

c h r i s t i a n i t y q & a

Introduction

This page provides answers to some of the commonest questions asked about the Christian faith. Questions are grouped into four headings: God, The Bible, Jesus Christ and finally, other religions.

... "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope."

1 Peter 3:15 (NAB).

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Questions About God

How can I know if God exists ?

Evidence for God's existence can be found in several ways:

1, In creation - we see nature all around us, for example in flowers, landscapes and mountains. Creation implies a creator.

2, In design - a computer is more complex than a chair. A hierarchy of designs from simple to complex implies that there must be a supreme designer of all of them. An analogy was provided by William Paley (1743-1805) and runs like this: Suppose someone found a watch in an empty field. The complexity of the design would lead one to conclude that it could not be the product of random events, but rather of some creative intelligence.

3, In morality - the sense of right and wrong. Where does this sense come from ? This points to a supreme lawgiver.

4, In causality - every effect must have a cause. Thus the world must have been caused by something else. However, there must be something that is uncaused, something not dependent on anything. That something is God.

5, In contingency - we observe that some things are dependent ('contingent') on other things for their existence. However, not everything can be contingent, so there must exist something that is not dependent on anything else (i.e. God).

If God created the world and everything else, who created God ?

The answer is no one! God is the 'Uncaused Cause' or 'Prime Mover'. Only things that have a beginning (e.g. the Universe) require a creator. God, on the other hand has existed from all eternity. He is an infinite spirit, not restricted in any way by time or space.

How can God be one in three persons ?

Christians call this the **Trinity** (literally: 'Tri-unity').

To explain this, we must distinguish between God's nature and his manifestation to us. God's nature is oneness, yet he has revealed himself to us in three persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All three are God, yet are also distinct persons within his one nature.

We can think of the Trinity mathematically: $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ rather than $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$, which would imply that there are three gods.

If God is loving, why does he send people to Hell ?

God does not send anyone to Hell. By his very nature, God is holy and cannot overlook sin, yet he desires that all should come to know him through faith. However, God does not compel us to love him, for forced love is not love at all. Thus Hell is something that humans choose voluntarily, through their rejection of God.

If God is holy and good, where did evil come from ?

Evil is not something that was created by God, rather it should be seen as a lack of good. God created man with free will - the ability to choose between right and wrong. Evil basically comes from the exercise of that free will in not following God. Being human means that we have responsibility for our own actions, whether they be good and bad.

Why do Christians pray to God ?

Christianity uniquely emphasises that a Christian can have a personal relationship with God. We should regard prayer as being the talking part of the relationship and a two way process at that. Jesus himself set down the model prayer for all Christians:

"This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and do not subject us to the final test, but deliver us from the evil one."

Matthew 6:9-13 (NAB).

Prayer has the benefit of drawing us into a deeper relationship with God - as we pray we learn more about his will for our lives.

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Questions About The Bible

What's so special about the Bible ?

Christian belief is that the Bible is the word of God, revealed to Man. God's word is true, unchanging and eternal.

"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness."
2 Timothy 3:16 (NAB).

Proof that the Bible is the word of God is found in 1 Peter 1:23:

"You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God..."

Who wrote the Bible ?

The Bible was written by several writers over an approximate period from 1500 B.C. to 100 A.D. However, the answer is that ultimately God himself was the author. Throughout the Bible we see men and women who God used as his instruments in bringing divine messages. The Bible was written by humans, but is '*God-breathed*', i.e. the spirit of God inspired the Bible writers to convey an accurate and true message - the very words of God himself.

Are there errors in the Bible ?

We must distinguish between human error and divine error. By nature, God cannot err (Hebrews 6:18: *"...in which it was impossible for God to lie..."*) and as the Bible is the word of God, it logically follows that the Bible cannot contain error. However, human error could occur in making copies of the original Bible manuscripts (e.g. numbers could be wrongly written down).

"Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart."

Hebrews 4:12 (NAB).

Why is the Bible superior to the Holy books of other religions ?

The answer is some of these books contain teachings that clearly conflict with the Bible. Either the Bible or these books are true. However, the Bible alone is divinely inspired and inerrant. As God cannot err, the other books cannot be the word of God.

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Questions About Jesus Christ

How can we know if Jesus ever existed ?

Outside of the Bible itself, we find evidence for Jesus' existence in the following:

1, Tacitus (c.55-120), a Roman lawyer and historian, clearly mentions Jesus in explaining how the Emperor Nero used Christians as a scapegoat for the problems he faced during his reign:

"...Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius."

2, Josephus (c.37-100) was a Jewish historian. In his *Antiquities*, he gives a clear description of Jesus:

"Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man, for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was the Christ, and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians so named from him are not extinct at this day."

3. Suetonius (c.69-130) was a Roman historian. In his *Life of Claudius*, he writes:

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ], he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome."

Did Jesus claim to be God ?

Yes he did. In John 8:58, Jesus says:

"Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM."

The words *"I AM"* were used by God himself in speaking to Moses in Exodus 3:14.

Similarly in Mark 2:5-7, Jesus heals a paralytic man and pronounces that his sins are forgiven. The fact that only God could forgive sins is clearly stated in verse 7.

Not only did Jesus claim to be God, his disciples called him so. For example in John 20:28, Thomas calls Jesus *"My Lord and my God."*

The apostle Paul clearly states this belief in one of his letters:

"Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

Philippians 2:5-8 (NAB).

Were Jesus' miracles really true ?

The fact that Jesus was sent from God clearly indicates that he was able to perform miracles. This was recognised not just by the disciples, but by others too. For example in John 3:2, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, says of Jesus:

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him."

Another example is the feeding of the 5,000, which is found in all four gospels.

Even outside of Christianity, there is support for this view of Jesus as a worker of miracles. For example, Sura 5:110 of the Islamic **Koran** says:

"God will say, 'O Jesus, son of Mary, remember My blessings upon you and your mother. ... You healed the blind and the leprous by My leave, and revived the dead by My leave'..."

Did Jesus really rise from the dead ?

In John 20:15-17, we read that Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene after his death. Jesus calls Mary by name and she recognises his voice. Mary not only heard Jesus, she clearly saw and touched him as these verses indicate. Later on in the same chapter, Jesus appears to his disciples. Most significantly, Thomas who initially doubts, confirms that Jesus really was risen by feeling the physical wounds on his body. The Gospels all contain accounts of Jesus' appearances after his death.

Evidence for Jesus resurrection is also found in Acts 9, where the risen Christ appears to Paul on the Damascus road.

How can Jesus be both God and Man ?

In John 1:14 we read that *"...the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us..."*

This is what Christians call the **Incarnation**: Christ was truly God and yet truly man. His two natures were not merged or confused in any way, but were totally separate. Christ could identify with every human emotion (he wept for example - See John 11:35), yet as God he had the authority to forgive sins (see Luke 5:20).

Paul expressed his belief in Jesus position as truly God and truly man as follows:

"For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily."
Colossians 2:9 (NAB).

Why did Jesus have to die ?

The Bible tells us in Genesis 3 that sin entered the world through Adam and Eve's rebellion in the Garden of Eden. As human beings, all of us inherit a sinful nature - we are by nature, sinners (Romans 3:23). By the very fact that God is holy, he cannot overlook human sinfulness. Romans 6:23 and 1 Corinthians 15:22 tell us that our sin leads to death and not just separation from God.

To restore mankind to God, some satisfaction had to be made for the sins of humanity. However, no human being could ever make that satisfaction. Instead God sent his son - Jesus Christ, to pay the price for us. As God, his death as the lamb of God would be sufficient.

The most famous explanation is that found in John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."
John 3:16 (NAB).

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Questions About Other Religions

Aren't all religions just the same ?

By this it is often meant that many religions have things in common, such as belief in the divine, a desire to do good and avoid evil, and respect for other human beings.

Christianity does not deny that there is truth and value in other religions. As an example, Zen Buddhism believes in five precepts as a way of governing one's conduct. One precept states "*I will respect the property of others, I will not steal.*" That said, other belief systems may also have practices that are contrary to the Bible. As the Bible is God's living word and without error, it follows that other religions cannot be the same as Christianity. Christianity uniquely claims that God came in human form to redeem fallen mankind and reconcile the human race to himself.

What are the differences between Christianity and Islam ?

The most significant difference is that Islam teaches that Jesus was a prophet, but was not God incarnate. Jesus' virgin birth is however, accepted as factual. Jesus (known as *Isa* in Islam) was one of many prophets, including Abraham, Moses and most significantly Mohammed (c.570-632). Mohammed was the *Seal of the prophets*, providing the final revelation for all mankind through the Holy **Koran** (Arabic: 'recitation'). The Koran was received by Mohammed from the angel Gabriel over a period of about 20 years.

Islam does not accept that Jesus died on a cross, rather God intervened and allowed someone who looked like him to die instead. In addition, Islamic belief is strictly monotheistic - there is one God *Allah*, who exists not in three persons, but one. Islamic tradition indicates that God has 99 names, e.g. *Al Malik* ('The King').

Islam does not accept the claims of the Bible to be inerrant and 'God-breathed'. Rather, the Bible has been corrupted over time with human additions. The Koran is the only infallible book and therefore only those teachings of the Bible which agree with it can be accepted.

Finally, Islam denies the Christian doctrine of 'Original sin', that is, the fallen nature humans inherit as a result of Adam's and Eve's rebellion against God. Islam believes human sinfulness is caused by weakness and not by a fallen nature.

What is Reincarnation ?

Reincarnation (which literally means 'to come again in the flesh') is the belief that at death the soul separates from the body to then be reborn in a new body. A person's deeds in their lifetime (known as *karma*) determine their fate in the next. To break this cycle of death and rebirth, one should strive to eliminate karmic debt through good deeds and attain *Nirvana*, a state of inner peace. Reincarnation as a belief is found in many eastern religions (e.g. in Hinduism, where it is known as *Samsara*.)

Christianity rejects reincarnation as contrary to the sovereignty of God - the ultimate judge of all. Furthermore, the cycle of rebirth and death as a way of dealing with our sins would negate Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, made for the sins of all mankind.

"Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, so also Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him."
Hebrews 9:27-28 (NAB).

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