

THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS
ON EVANGELISM #2

Just the Basics



Teaching Christian
Faith to Beginners

H A R O L D P E R C Y
and J O H N B O W E N

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THE WYCLIFFE BOOKLETS ON EVANGELISM

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- #3 GIFTS AND GROWTH *How Discovering Spiritual Gifts Nurtures Evangelism*

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↑
Re the use of "Part":

On p. 7, 2nd last para., are the words "Part 3 of this booklet". I now realize there are actually two Part 3s (the second being Part 3 of the Four Talks). I'm not sure if this is really confusing or not. We could change the Four Talks in Part 3 to simply Christian Basics 1, Christian Basics 2. Or ... not.

P A R T 1 :

The Importance of Starting at the Beginning

GEORGE HUNTER HAS OBSERVED that one of the great weaknesses of Christian communicators is that we tend to start in the middle, rather than at the beginning.¹ In other words, in our preaching and teaching we frequently assume too much in our hearers. With the end of Christendom in the western world, we should not assume that those with whom we are hoping to communicate have a clear understanding of the Gospel, whether or not they are already followers of Jesus Christ.

We are often closer to the truth when we assume that some of the people with whom we seek to communicate have little or no Christian memory, but are simply spiritually hungry and curious. Even people currently active in church would often admit that they have no very clear understanding of what Christianity is about.

If we hope to make disciples, therefore, we need to begin with the basics. We need to help people understand that being a Christian is not primarily about trying to be a decent person or a good citizen, but rather about following Jesus and learning to live the life of God's Kingdom. Being a Christian is, first of all, about an intentional commitment to give our allegiance to Jesus Christ in the face of the alternatives available to us.

At Trinity Church, Streetsville, people are helped to understand what it means to turn to Christ and become intentional disciples through a four-week course formerly called *Christian Basics* and now called *Christianity 101*. In advertising this course people are told it is for those "interested in learning what Christianity is all about, and for Christians who feel that

they would benefit from a refresher course in the basics of the Christian faith."

The remainder of this booklet contains an outline of this kind of course, in the hope that it may provide you with guidelines for putting together your own course where you teach the Christian faith to beginners.²

Each session is two hours long: the agenda for each session includes both presentations and small-group discussion. Each session also includes time for the participants to get to know each other better, and hopefully to build some deeper friendships within the group.

The setting should be relaxed and informal; coffee and refreshments should be available, both when the participants arrive, and for the break mid-way through each session. If there are more than seven or eight participants, they should be divided into smaller groups, each with its own discussion leader. If at all possible, the participants should be seated at tables—we have found that in general round tables create the friendliest atmosphere.

Each session includes a 20-25 minute talk on the theme of the evening. Part 3 of this booklet offers the text of these talks as we have done them. These may be a springboard for you as you prepare your own talks.

There are four sessions. The topics are, technically speaking, sin, the work of Christ, Christian commitment, and living the Christian life. There are many other topics that could go into an introduction to Christian faith, of course, but we felt that

these are the most important to begin with. You will see that this outline basically follows that of the questions put to candidates and sponsors in the order for Holy Baptism in *The Book of Alternative Services*.³

We want to make it clear that this material is offered simply as a series of suggestions to help you develop your own course: the content of each of the sessions can easily be adapted to a format and style of presentation that suits your own congregation or ministry setting. How you teach the faith to beginners is up to you: the important thing is to find a way to do it that works for you and the people you teach.

At Trinity, Streetsville, year by year, those who have participated in this course and who have made or renewed a commitment to follow Jesus are encouraged to declare their intentions publicly, in a service of reaffirmation led by our bishop. This service is invariably very moving and one of the highlights of the church's year.

PART 2:

Guidelines for Leading a Christian Basics Course

IF YOU HAVE FEWER than seven participants, you might choose to be both speaker and leader of small group discussions. This can be very demanding, however, and you might decide to work with just one other leader, who can take responsibility for the small group times, and perhaps for some of the administrative responsibilities there will be.

If, on the other hand, you expect more than seven or eight participants, it is important to have Small Group Leaders prepared to work with you in the program. Such people should be chosen carefully. It is not an occasion to ask for volunteers! Leaders need to be people who:

- already understand in their own lives something of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus
- ideally, have had some experience of small group leadership, and
- have familiarized themselves with the contents and shape of this course by reading this booklet and discussing it with you.

You will want to meet with your Small Group Leaders once or twice to discuss the material and the details of their role, before embarking on the program.

If the program goes well, participants will talk about it to family and friends, and it will grow. This will necessitate the recruitment of more Small Group Leaders, and preparing them for their job. Some of these leaders, of course, will emerge from the course itself. Eventually, some of them may

be sufficiently experienced and gifted to lead a Christian Basics program themselves.

Each leader will need a copy of this booklet, or the following pages may be copied and distributed to Small Group Leaders, for them to read and think about before you meet with them.

Guidelines for Leading a Christian Basics Course

JOBS THAT NEED TO BE DONE

Thank you for agreeing to help with Christian Basics! Good things will happen in this course as you pray and work and lead together. There are several roles involved in making a Christian Basics course work:

1. The Speaker

The Speaker will be responsible for giving a 20-25 minute talk on Christian Basics on each of the four evenings of the course. The Speaker may be, but does not have to be, a clergyperson.

2. Small Group Leaders

Part of the evening will be spent in small groups, either getting to know one another, preparing for the talk, or following up on the theme of the talk. You will have between three and seven people in your group. We hope these groups will remain fairly constant through the four weeks.

The job of the Small Group Leader is:

- to make people feel welcome and at home
- to act as a catalyst for discussion and Bible study as described in the notes which follow
- to pray by name for the people in your group in between sessions

- to enjoy yourself!
- and (where possible) to keep in touch with people once the course is over, to encourage them in their ongoing faith or search for faith.

The job of the Small Group Leader is not:

- to answer all questions: if you don't know an answer to a question, affirm the question (it may well be a good one), and promise to get an answer. Then, of course, make sure you do it!
- to preach to the group: resist the temptation to answer your own questions; resist the temptation to break a silence (it may just mean people are thinking). As a rule of thumb, it is OK for leaders to speak twice as much as any one member (this is a version of the Biblical tradition that the oldest brother inherits twice as much as any other sibling).

3. Course Leader

If you have a small number of participants, it is probably simplest for the Speaker also to act as Course Leader. If the course does attract a lot of people, however, you should appoint a Course Leader who is separate from the Speaker.

The job of the Course Leader is:

- to emcee each session
- to make people feel welcome and at home
- to provide the continuity between different parts of each evening, and between one evening and the next

- to keep the evening moving on schedule, and to explain what is happening at each point (e.g. “Now we’re going to go into our small groups for half an hour”). Be cheerful and enthusiastic!
- to pray for the Christian Basics program and all who are involved in it
- to enjoy yourself: the more relaxed you are, the more the participants will enjoy it and be able to get a lot out of it. You will feel more relaxed as you become familiar with the material and the shape of the course
- to arrive well before the beginning time, and be prepared to be the last person to leave at the end of the evening.

4. Other Jobs that Someone Has to Do

It may be that Small Group Leaders will be able to do these things, or other helpers may be needed who will pick up these tasks:

- set up the ROOM beforehand, including such things as VCR, overhead projector and/or media projector, if needed
- make REFRESHMENTS available at the right time (at the beginning and at the half-time break)
- provide a suitable BOOKTABLE. *Remember:* You need titles suitable for someone investigating Christian faith, or a new Christian. It is not appropriate to put out books which assume a great knowledge of the Bible and of Christian language.⁴
- provide SCRIPTURE on weeks 2, 3, and 4. (If you expect people to bring their own, either they may forget, and

will then feel embarrassed, or they will all bring different versions, which will be confusing.) You should EITHER bring cheap New Testaments (all the same edition) which people can keep if they wish, OR photocopy the appropriate pages for each evening.

GUIDELINES FOR EACH SESSION

SESSION 1:

What in the World is Wrong?

Purpose of this session: The theme of this session is sin: the Christian belief that the world has gone wrong because we have not given God God's rightful place in the world, nor have we followed God's ways.

1. ALL TOGETHER

15 MINUTES

Course Leader: Gather, welcome, introduce Small Group Leaders. Explain the purpose of the course:

- to be a straightforward introduction for those who are new to Christian spirituality and
- a refresher course for those who want to go over the basics of Christian faith
- to help people move forward in their spiritual journey.

Describe the format of the evening and the time-frame of the sessions. You might consider putting this on a flip chart, overhead or PowerPoint slide for the sake of clarity.

Allocate people to small groups (plan ahead of time how you are going to do this) and indicate locations (if there are different rooms where the groups can meet, it causes less distraction).

2. SMALL GROUPS

Getting to Know You

20 MINUTES

Each person is invited to answer these questions. (The leader should go first, so as to model how long to speak and a suitable level of vulnerability.)

- Where do you live?
- What keeps you busy?
- What brought you to church and how long have you been coming?

Getting Started:

Conversations About our Journey

20 MINUTES

Each person is invited to answer these questions:

1. My previous experience with discussion of religious issues is ...
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, my understanding of Christianity is ...
3. What I hope to get out of this course is ...
4. One thing I hope we deal with is ...
4. One question I have about Christianity is ...

(There is no Bible study component this week, so take your time.)

3. ALL TOGETHER

15 MINUTES

Course Leader: call groups together, invite leaders to share

comments (these should not be too personal if confidential things have been shared in the small group).

4. BREAK

10 MINUTES

5. TALK:

What in the World is Wrong?

20 MINUTES

Summary: In this introductory presentation, the topic for consideration is the brokenness and craziness of the world we live in. Most people are quite willing to concede that there does seem to be something amiss with the world. They are also willing to acknowledge that there is something wrong with them. Does Christianity have any explanation for this? Does it make sense? After introducing the biblical concept of evil as a power opposed to God and God's purposes, we invite the participants to think about where they see evil at work in the world today.

6. SMALL GROUPS

15 MINUTES

If you have a small number of participants and are therefore not dividing into smaller groups, it is suggested that you use this time simply to invite questions.

If you do have small groups, however, you can ask questions in the groups such as:

- What did you like in the presentation, if anything? What was helpful? What specially struck you?
- What was not clear? What did you find it difficult to agree with? What do you need to think about more?

7. ALL TOGETHER

5 MINUTES

Course Leader: close off the evening.

- Remind people about next week. (You may wish to remind people that each session connects to the others; one doesn't make full sense by itself.)
- Refer to relevant books/booklets on the book table.
- Close in prayer [See NOTE below about praying in such groups].

NOTE: Be sensitive to where people are at in their spiritual journey as you pray. You may need to say a (brief) word about what prayer is. Avoid phrases like "We are all your servants, Lord." They may not be! Speak on behalf of whoever is there, e.g. "Some of us are not even sure you exist, but we would like to know if you are."

Some heading in lieu of "Quaker Questions"
would be consistent with the other sessions

SESSION 2:

What's So Special About Jesus?

Purpose of this session: The theme of this session is Jesus: the Christian belief that God came into the world in Jesus Christ to live, die and rise again for us.

1. ALL TOGETHER

10 MINUTES

Course Leader: Gather, welcome, review purpose of course, introduce session, pray. Divide into small groups and indicate locations.

2. SMALL GROUPS

This is a chance for people to "check in." You may wish to ask questions like the following:

- How are you feeling?
- What sort of day have you had?
- Was it difficult to get here tonight (baby-sitters, traffic etc.)?
- How are you feeling about being here?

[Not everyone has to answer these questions, of course. It's just a chance for people to speak if they want to.]

? Questions

35 MINUTES

Each person is invited to answer these questions:

1. Where did you grow up? What were the winters like?
(5 minutes)
2. Describe the house you lived in. How was it heated?
(5 minutes)
3. Who or what was the centre of warmth in your life as a child?
(10 minutes)
4. When or how did God become more than a word for you? Or, When or how did you begin to "warm up" to God?
(15 minutes)

Bible Discussion:

"The Woman at the Well"

30 MINUTES

Explain that you are going to read a story from the Bible and then ask people to comment on it. You may wish to hand out copies of the statements below, or write them on a flip chart or overhead, so people can have the questions in mind as they read.

Then read John 4: 1-26 together.

(Consider asking people to read the different voices, i.e. narrator, Jesus, the woman.) [See NOTE below.]

NOTE: If everyone is using the same New Testament, give the page number. Do not assume that everyone knows the meaning of "John, chapter 4." You might say, "On page 132, there is a story from John's biography of Jesus."

Invite participants to complete the following statements:

- One important point in this story is ...
- One question I have about this story is ...
- One thing I have learned from this story is ...
- One point of contact between this story and my life is ...

When the reading is over, remind them of the statements and give them a minute or two to look over the passage again.

As leader, you need to respond to each answer, even if it's only "That's an interesting thought. Thank you!" You may also want to ask, "What makes you say that?" or "What did other people think about that?"

3. BREAK

10 MINUTES

4. TALK:

What's So Special About Jesus?

20 MINUTES

Summary: The second presentation focuses on Jesus as the one in whom God has acted to defeat the evil which seeks to thwart God's purposes in creation and history, and which corrupts and destroys the creatures of God. The crucifixion and resurrection are presented as the climactic act in which Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God. The "Good News" of the Gospel is that through Jesus evil has been defeated, making possible our reconciliation with God. As a result, we can turn to Christ, be set free from the hold that evil has on our hearts and imaginations, be forgiven by God, and learn to live the new life of God's kingdom.

5. SMALL GROUPS

10 MINUTES

If you have a small number of participants and are therefore not dividing into smaller groups, it is suggested that you use this time simply to invite questions. You might also ask the group their opinion of Jesus at this point in their spiritual journey.

If you do have small groups, however, you can ask questions in the groups such as:

- What did you like? What was helpful? What specially struck you?
- What was not clear? What did you find it difficult to agree with? What do you need to think about more?
- What would you say is your opinion of Jesus at this point in your life?

6. ALL TOGETHER

5 MINUTES

Course Leader: close off the evening.

- Remind people about next week. (Each session connects to the others; one doesn't make full sense by itself.)
- Refer to relevant books/booklets on the book table.
- Close in prayer [See NOTE on page 21].

SESSION 3:

Where Do I Fit Into This?

Purpose of this session: The theme of this session is commitment. God invites us to become followers of Jesus to experience the salvation he offers us in Jesus Christ.

1. ALL TOGETHER

10 MINUTES

Course Leader: Gather, welcome, review purpose of course, introduce session, pray. You may want to say at this point that there will not be discussion after tonight's talk because the topic lends itself better to personal reflection. (You may wish to invite questions based on tonight's talk at the start of next week's session.) Then divide into small groups as usual and indicate locations.

2. SMALL GROUPS

45 MINUTES

This is a chance for people to "check in." You may wish to ask questions like the following:

- How are you feeling?
- What sort of day have you had?
- Was it difficult to get here tonight (baby-sitters, traffic etc.)?
- How are you feeling about being here?

(Not everyone has to answer these questions, of course. It's just a chance for people to speak if they want to.)

Bible Discussion:

"Jesus and Nicodemus"

Explain that you are going to read a story from the Bible and then ask people to comment on it. You may wish to hand out copies of the statements below, or write them on a flip chart or overhead, so people can have the questions in mind as they read.

Then read John 3:1-21 together.

(Consider asking people to read the different voices, i.e. narrator, Jesus, Nicodemus.)

Invite participants to complete the following statements:

- One important point in this story is ...
- One question I have about this story is ...
- One thing I have learned from this story is ...
- One point of contact between this story and my life is ...

When the reading is over, remind them of the statements and give them a minute or two to look over the passage again.

As leader, you need to respond to each answer, even if it's only "That's an interesting thought. Thank you!" You may also want to ask, "What makes you say that?" or "What did other people think about that?"

Table Discussion

25 MINUTES

Either:

- Imagine a line with 1 at one end and 100 at the other. 1 is the person who knows nothing about God; 100 is when we see God face to face and know as much as we can ever know about God. 50 marks the point at which a person becomes a follower of Jesus in order to grow in relationship with God. (You could draw this line as you explain it if you wish.)

Invite participants to think about where they are on this line. Invite them (if they wish) to share with their group where they place themselves and why.

Or:

- What have been the main influences in your life that have moved you towards God and faith?
- Can you see times when you took a significant step forward (or backwards!) in your spiritual development (or, in the development of your spirituality)?
- What have been the things that have held you back from going further in this journey?

3. BREAK

10 MINUTES

4. TALK:

Where Do I Fit Into This?

25 MINUTES

Summary: Here we consider the question of how one should respond to this good news, which is not only an announce-

ment, but also an invitation. We are invited to turn away from the powers of this world that draw us from God's love and God's purposes, and to turn to Christ, in order to be reconciled to God, to enter God's reign, and to begin to live new lives as followers (or disciples) of Jesus. We invite people to consider whether they would like to turn to Christ, or to renew their commitment to him, and provide the opportunity to do so by leading them in a prayer of commitment. Sensitivity is of the greatest importance. We must avoid any appearance of rushing participants into a "conversion" experience. We want simply to explain the basics, and to indicate that true discipleship is a matter of intentionally choosing to follow Christ, as opposed to simply attending church or giving intellectual assent to certain propositions. It is important to explain that people respond to this invitation at different paces: some respond immediately, while others need time to reflect. It is also important that people be given the freedom to decide for themselves where they are in their faith journey.

5. ALL TOGETHER

5 MINUTES

Course Leader: Because of the nature of this presentation—a personal challenge to follow Jesus—it is not followed by discussion, which might interfere with people responding directly to God. Invite people to take time to reflect silently on the presentation. They may want to write things down or pray or just think for a few minutes.

Course Leader: close off the evening quietly.

- Remind people about next week. (Each session connects

- to the others; one doesn't make full sense by itself.)
- Refer to relevant books/booklets on the book table
 - Close in prayer [See NOTE on page 21].

SESSION 4:

Living the New Life

Purpose of this session: The theme of this session is the Christian life. Basic ideas of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus are introduced.

1. ALL TOGETHER

10 MINUTES

Course Leader: Gather, welcome, review purpose of course, introduce session, pray. Explain that the structure this week is a little different—that the talk will come before the break, in order to allow more discussion afterwards. Divide into small groups and indicate locations.

2. SMALL GROUPS

20 MINUTES

This is a chance for people to “check in.” You may wish to ask questions like the following:

- How are you feeling?
- What sort of day have you had?
- Was it difficult to get here tonight (baby-sitters, traffic etc.)?
- How are you feeling about being here?

(Not everyone has to answer these questions, of course. It's just a chance for people to speak if they want to.)

Review Time: Any or all of these questions work well:

- What have you learned so far in this course?
- How has it helped you?
- What has been new about it?
- What did you not know before?
- What has been a “refresher”?
- What has surprised or shocked you?
- What is happening in your life as a result of this course?

3. TALK:

Living the New Life

25 MINUTES

Summary: The final session helps the participants to think about what is involved in learning to live “the new life” of Christ. As those who have turned to follow Christ, they are part of the church, the “people of God.” Individually and corporately they have a new purpose in life, which is to bear witness to God’s reign in word and deed, and to find their place in God’s ongoing mission to rescue the world from evil and make all things new. They are introduced to some of the disciplines and resources they will need in order to grow in this new life.

4. SMALL GROUPS

15 MINUTES

- What did you like? What was helpful? What specially struck you?
- What was not clear? What did you find it difficult to

agree with? What do you need to think about more?

- What do you need to do next for your spiritual life and interest to grow? Is there one of the points from the talk that you feel you should begin with?

5. BREAK

10 MINUTES

6. SMALL GROUPS

25 MINUTES

Bible Discussion:

“Following Jesus”

Explain that you are going to read a story from the Bible and then ask people to comment on it. You may wish to hand out copies of the statements below, or write them on a flip chart or overhead, so people can have the questions in mind as they read.

Then read John 15:1-17 together.

Invite participants to complete the following statements:

- One important point in this story is ...
- One question I have about this story is ...
- One thing I have learned from this story is ...
- One point of contact between this story and my life is ...

When the reading is over, remind them of the statements and give them a minute or two to look over the passage again.

A Model for the Four Talks

As leader, you need to respond to each answer, even if it's only "That's an interesting thought. Thank you!" You may also want to ask, "What makes you say that?" or "What did other people think about that?"

7. ALL TOGETHER

15 MINUTES

Course Leader: Where do we go from here?

It is important to offer additional resources, such as Alpha, or a course in discipleship such as *Following Jesus: First Steps on the Way*,⁵ for those who want to continue to grow in Christian faith. Or you may wish to encourage participants to join existing small fellowship groups in the church. It would be useful to have a handout ready listing such opportunities, with all dates, times, places, and contact information.

Thank people for their attendance. Thank Small Group Leaders, and others who have helped (e.g. with refreshments).

Close in prayer [See NOTE on page 21].

THE FOLLOWING IS ONE WAY the four talks have been done. You are welcome to follow the outline, or to use whatever parts you find useful. Best of all, these talks may inspire you to create much better ones!⁶

Christian Basics, Part 1: What in the World is Wrong?

BY HAROLD PERCY

Something is Wrong

If you are anything like me, from time to time you get an overwhelming sense that there is something seriously wrong with our world. I read the newspaper, or I watch a newscast on TV, or I hear a sad story about someone's life, and I find myself thinking, "Boy, this is a mixed-up world," or, "There is something seriously wrong with this world." I hear about wars and atrocities; I see images of floods and hurricanes and famines; and I find myself thinking, "Surely this is not how things were meant to be!" Do you ever find yourself thinking like that?

There's Something Wrong With Me

Then sometimes, when I am feeling particularly honest, I find myself saying, "But the problem isn't all out there. When I stop looking at the world outside and take a minute to look at

I changed "Part I, II, III, IV" to "Part 1,2,3,4", to be consistent with the *Guidelines* section. OK?

what is happening inside me, I have to admit that there is something wrong there as well." It's obvious that there is something wrong with the world, but it seems there is something wrong with me as well, and I don't seem to be able to fix it.

For example, it would be impossible for me to describe to you how much I love my children. Words are simply not adequate for it. In my mind I have an idea of the kind of father I would like to be for my children. I could become quite poetic about it. But the reality is that I am not that kind of father. I constantly fall short of my own ideal for being a father to the children I love. I simply cannot live up that standard of what I want to be with any consistency. I might get close on particular occasions, but I find I can't keep it up.

The amazing thing about this is that when I fall short in areas of my life like these, it is not always or even often because I am confused about what to do, or don't know what to do. Even when I do know what to do and how to do it, I sometimes find that I don't. Other considerations (notably my own selfishness!) get in the way. Am I on my own in this, or is this something you find to be true in your life as well?

So What is the Problem?

In order to understand the heart of the Christian faith, we need to understand that, from the viewpoint of the Bible, the world as we experience it is not the world as God intended it to be. The Bible confirms our experience that something has gone seriously wrong.

In seeking to help us make sense of our experience, the Bible explains that there is an evil power at work in the universe, seeking to frustrate God's purposes for creation, for humanity and for history. The Bible portrays this power as personal and intentional and gives it names such as Evil, the Devil, Satan, and Beelzebub. This power, it seems, has no other agenda than to corrupt and destroy what God has created.

As the Bible describes it (most notably in the first three chapters of the Bible story), this evil power has driven a wedge between humanity and God by convincing us that life would go a lot better if only we could move God out of the picture and manage things ourselves. In other words, we should take God's place in the scheme of things, and become the masters of our own destiny.

Although we were created by God for intimacy with him, we have swallowed this terrible lie, that if only we could distance ourselves from God we would discover the joys of true freedom. This has led to a state of alienation between ourselves and God, so that the very centre of life is out of whack. Because of this alienation, the world is bent out of shape, and we are powerless to fix it.

I have to admit that my years of education in the Enlightenment tradition of the western world have shaped my world view in such a way that I sometimes find myself thinking that this scenario is absolutely preposterous. But then I look around

again, and I look inside again, and I think, "With such overwhelming evidence everywhere I look, this doesn't seem so ridiculous any more."

Even our most brilliant efforts often seem only to add to the problem. We have an uncanny knack for using the advances of scientific knowledge to build more destructive weapons of war. Then just when we think we might have found some formula that will guarantee peace for a while, atrocities erupt somewhere else. Even then, if we could find a way to end all wars, we still live with the very real danger of destroying our environment and, as a result, ourselves.

If we look on the personal level, things are just as complex and distorted. In a culture of such scientific brilliance, the question of meaning continues to haunt us. What is life all about? Why are we here? Where did we come from, and where is it all leading us? Why is it so difficult to maintain healthy families and marriages? Why are personal counselling and therapy such growth industries?

This is the context in which we live our lives and search for answers. The Christian faith is about the Bible's analysis of this situation and God's response to it. This week, as you live your life in the various places your responsibilities take you, ask yourself where you see examples of the fact that there is something wrong with the world, and ask yourself what role evil might be playing in these situations.

If this seems rather depressing, take heart! In our next session we will look at how Christian faith understands the action God has taken in response to all of this. There is an answer!

*Christian Basics, Part 2: What's So Special About Jesus?*⁷

BY JOHN BOWEN

God, Yes; Jesus, No

In the 1960s, lots of people liked Jesus but they didn't believe in God. Now, it seems to be the other way round. Everybody believes in God but a lot of people ask, "Why do I have to bother with Jesus?" Jesus just seems to complicate things. So in this series on basic Christian spirituality, it's important to ask this question: "What is so special about Jesus?"

In the history of Christian faith, three things about Jesus seem to have stood out as special, whichever branch of Christianity you look at.

Jesus' Life: the Cartoonist in the Cartoon Strip

As the first Christians reflected on the life of this strange, intriguing, compelling man, they wrestled with who on earth he was. And as they tried to account for everything they had seen and heard, they found themselves pressed to a conclusion

that seemed unthinkable, a reality that was scary and overwhelming yet irresistible, and for which they really didn't have the right words in their theological dictionaries. Yet what alternative did they have but to try and say it? So they gulped and said things like:

"Jesus perfectly mirrors God ... "

- as if, if God stood in front of a mirror, what God would see reflected back is the face of Jesus.

*"... and is stamped with God's nature."*⁸

- this is a stamp like the face stamped on a coin: the die has the face of the queen on it, and the coin has the exact same face of the queen on it: well, says the writer, God and Jesus are like that.

Remember that these are Jewish writers, who believed passionately in one God and only one God. Clearly their experience of Jesus was leading them to rethink what it meant to say there is one God.

Think of it like this. I don't know if you read a cartoon strip called "Overboard." It's about three pirates and their dog, a Labrador called Louie. What is unusual about this strip is that from time to time an extra character appears in the strip: he sits at a desk with paper and pen, he talks to the characters, and on the wall of his room is a sign saying, "Overboard Inc." Who is he? He is the cartoonist, Chip Dunham. Sometimes the characters refuse to say the words he gives them to say, sometimes

they argue with him about the strip, and just occasionally they thank him for giving them a role they enjoy.⁹

Christians believe that God has done something similar. God has written himself into the cartoon strip we call human life. God has appeared in our world and spoken and acted in a way that shows what God is like, on a real though limited scale. As a result, we can understand something of what God is like, and, of course, choose whether or not we want to know and co-operate with our Creator. And as Christians understand it, when God did that, the name by which God was called was Jesus.

Jesus' Death: the Pain of Redemption

In the earliest biographies of Jesus, accounts of the death of Jesus takes up no less than one-third of the pages. This is strange! A classic biography of Muhammad I have at home has 250 pages, of which six are devoted to his last year, and one to his death. Somehow that doesn't seem so strange: surely what matters, after all, is a person's life?

What then was so special about the death of Jesus? Classic Christian spirituality over the centuries has used shorthand explanations for this, such as, "Christ died for our sins." But what on earth does that mean? There is no one simple explanation. There are many theories and metaphors which may help, but none of them is ever going to be adequate. Anything important can't be described in just one way.

Let me offer you an illustration I personally find helpful.¹⁰ The movie, *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* is about a dysfunctional family. There is a mother, two sons and two daughters. The mother (Darlene Cates) has not stirred from the couch in front of the TV for several years, and is painfully overweight as a result. The younger son (Leonardo DiCaprio) plays a mentally challenged 13 year old whose main joy in life is climbing the water tower in the little town where they live, so that the fire department have to come and rescue him. Finally, the police decide to lock him in a cell to teach him a lesson.

His mother decides to do something about it. She goes to the police station and demands "Give me my son!" with such passion and authority that the police, breaking all regulations, immediately release him into his mother's care. As they leave, however, a crowd forms. They stare at the mother, giggling and whispering behind their hands. One man even takes a photograph. But she doesn't care: she has her son.

The mother had a choice. She could have said, "Well, he did a stupid thing and he needs to pay for it," and she would have stayed comfortably at home. But she decides that although she has done nothing wrong—the police are not mad at her—she is willing to go through suffering and humiliation so that her son doesn't have to suffer, and so she can have him back.

In the same way, we have done wrong. We have hurt God and messed up God's world. Like the mother in the movie, God had a choice: God could have said, "They got themselves into

this mess, let them pay for it.” That would only be fair. But God chose the other option: to come after us in person to get us back, even though it meant suffering and humiliation. And what we see in the crucifixion of Jesus is the suffering God goes through in order to be reconciled with us. The pain of Jesus’ death was the pain we caused to God’s love.

Jesus’ Resurrection

Jesus died on a Friday—and there seems to be no serious doubt that he was really dead—but by early Sunday morning his followers—terrified, defeated and demoralized by his death—began to say he was alive again. They even got to the point where they were willing to die for their conviction that he was alive.

This was not like people saying Elvis is alive: if Elvis is alive, it’s because he never really died. Nor is it like people in the 60s saying of Che Guevara, “Che lives”—meaning, his life is still an inspiration to us. No, the followers of Jesus were convinced that he had come back to them in a physical form which was recognizable yet mysterious. They said he had conquered death. They said this showed that Jesus was lord over heaven and earth.

Could such a thing be true? It depends how you think of the world. If there is no God, then no, probably not. But if there is a good God like the God Jesus taught about, then it would make perfect sense. In fact, what would be really puzzling is if Jesus had not been brought back from death!

Why does this matter? If it is true, then the world is a quite different place from what it is if it is not true. Let me give you just two examples. If it is true, then it means God has put the divine stamp of approval on all that Jesus did and said, and we should sit up and take notice. It also means that when we face death (our own or others’) we don’t need to be afraid because there is someone available who has overcome death, someone we can trust to take us through it.

“I Hate Church”

When my daughter Anna was about six years old, one Sunday morning before church, she said to me, “Daddy, I like Jesus, but I hate church.” Now, you need to know that I love the church, and I have served the church in one capacity or another most of my life. Yet Anna’s distinction can be a helpful one. Many people in our society say things like, “I’m really not into organized religion.” That’s OK, but it is a tragedy if they then throw out the baby with the bathwater, and miss out on Jesus just because they don’t like church.

The important question for us to consider in figuring out our spirituality is not whether we like church, but as Jesus once asked his first followers, “Who do you say that I am?”

Christian Basics, Part 3: Where Do I Fit In?

BY JOHN BOWEN

The first Christians did not actually call themselves “Christians” very often. More commonly, what they called themselves was “disciples,” which means “learner” or “student.” When they thought of Christian faith, apparently, what came to their mind first was not church or faith or the Ten Commandments or being a good citizen ... but learning. For them, the church was primarily a school, and the Christian life a process of learning.

If that is so, I want to ask, Where is this school? What is it for? What do you learn there? What are the teaching methods? Who are the teachers? Where are classes held? What do you need to do to graduate? And is it true that the graduate programs are out of this world? The easiest question is:

Who is the Teacher?

Not surprisingly, the answer is Jesus. Many times in the pages of the earliest biographies of Jesus he is called teacher, and a couple of times he calls himself by the same title.

But what is it that he teaches? In the 1940s, Dorothy Sayers wrote a series of BBC radio plays on the life of Jesus—*The Man Born to be King*. In one of those plays she puts into the mouth

of Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ first followers, the sort of thing Mary might have said to Jesus as she recalled their first meeting:

“Did you know? My friends and I came there that day to mock you. We thought you would be sour and grim, hating all beauty and treating life as an enemy. But when I saw you, I was amazed. You were the only person there who was really alive. The rest of us were going about half-dead—making the gestures of life, pretending to be real people. The life was not with us but with you—intense and shining ... But when you spoke to me, I felt the flame of the sun in my heart. I came alive for the first time. And I love life all the more since I have learnt its meaning.”¹¹

Jesus said on one occasion, “I have come so that people might have life and have it in all its fullness!” (John 10:10) That’s it: Jesus is a teacher of life: he teaches us how to live as God’s person in God’s world in God’s way—and in the friendship of God.

How Do We Learn This Kind of Life?

On one occasion when he invited people to join his school, he gave a powerful image to explain how the school works:

Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me ... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11: 28-30)

There in the centre of this saying of Jesus is his offer to be our teacher: “Come … Learn of me.” But how do we learn? He says, “Take my yoke upon you.” It is the image of an older ox and a younger ox being yoked together under a single yoke, so that the older can teach the younger how to pull the plough. In a sense, he is saying, “I am already wearing the yoke of being God’s person in God’s world. Come and walk alongside me, share the yoke I’m already carrying, and I will teach you what I know.”

What Will That Learning Mean?

It will be very different according to who we are. But it normally involves such things as learning to be generous with what we have—perhaps more generous than we feel comfortable with at first; learning how to forgive; learning to come alongside someone who is a bit of a misfit; learning new lessons in relationships—how to express our anger in more constructive ways, perhaps. Or Jesus the Teacher may want to mess with our career plans, or our retirement plans, or our holiday plans. The list is endless—as diverse as life itself.

Then too he says his yoke is “easy.” Now for anyone who has been a follower of Jesus more than about 24 hours, that sounds a little strange. Being a Christian is often tough! The original biographies of Jesus, from which this saying is taken, were written in Greek, the main language of Jesus’ world, and I am told that the Greek word for “easy” can be better translated “well-fitting.” Actually, we still use the word “easy” this way. We might say of a pair of new shoes, “They’re a really easy fit”—meaning they are comfortable to wear. This is the sense

in which Jesus’ yoke is “easy”: not that it’s no sweat but that it fits us well. After all, in those days, yokes were made one by one by the carpenter for individual oxen, so Jesus is saying, My yoke is made specially for you. It doesn’t mean there won’t be work, it doesn’t mean there won’t be difficulty—but it will still be the yoke I made for you.

What Does This Mean For Us?

After all, Jesus was being practical when he said these words. When he said, “Come to me!” that wasn’t a theoretical statement, and his hearers knew it. In my imagination, when he had finished, and the crowds were going home for supper, there were some who didn’t leave straight away. They pushed through the crowd and came up to Jesus, maybe a little hesitantly, and said something like this: “Jesus, you know what you said about being your student and sharing your yoke? I really think I’d like to do that.” And whoever that person was, whatever they had done, wherever they had been in their spiritual journey, Jesus said, “That’s great. You’re welcome. We’re just going to have supper. Come and eat with us, and I’ll introduce you to the others.”

In one sense, nothing has changed since that first day. We can still speak to him as straightforwardly as if he were present here in the flesh. The invitation to become his student, learning to live as God’s person in God’s world in God’s way, still stands. His invitation, “Come to me,” is just as real today as it was 2,000 years ago. And now just as then he waits to see what we will say.

Let me offer you the sort of thing you may wish to say to Jesus in response to his invitation. If it makes sense to you, and you feel you are ready, you may wish to echo these words silently in your heart to him.

Jesus –

*Thank you for inviting me to join your school.
Thank you for offering yourself as my Teacher,
and for shaping a yoke just for me.
I do want to learn what it means to live
as God's person in God's world in God's way.
Please enroll me as a student in your school.
Teach me to share your yoke
and to be your faithful student day by day.*

Amen

Next time, we will look at some of the nitty-gritty ways this teacher-student relationship works out in daily life.

Christian Basics, Part 4: Where Do We Go From Here?

BY HAROLD PERCY

The Christian message can be understood in terms of three words: reign, reconciliation and response. Those three words can help us recap what we have thought about in the last three sessions.

In the first session, “What in the World is Wrong?” we looked at what has happened in our world as a result of our not allowing God to rule as God. We have not honoured the reign of God in our world. Then, in the second session, we looked at the question of “What’s So Special About Jesus?” and saw how the death of Jesus bridges the gap between us and God—in other words, it brings reconciliation between us and God.

“Response” highlights the fact that although God has made reconciliation available, and although God’s reign is advancing in this world, God still invites a response from us. That response involves first of all turning away from our old self-centred life to Christ to begin a new life with him. We talked in the last session, “The School of Jesus,” about how a person makes that response.

So what now? Though that turning feels to many people like an arrival (and it is), it is also a beginning point, a point of

departure on a new journey through life. Every day, indeed, every choice, becomes an opportunity to continue the response to Christ. The Bible offers us the metaphor of being “born again” to describe what happens when we respond to Christ. That too conveys the reality that our response is an end (to the pregnancy) and a beginning (to our new life).

The way we move forward in our new life is by growing our new relationship with Christ. As with any relationship, if the friendship is to grow, we will need to find ways to nurture it and make it stronger and deeper.

Now that we have been reconciled to God, we also begin to share in the work of God’s reign. Instead of opposing God’s way or being apathetic about it, we become representatives of the king in his world. We try to understand God’s vision for this world and to find our place in it. As Paul puts it, we try to “find out what pleases the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:10)

So how exactly do we nurture our relationship with Christ in everyday life? How do we play our part in the reign of God? I like to express it this way, that the Christian life involves something for the heart, something for the head, and something for the hands.

The Heart

First, the Christian life involves the heart. We want to grow closer to Jesus, to know his love, and for our love to grow in response to his. One way of coming closer to Jesus is reading

the Bible. We read about what he did and said, we ponder his example, we think about what it would have been like to be present during his ministry, and we talk to him in prayer about what we read—what we appreciate, what we find difficult, what we want to imitate.

Prayer also involves our heart. The simplest way to think of prayer is as an ongoing conversation between friends, as we tell Jesus whatever is on our mind and try to listen for his voice of love and guidance. Worship too strengthens our relationship, as we learn more about our God and respond with song and prayer.

The Head

Second, Christian faith also speaks to the mind. One friend said, “When I became a Christian, one thing that worried me was that I would understand it all in six months and then I’d be bored.” Now, over thirty years later, as a university professor, she is delighted to be still learning, still growing in her understanding of the faith. Not that this should surprise us: after all, Jesus did say, “I am the truth”—which might suggest that there will be intellectual challenges among others!

How then does Christian faith affect my mind? Part of this is that I want to understand my faith more deeply. The writings of C.S. Lewis, for example, have helped countless thousands begin to understand what Christian faith means, how to understand the Bible, how to think about Christian ideas or doctrines, and how those ideas make sense of our world.

Christianity is also a worldview with implications for every aspect of this life which God has made. In every situation, then, I want to use my mind to learn to think as a Christian. What are God's views on the environment, on sexuality, on genetic engineering, on economics? What about the complex ethical issues of our culture? What does God think about those? The Bible is key to our learning here, but we can also find help in what others in the Christian community have thought over the years: books, study groups, seminars, and sermons. All of these help us to develop what St. Paul calls "the mind of Christ."

The Hands

And then, third, there is something for the hands. Learning to live the life of the kingdom means learning to make connections between faith and everyday life in all its dimensions. What among my actions will contribute to the Kingdom? How should I use my money? How should I raise my children? How should I behave at work? Jesus, knowing our human tendency to know more in our heads than we know with our hands, said, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them!" The blessing is not in the knowing but in the doing.

What then might it mean to follow Jesus with our hands?

For one thing, discipleship will affect our pocketbook, not least in this culture where money is so important. One couple

gave the money they had been saving for their summer holiday to a Christian ministry because they believed that was what God wanted.

Discipleship will also affect our behaviour at work. One man was asked point-blank in a job interview whether he would tell a lie for the good of the company. When as a Christian he said no, that was the end of the interview.

Discipleship will also affect how we respond to social problems. Tony Campolo tells the story of a group of Christian students studying sociology who decided to challenge what they considered to be the dehumanizing policies of the Gulf and Western oil company in the Dominican Republic. To their surprise, they caused the company to change its attitude to its holdings and its employees there.

To live this kind of life with head, heart and hands will involve us in the fellowship of a local church, where others are celebrating their faith in Jesus and struggling with the same questions of how to live as a Christian in today's world. The journey of faith is not a solitary one: traveling companions on the same road provide the safety, resources and encouragement we need.

The Divine Empowering

And where is God in all this? Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple once said something like this:

If you asked me to live a life following Jesus' footsteps, and learning to be like him, I would tell you it was impossible. It's as crazy as if you asked me to write plays like Shakespeare's. But if by some mystery, the spirit of Shakespeare could come and inhabit my personality, fire my imagination and expand my vocabulary, then, certainly, I could do it. And in the same way, if the Spirit of Jesus could come and inhabit my personality, and change me from the inside, then I could follow Jesus and grow more like him.

The Christian claim is that that is exactly what Jesus has done: not leaving us to figure out the Christian life alone, but providing his powerful and loving Spirit to live in the members of the Christian community, to enable and to empower us to live this new life.

Notes

1. George G. Hunter, *How To Reach Secular People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 102.
2. Another way to teach this kind of course is to use Harold Percy's *Christianity 101* videos. The talks are by Harold, and the structure of the evening and the group discussion is somewhat different from that set out in this booklet. There is a set of four videos, plus leaders' notes, discussion leaders' guide, and participants' notes. The cost is \$75 for a set, plus P&H. They may be ordered from Trinity Anglican Church, 69 Queen Street South, Mississauga, ON, Canada L5M 1K5. The phone number is (905) 826 1901, or you can email shirley@trinitystreetsville.org.
3. *The Book of Alternative Services* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 154.
4. You might want to consider the Dare Booklets from the Wycliffe College Institute of Evangelism, since these are intended for the same audience that *Christianity 101* is for. The Dare Booklets is a growing series on topics at the interface of the Christian community and our culture. Their intention is to stimulate conversation between friends who believe differently. You can read the text of some of these on the website: <http://individual.utoronto.ca/johnbowen/dare/>. The booklets themselves can be ordered from wycliffe.college@utoronto.ca.
5. Harold J. Percy, *Following Jesus: First Steps on the Way* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1993).
6. John Bowen's version of all four talks, plus a fifth introductory one, are to be found in Dare Booklet #14, *Finding a Story to Live By*.

Is this how
you'd like
the ref to
Tim's
book?

7. For a truly unchurched audience, it is important to tell the story of Jesus before making doctrinal statements about him. I probably err on the latter side in this particular talk. I am grateful to the Rev. Tim Chesterton of the Diocese of Edmonton, who has taught his own Christian Basics course for some years, for this observation. See Tim Chesterton, *Starting at the Beginning* (Toronto: ABC Publishing, 2004). (JB)
8. Both these phrases are from *The Letter to the Hebrew Christians*, chapter 1, verse 3, in the Bible.
9. C.S. Lewis and William Temple use a similar image, of Shakespeare writing himself into the script of Hamlet, in order to talk with Hamlet. You may think this is more suitable for your audience, or you may think of your own example. (JB)
10. I reflect more on this image in chapter 11 of my book, *Evangelism for 'Normal' People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002). (JB)
11. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Gollancz, 1943), 187.

To make the notes consistent, I removed "The" from "The Anglican Book Centre", and added city names to those refs that didn't have them.