:8-9).

As a result of these sayings and his actions, his followers began to worship him as divine soon after his death.

Scholars have different views on these claims, but historian Richard Bauckham from Cambridge University concludes:

"Jesus ..., though usually reticent about it, speaks and acts for God in a way that far surpassed the authority of a prophet in the Jewish tradition. .... Could Jesus act with fully divine authority and exercise the divine prerogative of giving life, while being himself no more than a human servant of God? No, because in Jewish theology such prerogatives belong uniquely to God and cannot simply be delegated to someone else."



### 3. Can we believe Jesus?

The factual information about Jesus is *evidence* and *authority*, two of the factors we need to consider in deciding what we can believe. Now comes the more personal part.

It is likely that we will have an *intuition* about whether we can trust Jesus. Do you think he was an admirable character? Someone you can respect enough to want to follow him? Do you think he told the truth as he saw it? Do you think you can trust him more than any other religious teacher?

We can also consider other ways we can know truth.

Consider your *personal experience*. Has your experience of following Jesus been positive or negative? Have any negatives been because his teachings have been followed, or because they have been neglected?

Consider also the *track record* of those following Jesus, especially those you know. Has his teaching and example led them to live unselfishly, or selfishly? Do christian organisations do good work, even if you doubt some of their teachings? Does following Jesus lead you to a "better" life?

When christians follow the teachings of Jesus to care for the poor, forgive their enemies and love everyone, they have a very positive impact on the world. But much evil comes when churches or governments use religion as a way of keeping power.

None of this is certain, any more than any human relationship is certain. But in the end, we have (I believe) enough information to make a choice between three different alternatives:

How much  
certainty do we  
need to believe?

- 1. You may believe Jesus did indeed tell the truth and you are willing to trust his teachings. That doesn't mean you accept everything in the Bible or all that modern christianity teaches, but it does give you a starting point.
- 2. You may believe Jesus was a good man, but not feel you are able to commit to more than that, at least not yet. But you may be happy to follow his teachings. You may also choose to keep investigating - some suggested reading is at the end of this note (page 32).
- 3. You may be unimpressed. He may have been a good man but there are many good people. You may remain unsure about God.

We make these choices by our words and by the way we choose to live.

## Is the Bible truly God's Word?

Firstly, what does "God's Word" even mean?

We know the Bible had human authors who wrote in the language and culture of their time, and it was compiled and transmitted to us by people (we don't have the original documents, but copies of copies).

So there is no claim that the Bible was directly written by God. But did God so control the human authors, compilers and copiers that what they wrote comes to us completely from God, without error and full of truth?



Papyrus containing part of 2 Corinthians, dated to about 200 CE.



## God-breathed?

The Bible nowhere claims to be entirely the word of God. It claims *some parts* are directly the words of God, but that is all. For the whole of scripture, the strongest claim is that all scripture is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16).

This phrase is much argued over. Does it mean that God breathed it out (which may be a claim for divine authorship), or does it mean God breathed into it to use it for his purposes? The latter is consistent with other Biblical statements when God breathed into something already existing, but that is as far as we can go.

And it doesn't *look* as if the Bible is the perfect words of God. There are many documented historical and doctrinal inconsistencies within its pages (see box).

It's as if the authors offer the reader choices from two different perspectives. We don't need to be worried about this, but recognise it as the ancient Israelites' way.

## How Jesus & Paul used the scriptures

When Jesus and the apostles refer to the Old Testament, they often change the meaning to make a different point than the original author was making:

- Jesus in John 10:34-5 changes the meaning of Psalm 86.
- Paul in Ephesians 4:8 reverses who gives gifts to whom from the original in Psalm 68.
- Jesus in Luke 4:18-19 and Paul in Romans 3:10-18, 5:9-10 & 12:19-21 omit or change Old Testament quotes to remove references to God's vengeance. It seems they wanted to correct some Old Testament views of God.

It seems, then, that Jesus and the apostles didn't see their scriptures as fixed and binding authorities, but rather as God's fluid revelation that could be applied in different ways.

### Examples of God breathing in the Bible:

In most cases, God breathed into something already existing, e.g.:

- Genesis 2:7: God breathed into the life he had just created.
- Ezekiel 37: God's breath entered into skeletons.
- John 20: Jesus breathed on his disciples to give them the Holy Spirit.

### Old Testament inconsistencies

- Sometimes there are two versions of events - e.g. 2 Samuel 24:1 says an angry God told David to take a census, but 1 Chronicles 21:1 says Satan did this;
- or teachings contradict each other - e.g. the rules on slaves differ between Exodus 21:2-7 and Deuteronomy 15:12 and the Passover rules differ between Exodus 12 and Deuteronomy 16;
- and prophets sometimes correct earlier Torah understandings - e.g. Exodus 20:5 & Deuteronomy 5:9 say God will punish children for the sins of their fathers, but Ezekiel (18:17-19) says God doesn't do this.



## So how is it best to view the Bible?

The Bible contains the sacred writings that formed the basis of first Jewish and then Christian religious beliefs and practices. They are not perfect nor consistent, for they reveal the gradual unfolding of understanding about God.

The Old Testament contains material that is legendary or a selective interpretation of history. The New Testament is much more historically based. Both are used by God to reveal truth.

Thus we can gain knowledge of God, and especially Jesus, from the scriptures without needing to defend, investigate or worry about every anomaly. It leaves some matters uncertain, but the main matters are well-evidenced.

### The end of certainty?

The appeal of a perfectly accurate Bible is that it gives us a sense of certainty. *"God said it, I believe it!"* Does the view I'm suggesting leave us in perpetual doubt?

Firstly, inerrancy only gives us an *appearance* of certainty. Believers still disagree over many doctrines (e.g. Calvinism vs Arminianism, the return of Jesus). And they are often selective in the Biblical teachings they accept, for example:

- Few Christians believe in the death penalty for mediums, blasphemers, adulterers, homosexuals, or those who curse their parents, as commanded in Leviticus.
- Few Western Christians would accept Jesus' teaching that *"those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples"* (Luke 14:33). Yet the evils of wealth is a common but neglected New Testament theme (James 5:1-6, Mark 4:19, 10:22, 1 Timothy 6:17).

There are many such examples. So an inerrant Bible doesn't provide certainty at all.

The Old Testament records God's unfolding revelation.



An inerrant Bible doesn't provide certainty

Secondly, the Bible tells us of ways we **can** be confident of the truths we need to know - via the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised the Spirit would lead us into "*all truth*" (John 16:13). Paul says we'll know God's "*perfect will*" if we allow the Spirit to transform our minds (Romans 12:2).

I conclude that the days of *thinking* we have certainty may be in the past, and we're now living in a time of allowing the Spirit to interpret the scriptures to us with confidence (if not certainty).

So can I keep on believing?

A God who created a scientifically "finely-tuned" universe, but also created humans as physical/mental beings with abilities to reason, act ethically, freely choose, create beauty and to love?  
A God who loves and can be known?

A Jesus who is known in history. Who calls us to a life of purpose and altruism. Who will one day put all things right.

And a Bible that portrays God's unfolding revelation to, and correction of, pagan people who recorded the good and the bad? A Bible that is very human, warts and all, but is nevertheless inspired by God to lead us to him, and to truth and life through Jesus?

Can you believe these things?

Do you think the evidence, or your personal experience show it to be true?

Does it encourage you to live well?

Does it *feel* right?

If so, your questions and doubts can be considered from that viewpoint.

And we can move on to other questions!



Can you believe these things? If so, then other questions can be resolved on that basis.

## 4. Faith for the future?

What will our future faith look like? What will we still believe? In what new things will we find truth? And what old things will we let go?

Based on what we have already discussed, here are some brief ideas about a future faith.

### What is the Bible and how to read it?

The Bible records the unfolding revelation of God through the Jewish nation.

The gospels are a one-time only, not-to-be-repeated record of the coming of God's son and the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth.

The remainder of the Bible is a prologue or preparation for that story, or an epilogue or reflection on that story.

We read the Bible with an understanding of its original meaning and with a prayer that the Spirit will reveal to us how to understand and apply it today. We appreciate the understanding of expert historians and theologians, and we trust that what is uncertain isn't crucially important.

We don't expect the Bible to be without error, and we know some parts don't reveal God accurately and are not applicable today.

But we do expect it, by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit, to lead us to Jesus and to teach us his ways.

So regular Bible reading is helpful, provided we read it prayerfully and thoughtfully, and interpreted by our understanding of Jesus..



Read the Bible  
through the lens of  
Jesus, who is the full  
revelation of God's  
character

# The mission of Jesus

We can believe what Jesus said about his mission on earth:

1. **To show us God:** he said when we see him, we see God (John 14:7-9).
2. **The kingdom of God:** all historians agree that Jesus saw himself bringing God's long-promised kingdom, or rule, on earth in a new way (Mark 1:14-15), with him as the messiah/king. He saw this rule as being one of love and service, not power and submission (Luke 4:18, 22:27). He called us to join him in this service (John 12:26).
3. **Salvation:** for the Jews, salvation meant a good life free from oppression, in the glorious age to come when the Messiah would put things right. For us, it means we can receive forgiveness and new life now and in the age to come on the new earth.
4. **How to live:** Jesus gave us an indication of how to live, via his example of serving and his teachings (e.g. the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-7).
5. **All things new:** in the end, God's plan is nothing less than to renew all things - the universe and its people. We will be resurrected on a new earth.



## Our part in Jesus' mission

We are called to be part of Jesus' mission to show God to the world, and to bring the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven. This means

- sharing God's forgiveness, grace and salvation,
- caring for the poor and marginalised,
- working for justice, and
- making all things new.

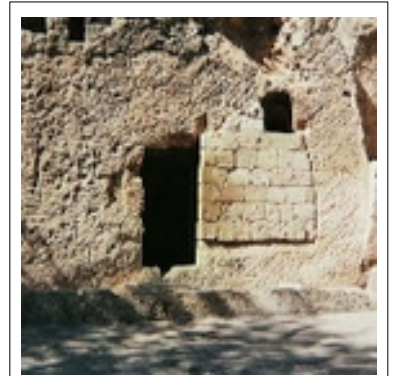
God's plan is nothing less than to renew all things - the universe and its people.

## The resurrection

The physical resurrection of Jesus is a core teaching of the New Testament. God raised Jesus from death because death couldn't hold the son of God. Rather, he defeated it.

The evidence for the resurrection is:

- Jesus' tomb was found empty (most historians seem to accept this).
- Jesus' disciples had visions of him alive after his death (again, most historians seem to accept this, even if they don't believe these appearances were physical and real).
- Belief in the resurrection was a major motivating factor in the subsequent missionary zeal of the church.
- Many sources, including the 4 gospels, other parts of the New Testament, and the writings of Josephus, record the resurrection. If it weren't so miraculous, its historicity would be unquestioned.



Ancient rock-cut tomb in Jerusalem, possibly similar to Jesus' tomb.

Jesus resurrection appears to be the best explanation for these facts, especially if we accept that Jesus was God's Messiah.

## The atonement

John called Jesus *"the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world"* (John 1:29). Jesus said he would give his life *"as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). In first century Judaism, these are clear references to the Jewish sacrificial system.

Some Christians have deep problems with the idea that God would need to sacrifice his son to atone for human sin, and it is true that some expressions of this are crude and repellent.

But the idea is absolutely central to the teachings of both Jesus and the apostles, so we must accept it, even if we don't understand it. Somehow, Jesus died for our sins.

There are many theories of the atonement. They can be conveniently split into:

- theories that say Jesus' death changed how God acts towards us (from wrath to forgiveness) - the most important is *Penal Substitutionary Atonement*;
- theories that say Jesus' death changed evil by defeating sin, death and the devil (e.g. *Christus Victor*);
- theories where it is us who are changed, by realising how much Jesus loved us (e.g. the *moral influence* theory).

I believe all theories have some truth, but the most satisfactory theory (for me) is *Christus Victor*. But as CS Lewis said, while christianity entails belief in the atonement, we aren't required to hold to any particular theory.

## How to respond to God

It is tempting to work out a simple and clear way to respond to God - a "sinners prayer", a statement of faith, a commitment. But each person is different, so I will offer a few ideas that may be applied in different ways to different people.

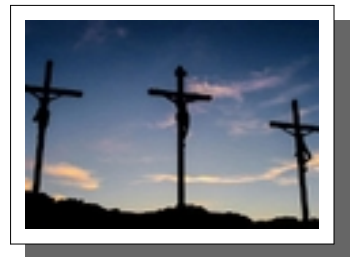
**Belief:** it all starts with acknowledging that we believe in Jesus.

**Forgiveness:** we all know things we've done that we know to be wrong. Asking God for his forgiveness allows us to start with a clean slate (1 John 1:9).

**Invitation & commitment:** we want to be part of team Jesus bringing in the kingdom of God, so acknowledging this to God and inviting him to lead us and use us is important.

**Talk and action:** Jesus said our actions reveal our true selves more than our words do (Matthew 21:28-31). Part of our response to God is to try to live in a way that pleases him.

Christianity entails belief in the atonement, but we aren't required to hold to any particular theory



Responding to God is more important than following a formula





## The Holy Spirit

In Trinitarian theology (which isn't explicit in scripture) the Spirit is the third person of the Godhead, and should be referred to as "he" or "she". But sadly the Spirit is sometimes either ignored or over-emphasised.

Jesus said it was better he left earth so the Spirit could come (John 16:7), so the Spirit's gift to us must be a big deal.

The Spirit guides us into truth, convicts us of sin, develops character in us, is the source of gifts to build up the church, assures us of God's love for us, and more.

If we want to be effective in following Jesus, it is important to pray daily for the Holy Spirit to fill us and give us all these blessings. We should invite the Spirit to guide us, especially in applying scripture to difficult questions.

## Things we don't have to believe any more?

There are many things we may have once believed that we can now question and probably jettison.

### Did God command genocide?

The Old Testament portrays God as having commanded the Israelites to kill whole tribes or all the inhabitants of cities. There are three reasons to doubt this was God's command:

1. The character of God, as revealed in Jesus, wouldn't allow him to give such a command.
2. Based on our understanding of the Old Testament as an unfolding revelation, we can believe that this was a pagan belief that was later revealed to be mistaken.
3. Historical and archaeological evidence suggests that the genocidal events didn't actually happen.

## The Trinity

In Trinitarian theology, God is considered to be three divine "persons" but one being, one God.

An analogy may be a cube, which is one solid object but 6 plane figures (squares).

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all considered to be equal, but relate to the human race in different ways.

I think theologians claim too much, but the Trinitarian formula is a helpful way to see God.

I cannot believe  
that Jesus would  
command genocide.  
So I cannot  
believe God would  
have done it.

# Hell

Hell, a place of everlasting torment, is one of the most hated doctrines of the church. Fortunately we don't have to believe it in its traditional form, for it is based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus said.

Here are 4 facts about "hell" in the Bible:

We can reject the  
abhorrent idea of  
so many people  
suffering forever

1. "Hell" is a Germanic word used to translate the Greek *Ge'enna*, from the Hebrew *Ge Hinnom*, which literally means "Valley of Hinnom", referring to a valley outside of Jerusalem. So "hell" is a **metaphor** for a place of punishment and/or refinement.
2. Jesus is the only person in the New Testament who uses the word in the sense of a place of punishment. (Paul never uses it in his letters or his speeches.)
3. The Jews of Jesus' day had a range of views about God's judgment and the resurrection of the righteous, which they thought would happen at the end of this age and the beginning of the age to come. Most thought *Ge Hinnom* was a place of purification rather than punishment, and people would only stay there a short time, not forever.
4. It appears Jesus used *Ge Hinnom* in this way.
  - "Eternal punishment", which Jesus mentioned, doesn't mean "everlasting punishment", but "punishment in the age to come".
  - He said we need fear "destruction" rather than everlasting punishment.

So while it seems we need to be wary of missing out on being resurrected into life in the age to come, we can reject the abhorrent idea of so many people suffering forever.

## What does eternal mean?

First century Jews believed they were living in an evil age, but when the Messiah came he would usher in a new age of peace and freedom.

The word "eternal" comes from the Greek "aion", which was used for the "age to come".

Thus "eternal punishment" doesn't mean everlasting punishment, but punishment in the age to come.

## Can only christians be "saved"

Jesus said that no-one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). Does this mean that only "born again" christians will receive eternal life? What happens to those who never hear the name of Jesus? It seems unfair for them to be condemned without having any opportunity to believe.

There are three main views on this.

**Exclusivism:** only those who have explicitly accepted God's offer of salvation in Jesus will be saved. This is a common evangelical view. However three thoughts suggest otherwise:

1. Faithful Jews in the Old Testament surely received eternal life without ever knowing Jesus.
2. Romans 2:14-16 seems to indicate that gentiles who follow their conscience will be accepted by God.
3. It seems unjust to condemn someone without them having any opportunity to believe.

**Inclusivism:** all people will be judged according to the light they have been given. Those who are "saved" are saved by Jesus, even if, like Old Testament Jews, they didn't know this. This view, which was held by CS Lewis and apparently by Billy Graham, satisfies the three requirements above, and is becoming more prevalent..

**Universalism:** all people will be saved in the end. After death we all have opportunity to turn to God and in the end, God's love will win out. This view is supported by some scriptures but opposed by others. It is still a minority view, but held by many progressive christians.

It seems to me that *Inclusivism* makes most sense of both scripture and the love of God. Everyone gets the gift of this life, and those who respond to the light they have receive life in the age to come.

What happens  
to those who  
never hear the  
name of Jesus?

### Biblical universalism?

In many places, the Bible uses the word "all" - e.g. "*as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive*"

(1 Corinthians 15:22) - suggesting universalism.

However other passages (e.g. Matthew 10:28) indicate judgment and the possibility of forfeiting life in the age to come.

## God's wrath

The Bible affirms many times that God is a God of love, that his attitude towards us is loving and gracious. So how do we explain the many places where God is portrayed as wrathful and angry?

I think there are two wrong extremes here, and one better understanding.

It is a common evangelical response to say God is loving, but he is also just, and his actions towards us encompass both attitudes. As if his love and justice were equal and opposite, and the sacrifice of Jesus was a way of satisfying both. I think this gives too much place to wrath.

On the other hand, more progressive Christians tend to downplay wrath - perhaps it is a leftover from an imperfect understanding of God in the Old Testament, now corrected by Jesus. God isn't anything else but loving. But I think this response misunderstands love.

NT Wright points out that anger at the effects of sin is part of love. If you love someone, you will be angry if they are deliberately hurt. So, he says, God is indeed angry at sin and determined to eradicate it, because he loves his creation deeply. But this anger isn't vengeful, as the word "wrath" may suggest, but is based on compassion.

So it isn't anger that motivates his response to our sin, but love. After all, the most famous verse in the Bible (John 3:16) *doesn't* say God sent his son because he was angry, but because he loved.

So there is a reality to God's wrath. His anger against sin is the other side of his love towards us. But we need to be careful not to speak about God's wrath (as unfortunately often happens) in a way that people lose sight of his love for them.

Wrath - extreme or vengeful anger.

God's wrath - God's anger when provoked by sin.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..."

John 3:16



# LGBTQI is a sin?

This is a tricky issue, because:

- the church has caused much hurt to LGBTQI people, and it is still a highly emotive and divisive issue,
- the Bible condemns same sex relations, and
- the worldwide church is divided on this issue - the traditional interpretation of the Biblical teaching is contested and may no longer be applicable.

But a few matters seem clear:

1. Alternatively gendered people are a reality. It isn't a choice for most of them, but the way they were born.
2. Discrimination against alternatively gendered people is wrong. Whether we agree with their choices or not, they have as much right as anyone else in a democratic society to live as they choose.
3. The church needs to undo and apologise for the hurt and harm caused to queer people for so long.
4. Thus the LGBTQI community should be welcome in our churches (if they want to be there!) and LGBTQI christians should be welcomed into ministry.
5. The difficult question is same sex marriages - should christians bless them as acceptable to God? My feeling is:
  - based on the principle of allowing the Spirit of God to guide our decisions on issues like this, we simply don't yet have a clear indication of his leading on this, so
  - perhaps we cis-gendered christians should, in love, stop making pronouncements and leave LGBTQI christians to work out their own choices with God without pressure from us? Some would choose to be celibate and others would not.



The church needs to apologise for the hurt caused to queer people



## Patriarchy

The Bible is notoriously patriarchal, not just in the Old Testament but in the New as well. What are we to make of this?

Some Christians just go with what they prefer, and say that women should be treated equally and we just relegate the patriarchal parts to the past. But I feel this doesn't respect the scriptures sufficiently, even though I agree with the outcome.

I think instead our attitude should be based on asking the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to God's people. And I think an indication of the Spirit's guidance is seen in many respected Christians around the world giving equality to women.

So it seems clear to me that the Spirit is indeed leading the church into equality rather than "complementarianism", which is a form of patriarchy. This fits with the fact that Jesus treated women far more equally than was normal for his time.

The outcome is the same, but the decision process is more consistent with our understanding of the Bible and the Spirit.

## Are people totally evil?

One of reformed theology's pillars is the doctrine of total depravity - meaning that there isn't any part of our nature that isn't touched by sin. Depending on the definition of "touched", that may be true, but the name "total depravity" seems awfully negative.

It seems better to emphasize people are gloriously made in the image of God. No matter how much we fall short, that image is never totally obliterated, even if it is distorted. Consequently we are capable of great good, as well as some of us being capable of great evil.

And of course, when we are redeemed by Jesus, we become daughters and sons of the king!

Patriarchy: "a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage"



We are all made in the image of God, and that image is never totally obliterated

## Church as we know it

It is important we don't try to go it alone. The kingdom of God is a journey that should be shared with others.

Church ought to be the public expression of the kingdom of God, exhibiting to some degree all the values we see expressed in Jesus - love, acceptance, serving, healing, challenge, teaching, etc. It ought to be a place where deconstructing christians can find acceptance, empathy, encouragement and good teaching.



Unfortunately, it isn't always that way. We'll never find a perfect group of christians, but we can at least find a group that will help us rather than hinder us.

- Some churches will come way closer to the ideal than others. At first, we will likely need the support and fellowship of a good church, though as we mature we may be called to minister to others in a not-so-good church.
- Maybe a joining a small home church, or a christian service ministry will be a better option in some cases.
- Whatever we choose, we should be asking God for his guidance about where we should find our home.

### The first churches

The Bible word translated "church" means an assembly of people.

The early church mostly met in homes, probably in groups of a dozen to maybe 50.

There were no denominations back then.

## Approaching other questions

In these examples, I suggest we have seen how we might approach all difficult questions:

- Pray for the Spirit's guidance and look around to see how the Spirit might already be leading the church on the question.
- Interpret scripture, and God's character, through the lens of Jesus.
- Read what the most reliable experts say on the matter.

# Appendix: Reasons to believe God exists

Most people's belief or disbelief in God is based on fairly personal factors (I think). For many Christians, belief is based on Jesus as he is portrayed in the gospels.

But some people (including me) also look to philosophy and science to provide information and arguments.

Here is a summary of some of the arguments.

## Explaining our universe

### Cosmological argument

For millennia (probably longer) people have wondered why the world or the universe exists at all. This argument concludes that the universe must have been created, because it couldn't have appeared out of nothing - if nothing existed then nothing would ever exist..

It seems logical that there must be something that has always existed (and so never appeared out of nothing), and everything else came from this. The material universe itself doesn't look like it has always existed (if it had, every physical action would have long since ceased and the universe would have "run down" to a thin homogeneous "soup", where nothing more could happen).

So, the argument goes, a non-material God who has always existed is the best explanation.

### Fine-tuning argument

About 50 years ago cosmologists were examining some of the fundamental properties of the universe (like the size of forces like gravity, the mass and charges of particles like



The Sombrero Galaxy, about 30 million light years away. It is about a third of the size of our "Milky Way" Galaxy, and is quite different in composition. There is a massive black hole at its centre.

It is believed there may be at least 2 trillion galaxies in the universe. It is hard to believe that all this matter, space and energy appeared out of nothing.

The known laws of physics show that it is highly improbable that a naturally occurring universe would allow stars and galaxies to form.

electrons, etc) and found that the universe is "fine-tuned". If any of these values was very different, the universe probably wouldn't exist at all, and certainly wouldn't have allowed life to evolve.

Computer modelling has shown that of all the possible universes allowed by physics, only a vanishingly small number would allow life. The odds of this happening by chance are so small that an explanation must be found. Creation by God is one such explanation.

The only scientific explanation is that there may actually be many, many different universes, and ours is one of the very few that allows life. But critics of this idea point out the science is speculative, and we still have to explain how a multitude of universe, each with different physical values, came to exist. So God might still be the best explanation.

## Moral argument

Most people believe we all have a moral sense, and there are some things that are truly right or wrong. For example, most people would believe the Holocaust, war crimes, pedophilia, genocide and rape are wrong.

But if humans are merely intelligent animals produced by evolution, how can things can be truly right or wrong, rather than helpful to survival and reproduction? All the evils I have just mentioned could help survival.

So it seems that we have to either cease thinking these things are wrong, **or** find an explanation "behind" our evolution that explains our moral sense.

A moral God is the obvious explanation. He knows these things are truly wrong because they contravene "the law of love". Our moral sense is impaired, so we don't always see this.

### The science of fine-tuning

If you want to read more about the science of fine-tuning, *A Fortunate Universe* by Aussies Geraint Lewis and Luke Barnes is the book you want.



### Euthypro's dilemma

Does God command things because they are right (in which case he is subject to a moral law higher than him), or are they right because he commands them (in which case morality is arbitrary)?

This is supposed to be a dilemma for theists, but I think it isn't demeaning for God to be subject to moral law, just as he is subject to logic and maths.

# Human capabilities

Humans are capable of amazing things.

## Consciousness

We are conscious of ourselves as beings who experience emotions like pleasure and pain. I experience things from my perspective, and I don't know your experience. Scientists cannot explain why we are conscious in this way, it seems to provide no evolutionary advantage. But if God created us to be spiritual beings, that would explain consciousness.

## Free will

If there is no God and the world is purely physical, then everything that occurs is a physical process governed by physical and chemical laws. This includes the processes in our brains.

So, given a certain sensory input, the brain responds according to physical laws and I react in some way - but there wasn't any way for me to react differently because there is nothing outside the laws to change my thoughts. Many scientists conclude - free will is an illusion (see box).

The only way I can have true freedom to make a different choice is if the physical laws are NOT all that controls my brain - that there is a non-physical element to life. The existence of a creator God provides this possibility.

## Rational thought

Furthermore, if my brain processes are controlled by physical laws, then they can't be controlled by logic unless somehow my brain has evolved to be logical. We can see how this might be possible for very simple thoughts - it would be evolutionarily advantageous for us to have some basic cognitive faculties.



### Quotes on free will

*"Naturalistic evolution has clear consequences .... human free will is nonexistent."*

Prof William Provine

*"The impossibility of free will .... can be proved with complete certainty."*

Philosopher Galen Strawson

*"The sense of will is an invention of the brain."*

Physiologist Colin Blakemore

*"In order to engage in rational decision making we have to presuppose free will"* John Searle:

*[free will is a] "morally necessary illusion"*

Philosopher Saul Smilanski



But it doesn't seem to confer a survival advantage to be able to engage in deep abstract analytical thought, in fact it may slow down our response when we need to react quickly. So again, it seems our brains must be more than physical in some way.

All three of these considerations suggest that humans are not merely the result of physical evolution, but that a creator God used evolution to create us as more than physical beings.

Without God we  
cannot explain  
consciousness,  
freewill and  
rationality

## Religious experience

People all over the world claim to have experienced God in some way - he spoke to them, or appeared in a vision, healed them, helped them, answered their prayers, etc. It is easy to dismiss these experiences, but they are very common and some of them are supported by good evidence.

Sometimes people who are prayed for are remarkably healed - sometimes the results are even written up in medical journals. Other times God's intervention leads to very positive changes in people's lives.

Studies show that people who have these experiences are not suffering from a mental illness - in fact overall they are apparently healthier than average.

An estimated 300  
million people claim  
to have received or  
observed healing  
after prayer to the  
christian God

So we may reasonably ask whether **ALL** these reports can be dismissed? Perhaps God has really interacted with them. Of course we may then ask whether the christian God would be healing Muslims or Hindus? Nevertheless, these reports provide significant evidence of God.

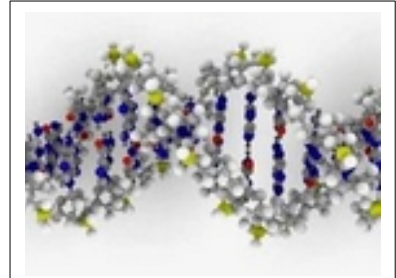




## Other arguments

Many people think other aspects of life point to God:

- The laws of mathematics seem to be universal, yet this doesn't seem to be necessary in a physical universe.
- The sophisticated information contained in DNA suggests a designer.
- Are beauty and love likely results of physical evolution?



Human DNA is made up of twisted strands of paired molecules in 23 large molecules containing in total 3 billion pairs. DNA is capable of storing vast amounts of information, and contains the code to construct the human body. Some people believe it is so complex it must have been designed.

## On the other hand ....

There are, of course arguments against the existence of God, including the apparent hiddenness of God and the claim that everything we know can be explained without God.

Just one argument seems to me to be strong - the argument that a good God wouldn't have created a world where so much suffering and evil can occur. While we can explain why some evil occurs - because God has given us the great gift of free will - it is hard not to wonder why it needed to be *this* bad.

I agree the argument is strong, and makes it harder to believe in God. But there are so many arguments that indicate that God does indeed exist, I am more influenced by them. But human suffering remains somewhat of a mystery to me.

## Putting it all together

These theistic arguments have cumulative force to me. Philosophy suggests that God most likely exists. And that he is a creator who had a plan to create humans with the ability to think, love, act ethically and freely, and to use these abilities to discover him and to live fulfilled and moral lives.

This reinforces what I learn from Jesus, and gives me greater confidence that I can put my faith in him.

## Further reading

My websites, *Is there a God?* (<https://www.is-there-a-god.info>) and *the Way?* (<https://the-way.info>) have lots more useful information on faith and faith reconstruction. I particularly recommend these sections:

- Is there a God? (<https://www.is-there-a-god.info/is-there/>)
- Faith for the new millennium (<https://www.is-there-a-god.info/change/faith-for-the-new-millennium/>)
- Faith deconstruction (<https://the-way.info/faith-deconstruction/>)

The best book I know about Jesus is Richard Bauckham's *Jesus: a very short introduction*. Bauckham is an eminent historian and a christian.

If you want to read what a respected atheist historian says about Jesus, I recommend Maurice Casey's *Jesus of Nazareth: An Independent Historian's Account of His Life and Teaching*. I don't agree with everything he says, but there is so much to learn here.

The best apologetics book I know is William Lane Craig's *Reasonable Faith*. Craig is a well-known philosopher and debater, albeit on the conservative side of christianity.

Tim Keller's book, *Making Sense of God* addresses those aspects of human life and aspirations that point to God, and is well worth reading.

For a better understanding of the Old Testament, I recommend the books, podcast and website of Peter Enns (<https://peteenns.com>) and videos by the Bible Project (<https://bibleproject.com>).

For an amazing story of God's Spirit in action, check out *The Law of Love*, a documentary about Jackie Pullinger, a young English girl who unexpectedly became a missionary to Triad gang members in Hong Kong's notorious Walled City. You can buy it on DVD (e.g. on Ebay - <https://www.ebay.com.au/itm/133730937375>) or watch a low quality version on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iqXypetmV5g>).

Many people, especially women, have been helped by the books of Rachel Held Evans.

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