

Christianity Explored

Introduction to Christianity Explored

Mark 1:1

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January 17, 2010

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Scripture

Today I am beginning a new ten-week series of messages. It is based on a series that is titled *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper, out of England.

The purpose of *Christianity Explored* is to introduce people to Jesus Christ. My interest in this series was aroused when I was trying to find a tool that I could use to help un-churched and de-churched people (i.e., people who used to go to church but don't anymore) examine Christianity. I believe that *Christianity Explored* is a useful tool, and as I was examining it I thought that it would be good to expose our entire congregation to the material.

So, for the next ten weeks we will explore Christianity by looking at the Gospel of Mark. Obviously, this is not going to be a detailed exposition of Mark's Gospel. However, my goal is to address three questions that cut to the heart of Christianity:

1. Who is Jesus?
2. Why did he come?
3. What does it mean to follow him?

So, with that in mind, let us begin our "Introduction to Christianity Explored" by reading Mark 1:1:

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

Introduction

Sometimes Christians talk about the Bible as if it is the last word on any subject. However, many un-churched and de-churched people have a problem with that approach. They wonder:

¹ The material for this message is from *Christianity Explored* by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper (New Malden, Surrey: The Good Book Company, 2002), xi-6.

- Is it really possible for a sane person to reach the conclusion that the Bible is indeed God's way of speaking directly to human beings?
- And if so, on what grounds?

Let me use a simple illustration to answer these questions.

Suppose I show you that I have a bag of Hershey's milk chocolate Kisses. How do you know that the bag of Hershey's Kisses really contains milk chocolate Kisses?

There are three simple tests that you can apply to know whether the Hershey's Kisses really are Hershey's Kisses.

First, there is the *claim* test. You can look at what it says on the bag. If the bag claims to be anything other than Hershey's Kisses, then you might as well forget it. But, if it claims to be Hershey's Kisses, then that is an important starting point.

In the same way, what does the Bible say about itself? The Bible claims to be God's word to human beings. It says that it is "God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), that God speaks to us through it.

Now, the fact that the Bible makes a claim to be God's word to us is not sufficient to prove that it is indeed God's word to us. After all, I could claim to be the rightful heir to the Oppenheimer fortune. That claim by itself does not make it true. But, it does warrant further examination.

The Bible claims that it is the word of God to human beings. Further, the Bible claims that it holds the secret to eternal life. It claims to have extraordinarily accurate prophecies (most of which have already come true, although some concern events yet to come). And it claims to show the only way that human beings can be saved from God's judgment.

The Bible makes all these claims. Outrageous? It certainly appears to be. Provocative? Just a bit. True? That depends on who you ask. But even if there is only the tiniest, tiniest possibility that these claims might be true, then the Bible certainly deserves further examination. Because if the Bible turns out to be God's word to human beings, wouldn't it be extremely unwise to ignore its message?

Second, there is the *look* test. You can open the bag of Hershey's Kisses to see what is inside. Does it look like the bag contains Hershey's Kisses inside?

Similarly, if we open the Bible and look at what is in its pages, it certainly looks like God's word.

Approximately forty different authors over a period of sixteen hundred years wrote the sixty-six books of the Bible in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). The authors were fisherman, farmers, government employees, or kings. They wrote in different time periods, in different geographical locations, and to different groups of people. One would expect a wide diversity of themes to be displayed when combing all sixty-six books into one Bible. However, the truth of the matter is that there is an amazingly unified message that comes through in the Bible. This fact is what makes the Bible unique. Despite the incredibly diverse variation in authors, settings, and so on, there is a breathtakingly stunning uniqueness about the single, unified message of the Bible.

There is one striking message—one striking person—at the centre of the entire sixty-six books that make up the Bible. And that person is none other than Jesus Christ, the subject of *Christianity Explored*. Given the diversity of its origin, the long period of time over which the Bible was written, and the even longer period of history that is covered in the Bible, this single-focused purpose is stunning and staggering.

Then there are the extraordinarily accurate prophecies that are contained in the Bible that have been fulfilled—hundreds of them. In fact, there are more than 300 prophecies that refer to Jesus' first coming alone, of which 29 prophecies were fulfilled to the very smallest detail in the final 24 hours of Jesus' life. Not a single prophecy in the Bible has ever been shown to be wrong.

In fact, despite the attacks on the Bible by people who claim that it is just like any other book, full of mistakes and contradictions, it may surprise you to know that the Bible's authority was never seriously questioned until the 17th century!

The Gospel of Mark, which we will be examining in the

coming weeks, was written in about 55 AD. Thus, Mark wrote his Gospel approximately 25 years after the death of Jesus. That would be like me telling you about my courtship and wedding to Eileen, which took place 25 years ago. If I told you that I married Eileen just a little over 4 months after we met, that we got married in Chicago, and that there were 500 people at our wedding, you could make a few phone calls and verify the accuracy of my report.

Similarly, Mark's Gospel, written in 55 AD, is well within the living memory of the events it records. Mark knew that the readers of his Gospel could easily verify the truth of his report.

But no one found fault with his report. Even those who were hostile to Jesus and his followers were unable to dispute successfully the historical accuracy of Mark's words. And even the harshest critics today are unable to make their criticism stick.

Furthermore, as you would expect from a book so grounded in historical realities, archaeological evidence repeatedly confirms the accuracy of the history presented in the Bible.

You see, it is important to remember that the Bible is not merely a collection of wisdom that may or may not be of interest to us. The Bible is historical. For example, rather than just telling us that "God is powerful," the Bible gives us real historical facts to show us that God is powerful, such as the amazing deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh.

So, one way to know whether or not the Bible is true is to examine the history of the Bible. And once again, there are no historical discrepancies in the entire Bible.

And so the Bible not only claims to be the word of God, it also looks like the word of God when it is examined.

And finally, there is the *proof* test. You can open the bag of Hershey's Kisses, and take out one of the little Kisses and taste it to see if it is indeed a Hershey's Kiss. That would really put the question beyond doubt.

Do you remember the saying, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating"? The Bible is no exception to this dictum. If you put the Bible into practice—and I hope you do—you will discover that the

words of the Bible could only have come from God. In other words, the Bible proves itself to be God's word.

Don't be swayed by people who tell you that the Bible cannot be trusted. There are literally hundreds of millions of people who would tell you otherwise. In any case, it is too important an issue to have other people form your opinion for you. You need to come to a conclusion for yourself. I encourage you to see for yourself what the Bible says, examine its claims, and then make your own judgment about it.

Lesson

As we begin our study of *Christianity Explored*, I want to answer briefly three questions:

1. Does God Exist?
2. How Can We Know for Sure That God Exists?
3. How Can We Know God?

I. Does God Exist?

First, does God exist?

Maybe you can think of a time when you were overwhelmed by a sense of the wonder of nature. It makes us instinctively ask, "Where does it all come from?"

I wonder how you answer that question. Some people are convinced that the world sprang into being by chance, but others think that our universe—and everything in it—was deliberately created by God. Sir James Jeans, the famous British astronomer, once said: "The universe appears to have been designed by a pure Mathematician."² For him, as for many, the order of the earth and the solar system points to a master planner.

Take, for example, the fact that the earth is tilted at an angle of exactly 23 degrees. Scientists tell us that if the angle were even

² Sir James Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 140.

slightly different, the earth would gradually be encased by an ice cap. It has to be exactly 23 degrees to work.

Or what about the galaxy we live in? There are apparently 400 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy alone, and there are estimated to be over 100 billion galaxies in the universe.

Now, in Psalm 8 King David wrote: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (8:3-4). These verses tell us that God has set this whole universe in place and holds it as you or I might hold a contact lens on our finger.

How do we know that we matter to God, and that he is “mindful” of human beings? Well, this immense and awesome God is not just concerned with the stars and the planets. He also created the molecules, the neutrons, and the protons. He made the 75,000 miles of blood vessels in the human body that carry blood to over 60 trillion cells.

II. How Can We Know for Sure That God Exists?

Second, how can we know for sure that God exists?

Now, according to opinion polls, most people believe that there is a God. But the thing that really baffles them is, “If God is there, how can I know what he’s like, and how am I supposed to relate to him?”

I had real difficulty with that question for a long time. When I was a child, my parents used to take me to church, and I just found it so boring. If I was supposed to relate to God in some way, I couldn’t see what on earth church had to do with it. I was so bored, I can remember sitting and counting the bricks up the wall.

It may be that you’ve tried to relate to God in the past by going to church, but for one reason or another you’ve found it boring too, and so you left with the impression that Christianity as a whole is boring.

Or maybe you think that the Bible is irrelevant. After all, it was written thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away. What relevance could it possibly have for us today?

Or maybe you think that Christianity is simply untrue.

Many think that the Bible is all a world of make-believe that belongs in kindergarten. So Jesus walking on the water, the three wise men, the feeding of the five thousand, Santa Claus and Winnie the Pooh are all somehow wonderful stories and fairy tales.

But all of these preconceptions are wiped out by one verse in the Bible. It is Mark 1:1, **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

So Christianity is not primarily about:

- Going to church,
- Obeying rules, or
- Getting baptized.

Nor is it about:

- Beautiful buildings, or
- A God whose only aim in life is to stop me from having fun.

No, Christianity is about **Jesus Christ**. The word **“gospel”** means “good news.” So Mark 1:1 tells us that the **gospel**—the good news, Christianity—is all about **Jesus Christ**. Mark 1:1 doesn’t say that the beginning of the gospel is about keeping rules and being miserable. No, it says, **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

Nor is the beginning of the gospel about “throwing your brain out of the window.” You don’t have to suspend your mental faculties to believe in Jesus, because he is a real person who lived and walked and talked and died in human history. He is someone who can be investigated.

So back to the question: “How can I know what God is like and how am I supposed to relate to him?” One of the great things about Jesus Christ is that when we look at him, the guessing games about God stop. Because the Bible says that God has shown us

what he is like by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. Colossians 1:15 says that Jesus is the visible “image of the invisible God.”

Suppose you wanted to get to know the President of the United States personally. How would you go about that? You could:

- Write a letter to the president, or
- Go to the White House and ring the doorbell, or
- Stand outside the White House with a large sign asking the president out to lunch.

Of course you wouldn't get very far with any of these approaches. Your only chance of getting to know the president would be if the president took the initiative and came out to meet you.

And that is what the Bible says God has done by sending his Son, Jesus Christ. God wants to introduce himself to us, and Jesus is the way he's chosen to do it.

I'm sure you've had the experience of walking down the main street in a busy city and being offered a leaflet which you ignore—or take and then ignore—because you don't think it'll do you any good. Well, the *Evening Standard* newspaper conducted an experiment. They got a man to stand outside Oxford Circus station offering people a leaflet. On the leaflet was the free offer of £5 for just bringing the leaflet back to the man. Hordes of people passed him, and in three hours only eleven came back for the £5. People assumed they knew what he was handing out and that it would do them no good, so they didn't bother to take it or read it.

My plea is that you don't make the same mistake with the Bible, because it's our main source of information about Jesus. If you want to find out what God is like, and how you're supposed to relate to him, then this—the Bible—is all you need.

III. How Can We Know God?

And third, how can we know God?

Like any relationship, this will take time. We live in an age of instant things, don't we? We have:

- Instant credit,
- Instant coffee, and
- Instant communication.

But relationships aren't instant. They take time. Please don't say, "I went one week and tried it but it didn't work." I know that for many of you time is a very precious commodity. The urgent is always the enemy of the important. So do please make time to find out about these things.

Bob Geldof titled his autobiography, *Is That It?*.³ At one point he had just raised £50 million for Live Aid and, while standing on the stage, he heard a fan shout, "Is that it?" Geldof writes, "It's a question I keep asking myself." In an interview with Mick Brown for *The London Times* newspaper we read this: "Ask Geldof whether he feels that his life is fulfilled, and he snorts with laughter. 'Not at all. I don't know what that would mean. I am unfulfilled as a human being; otherwise, why are these large holes here?' He thumps his chest. 'Everything I do is because I'm frightened of being bored, because I know that's what's down in those holes. I'm frightened of it; it makes me very depressed. So I stay active. Frenetically so, unfortunately. And that "freneticism" keeps me going all the time and allows me to think I'm not wasting time.'"⁴

Barry Humphries, the Australian comedian, titled his book, *More Please*.⁵ He writes, "I always wanted more. I never had enough milk or money or socks or sex or holidays or first editions or solitude or gramophone records or free meals or real friends or guiltless pleasure or neckties or applause or unquestioning love. . . . Of course, I have had more than my share of most of these commodities but it always left me with a vague feeling of unfulfillment: where was the rest?"

Isn't it amazing how predominant this theme of discontent, of wanting something more, of being unfulfilled, is in music, film and

³ Bob Geldof with Paul Valley, *Is That It?* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1986).

⁴ *The London Times*, September 1988.

⁵ Barry Humphries, *More Please* (Middlesex: Viking, 1992), xi.

literature? All around us we see people setting their goals, achieving them, feeling euphoria for a while, and then feeling emptiness all over again.

So they set more goals to fill the emptiness, and the cycle begins again. But there is still something missing. It seems that lasting fulfillment never comes by simply getting what we want. Part of us is still not satisfied.

Thom Yorke, of the band Radiohead, was asked why he continued to make music, even though he'd already achieved the success he hoped for. He said, "It's filling the hole. That's all anyone does." To the question, "What happens to the hole?" Yorke paused a long time before answering: "It's still there."⁶

In the movie *The Matrix*, Morpheus says to Neo: "Let me tell you why you are here. It's because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life. There is something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind driving you mad."⁷

Augustine summed up the problem 1,600 years ago when he wrote about God, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."⁸

Conclusion

The good news is that we can know God. And we can know God when we accept what God says about his Son, Jesus Christ. He came and lived and died so that he could reconcile us to his Father. And in the upcoming sessions we will learn more about Jesus: who was he? And why did he come?

⁶ *New Musical Express*, 2001.

⁷ *The Matrix* (dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski; prod. Joel Silver; Warner Brothers, 1999).

⁸ *Augustine's Confessions*, Book 1 (1). Taken from *St. Augustine, Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

O God, Mark said that the good news is about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Many of us here today know that to be true. But others are not sure about that. Help each one here today to believe that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the savior of sinners.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.