

# Christianity Explored

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## Preface

You sometimes hear Christians talking about the Bible as if it were the last word on any subject. And I know that many of my readers will have a problem with that sort of attitude. 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? On what grounds?

This is a simple illustration, but go with it. How do you know that a bag of sugar really contains sugar? Assuming you've been to the store and asked for a bag of sugar, how can you know that you've got what you paid for?

First of all, you could look at what it says on the bag. If it *claims* to be anything other than sugar, you might as well forget it. What does the Bible say about itself? It says it's 'God-breathed', that God speaks to us through it. Not that claiming something proves anything in itself. After all, I could *claim* to be two slices of apple pie. But any book that makes all the claims the Bible makes about itself demands some examination at least. For example, how many books insist that they hold the secret of eternal

life, contain extraordinarily accurate prophecies (most of which have already come true, although some concern events yet to come), as well as claiming to show the only way that human beings can be saved from God's judgement? The Bible does all these things. Outrageous? It certainly seems to be. Provocative? Just a bit. True? It depends on who you ask. But even if there is only the tiniest, tiniest possibility that these claims might be true, the Bible deserves our attention. Because if the Bible did turn out to be the word of God, wouldn't it be extremely unwise to have deliberately ignored it?

Secondly, you could open up the bag to see what's inside. Does it *look* like sugar? And if we open the Bible and read it, it certainly *looks like* God's word. Approximately forty authors wrote in three different languages over a period of one thousand five hundred years. Some of the authors were young, some were old, some were soldiers, others were fishermen, farmers, civil servants or kings. They wrote during different periods of history, in different geographical locations, to different groups of people. It wasn't like a relay race, with one author handing on the baton to another. Often, they were writing centuries apart. But despite this amazing variation – which alone makes it a unique book – the Bible has one theme running through it like rings in the trunk of a tree. There is one striking message, one striking person at its centre. That person is 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 it deals with, this single-minded purpose is quite staggering.

Then there are the fulfilled predictions that the Bible

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contains – hundreds of them. There are more than 300 predictions that refer to Jesus Christ alone, 29 of which are fulfilled in the final 24 hours of his life. Despite the attacks of people who claim that the Bible is just like any other book, full of mistakes and contradictions, it may surprise you to learn that the Bible's authority was not seriously questioned for 15 centuries.

The book of Mark, which we'll be looking at in more detail, was written in about 65 AD. That's well within living memory of the events it records. So Mark knew that his first readers would easily be able to verify the truth of his account. But no one found fault. Even those who were hostile towards Jesus and his followers were unable to successfully dispute the historical accuracy of Mark's words. And even the harshest of today's critics have been unable to make any of their criticism stick. Furthermore, as you would expect from a book so grounded in historical realities, archaeological evidence has repeatedly confirmed the unwavering accuracy of biblical history. You see, it's important to remember that the Bible is not a collection of wisdom that may or may not be of interest to us. It is historical. For example, rather than just telling us that 'God is powerful', the Bible gives us real historical facts – such as the amazing deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt – that demonstrate the fact that God is powerful. So if you want to know whether or not there is any substance to the Bible, one way of doing it is to see if there is any substance to its historical claims.

Thirdly, you could always open the bag, dip your finger inside and actually taste it to see if it's sugar. That would really put the matter beyond doubt. You've heard people say that 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating',

and the Bible is no exception to this rule. If you put the Bible into practice – and I hope that, by the end of this book, you’ll want to – you’ll see that the words the Bible contains could only have come from God. It *proves* itself to be God’s word.

Don’t be put off by those who tell you that the Bible can’t be trusted. There are literally millions of people who would tell you otherwise. In any case, it’s too important an issue to have other people form your opinion for you. Instead, I hope you’ll want to see for yourself what the Bible says, examine its claims and then trust your own judgement.

## Introduction

First of all, I have a confession to make. There is another book that has been around a lot longer than this one, and it has exactly the same aim: to make you familiar with who Jesus Christ was and why he is of absolute importance to everyone who has ever lived and ever will live. The person behind this other book is infinitely more gifted than I am, and the book's scope is admittedly superior to the one you're currently holding. Copies are readily available not only on the internet, in book stores and in libraries, but also in hotel rooms the world over, and it has been translated into more languages than any one person could reasonably be expected to master.

Actually, I'd better make that two confessions. The second is that I didn't have a particularly religious upbringing myself. In fact, my experience of Christianity was limited to a few dull sermons, slightly spooky people in strange garments hanging about in dank halls and religious education lessons during which I attempted to find references to rugby in the Bible. Christianity was worse than boring: it was a fiction. Jesus walking on water, the three wise men, the feeding of the five thousand, Father Christmas and Winnie the Pooh were all mixed up in my mind together. They were all make-believe, best left in the nursery.

So I was shocked when I discovered that my older

brother George had become a Christian. I remember telling him in no uncertain terms exactly what I thought about God and everything connected with God. To his credit, George didn't respond in kind. Instead, he pointed me to a single sentence in the Bible, the very first sentence of Mark chapter 1: 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.' He explained that the word 'gospel' simply means 'good news'. 'Rico,' he said, 'you don't understand Christianity. You think it's all about church, men in dresses, obeying rules and beautiful old buildings, but it's not. It's just good news. Good news about Jesus Christ.'

Even my time in church, however, had brought me no closer to knowing what this 'good news about Jesus Christ' actually was. In fact, if I could hand the book you're now holding to the person I was twenty-odd years ago, that person would have dismissed it straight away. He wouldn't even have given it the benefit of the doubt, which is strange because – as I've since discovered – Jesus Christ is able to provide definitive answers to questions that were endlessly troubling to me. How can I be content? Is there any meaning to life? Is there life after death? Does God *really* exist or did we just make him up ourselves? If God exists, why is the world so full of injustice?

I suppose most of us already have an opinion about God. Some people look at the world, with all its suffering, and reject God out of hand. But other people have an inkling that yes, God probably does exist. They're not sure what He/She/It is like, but having seen the incredible scale and diversity of our universe, not to mention the beautiful form and function of our own minds and bodies,



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it seems like a reasonable proposition. The British astronomer Sir James Jeans certainly reached that conclusion. He wrote, ‘The universe appears to have been designed by a pure mathematician.’ For him, the amazing order of our universe – from the tiniest blood cell to the most distant galaxies – points to the existence of a master planner. Tom Stoppard, one of the most celebrated and intellectually rigorous playwrights of our time, wrote a play called *Jumpers*. When asked to talk about the play’s theme, Stoppard said:

A straight line of evolution from amino acid all the way through to Shakespeare’s sonnets – that strikes me as possible, but a very long shot. Why back such an outsider? However preposterous the idea of God is, it seems to have an edge of plausibility.

‘Atheism is a crutch for those who can’t accept the reality of God’, one of his characters says.

One other factor that has led some people to feel that God might exist is the human sense of loneliness, emptiness and restlessness, not to mention our sense of the infinite. That’s why the background story of *The Matrix* is so ingenious: it feels like it *might* be true. In the film, Morpheus tells 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.

(Come to think of it, that would be confession number three: I watch far too many films, as will become apparent.)

And it often seems as if nothing we do stops us feeling that way. A great job isn't enough. The car we've always wanted isn't enough. Friends aren't enough. Marriage and money aren't enough. Thom Yorke of the band Radiohead, in an interview with the *New Musical Express*, was asked about his ambitions:

Ambitious for what? What for? I thought when I got to where I wanted to be everything would be different. I'd be somewhere else. I thought it'd be all white fluffy clouds. And then I got there. And I'm still here.

The interviewer asked him why he carried on making music, even though he'd already achieved the critical and commercial success he hoped for. '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.' What Morpheus and Thom Yorke describe is nothing new. Augustine, writing in the fifth century, suggested a reason for this sense of 'wrongness' in our lives: 'O God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you.' Could he be right?

Having a vague sense that God might exist is one thing. According to recent polls, between 70 and 80 per cent of people in the UK have just that vague sense. But to believe that God actually *cares* intimately for those he has created probably seems a bit far-fetched to many. However, that is the claim the Bible makes. Furthermore, the Bible says, we can know God personally.

Imagine that you wanted to get to know the Queen personally. You could try writing a letter, or ringing her (don't bother looking in the directory), or you could try

standing outside her gates with a very big sign. I don't recommend flying a light aircraft into her garden because the last person who tried that – funnily enough, an author trying to get some free publicity for his book – got arrested. The fact is, you wouldn't get very far with any of these approaches. Your only chance would be if she decided she wanted to meet you, came out of the palace, and introduced herself personally. And that is exactly what the Bible says God has done in Jesus Christ. It tells us that God wants to meet us, and that Jesus Christ is the one he's chosen to make the introduction.

### **Our choice**

Now *if* the Bible's claim is true – that our creator wants to meet us through Jesus Christ – then that would affect all of us, whether we like it or not. Of course, we could choose to avoid investigating this claim. Alternatively, we could choose to examine the claim to see if it *is* true. But I am duty-bound to say that each of these choices will have serious implications for us.

A few years ago, a London newspaper conducted a revealing experiment. The *Evening Standard* had a person stand outside Oxford Circus underground station and offer people leaflets. On each was written a simple instruction: *Bring this piece of paper back to the person who gave it to you and they will give you £5. No strings attached.* People swarmed by, and lots actually took the leaflet, but in three hours only eleven came back. Apparently, most of us automatically assume that these bits of paper will be of no real interest, that they won't do us any good. (Actually, I'm sure I must have been one of those people who threw the leaflet away without even

looking at it, and I've often kicked myself for being so stupid. Now, of course, I take every bit of paper I'm offered, so not only have I become extremely popular on Oxford Street, I've also become something of a fire hazard.)

My only plea is that you don't make that assumption. Don't assume that you've heard it all before and that reading the Bible will be of no use to you. Instead, I ask you simply to give it the benefit of the doubt as we focus on a single book of the Bible, a book named after its author, Mark. It's an accurate account of Jesus' life, written with the insight of those who spent years by Jesus' side. By making time to read Mark, you may begin to see – as I did – that Jesus Christ is the most conclusive proof anyone could have not only that God exists, but also that he made you, and that he cares passionately for you. In fact, Jesus answers all the difficult questions we posed a few paragraphs ago.

And if those kinds of answers frighten you, then, as they say before the football scores on the news, 'look away now...'

Christianity Explored is an informal Christian evangelistic teaching course developed by Rico Tice and Barry Cooper at All Souls Church, Langham Place, a leading Anglican church, and published by The Good Book Company. The course is considered to stand within the conservative evangelical tradition. Christianity Explored Ministries has also developed a second evangelistic course in 2016 Life Explored. The third edition of the course was published on 10 May 2011. Christianity Explored Ministries helps people to meet Jesus in the pages of the Bible. We publish a range of materials to introduce Jesus Christ to those who are unfamiliar with his message. If you're interested in running a Christianity Explored course with friends or at your church you can find more information on our Christianity Explored Ministries website. Christianity Explored Leader's Handbook by Christianity Explored Perfect Paperback \$12.99. In Stock. Ships from and sold by Amazon.com. FREE Shipping on orders over \$25.00. Details. Christianity Explored Leader's Kit: What's the Best News You've Ever Heard? by Christianity Explored Perfect Paperback \$29.97. Only 3 left in stock - order soon. Ships from and sold by gott\_books. Christianity Explored is helping Christians around the world to introduce people to Jesus as they explore the Gospel of Mark. Over seven sessions, participants will discover who Jesus is, why he came and what it means to follow him. The structure of each session is simple: a short Bible study, a short video and a discussion with the chance to ponder the big questions of life.