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What
is a
Christian?

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Contents

Introduction	1
1. What does it matter anyway?	3
2. A Christian has recognised who God is	19
3. A Christian has repented of all that is wrong	33
4. A Christian has received what Jesus offers	43
5. A Christian is revelling in what he or she has	55

Introduction

The title of this book should, according to good grammar, be, ‘*Who* exactly is a Christian?’ but that tilts the book away from what it is about. This little volume is unpacking the distinctives that make Christian belief so vibrant and joyful. It attempts to unearth the core beliefs that real Christians have in common. All true Christians have a basic structure in their faith that unites them to other believers.

In 1962 the American and British scientists James Watson and Francis Crick won the Nobel Prize in Medicine for their work. They are widely recognised as being pioneers in the work of discovering DNA. It was one of the most significant scientific discoveries of the 20th century. DNA is the material in humans and almost all other organisms, which makes us what we are. It stores and encodes the information which forms the building blocks of life.

This little book examines the ‘DNA’ of Christians. Despite all Christians possessing different physical features, personalities, and cultural backgrounds, as well as varying peripheral concerns, there are core beliefs which are basic to those who have truly put their trust in Jesus. Of course, we know that many, especially in the West, claim the name ‘Christian’ but are not following Jesus. For them, it is social and cultural. But what is it that people who are more than nominal Christians believe? What are the building blocks of real Christian faith? What is basic for the person who has come to know God in a dynamic and intimate relationship? What is the Christian’s DNA?

I hope that you will enjoy reading. It may not help you to win the Nobel Prize, but I pray that it will introduce you to the true and living God who is, after all, the Author of DNA!

1.

What does it matter anyway?

At a circus an elephant was tethered to an eighteen-inch stake. The huge beast could easily have pulled it out of the ground and become free, but he didn't even try. The circus owners had tied him to the same post since he was a baby. He had tried repeatedly to break free, but found that he couldn't and so concluded that he could never pull the stake out of the ground. So there he stood, a massive creature capable of lifting whole trees, yet held captive by a puny piece of wood.

In a similar way, throughout our early years we can all too easily pick up negative ideas of who Jesus is, and what He did. For some, on both the outside and inside of the church, it looks messy and complicated, and others have had bad experiences of church. Christian belief

and church can be portrayed and perceived as appealing only to the weak-minded and easily deceived, appearing irrelevant and/or untrue. So it is a serious challenge to break away from that which tethers a person's mind, to take a closer look at the Christian message, to break free from a mindset formed in childhood and seek to be objective about Jesus.

A God-shaped hole?

And yet, something within us gives us a sense of awareness of there being more to this life than 'threescore years and ten'. When we stand at the graveside of a loved one, or see a stunning sunset, or feel the intensity of the joy of life, we resound to the truth of the Bible's words that 'God has put eternity in the human heart'. There is too much around us to believe that the only dimension is materialist. We are naturally curious and wonder why we are here and what life is really about.

The late Helen Keller, whose sight and hearing were destroyed by an illness before she was two years of age, expressed this awareness of God when just a teenager. She was to become a truly inspirational woman. Anne Sullivan who lived with Keller and taught her for many years thought it would be impossible to teach little Helen about God. But when Helen was fourteen, Miss Sullivan placed her sensitive fingers on her lips and slowly spelled

out ‘G-O-D.’ It was a breakthrough. Helen’s face lit up and she exclaimed, ‘Oh, I am so glad you told me His name, for He has often spoken to me.’

Even in today’s secular age, there is a steady stream of people who want to break free from cynical unbelief, which has held them captive for so long.

Melvyn Bragg, author and broadcaster – and certainly not a convinced Christian – describing his ‘first steps back on the road to faith’ wrote, ‘Stephen Hawking speaks of worlds of thought which we shall never know – there is the inexplicable. I think most of us sense that now and then we have pulses from it – in passion, in daydreams, “surprised by joy” ... the current notion that atheistic reason marks the high point of human intelligence, strikes me as very doubtful. I’m as certain as can be that there’s more to come.’¹

Human beings are essentially religious. The hearts of men and women are instinctively aware of God. It was the way we were created to be. That is why something grates when one listens to atheists. We know they haven’t got the answers. We find people worshipping on the banks of the Ganges; praying with their faces turned toward the sun, the moon, the East, or Mecca, in a temple, a chapel or cathedral or communing privately with their Heavenly

1 *Daily Telegraph*, Saturday, 11 June 2011

Father. Humans are essentially devout. Alain de Botton, author of 'Religion for atheists', helped set up 'The School of Life', which runs a course called, 'How to fill the God-shaped hole'. We were created with a spiritual dimension; we were made to know God, and He just cannot be shaken off. The One who brought all things into being has you and me as part of His design. We pursue God because He has put an urge within us that spurs us to do so.

Christianity is still making an impact

The claims of Christianity and its impact are such that it is totally unwise to ignore them. We do so at our peril. We are repeatedly told by some that all religions are more or less the same. Yet even the most casual look at Christianity demonstrates how far that is from the truth. Only in Christianity is there belief in one God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; only in Christianity do people rely on what God has done to save them, rather than hoping that their own efforts are sufficient to save them; only in Christianity is there a Saviour who not only died for them, but rose again from the dead. And only in Christianity is there the Holy Spirit who guides, encourages and supports those who trust in God. That is why Christians say they actually *know* God in a personal way. That is why it is only Christians who have a certainty about life after

death because they are depending on what God has done for them, rather than what they do for Him.

Of course, Christians make mistakes and get things wrong. There ought never to be smugness in Christianity. Our only claim is that whilst we have messed up, God has come to our rescue. We are what we are because of what He has done for us. Nevertheless we have been changed, and the results of that are very noticeable even by those who are opposed to Christian belief.

Atheistic journalist, Matthew Parris, writing of his experience of growing up in Nyasaland (today called Malawi), reflected, ‘... travelling in Malawi refreshed another belief, too: one I’ve been trying to banish all my life, but an observation I’ve been unable to avoid since my African childhood. It confounds my ideological beliefs, stubbornly refuses to fit my world view, and has embarrassed my growing belief that there is no God ... I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa ... Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good ... far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them.’²

2 *The Times*, Saturday, December 27, 2008

Roy Hattersley, politician and journalist, wrote in the *Guardian*, under the strap-line, 'We atheists have to accept that most believers are better human beings'. He said that repeatedly he felt his own atheism was being challenged by Christians he saw. Here is a typical comment:

Last week a middle-ranking officer of the Salvation Army, who gave up a well-paid job to devote his life to the poor, attempted to convince me that homosexuality is a sin. Late at night, on the streets of one of our great cities, that man offers friendship as well as help to the most degraded and degenerate human beings ... and he does what he believes to be his Christian duty without the slightest suggestion of disapproval. Yet, for much of his time, he is meeting needs that result from conduct he regards as intrinsically wicked.³

And again Alain de Botton, a non-believer, argues that agnostics and atheists should steal from religion and gain from them insights into building a sense of community, making our relationships last, overcoming feelings of envy and inadequacy, escaping the twenty-four hour media, and creating new businesses designed to address our emotional needs! He has even devised Ten

3 *The Guardian*, Monday, September 12, 2005

Commandments for atheists. But he has no answer to the problems of sin, guilt or death, and no one to give the desire or power to live according to the standards he has devised.

Jesus defines Christianity

The central Christian belief is that through Jesus' death on a cross twenty centuries ago, we can have forgiveness and be given a new start. For Christians, the one subject which defines them is not a creed but a Person. It is all about Jesus. He is the One who was anticipated through the ages prior to His birth. In fact the Old Testament, written long before Jesus was born, prophesies about Him in such detail that we are told where He would be born – in a tiny village called Bethlehem, eight miles from Jerusalem; how He would be born of a virgin; details of His life, teaching and works; and about His crucifixion in minute detail, even though crucifixion was not devised as a means of execution until many centuries later. Prophecies of old, repeated by Jesus throughout His life, made it clear that He would die for the sins of the world, be buried and three days later rise from the dead.

The Christian is clear that Jesus is the Lord to whom they have submitted and before whom one day every human will bow. He is the Saviour they trust to rescue them from their plight of sin and rebellion. He, through

the Holy Spirit, is their Companion, whom they rely on to guide and guard them through life's journey. He is the King, the rightful ruler, whose government is legitimate and perfect and will one day be manifest across the world. He is the Judge before whom every individual will give account. He is the One they love, follow and seek to be like because He first loved them and gave Himself for them.

The One God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There was love and relationship manifested between each Person in the Trinity throughout the aeons of eternity past. But it was always God's plan that in 'the fullness of time' the Son would step into the arena of human history, manifest in a human body. He was the God – Man. Centuries earlier God had told Moses that he and his people should call God, 'I am'. Jesus took on Himself this very name that God's people used when speaking of Him. So repeatedly Jesus called Himself 'I am'. His hearers knew exactly what He was saying, and some even attempted to stone Him to death because they felt He was blaspheming.

Jesus' miracles were a demonstration of His power, signs that He was who He claimed to be: miraculously He fed the hungry, cured the blind, the deaf, the mute, the paralysed, the lame and the leprous. He calmed the storm at sea, raised the dead, and turned water into wine. He lived a pure, spotless life that could not be faulted. And