

# Basic Christianity

## Week One

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### Introduction

People today believe all kinds of things. It seems, in fact, that America is a virtual "belief cafeteria" with faiths of every kind to select from. The statistics show that while the majority of us identify ourselves as "Christian," most people do not believe some of the most basic and essential biblical truths. Many of us are really confused about spiritual things.

Maybe we believe pretty much what the Bible teaches but don't really understand our faith. This makes our faith shaky and unsatisfying. How can we apply our faith to our lives if we don't have a deep grasp of what it is? It would be like trying to build a bridge without a solid knowledge of physics. No one in their right mind would chance crossing such a bridge. It's odd that people take such great pains with their careers and other interests, but so little with the things that matter most. And this brings us to the next point.

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- *Importance of doctrine.* Truth matters. Just as there are consequences to errors in engineering or science, so too there are consequences to being wrong in the realm of spiritual truth. That's why Jesus said, "you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). And we note too, the Apostle Paul's warning, "See to it that no one take you captive through philosophy or empty deception" (Colossians 2:8). Here are three key reasons why doctrine is vital:
  1. Everyone needs answers to the "big" questions of life. What happens to me when I die? Where did I come from? Is there a God? How can I know God?
    - Eternal issues are at stake. If the Bible is right, then the faith commitments a person makes in this life will determine their eternal destiny. Certainly, such ultimate and weighty concerns demand careful thinking through.
  2. The kind of life we live is also affected by what we believe. Jesus taught, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). As we discover God's design for our lives, and begin to live it out, we will find God's transforming hand in our lives. The more we know about God, the more we will be able to recognize his work in the world and in our lives.
  3. We have a built-in need for our lives to be vitally connected to reality. We may pity the person whose life is in service to a lie--the Nazi or the Hare Krishna. We may admire their dedication, but realize that it is being wasted on falsehood. On the other hand, when our lives are poured into true and deeply meaningful things, it has a profoundly satisfying result: The best of our abilities and personalities are brought out. Life has a real direction and purpose.

The role of doctrine is to clarify these issues. Doctrine lays out what we could call the Christian *world view*. By world view, I mean the essential truths of the Bible and how they answer the key questions of life.

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- *How we arrive at doctrine.* Doctrine *systematizes* what the Bible teaches. The Bible was written

over a several hundred year period by many authors in very different cultural settings. Yet the important issues are consistently and clearly expressed. What the biblical authors say about who God is, what it means to be human, how to be in right relationship to God, and other key truths are stated repeatedly throughout the scripture. Doctrine means taking these selections from all over scripture and organizing them into subjects. This class is an introduction to Bible doctrine.

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## Who Am I? The Christian View of Human Nature

*Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness' . . . And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26,27).*

This is a very different starting point for human nature than what we are taught to think. When we think about human origins, we tend to think about evolution. The basic idea is that the human species is the product of a long process of biological change, based on the "survival of the fittest." According to evolutionary theory, there is no purpose for human life. We are here by evolutionary chance. We can not say that there is anything essentially unique or valuable about the human species in general, or about each one of us in particular. Nature is indifferent to our search for meaning, because nature itself serves no ultimate purpose.

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### The dignity of man

*What is man, that You take thought of him? And the son of man, that You care for him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and majesty! Psalm 8:4,5.*

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In contrast, the Bible places great value in human life. We are uniquely "the image of God." We are both physical and spiritual. There is something very special about each of us, according to the Bible.

### What does it mean to be in the "image of God?"

- Gen. 1:27. *Benevolent rulership.* Adam is entrusted with a stewardship of nature. Other species adapt to the environment. Man is to care for it. Just as God rules creation, he has entrusted to man the responsibility to care for the environment.
- Gen. 2:15. *Creative accomplishment.* Adam is to cultivate the ground. He is to make things useful for human purposes. As God is creative, so is man.
  - Art, literature, music; these are aspects of human uniqueness.
- Gen. 2:16,17. *Free Will.* Humans are not biologically determined automatons. We are free to make choices that guide our lives.
  - Genuine freedom entails the possibility of making significant *moral* choices. Only humans are responsible for their actions. We do not blame animals for what they do. We acknowledge that it comes naturally to them. But for man, freedom means both the extraordinary opportunity to chart our own course and the liability of being held accountable for these choices.
- Gen. 2:18. *Social.* The ability to experience love relationships is essential to personhood. When we really think about what motivates us, and what brings out the best in us, it is tied to our social nature.

- The greatest examples of human virtue are people who gave all they had to serve others.
- A vital life quest is for people to love. Certainly this is true in the romantic sense--finding a mate to enjoy a life of love together. Think about all of the songs, art, music you know. Isn't it primarily about this quest? God's design is for lasting, stable love relationships.
- No man is an island. We are social beings by nature. In fact, the family, which is the basic social unit is where we learn to communicate, where we adopt our values, and the survival skills that will take us through life.
- Gen. 2:19,20. *Intellectual*. We have a built in need to understand the world around us. We want to learn, not merely for the sake of survival, but simply to understand.
  - We see the intense curiosity of children as evidence of this.
- Gen. 1:28, 2:24. *Sexual*. Sex is not a sin, nor is it the cause of all evils. Sex expresses the joining of two people in the most intimate way. It both preserves personal diversity and distills unity. In this respect, sex reflects God's intimate unity in the trinity.
- Gen. 2:25. *Open*. As the creation narrative ends, man is in harmony with God and with each other. Adam and Eve are not ashamed of who they are. Their identities are secure and they can be completely vulnerable.

So this is how God designed humans "in his image" to be. Yet, we know from our own experience that it's not that way now. There is another side to human nature.

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### Human depravity

*The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick. Who can understand it?* Jeremiah 17:9.

*And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die'* Genesis 2:16,17.

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Most people believe the biblical view about human dignity. We recognize something of value about human beings that we don't see in anything else. Yet, everyone recognizes that there are problems with man. Secular people typically believe that people are basically good. If every one were properly educated and had their basic needs met, there would be no problems in the world. Problems people have is a result of what is done to them, not something that originates within them. Sometimes this view is called "humanism."

On the other hand, the Bible teaches that there is something fundamentally wrong within us. People are not "basically good," and our core problem is not something that has been done to us by others. We are inherently *valuable*, but not inherently *good*. The essential flaw in our nature results from what the Bible calls "the fall." While human beings maintain the dignity of sharing in the image of God, the image is distorted, corrupted.

- Genesis 3:1-6.
  - God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden as a tangible opportunity to exercise freedom to reject God. The tree is the opportunity to say no to God. But it is not because God is uptight that he told Adam And Eve not to eat, but because he knows what is good for us. *Autonomous*, self-directed will has catastrophic consequences.
    - C.S. Lewis' illustration of each ship in the fleet doing their own navigation.
  - Consequences of the fall.

- Gen. 3:7. *Psychological alienation*. Adam and Eve were no longer comfortable or secure with themselves. They could not be vulnerable before each other.
- Gen. 3:8,9. *Theological alienation*. No longer confident in their standing before God. They recognized the barrier of sin that they erected by their disobedience. No longer will they have direct access to God.
  - Universal human awareness that man and God are alienated. That's what all religions of the world are based on. They may see God differently, and even view the human dilemma differently from the Bible, but they all acknowledge the fundamental rift between man and God.
  - Colossians 2:14. The Certificate of Debt.
- Gen. 3:12. *Social alienation*. Unity between Adam and Eve was shattered. Rather than seeing his mate as a compliment to himself, Adam blamed her for his choice. Perhaps this is the most significant outward sign of the fall. War, divorce, breakdown of community and family attest to the distorted and corrupt social nature of man.
  - Quote Alan Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, p. 118, 124. See also study cited in *Chicago Tribune*, "Kids pay toll of broken home, study says."
  - Most people's lives revolve around the desires of self. "Looking out for #1" is really what its all about.
  - Human sexuality has been transformed from a celebration of unity to self-seeking pleasure and exploitation.
- Gen. 17,18. *Ecological alienation*. Previously cultivation was easy, now it is with great toil that the crop would be harvested.
  - Man's stewardship of the environment is distorted. The current ecological crisis gives sharp testimony to how irresponsible we are with nature.
- Gen. 3:19. *Death*. Ultimately, the fall means death to all people.
  - Death is not natural. We were not created to die. Paul refers to death as "the enemy" in I Corinthians 15. In John 11, Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus.

So the greatness of man is corrupted by the fall. We maintain the image of God, but in all of the areas of human dignity, a pervasive element of distortion remains.

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## Under God's Judgment

*For the wages of sin is death. . .Romans 6:23*

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Clearly, we can not think of a less popular idea. Most people no longer believe in a "judging God." This is true for basically two reasons. First, we don't think that sin is quite that serious. Second, we don't think the idea of a loving God is consistent with God judging. So lets delve into this more fully.

- *Sliding scales*. Most of the time when we think about moral evil--the kind worthy of God's judgment--people like Hitler come to mind. No one would claim the self-righteous position of sinlessness. But the thinking is that most of us are not *too* bad. Most of the time we're honest, hard working people. We don't hurt other people and would never think about doing the really terrible things Hitler and others have done. So we tend to see two different kinds of "sinners." The real serious ones, deserving of hell, and the rest of us.
  - But let's think about what this view really means. Some sinners are worthy of God's judgment, but others aren't. Where do we draw the line? How much sin is too much sin? In

the final account, doesn't it make a mockery of God's moral character. The fact is that we are all in the same situation: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

- Illustration of swimmers going from LA to Hawaii
- What really are God's moral requirements? (James 2:10). Part of many people's confusion about moral guilt comes from appealing to current social standards of ethics, rather than biblical ones.
  - *Matthew 22:36-40*. Now it is clear that we simply don't live up to this standard. The person who thinks that they are "basically good" don't define goodness the way Jesus does. They think they are good because they don't do certain obvious evils. But as for the motivations of the heart, and a life of sacrificial love on behalf of others, it is sheer foolishness and self-delusion to think that we are righteous on these terms.

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- *A loving God won't judge*. How could a loving God send anyone to hell? This is something I've struggled with quite a bit. I wonder about those who didn't get a clear, relevant presentation of the gospel like I did. And I think about the fact that eternal punishment is an awfully big sentence for what most people do. So what do we do about this?
    1. *Those who haven't heard the gospel?*
      - Some are innocent because they lack the ability to grasp their moral state. See 2 Samuel 12:23.
      - Romans 1:18-23; 2:14-16; Luke 18:9ff. Natural revelation gives everyone reasonable and intuitive awareness of the human condition.
      - We are responsible for responding in faith to what God *has* revealed to us (Gen. 15:6). Abraham did not know the full plan of God. He only knew that God was calling him, and that he should act in obedience.
      - So why evangelize? Because what intuition a person has gets lost and distorted in false religion.
    2. *Eternal punishment for finite sins*. How is the punishment fitting the crime here?
      - 1 Tim. 2:3,4. God's desire is that all be saved.
      - Heb. 9:27. We are given a finite amount of time to make a decision of permanent consequence.
      - What would be the appropriate sentence? The point is not a fixed number of years for a particular offense. Rather, the issue is whether or not we will humble ourselves to receive forgiveness. Jesus said, "He who is not for me is against me" (Mt. 12:30). War time analogy fits in here. The issue is not the number of sins, but where we have our allegiance. We have a limited time to decide.
    3. *What if God does not judge?* In what sense does this preserve his basic goodness? Think about it just a minute. If God does not intend to hold anyone responsible for their lives, then God is ultimately responsible. Further, what would eternity with an unrepentant Hitler be like? Could this be heaven? What is the difference between heaven and hell at this point?

So human beings are in a very bad situation. As Isaiah illustrates, "all of us like sheep have gone astray" (Isaiah 53:6). An absolute moral being must impose consequences on human sin. To overlook our cruelty is not loving. But God has a solution.

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## God's Solution

*But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son. . . Galatians 4:4*

God is omniscient. That means he knows everything--including the future. Even before he created us, he knew what was going to happen. So he decided on a plan to deal with man's rebellion. We see his plan unfolding through the pages of scripture. In fact, that's really what the Bible is: the revelation of God's plan for fallen humanity.

- In the Old Testament:
    - Genesis 3:15. Seed of woman
    - Genesis 3:22. Expelled from the garden, so that they would not eat from the tree of life and remain forever in a fallen state.
    - Genesis 12:3. God will bless the world through Abraham
    - Sacrificial system: A picture of what God will do through Christ
      - Lev. 17:11. Substitutionary Atonement: Death of an innocent on behalf of the guilty
      - Lev. 16:1-3. Day of Atonement
    - Isaiah 53. The suffering servant predicted
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- Fulfillment in Christ:

*Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill* Matthew 5:17.

Often, people think that the essence of Jesus' teaching was moral: Sermon on the Mount, for example. In reality, the overwhelming emphasis of Jesus' teaching was about his death and resurrection.

- Jesus' teaching about his death (Mk. 8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34)
  - John 1:29; Hebrews 10:12. Christ is the fulfillment of sacrificial system.
    - Because Christ is eternal and sinless, he could substitute for all men.
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## Saving Faith

*But to as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.* John 1:12.

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Salvation is offered by God as a gift. That's what *grace* means--not something you say before dinner. But he will not force us to take his offer. We must exercise faith. But what does this mean?

- Faith means *agreeing* with God about our need for forgiveness and the adequacy of his provision in Christ.
  - This means acknowledging that we in no way earn God's acceptance. See Ephesians 2:8,9.
- Faith means making a conscious *decision* to trust Christ's death on our behalf.
  - Wheelbarrow analogy

This is what it means to be right with God. We simply humble ourselves to receive what we could never earn. God wants us to be confident in our standing before him. Once the issue of forgiveness is out of the way, we are restored to permanent fellowship with God (Ephesians 1:13,14).

Receiving new life in Jesus Christ is where it all begins. In the third week we will discuss in detail how God works in our lives as believers.

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