

*Questions*  
*Week 1*  
*By: Kevin Bobrow*

In this series *we are striving to **dive into** questions*, to turn them over and over in our minds and hearts, and to consider whether the answers we have always accepted are correct or if we need to dig deeper.

It is easier to avoid questions, especially difficult ones. It is simpler either to focus on what we are sure of and ignore issues that are more difficult or to assume that we have already figured out the most difficult questions and do not need to revisit them. Allowing for ambiguity and ongoing wrestling with and consideration of the issues is much more difficult.

We are going to take time in this series to consider some of these challenging questions—questions that have rocked the faith of many men and women, strengthened the faith of others, and led to countless written works. Instead of leaving such thorny issues alone to avoid controversy, we are going to dive into them, to see what God has to teach us through them.

*This Week's Question: Is the Bible Really Trustworthy?*

**Day 1**

This week we are going to dive into the question of whether we can really trust the words of the Bible. The trustworthiness of the Bible is a huge issue and a giant question for us to consider. There are so many angles we could explore, and we must limit ourselves to a few core issues this week, pressing issues that are confronting us most readily in our world today. Hopefully by confronting some of these questions about the Bible, by turning them around in our minds and hearts, we will come to a deeper understanding of what the Bible is and why we can trust it.

If a family member or co-worker asked you to explain why the Bible is trustworthy, what would you say?

Would you feel equipped to explain why these old writings are so important, or why they can be trusted? Explain.

What would be most challenging about answering these questions?

*This week we are going to explore what the Bible is, where it came from, and why it is trustworthy.* Then we will close the week by considering whether the Bible is relevant for us today. But before we begin our digging, let's pause to consider why such questions about the Bible are crucial in our day and age.

There are two giant forces in our world today that are at work in every area of culture and in every part of the world, and these two forces have helped bring us to the place we are today, particularly in regards to the commonly held understandings about God, the Bible, truth, etc. These two forces have made this question about the legitimacy of the Bible pressing, even urgent.

The first force at work in our world is **globalization**. Our world is smaller than it has ever been, and we as a human family have more exposure to each other than ever before. We can not only learn about some far off culture; we can watch that culture's videos, read their material, and look at their villages using Google Earth. Religions very different from those prevalent in our culture are easily explored and considered, since they are only a click away. We are exposed to completely different ways of thinking more often than ever before. This is a significantly positive development in many ways, and offers many opportunities for caring for each other and understanding each other. It certainly opens the door to more opportunities to share the truth we have found with others.

What do you appreciate about the ways in which our world has grown smaller?

How has the world grown smaller than it was 20 years ago? What has caused this shift?

Does anything about globalization frighten you?

However, this cultural shift has led to some challenging developments as well. For example, in our globalized world we hear a multitude of viewpoints on God, truth, and right and wrong, and increasingly, accepting this plurality of viewpoints as all equally valid is seen as the only just course of action. If we as individual members of the human family are all valuable and equal, this line of thinking goes, and among us there is a multitude of different ideas and viewpoints, then surely all of these ideas and viewpoints must be equally valuable and important. Surely all of our viewpoints must in some sense be *true*.

Have you heard or encountered this line of thinking? If so, how did you respond?

What do you think the appropriate response is to this view that all viewpoints are valid or even true?

This way of thinking is called relativism, and it has clear implications for our belief in the trustworthiness and the uniqueness of the Bible. We believe the Bible is utterly unique and uniquely true among any other written work. We believe the Bible to be, in some sense, the very Word of God. But if “your truth” is as valid as “my truth” and there is no “THE TRUTH”, then the Bible is just another “holy book” among many other sacred writings, like the Koran of Islam or the Upanishads of Hinduism. Therefore, Christianity’s belief that truth is not relative but rather that there is a God over all and truth that applies to all clashes with what has developed philosophically in our era of globalization.

What should the stance of Christianity be toward these philosophical developments? Should we feel threatened and frightened? Why or why not?

Pray:

-Ask God for wisdom to know how to deal with these changes, and for the words to say in response to your family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers who might be struggling through some of these things.

- Ask God for honesty to deal with your own doubts, since each of us is a part of our culture and we are not immune to these developments. Ask him to give you understanding.
- Thank God that regardless of cultural developments, he is the same yesterday and today and forever.
- Spend a few minutes just thanking God for all he has done in your life.

## Day 2

The second force at work in our world that has had a significant impact on our current cultural situation is the **marginalization of Christianity**. For thousands of years Christianity was at the center of Western culture, the dominant religion without any competition. Other religions were present at certain times or in certain places, but they were definitely at the margins of society when compared to Christianity. This dominance of Christianity in the Western world actually goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, when Constantine, the emperor of the Roman Empire, stopped the persecution of Christians and declared Christianity the official religion of the empire. This development played a major role in transforming Christianity from a persecuted, underground faith to a powerful religion. There were times in the Middle Ages when the Church and its leaders dominated even the most powerful political leaders.

Do you think Christianity should be in a dominant cultural position? Why or why not?

What are the positives of such a dominant position? Can you think of any negatives?

This situation that began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and lasted for hundreds of years is often referred to as the age of Christendom. The entire Western world was referred to as Christendom, or the Christian Kingdom. Christianity dominated. However, as I am sure you are aware, things have changed. Instead of Christianity being able to control public policy, today public policy is literally marginalizing Christianity, pushing it back to the fringes of culture. Today, the basic tenets of Christianity do not hold sway but are questioned publicly.

Where are places in our culture that you see Christianity and its basic beliefs questioned? What is your gut reaction when you experience this?

Believe it or not, in many ways this cultural shift is a good thing, since Christianity may have been more vibrant and world-changing in its first three hundred years, while persecuted and marginalized, than it was in the next thousand while in a dominant cultural position. When Christians were being killed for claiming the name of Jesus, there were no “sideline” Christians. Unlike today, people who called themselves Christians but did not act like it were scarce. You were either a follower of Jesus willing to die for your faith or you were not a Christian.

Obviously we do not hope for persecution, but the dominance of Christianity has led to an abundance of “marginal” Christians and has hurt our witness for Christ. Thus, this shift has the potential to make those who follow Christ more serious and committed. No longer will people claim a faith in Christ for a political or social advantage, since it will be a disadvantage. Following Christ will no longer be comfortable, and this has the potential to create a much more vibrant and committed Church.

Just like globalization, this development has had a huge impact on our view of the trustworthiness of the Bible. When Christianity is pushed to the margins and its basic beliefs questioned, and when a widespread acceptance of the words of the Bible turns into open suspicion or even hostility toward them, there is no longer any inherent trust in the Bible. For many, it is just another book, and to trust it because it is “the Bible” is foolish and naïve. *In our current cultural environment, it is essential that we understand why it is we believe the Bible is trustworthy and true.*

Do you believe the Bible is trustworthy and true? If so, why do you believe this?

If someone asked you to explain why someone would base their life around the words of some ancient book, what would you say?

If someone else asked you to explain why you think this book is God’s Word, how would you explain that?

These are difficult questions, and our current cultural situation makes this issue one of supreme importance for Christians. As globalization causes us to encounter more ways of thinking, many wonder if any one way of thinking could be right. And as Christianity is pushed to the fringes, no longer is the Bible simply accepted as God's Word; rather, it is submitted to serious questioning.

Many Christians respond to these changes by digging in their heels more firmly, shouting that we are right and they are wrong. Any sign of a questioning of the Bible is seen as evil and heretical and is not given a hearing. Those who question why we should listen to the Bible's words, or how we know the Bible is from God, both of which are appropriate questions, are seen as doubters and are dismissed as unbelievers.

May this not be our response, either to the questioning of others or to our own doubts. The question of what the Bible is and why we should trust it is one each of us ought to struggle through and consider. If we lived in a culture where the Koran had long been dominant, and it was assumed that any good person accepted everything in this book as truth (and anyone who questioned it was a heretic), it would nevertheless be a good thing for those of us in that culture to come to our own conclusions about the trustworthiness of that book. In the same way, questioning the trustworthiness of the Bible, and exploring what it is and why it is true, is not only appropriate but is necessary for every person. Dealing with and exploring these questions is our goal for the rest of the week.

Pray:

- Ask God for wisdom to know how to deal with this cultural shift that has marginalized Christianity. Ask him for the humility to not brashly shout down all other viewpoints and simply claim you are right and others are wrong.
- Confess the ways you have failed to interact with the questioning world in a humble way.
- Thank God that he is in control, even when the world seems so uncertain, and thank him that he is not threatened by all the questions.
- Pray for those who are in a state of confusion, desiring the truth but unsure of where to look for it.
- Spend a few minutes praying for the followers of Jesus around the world, from those who are being marginalized in our culture to those who are being persecuted in other parts of the world. Ask God to use these cultural developments to strengthen and revitalize his Church.

## Day 3

Hopefully the last two days have made it clear that we cannot avoid this question about the Bible's trustworthiness. It is not only necessary in our cultural environment to confront this question, but it is always appropriate for each of us to consider why we believe what we believe. And if we are going to base our lives around the words in this collection of writings we call the Bible, it is very important that we know *why* we are basing our lives around those words!

We will consider two main questions today: what is the Bible and where did it come from? In other words, how can this group of writings be defined? And how did they come to be unified into this giant book we call the Bible?

Most basically, the Bible is a collection of writings. These writings include many different genres, such as poetry, historical narrative, wisdom literature, prophecy, letters, gospels, apocalyptic literature, and more! These various books of the Bible were written over the course of *centuries* by many different human authors.

The Bible can be broadly separated into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, but there ought to be no sharp dividing line. The entire work is a unified story about the work of God in the world, and his action in creating the world and then creating for himself a people devoted to himself. Much of the Old Testament is a record of God's interactions with Israel, the people he chose for himself out of all the peoples of the world in order to bless and save the whole world.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament books represent an incredible variety of genres, authors, and time periods. Israelites often called the entire Old Testament the *Tanak*, and this is an acronym that can be helpful in understanding the way the Israelites who were compiling the Old Testament organized its various writings. Tanak is an acronym formed from the initial Hebrew letters in the Old Testament's three traditional subdivisions: The Torah (which means "teaching", also known as the Five Books of Moses), the Nevi'im (which means "prophets" and represents all the prophetic books), and the Ketuvim (which means

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<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 12:1-3, where God promises Abraham to make him into a great nation, to bless him, and to bless the whole world through him.

“Writings” and represents all the other books, such as Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, etc.) Hence *TaNak*. Broadly speaking, the Torah is a record of God’s early interaction with the world and with Israel. The prophets are those God used to speak truth to his people along the way, calling them to repentance or obedience. And the Writings are very diverse, but give more of a record to the story of God’s interactions with Israel—from the Psalms, which often are songs about different parts of Israel’s worship, to 1 and 2 Kings, which give a record of the Israelite monarchy, to Ezra, which is a record of the return to the land of Israel after the exile.

That’s what the Old Testament is: a record of God’s interaction with the world, specifically with his chosen people Israel.

It is important to remember that what we call the Old Testament is the entire Bible for Jewish people today. Early Christians took the established Scriptures of the Israelites as their Scriptures, and it was several hundred years before the New Testament Scriptures were collected and organized into a new set or canon of accepted writings. So when Paul mentions “Scripture” or “the Scriptures”<sup>2</sup> in his letters, he is speaking about the Old Testament, since the New Testament did not yet exist.

The various books that are a part of the Old Testament were compiled and organized over the course of hundreds and possibly thousands of years. The events in the life of this nation chosen by God were told and retold, recorded and copied, saved and treasured as the record of God’s actions among them. That the Israelites were meticulous in caring for these Scriptures and ensuring their accuracy is an understatement. They saw the words of the Scriptures as holy and maintained and passed those words on with the greatest care.

Still, at some point Jewish leaders had to decide what the standard text of the Old Testament was. With so many hundreds of years of copying and passing on these books and prophecies, there were variations in the books. Eventually the books were standardized; the wording was determined and decisions were made about which books were in and which were out. This process of standardizing the text was a complex one, but suffice it to say that the Israelites were passionate about maintaining the integrity of their Scriptures, down to every single letter in the text.

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<sup>2</sup> See Romans 1:2, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 2 Timothy 3:15-16.

The early Christians took this Hebrew Bible as theirs not because they trusted in this process but rather because they read and treasured this Bible as *their* Bible. This is important: the earliest Christians did not see themselves as a part of a new religion. They were almost all Jews themselves, and saw themselves as true Jews, part of God's people. The fact that God had acted in a new and amazing way through Jesus to open the way for non-Jews to be saved did not change the fact that they saw themselves as Jewish, and it did not mean they were part of any new religion. Within a few years it became clear that there was a giant chasm between those who believed Jesus was the promised Jewish Messiah and those who did not, and at that point Christianity emerged as a new movement, and eventually its own religion.

But because the earliest Christians did not see themselves as a part of any new religion, the writers of the New Testament never would have seen the Old Testament as an *Old* Testament. That was their Bible. And they never set out to create their own writings as Scripture, or any sort of *New* Testament. They were merely recording the new actions of God among them, or writing letters of encouragement to their fellow Christians. It became apparent very quickly to Christians reading these works, however, that they were more than just another letter or book.

Christians came to recognize that these writings were more than just good reading material and were also inspired by God, and over the course of 300 years or so, these writings were weighed to determine the New Testament canon. There were many books that were specifically excluded from the New Testament canon, and there were specific criteria that the Church leaders used to determine whether a book should be included in the New Testament. One such criteria was *apostolicity*: was this work connected to an apostle, one of the twelve, or Paul, who was specially designated by Christ as an apostle? If not, it was much more challenging for it be accepted into the New Testament. Other criteria included age (how close to the time of Christ had it been composed) and obviously whether the work matched up with what the Church had always believed.<sup>3</sup>

As for what constitutes the New Testament, it is made up of a group of writings all written within 100 years of Christ. The New Testament is made up of four gospels, which tell the story of Jesus in historical narrative. Certainly these gospels were written not merely as

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<sup>3</sup> It was for this reason that the Gnostic gospels, which have received a lot of publicity lately, were excluded from the canon. It was not, as Dan Brown suggested in *The Da Vinci Code*, a massive cover up. It was quite simply that these works were very far off from what the Church had always believed and did not tell the truth about Christ. This is why Gnosticism was declared untrue by the early church right from the start.

history in the modern sense; they did not strive to be unbiased and made it clear they were written so that the readers would believe Jesus was the Messiah. Nevertheless, the writers emphasized that they had worked hard to provide a truthful, accurate account (see Luke 1:1-4). These gospels provide the most accurate information about Jesus and his life, death, and resurrection. Acts is a record of the early church from the time of Jesus' resurrection until Paul is taken to Rome as a prisoner. It provides us with a glimpse into the life of the early church, and how the earliest followers of Jesus tried to live out and share their faith. Most of the rest of the New Testament is made up of epistles, or letters, sent to churches or individuals to encourage or challenge them in the faith, mostly written by Paul. Revelation obviously is in its own category as apocalyptic literature, meant to encourage the late first century Christians amidst persecution. These 27 works were officially recognized by the Church as the canon of the New Testament.

Wow. That was a lot of information. But we barely scratched the surface of the story of what the Bible is and where it came from. What sticks out to you about all of this? What fascinates you? What troubles you? What questions do you have?

Pray:

-Spend some time thanking God for this incredible book we call the Bible. Thank him that it has the power to impact, mold, and change us.

-Ask God to help you hear him speak through the words of Scripture. Ask him to shape you through the time you spend reading and listening to its words.

-Confess the times you have taken the Bible for granted, not treasuring it or caring enough to hear God speak through it.

## Day 4

So far we have covered:

1. Why the trustworthiness of the Bible is important in today's cultural environment and
2. What the Bible is and where it came from.

These were essential precursors to our central issue for the week: is the Bible really trustworthy? It is great that we know a little bit about what the Bible is and where it came from, but is it trustworthy? Should we base our lives on its words?

Before we get into specific reasons why the Bible is trustworthy, we need to pause and consider two essential truths.

First, the only way to truly know if the Bible is trustworthy, if its words have the power to mold and transform and shape us, is to read it with the expectation that it has the ability to do so. Reading the Bible has never transformed a sworn atheist; those who are closed off to God and what he wants to say through Scripture will never experience the power of Scripture's words. The Bible is not mystical or magical; it is powerful not because it will jump out and grab you but because it is true, and it testifies to God, and God speaks through it. So, if you want to truly know if the Bible is trustworthy, at some point you are going to have to trust enough to read it with an open heart.

Second, the Bible is about real people and real experiences with a real God in a real world. It was never intended to be a philosophical book. It is a book about living. It is a book about the ways God has interacted and is interacting with people, and it is about how God wants his people to live. Therefore, you will never truly know if the Bible is trustworthy by studying about it. You must experience it. And you must do it. As James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The Bible is a book that should be more experienced than theorized about. At some point, if you want to know if the Bible is trustworthy, you are going to have to give its words a try. You are going to have to try to live it out.

Have you been guilty of allowing your concerns about the trustworthiness of the Bible to keep you from engaging it with an open heart?

Have you been guilty of over-theorizing about the Bible instead of trying to live out its words?

It is much easier to question whether Jonah really was swallowed by a whale than it is to deal with the real point of the book of Jonah: the fact that God loves even our enemies and

wants us to love them too. What do you think God might be asking you to change about your approach to the Bible?

Let's move on for a few minutes to this issue of the Bible's trustworthiness. Knowing that we must approach it with an open heart and that we must live it out, what evidence is there of the Bible's trustworthiness? What should reassure us that these words are worth trusting?

There are three pieces of evidence we will consider. First, many of the facts in the Bible can be verified by outside sources. Sources can include written works that corroborate what the Bible says or archaeological evidence that matches up with the facts in Scripture. For example, in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus or the Roman historian Tacitus many of the facts recorded in the New Testament are corroborated, such as the fact that there was a Jewish leader named Jesus who was crucified. Or the fact that it was the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate who put him to death. Archaeological excavation has uncovered many inscriptions that testify to facts in the Scriptures. For example, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III is a black limestone sculpture that was discovered in 1846 and depicts "Jehu of the house of Omri" paying tribute to Shalmaneser the Assyrian king. This refers to King Jehu of Israel, of the house of Omri, who is described by the Bible and who would have paid tribute to the king of Assyria. This outside evidence does not mean that everything in the Bible is true, but it is a great way to show that these stories were not simply created out of thin air; the words of the Bible describe real people in real places living real life. The Bible doesn't describe heroes who live in heavenly cities no one has ever been to. The places it describes are real places we can visit, and the people it describes are often attested to elsewhere.

Second, the Bible displays amazing internal consistency. For a book written over the course of several thousand years, in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), it is remarkable how consistent and unified its message is. We often talk about how God is portrayed differently in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament, but the picture of God throughout the Bible is actually incredibly consistent. He worked in different ways at different times, but throughout the Scriptures God is patient, loving, always bearing with his people, and always trying to make a way for them to be purified and forgiven. The story of redemption described throughout the Scriptures, and the promise of a Messiah who will make it possible for the relationship between humans and God to be restored, runs throughout the Old and New Testaments in a very coherent way. This

consistency also does not prove the Bible is trustworthy, but it testifies to the fact that all these different writers were experiencing the same God, and were part of the same story.

Finally, the Bible's own honesty and *real-ness* testifies to its trustworthiness. Many "sacred" books read more like propaganda than testimony about God. They present a very pretty picture of their belief system, a picture without messes. The Bible, however, is brutally honest. It paints a very realistic picture of humanity, showing that this chosen people of God continually ran away from him. They continually forgot what they were supposed to be doing; they bowed down to idols even after seeing God part the Red Sea! Isn't that a true description of humans?? In this book the most celebrated king, David, is portrayed as an adulterer and murderer. Jesus' chosen disciples are not recorded as heroes of uncanny strength and cunning; they are frightened, cowardly, and weak. This is an honest picture, and passes the "real life" test. It describes real, weak, frail, sinful human beings. And since that's the only kind we've ever experienced, it adds to its trustworthiness.

What do you think of these pieces of evidence? Do they help convince you of the reliability of the Bible? Why or why not?

As we said at the beginning, these pieces of evidence cannot convince. You must live it to test it. And that is perhaps the best piece of evidence for the trustworthiness of the Bible, the most important one of all: the Christian life works. There are many ways to live, and you can choose any way to live you want. But following Jesus, and living the life he calls us to live, works. It is the best way to live. It leads to peace, joy, and freedom. No regrets, no shame, and no baggage. In the giving away of ourselves, in laying our lives down for each other, we find real life and real fulfillment—life the way it was intended to be lived.

Let this be a challenge for you, if you have never truly given yourself to following Jesus and living the Christian life. Try it. Give it a shot. See if it's not the best way to live. Part of following Jesus is meditating on and living the Word. See if it works. For millions of Christians over the centuries, this has been the best evidence of just how trustworthy the Bible is.

Pray:  
-Tell God what is on your heart today. Express your concerns, worries, frustrations, joys, hopes.

- Ask God to give you a passion for his Word and for living out the life he wants for you.
- Ask for forgiveness for the times you have lived the life you wanted to live instead of the life God is calling you to live.
- Thank God for the ways he has inspired his Word and for the ways he uses it to shape and form his people.

## Day 5

In this final day, we are going to attempt to tackle the issue of relevancy. Is the Bible relevant? Does it have meaning for my life today? If so, how? As a part of this discussion, we are going to explore the issue of proper and improper interpretations, as this is one of the most *relevant* issues today regarding the Bible.

How relevant do you feel the Bible is to your every day life?

Does it impact how you go about your day—your work, your home life, your thought life?

If the Bible is powerful, and is in some sense the Word of God, then it certainly ought to impact the way we live as God's people. It *is* relevant, even if sometimes we act like it isn't. One of the most remarkable parts of the story of the Bible's composition is the way God has worked throughout history to preserve these words, this record of his actions in the world and interactions with his people. The fact that we have words that were written thousands of years ago in a desert, by those without even a pen and paper (no less a computer), is amazing. When you consider this, it is clear that God has been instrumental in preserving the words of Scripture, enabling all of us in future generations to have them.

It is also amazing to consider the ways he worked through so many different human authors to present such a clear and unified message. He used a man like Moses, born thousands of years before Christ, in an Egyptian cultural context, at a time when most Hebrews were largely illiterate. And then he used a man like Paul, born around the time of Christ, highly educated in a Roman cultural context, at a very different time and place. These men,

outside of sharing a common Hebrew heritage, had almost nothing in common. But God worked through the circumstances of each in unique ways. And he used them to bring forth portions of the Bible that, while different, present messages about the same God with the same purpose. The way God worked to bring forth the Scriptures is really incredible.

Just like he was at work in the composition and assembling of the Scriptures, he is at work today, bringing relevance to every word we read in our Bibles. Because he is a God who is passionate about forming a people who follow him and love him, he is actually always at work in the Scriptures, using them to convict us and change us and show us what he wants from us. The words of Scripture are not static or flat; they are alive and moving, as the Spirit works through them in our hearts to form us. As the book of Hebrews says, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

Have you ever sensed your own thoughts or attitudes being judged, being penetrated, by God? By his Word?

If we read the words of the Bible with open hearts, God will use them powerfully. He is at work, breathing new life into his Word at every reading to mold and shape us. Whenever we open ourselves to him and what he wants to say to us, he is ready to speak clearly to transform us.<sup>4</sup>

Before we close out the week, let’s talk briefly about the *interpretation* of the Bible. Let’s assume we can all agree on the fact that the Bible is trustworthy. And let’s even say we can agree that the Bible is relevant to our lives. But what if I read the Bible and understand it one way, but you read it and understand it another way? How do we know if someone is properly interpreting Scripture or distorting it? Are there any constraints on interpretation?

These are challenging questions we could spend weeks on, but let’s try to get somewhere in a couple paragraphs. First of all, it is true that Christians can read the Bible with open hearts and understand it differently. This explains some of our less-than-commendable

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<sup>4</sup> A great book on this topic is *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, by Eugene Peterson.

history of fighting, disagreeing, and splitting in the Church. While different interpretations do not have to lead to such deplorable consequences, it is clear that Scripture will be understood in different ways by different people. So does anything go? Are all interpretations equally valid?

The short answer is no. Anything does not go, and all interpretations are not equally valid. There are some constraints on interpretation, some boundaries, we must adhere to if we want to end up with an acceptable interpretation of Scripture. Those boundaries include:

- Our interpretation does not contradict the overarching message of Scripture
- Our interpretation matches up with the way of Christ
- Our interpretation pushes us to love God and love our neighbor more
- Our interpretation does not conflict with what Christians have believed throughout the ages

These are certainly not the only constraints, but they are some important ones. If any interpretation of Scripture conflicts with the fact that God is a loving and merciful God, for example, it is not a valid interpretation. If any interpretation of Scripture clashes with the way of sacrifice and mercy, it is not a valid interpretation. If any interpretation of Scripture pushes me toward hate instead of love, it is not valid.

People often use the Bible to support their own personal view instead of allowing the Bible to create and inform our views. We should allow God to speak through his Word instead of using his Word to validate what we already think. There are times when it is easy to dismiss a certain interpretation because of the self-serving bias and clear contradictory nature of that interpretation.

There are groups who use the Bible to justify hatred and injustice. Someone might quote a few verses from the Old Testament (completely without consideration of the original context and intention of the writing) to support their claims about what disgusts God, and what should be done to people who fall into one camp or another. There are other groups who will quote a selection of verses from the Bible to support the exact opposite claim, while in the process straying from both the overarching message of Scripture. We must always use care not to make the Bible say what we want it to say.

As we read the Bible with an open heart, may we submit every understanding and interpretation to God, asking him to help us understand correctly. May we read with

expectation, believing God will shape us and transform us through these powerful, relevant words.

-Rededicate yourself to studying, meditating on, and being transformed by the Bible. Ask God to give you a passion for his Word and a passion for him.

-Read David's Psalm about the majesty of the Word, Psalm 119.

### *Small Group Discussion Guide*

#### **Is the Bible Really Trustworthy?**

Begin by sharing someone you *really* trust. Someone you would trust with your life. Someone you *know* would come through.

- Why do you trust them? Be specific.
- What is it about God that makes you trust him? What makes it hard to trust him?

This week we are talking about whether the Bible is trustworthy. We are

- If a family member or co-worker asked you to explain why the Bible is trustworthy, what would you say?
- Would you feel equipped to explain why these old writings are so important, or why they can be trusted? Explain.

Many Christians feel ill-equipped to explain the process by which the Bible came into being. There are many voices in our culture, shouting that the Bible is propaganda or that it was the creation of a bunch of power-hungry church bishops. There are many saying it simply cannot be trusted.

- What do you think the reaction of Christians to these voices ought to be? Why?

The truth is that spewing out a bunch of facts about why the Bible is reliable will simply not convince anyone. The Bible is neither a science text book full of facts nor a mythical story full of make-believe adventures. The Bible is a record of God's actions in the world, and it testifies to all he has done to create and then redeem humanity. It is not a book to be tested philosophically or scientifically; it is a book to be lived.

- What do you think the average person's perception of the Bible is? What do your friends or neighbors or co-workers who are not Christians think about this book? Do their perceptions matter? Why or why not?

God's people throughout the ages have found the Bible to be both trustworthy and relevant. The best way that it becomes clear that it is trustworthy is to live it, to try it out. The Bible is a book about living, and it is most effective when it is lived, not theorized about.

- Have you ever truly tried to "live out" the words of the Bible? If so, explain the impact it had on you.
- As you sought the truth in Scripture, has God ever spoken to your heart, or led you, or convicted you of how he wants you to change? Explain.

The Word of God is living and active, ready to change and mold and transform us. It is relevant because it is God's Word not simply from long ago—it is God's Word today. He is using it to shape and mold his people, to speak to their hearts and draw them to himself. Spend some time praying as a group for a passion for the Bible. Ask God to use your group times not simply for fellowship or fun, but to mold you and shape you through his Word.

## Questions Week 2

*How to use this guide:*

*This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.*

We are in the second week of our series “Questions.” Our attention and focus over the next several weeks will be on trying to address some big questions about faith, God, and life. I think we all have questions from time to time. Often these questions are minor, the answers on which there really is very little riding. Other times we come face to face with a question that is huge and one on which, it seems, everything rests.

*[Q] Give an example of a question you might encounter during the day which is mostly trivial? Give an example of a question on which much is resting?*

The hope and goal of this series is to address the huge questions we all wrestle with at some point in our lives. This week we are going to look closer at some questions surrounding hell. There may be no topic more difficult to address and which raises more questions than that of hell.

*[Q] On a scale of 1-10, how difficult of a topic is hell for you? Why?*

One of the questions that comes up very often with regard to hell is the question of whether all non-Christians go to hell? If someone doesn't believe in the Bible or if they were raised in a culture where the Bible wasn't even available, what happens to them? What does this mean for all the people who were born in cultures or during eras when they didn't have the ability to choose to follow Jesus for themselves? Are all “non-believers,” whether by their own choice or not, going to hell?

*[Q] Can you identify with this question? Why or why not?*

This is a complex and difficult question. It's important to realize, right off the bat, that many people disagree on this topic, even among Christians. If our goal is absolute certainty or a consensus among Christians, you're just not going to find it. The truth is this question is very unclear and difficult to approach directly. So instead of focusing on what is uncertain, let's begin with what is more clear and work toward what is unclear.

For starters, as we talked about last week (in case you missed it, you can pick up week one of Questions), we have good grounds to trust the Bible. Though we don't always see how God is working because our perspective is limited, we can see through the Bible that what God is doing is just and wise.

We can also know that when we see Jesus in the Bible, what we are seeing is God being revealed to humanity. This is the central theme of the New Testament of the Bible. Jesus says of himself, "If you see me, you see the Father" (John 14:9-10). What this means is that if something which to my reason doesn't square with what is revealed by Jesus in the Bible, then I'm forced to rethink my beliefs or be willing to "suspend" my own reason. However God may appear at times, He cannot be other than what is revealed in Jesus Christ.

*[Q] Why is it important that our thoughts and beliefs about God are consistent with what is revealed by Jesus? In what ways do people sometimes get this wrong?*

What is also clear from the Bible is that there is no salvation or rescue outside of Jesus. Jesus said of himself, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6) and with regard to Jesus we read in the Bible, "There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The distance we have from God can only be bridged by Jesus and it is only through Jesus that sinners are made compatible with God.

This is where things get a bit more difficult, because another thing which is made clear from the Bible is that there are some people who did not know Jesus personally or consciously, but who were still brought near to God and saved. Moses, Abraham, Noah, Job, and Melchizedek, are all mentioned as individuals who shall be in heaven. How can this be true if it is only through Jesus that people are saved? How is this possible if it is only through Jesus that people can come to the Father and if Moses, Abraham, Noah, Job, and Melchizedek were sinners in need of salvation just like everyone else?

This leads us to an odd place, doesn't it? It is only through Christ we can come to the Father, and yet people who died before Christ was born are said to be with God. The only conclusion we can come to is that somehow the sacrifice of Jesus can be applied by God to people who didn't consciously choose it for themselves.

How does this work? Who does this apply to? What does this mean for people living in countries who have never heard of Jesus? I don't know. The Bible is unclear on this point.

While there is enough in the Bible to maintain hope for people who have never heard of Jesus before, there is nothing which would give someone in this situation assurance or guarantees of their position with God.

*[Q] What is your reaction to the idea that somehow the sacrifice of Jesus can be applied to people who never knew or chose Jesus for themselves?*

For people reading this devotional guide, this is more of an intellectual issue than a real one, since all of us live in a culture and during a time when we have access to the Bible and to knowing who Jesus is in ways never dreamed of by previous generations. Sometimes this objection about people who never knew God going to hell can act as a smoke screen to help us avoid making a choice of our own.

Is hell, the way it's described in the Bible, literal?

This really is a great question. As we read what the Bible says about hell, what we encounter is unique language and very powerful images. But are these images a description of the literal hell, or are they meant to convey a meaning but not literal description?

First off, some of the metaphors used to describe hell would be contradictory to each other if taken literally. For example, hell is described as a place of total darkness. It is also described as a place of burning fire. Clearly, these two things can not be literally true at the same time. Hell, in the Bible, is described as a pit and also a lake of burning brimstone. Perhaps it is possible for a pit to be filled with a lake of burning brimstone, but it seems as if two different geological phenomena are being described. Hell is also described as a place of punishment as well as a place of destruction, two concepts also in seeming conflict.

The images and metaphors used to describe hell are not to be taken as a literal snapshot of hell. Rather, each hopes to convey some part of what the reality of hell is and to impress on the reader, and impresses strongly, that hell is a really bad place. Hell is the opposite of what God wants for humanity. Even the word used in the Bible for hell is a metaphor. Many times the word used to describe hell in the Bible is the word gehenna. Gehenna was a valley outside of Jerusalem which was the city's major dump. There were often fires smoldering for weeks as the trash burned. The smell was offensive and only the truly desperate lived in this valley, separated from the rest of humanity. Not many people choose

to live in a dump unless they don't have any other options. Again, the symbolic and metaphorical significance of this word is hard to miss.

The truth is it's difficult to take all the metaphors of hell literally. It just doesn't seem logically consistent. What this does not mean is that we should take hell any less seriously. If God went out of his way to reserve some of the most powerful metaphors in the Bible to describe hell, we would do well to learn what these metaphors are really pointing toward; hell is not a place where we want to end up.

*[Q] To what degree do you picture hell literally? To what degree do you think of hell metaphorically? What difference does it make in thinking about it each of these ways?*

This raises the question of how a loving God could torture people in an eternal hell? If God loves people and hell sounds like something we wouldn't wish on our worst enemy, how is God could use it as a punishment?

One of the first things we must realize is that God doesn't put people in hell, people put themselves there. Again, realize that it is against God's desire that anyone should perish, so if anyone ends up in hell it is against the will of God that they do so. God does not take delight in people's pain. God is not a sadistic torturer of people, laughing in delight as another person is sent to hell. Not at all. (Read Ezekiel 18:23).

The Bible describes the people in hell as people who loved the darkness more than the light and who chose, for themselves, to embrace the darkness. Hell is where they want to be, not where God wants them to be.

*[Q] In what ways do people choose hell for themselves?*

It is true to say God allows people to go to hell, but he does this by giving people their own way. In Romans we read several times about people to whom "God gave them over to do what they wanted to do" (Romans 1:20-32). The judgment of God was to allow these people to walk their own way. If someone longs for God to leave them alone, God ultimately will, allowing them to choose their own way apart from him. And in doing do, God really does cast them into hell, a life without God, because of their own desires to be there.

When an alcoholic desires the bottle more than his wife and kids and home he will ultimately get to the point where he wants them all to just leave him alone. This is his true desire, but anyone looking at the situation from the outside can identify this as hell. This man might really think he is happier with the bottle alone than with his family but without the bottle, but the truth is he is miserable. The alcoholic might get what he wants, but he ends up in hell with his privilege.

It's the same way with God and self-addicted sinners; he gives them what they want. That person will miss out on what life is really about and will cut him or herself off from the love, joy, and peace God has to offer. But this is not God will or God's choice; it is merely God allowing a person to choose for him or herself.

*[Q] Does this understanding of how people end up in hell alter how you think about God role in people being in hell? Why or why not?*

This also raises the question of whether or not hell is eternal. There is some debate about this among scholars and people often land on different places with this issue. One thing which can be said for sure, if hell is eternal, it is "locked from the inside" as C.S. Lewis once put it. Again, it is not the will of God which locks people in hell, but the will of the people themselves. The eternity of hell is an eternity of a will which is curved in on itself, which blocks everything that could ever lead it into anything like a healthy state of being. There comes a time when all the choices have been made and someone receives the natural consequences of their choices. This is where heaven and hell become eternal.

While there is nothing implausible about an eternal hell and a loving God being coexistent, there are others who believe hell is not eternal. Some people believe the grace and love of God are strong enough to pursue us even in that place, even in the midst of hell. After all, didn't God's love and grace find us in our current separation from God, in our current hells? What would prevent a loving God from seeking and finding us even in hell to bring us back to God?

There are others still who do not think hell is eternal because it is ongoing, but because the results of hell are eternal. Instead of being hell being a place where people suffer eternally, hell is a description of what it means when God finally makes an eternal choice of place someone outside of his presence. The Bible talks about people in hell being destroyed, burning up like chaff, perishing. In this view, God's justice and mercy converge in one act

and in judging the rebellious, God mercifully puts them out of existence precisely because he doesn't want them to endure eternal punishment.

*[Q] In what way do you understand the eternity (or lack of it) of hell?*

Another question which is raised about hell comes down to timing. From time to time there are people who predict when the world will come to an end. What does the Bible say about knowing when the world will end?

This obviously has come to the forefront of attention on a national stage with the predictions made by Harold Camping of Family Life Radio. His prediction of the end of the world is posted with the tagline "The Bible guarantees it!" Is it true? Does the Bible spell out the timing of the end of the world?

*[Q] What is your reaction to people who predict the end of the world will take place on a specific date?*

The truth is that Jesus' followers had the very same questions and they were in the unique position of being able to ask Jesus directly. Jesus goes out of his way to make it clear that we simply can not know the day or the time when the end of the world will take place. Jesus said, "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Matthew 24:36). What Jesus is saying is that *he* doesn't even know when it will take place. Is it possible to know when the end of the world will take place? In a word, no. After all, if Jesus wanted us to circle a date on the calendar, he could have given it to us.

It seems arrogant and naive to presume to know something Jesus is unable to know himself.

While many people claim to be "decoding" or "dissecting" the Bible with the ability of finding the secrets held within, it seems they miss the point of what they are reading in the Bible in the first place. What Jesus is telling his followers is that the point of the whole endeavor isn't trying to decode when the end of the world will come, but to live in such a way that when the end comes, we are prepared. This isn't about selling all our possessions to buy billboard space to announce a date, but living exactly the way we would if we did know the date and it was coming soon.

If you were in school and you knew the date of a final exam, you might be tempted to procrastinate and avoid preparing for the exam until the last possible minute. Let say, on the other hand, you knew there would be an exam at some point, but you were not given the day. Then the only rational course of action would be to always be prepared.

The truth the Bible reveals is that Jesus will return one day and we would all do well to be prepared for that day. Jesus compares his return like a thief coming in the night, breaking into the house while everyone is asleep, because Jesus will return “at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:44). The point isn’t to determine when the thief is coming and only lock the doors on that night, but to realize one day a thief will come and we need to always be prepared.

*[Q] What do you think it means to be prepared? What would change in your life if you were truly prepared for Jesus’ return?*

The topic of hell is a difficult one for any Christian. Yet, what we sometimes encounter are Christians who seem almost gleeful when they tell you who is going to end up in hell and who isn’t. Again, let’s not miss the point Jesus is making in the first place. Jesus is not expressing God’s desire that people should be separated from him, nor is he gleeful when someone chooses a different way than the life Jesus knows is best for them. Whenever a Christian rejoices because someone is far from God, it is only evidence that that person has completely missed the mission of Jesus and the heart of God.

We read in the Bible:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” 2 Peter 3:9

God longs for everyone to turn toward him and avoid the eternal separation which is, in the end, what it means to be in hell. Think about it this way: Jesus died so we could avoid hell. Hell must be one terrifying and horrible place to be if the cure required for us to avoid it is something so severe. Cutting off a person’s arm seems like a torturous and extreme form of punishment, unless a doctor does so in order to save a person’s life. The extremity of the cure shows the direness of the illness.

*[Q] What thoughts or questions do you still have about hell? In what ways does the extremity of the cure show the seriousness of hell?*

*Questions*  
*Week 3*  
*Kevin Bobrow*

**Absolute Truth**  
*Introduction*

The issue of absolute truth vs. relative truth is one that is very theoretical, even philosophical. It is an issue that has captured the attention of many brilliant thinkers.

For me, however, and perhaps for you, this issue is not merely theoretical. It is real and personal; it matters. Included among those who do not accept that there is absolute truth are some of my closest relatives. This fact has made me wrestle with this issue, and I hope you will wrestle with it as well. I hope you will think through the issue, study what Scripture has to say, and land in a place where you know what you think and can humbly share that perspective with others.

**Day 1**

Let's try to get to the crux of this issue quickly. Suppose we were living in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, before there had been much exploration of the world and prior to any scientific consensus that the Earth was round. In our little village in Europe we were quite advanced, and we had been having some discussions about the nature of our world. Suppose that in those discussions I spoke up and said, "I am quite confident that the Earth is actually a giant square cube." This would have sparked all sorts of discussion, and the consensus would have been that I was off my rocker, and it was clear to all that the world was flat. How else could we walk around and not fall off the edge of this "cube"?!

Would my opinion that the Earth was a giant square cube change what it actually was? Or would your opinion that it was flat make it fail to be round? Of course not. Clearly these would just have been incorrect opinions or assumptions. Here are more difficult questions: am I entitled to my opinion about the Earth and are you entitled to yours? If we believe in our hearts that what we hold to is true, is that in some sense true for us? In this scenario, would it have been true *for me* that the Earth was a cube, and true *for you* that it was flat? Are these opinions in any sense true because we believe them to be true? Or because they are true *for us*?

These are hard questions, and I don't pretend to know all the answers. But this week we are going to tackle this important and difficult issue, or at least begin to wrap our minds and hearts around it. It is a very important issue in our world today, and has come to the forefront in many philosophical discussions. It certainly always seems it always becomes the central sticking point in any religious conversation. If you were to gather any number of people from any section of our society to have a religious or spiritual dialogue, it seems that inevitably that conversation would end up with a statement about absolute truth. It might sound something like: "Well, when it comes down to it, we all have the right to believe what we feel is right. And if what you believe works for you and what I believe works for me, then that is your truth and this is my truth." Those words might not be used, but that would be the essence of what was said.

Have you had conversations like this? In what sort of situation did they occur?

How did you respond? What do you think is the best way to respond?

How did we get here, to this cultural and religious environment where nothing is absolutely true? Obviously there is a long answer to that question, and we could have a 6-week study just on the history of how we came to where we are culturally. A short answer: historically, as variant worldviews have come in contact with each other, and clashed with each other, it has caused major problems. Wars over belief systems have been plentiful, atrocities have been committed, oppression and murder have taken place. It seems that humans have generally grown tired of all the fighting and the deplorable actions that have come out of religious disagreement, and this has led us toward a more understanding stance toward new

worldviews. We have gradually felt less threatened by the views of others and have not been stirred to violence or anger by them, as people were in the past. As this has happened, atrocities committed by one group against another due to their worldview or belief system have seemed increasingly naïve and repulsive. Why would you hurt another, or oppress another, we ask, simply because they think differently than you do?

That is a good question. And certainly as those who follow Christ, we must side with mutual understanding, and a loving attitude toward others, and we must flee from any action toward others that is oppressive. But it seems that what has happened in this environment is that people have been so disgusted by the actions of those who would seek to oppress and hurt those who think differently from them that they have gone too far in response, saying that there is no overarching, absolute truth at all. We all think so differently, and we are all valuable people, so all of our views must be equally valid and acceptable and, in some sense, *true*.

Does this way of thinking appeal to you?

Do you think it would be easier or more difficult if this were true, that all ways of thinking and belief systems were in some sense true, and valid? Why?

If someone asked you if Christians really believe that there is only one true way of thinking, or living, or believing, how would you respond?

For the rest of the week we are going to explore Scripture, and see what God's Word has to say about this issue. We must not formulate our opinions by listening merely to what everyone in our culture around us is saying; rather, we must have our foundational beliefs and understandings about the world formed by Scripture, since we believe it is from God and is *absolutely* true.

→ Spend some time asking God to give you wisdom regarding this challenging question.

→ Thank God for his presence in your life, for the ways he has been there for you and loved you. Thank him that you know he is true because you have experienced a relationship with him.

## Day 2

Today we are going to turn to the Old Testament, and see what we can learn about this issue of absolute truth from there. Believe it or not, this issue is one of the first that is confronted in the Bible; we see it come up right out of the gate in the Garden of Eden.

Read Genesis 2:15 – 3:9.

I had you stop at 3:9 because I find that verse one of the most poignant in all of Scripture. God, the loving Creator who enjoyed perfect relationship with his creation, calling out for Adam and Eve, saying, “Where are you?” God knew of Adam and Eve’s decision. Yet he was searching for them, calling out and asking where they were. He loved them, but he knew their perfect relationship had been shattered. The life and the world God envisioned for his creation was now broken irreparably. And we still feel the effects of sin every minute of every day in our world.

Did you see what occurred in this story that was a perfect example of absolute truth, or the distortion of absolute truth? The serpent, believed by most scholars to represent Satan in some fashion (whether Satan appeared as a serpent or spoke through the serpent or whatever), started out by distorting the truth. He said, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” No, in fact God had not said this. He had actually said the opposite, telling Adam he “was free to eat from any tree in the garden”! There was only one limit on that great freedom, and Satan twisted it to make God seem selfish and mean-spirited. That is how the distortion of truth works. Truth is turned around into non-truth, into lies.

Eve responds by correcting Satan, explaining that God had only said not to eat of that one tree. Satan responds to this true statement by attacking it with *his* truth. Here is the attack on absolute truth. He relativizes Eve’s true statement, claiming it was only true in her mind, only true according to that mean, controlling God. Instead, Satan says, the opposite

is true: if you eat it good things will happen! You'll know more, have more wisdom, and be more like God.

Of course in a sense they would know more (about sin), but they wouldn't be more like God. This decision would separate them from God. Satan used half-truths to twist and distort and trick Adam and Eve into sinning. He claimed they wouldn't die, but this was another half-truth: they wouldn't die *on the spot*, but sin would lead to their sure death, since they were kicked out of the Garden and the perfect existence God had planned for them.

Satan had in a sense convinced Adam and Eve to give up on their understanding of truth. Their understanding had been based on their logical conviction that this wonderful God who created them and loved them also told them the truth. Satan convinced them to question what God told them and to embrace "another truth." This idea that has become so popular today, that we can each embrace a "different truth", goes all the way back to the dawn of creation. Its source is in the heart of the evil one, who seems to give special focus to distorting the truth. His current project seems to be to convince humanity that there is no one right way to live, no one right way to believe—no Truth, only your truth and my truth.

Have you ever found yourself doubting whether there is absolute truth? Have you found yourself considering whether perhaps all of us can believe whatever we wish and those beliefs are true *for us*? How do you think such thinking lines up with the deception we saw played out in Genesis?

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament there were similar problems among God's people. They seemed to forget often who they were supposed to be and who God was, embracing distortions of the truth that were in the culture around them. Israel often fell into the trap of *syncretism*, which is the mingling of different religions or thought patterns into one jumbled group of beliefs. It is taking a little bit from one way of thinking, and a little bit from another, a few beliefs from this religion, and a few beliefs from that one. In the end you arrive at *your personal truth*.

When I think of modern-day syncretism, I think of Oprah. I am sure Oprah is a nice woman, and she is a beautiful creation of God I do not want to judge in any way. Nevertheless, she is a public figure, so she serves as a good illustration. Perhaps this is not true, but it seems that Oprah embraces any and every thought pattern or belief system that suits her fancy. If it *seems* right, it must be right. So she will have Tom Cruise on the show and listen to him talk about his strange religion, and she'll embrace aspects of that. And she'll have Eckhart Tolle on the show and listen to him talk about his wacky version of spirituality, and she'll embrace aspects of that. Whatever anyone says that seems profound, she seems to find a way to embrace!

This sort of resembles what the Israelites did in their history, and what we must be on our guard against doing. God was angered and upset again and again when his people would fall into syncretism. The people of other cultural and religious backgrounds that lived around them would worship idols, and God's people would begin worshipping idols too. Their neighbors would worship foreign gods like Baal or Asherah, and the Israelites would begin worshipping them too.

You may be thinking: "That sounds ludicrous! God's people worshipping idols and false gods? I would *never* worship false gods!" Well let me explain how God's people could fall into what might seem unbelievable to us, and then let us consider whether we might also be guilty of a sort of syncretism. The Israelites were part of a culture where virtually everyone held to a polytheistic worldview. Polytheism means "many gods", and it is the worship of many different deities. We see this in classic Greek and Roman mythology to an extent, but in the ancient Near East where the Israelites lived, it was not mythological in any way for their neighbors. They truly believed that there were many gods—probably hundreds. It was their job to appease those gods, to make them feel appreciated and recognized, so that the gods would not annihilate them or hurt them. So, for example, if there was a god of the sea, you better appease that god by making sacrifices or doing certain rituals, or else that god might send the sea onto dry land and wipe you out with a flood. Each natural disaster was connected with a powerful god, so drought was avoided by paying tribute to one god and famine was averted by paying tribute to another, and the list could go on. *In this way of thinking there is no harm in worshipping too many gods, only in not worshipping enough!* This is classical polytheism.

If you lived in a culture where this was the norm, if *everyone* you rubbed shoulders with thought this way, it would be very difficult to continue to hold to your own worldview. In

the case of the Israelites, even though they had been chosen by God to be a special people for him, and even though one of the foundational commandments God gave them was not to worship any other gods, they forgot. And often they fell for the trap of this distorted version of spirituality and engaged in syncretism.

Do we engage in syncretism? We probably don't worship idols in our bedrooms, but do we fall for a distorted version of spirituality? Do we take a little bit of our worldview from a friend, a little bit from talk show hosts, a little more from our favorite radio show, and a little bit from our favorite music or film? Is this not a form of syncretism? We meld the ideas around us together into *our own* worldview, *our own* version of the truth. And it must upset God in a similar fashion.

Are you ever guilty of this sort of syncretism? Why or why not?

→ Ask God to forgive you for the ways you allow the influences around you in culture to shape your beliefs and worldview and ways of thinking. Ask him to shape your beliefs and worldview through your relationship with him and through his Word.

→ Ask God for a discerning mind and heart, so that you are aware of when you are allowing yourself to be overly shaped by the cultural influences around you.

→ Thank your Father for his great patience with his people, from Adam and Eve all the way to you. Thank him for his great love that conquers even our sin.

### Day 3

Yesterday we talked about Israel, and how the Israelites often forgot their call to be solely devoted to God and separate from the thinking of their polytheistic neighbors. We begin today by talking about some of the most treasured words of this people, a passage that became the most quoted words of the Old Testament. They come from Deuteronomy 6, and the passage is often referred to as the "Shema." *Shema* is a Hebrew word that means "hear" or "listen", and they call the passage this because it begins with this word, in the imperative (meaning "Listen!" or "Hear!"). These words were spoken by Moses to the people as they prepared to enter the promised land:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land. Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah. Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you. Do what is right and good in the LORD’s sight, so that it may go well with you and you may go in and take over the good land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers, thrusting out all your enemies before you, as the LORD said.”

#### Deuteronomy 6:4-19

What stands out to you about this passage? Why does it stand out?

How does this passage relate to absolute truth?

It seems to me that the point of this passage is that no matter what the Israelites encountered, no matter what belief systems surrounded them, they were to *remember* that their God was the only God. There is one God, not many! And he has done amazing

things for you, so don't forget him! Don't fall for the traps that are around you, the distortions of truth.

They were reminded in these words that their God was a jealous God, and would not put up with them joining in with the polytheism of their neighbors. He wanted their full devotion, their whole hearts. The most famous words of this passage are right at the beginning, when Moses tells the Israelites to love the Lord with all their heart and soul and strength. This, according to Jesus, is the most important commandment in all of Scripture.

Why was this commandment so important? And what does it have to do with absolute truth? This commandment was so important for the Israelites, first of all, because if they were actively loving God with all their heart and soul and strength, they would not be tempted in the least by the false religions of their neighbors. *If they had a vibrant relationship with God, their focus would be on loving him and pleasing him, and the various worldviews around them would have no allure.*

In the same way, the worldviews around us will have no allure, and this issue of absolute truth will not even be an issue for us, if we are actively loving God—if we are giving all of ourselves and all of our energies to loving him and pleasing him. When you know God, you know he is absolutely true and there is no other. A lot of these philosophical arguments about whether there is any overarching truth that applies to all become irrelevant, because we know the God who is over all. We will not doubt whether God is really God if we know him...

Consider for a moment a couple who has been married for 25 years. Many years ago this couple stopped actively engaging in a loving relationship. They are there for each other, and they are *near* each other. They are roommates, share in managing their finances, and are teammates in raising their children. But at some point they stopped actively loving one another with all their hearts. They stopped going out of their way to show one another how deeply they love each other, stopped finding new ways to thrill one another's heart.

We often feel blindsided when relationships like this end with the husband walking away, or are demolished by the wife's infidelity. Occasionally such events are truly a blindside, and one partner was fully invested while the other simply was not. But often such an end to a marriage would not surprise us if we knew the inner workings of that particular

marriage. If we had been able to see inside the relationship, we might have seen the slow, often imperceptible move of these partners away from one another.

If we are not actively loving each other as husband and wife, it is easy to forget what we love about each other. It is easy to begin to focus on the flaws of our spouse, since we all have flaws, and forget all the wonderful things about them that we take for granted.

Have you ever noticed this tendency in your own marriage, or in your relationships with other friends or loved ones?

If so, how have you tried to address this challenge? What do you think the best way to address it is?

This is an analogy for what often happens in our relationship with God. The man or woman fully invested in loving God and living for him has rarely been tempted to be unfaithful, and has rarely doubted that this God is the only God, powerful and loving and amazing. But as we become less invested in actively loving him, as we begin to take our relationship for granted, and as we stop striving to please him in everything we do because of our mutual love, it is much easier to begin the slow move away from God. It is much easier to begin to doubt whether God really is the only God, and whether the truth of his Word really is absolute and applicable to all.

**The Shema teaches us that the best way for us to remember that God is who he says he is, and that there is an absolutely true God who is over all, is to love that God with everything we have.** As we love him and experience his love for us, it becomes clear that this God must be the only God, because there could be no other like him. All our philosophizing *about* God is replaced by a love relationship *with* God. And in the midst of that fulfilling relationship we want to share this amazing love with those around us, whatever their current beliefs or worldview might be. We know that sharing the most fulfilling relationship we have known is not judgmental or arrogant, but in the words of the evangelist D.T. Niles, “*Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.*”

Do you think your questions about absolute truth or doubts about whether Jesus is the only way are sometimes made worse by the fact that you are not engaged in a loving relationship with Jesus? Why or why not?

What could you begin doing today to live out this greatest of all commandments? What could you do to actively love God with all your heart and soul and strength today?

→ Spend time expressing your love for God: thank him for all he has done, praise him for his goodness to you and patience with you, tell him in new ways why you are so grateful for a relationship with him.

→ Ask for help in not moving away from God but continuing to move toward him, and doing whatever it takes to continue actively loving him. Ask for forgiveness for when you have slowly walked away from a close relationship with him.

→ Ask for a passion to share this relationship with Christ you have with others, not in an arrogant way but because you know in your heart that our God is the only God.

#### Day 4

*“There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”* Ephesians 4:4-6

The words above are a beautiful, clear expression by the apostle Paul regarding the issue we have been studying this week. He was absolutely certain, based on his own relationship with God, that there was no other. He was completely sure that this God he knew, this Lord who had changed his life, was the only God, the Father of all. And, as we studied yesterday, we can be certain too, based on our own relationship with him.

But even this wonderful conviction that our God is the only God, and that the truths of Scripture apply to all, has been distorted into something evil throughout history. Perhaps the clearest example is that dark stain on the reputation of Christianity called the Crusades.

These were wars waged between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries by “Christian” Europe, and these wars were waged for different reasons and with different targets. Inevitably they were waged in the name of Christ, which is why they are such a despicable piece of history to Christians.

Let’s look at the historical background briefly. At this time there were two main empires that called themselves Christian, the Holy Roman Empire in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire in the east. The Holy Roman Empire was led religiously by the popes, and the popes were in continual power struggles with the Holy Roman Emperor, as each wanted control of this vast empire. In the east the Byzantine Emperor had control. These two empires had split religiously over minor issues, and there were very hard feelings between the two. However, in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century the Byzantine Emperor reached out for help to the pope, because the eastern empire was being attacked by Seljuk Turks from further east.

The Byzantine Empire did in fact fall to the Turks just prior to the first crusade, and the Turks then had control of the entire eastern empire. This fact scared the pope and the entire Holy Roman Empire of the West, because they feared the same fate would befall them. They did not want these Muslim Turks consolidating power and then taking over all of Europe; they wanted eastern Europe under Christian control. However, capitalizing on the spiritual fervor which had arisen separately in Europe around this time, the pope called for the first crusade to “recapture the Holy Lands” for Christ! Though the lands of Israel had been part of the Byzantine Empire that were conquered, in actuality this call for a crusade had nothing to do with the Holy Lands, nothing to do with Christianity, and certainly nothing to do with Christ. It was completely politically motivated, and the entire campaign preyed on the uneducated and the misinformed. The pope actually promised that those who died in battle would gain immediate forgiveness for all their sins and those who were victorious would gain glory for retaking these lands from the Turks.

During the next couple hundred years when the Crusades were happening, unspeakable atrocities were committed by these waves of uneducated, manipulated, misinformed crusaders. Muslims, Jews, and eastern Christians were “converted” through baptism by force, or massacred. And when the defeated Turks regrouped and began retaking cities, the pope simply called for another crusade, promising these young men and even children spiritual rewards for marching off as a “soldier of the Church.”

Can you see why this series of events has been a stain on the reputation and witness of the Church? What do you think is the proper response and posture for Christians to take when these events are recounted today?

These events, as we saw, were really politically motivated and had very little to do with faith in any sense. However, since they were committed in the name of Christ, they have done incredible damage to his reputation over the centuries. This is *absolute truth gone awry*. Because of a belief in the truth of what the popes said, these crusaders persecuted and killed innocent people. The popes abused their position of authority, which made people believe that what they said was true.

Here's the point: we must be on our guard against the truth that we believe becoming distorted and leading us into sin. We believe that God is the only God, and Jesus is the only way to salvation, and the Bible is true for all. But if these true beliefs become distorted and lead us into sin – if they lead us away from love and toward hate or oppression or persecution, then we are no longer following the truth. We must live out the truths we believe in a way that honors God, or we are actually forsaking the truth we claim to believe.

Are there ways you have bought into such distorted notions of absolute truth, namely that those who do not believe the truth are enemies to be conquered? What has your attitude been toward those of other religions, or those who refuse to believe in Christ?

The reason the Crusades are such a terrible part of history is that they were events done in the name of Christ, where those who called themselves Christians (including the pope) were involved in some of the most heinous acts imaginable. Even though the events occurred due to political motivations, they were committed in the name of religion; Christians massacred Muslims and Jews and proclaimed they were killing them in the name of Jesus. This is sad and disgusting.

We believe that our God is the only God and that he is over all, and we believe that the truths of Scripture are overarching truths that apply to all, but this does not mean that we adopt a position of superiority toward the world. It does not mean we sit back on our high

haunches and judge this person and that person, this religion and that religion, this nation and that nation because they do not accept what I know to be true. In fact, those who follow Christ must do the opposite! Jesus himself took a position of humility; when he could have sat on his throne and judged, when he could have wiped us all out because we were sinners, he instead stooped from his lofty position and became a man. And not only did he become a man, he humbled himself even further and went all the way to the cross, to the most degrading of human deaths, out of love. (See Philippians 2:5-11). If we follow this Christ, we must similarly humble ourselves. Our posture toward the world must not be one of superiority and arrogance, but one of humility and sacrifice and love.

This must be our attitude even toward those who malign the faith, who loudly proclaim Christianity to be a myth, who preach that there is no absolute truth and we all must find the truth that works for us. If we follow Jesus, we must not respond by shouting them down, by trying to shut them up, or by trying to more noisily proclaim what we believe. We must bear with them, show them love, and show them by the lives we lead that our God is indeed absolutely true and absolutely unique from anything else the world has to offer.

- Ask forgiveness for the times you have, like the crusaders, taken an improper stance toward those with different ideas or different beliefs.
- Ask for patience and the strength to love even those who might stand for everything contrary to what we believe.
- Pray for those who might be considered “enemies” of Christianity, realizing that we do not have any enemies, since we are called to love all. Pray for such people you know, who you come in contact with every day, and for those you have never met across the world.
- Thank God that he can use broken, incomplete men and women and boys and girls to speak his truth and show his love to the world.

## Day 5

Yesterday we focused on some negative directions a belief in absolute truth can take us. This doesn't mean that there is no absolute truth, but such events have contributed to our current state in many ways, a state where anyone who claims that what they believe applies to everyone is viewed as judgmental or narrow.

As globalization has made our world feel like a smaller place, and we have been able to learn about cultures that were totally closed to outsiders in years past, it has become more difficult for us to hold to the notion of absolute truth. As we have met and encountered people with very different viewpoints and religious beliefs, it has become difficult for us to say that our worldview and beliefs are right and theirs are wrong. Along with this, some Christians have handled the situation incorrectly and turned these developments into a fight to be won, further repulsing those who are not Christians.

All of this has led us to where we are today, when each of us is told by our culture to find the truth that works for you, *your truth*. But make sure that while you are finding your truth, you don't presume that your truth is the only truth. Your truth better not trample on someone's truth or your truth is oppressive.

How do we get through all this mumbo jumbo? Where do we even begin?

I think it's important for us to understand on some level the cultural developments that have led us to where we are. Our postmodern culture can be described as *anti-metanarrative*. That's a confusing term, but basically a metanarrative is a grand narrative, an overarching story. As Christians we believe in a metanarrative; God's grand narrative is told in the Scriptures, his story that ranges from the very dawn of creation to the end of time. This grand narrative is the story of which we are a part, and gives meaning to everything we are and everything we do.

Throughout history there have been different metanarratives that have held sway, but generally there has been agreement that there is an overarching story that explains who we are and where we came from. However, in our culture there has been a steady move away from metanarratives, primarily because postmodern philosophers see them as oppressive. If my grand narrative incorporates you into a story where you need to be saved by the God I worship, that is oppressive, they would say.

Since the notions of absolute truth and metanarrative have been assaulted in our culture because they are seen as oppressive (at least in part because there have been those who have indeed oppressed others in the name of Christ), we must respond not by giving up our claim that there is absolute truth but by conveying the truth about Christ in the most loving of ways. We must respond not by giving up our claim that we are a part of a grand

narrative with the God of the Universe at its center but by living as a part of that story in humble, non-coercive ways.

What are ways we can respond to this current cultural environment in loving, humble, non-threatening ways?

How can we, at CCC, respond to the unbelief or even ill will of our neighbors with grace?

We are in a tough spot as Christians today, for we live in a time when it seems the majority claim relative truth; even many who claim faith still would say that everyone is entitled to “their truth.” However, this must not change the conviction of our beliefs. We must not allow the cultural forces around us to change our understanding of the truth from Scripture.

The apostle Paul was actually in a situation not too different from the one in which we find ourselves in Acts 17. He was in Athens, and Athens in the 1<sup>st</sup> century was a hot bed for new ideas. New philosophies, new religious beliefs, and new gods were constantly being embraced here, and as he walked around the city we are told he was greatly distressed by what he saw. Here’s what happened:

*So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbling trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean.” (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)*

*Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in*

*every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.*

*“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’*

*“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”*

*When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.*

Acts 17:17-34

What stands out to you about this passage? What posture did Paul take toward the people of Athens as he shared the gospel?

This is a great example of confronting one’s culture with the truth, but in a way that does not alienate or anger or judge. Paul quoted their own poets, showing he was truly interacting with culture and not hiding from it. He encouraged them and gave them credit for their spiritual desire, even if that desire was misplaced. He told the truth, certainly not opting to preach relative truth or giving up on the overarching story of Scripture. But he told it in a respectful way, a way that made them interested to hear more.

This is our calling. We must not be dishonest, claiming that we accept all stories and worldviews as equally valid. We do not and cannot. There is one story, one God, and one truth. If Christianity is true, then other religions cannot also be true. They are at many points mutually exclusive, so to claim that all can co-exist is intellectually dishonest. Though it is more culturally acceptable simply to say “I’m okay and you’re okay”, we must continue in our conviction that there is absolute truth and a grand narrative of which we are a part.

At the same time, we must share the truth about Jesus with humility toward the culture and toward our neighbors. We must realize we do not have it all figured out, and admit that we do not. And we must have a deep compassion for those who have been hurt and have felt oppressed in our world. We must have a passion to share our loving, humble Savior with them in gentle, caring ways.

→ Spend time in prayer for your family members or friends who deny absolute truth and the story of Scripture. Ask God for a great compassion for them, and for the proper stance of humility and love toward them.

### Small Group Discussion

#### *Absolute Truth*

Name something you used to believe in that turned out not to be true.

How did it make you feel when you found out you had believed in a lie?

What does “absolute truth” mean to you? How does this compare to “relative truth”?

Absolute truth is basically something that is true for everyone—it is absolutely true in all times and places and for all people. It is truth that applies to all of us. Gravity would be an example of a concept that is accepted as absolutely true. It doesn’t matter who you are or

where you come from, gravity applies to you. You cannot defy gravity; it is not a respecter of persons and this principle applies equally to all.

How does our culture view absolute truth, especially as it relates to religious truth?

If you told an unbelieving friend or family member that the truth of the Bible is absolute and applies to their life, how do you think they would respond?

It seems that increasingly our culture is finding the notion of absolute truth offensive, doesn't it? It seems that the dominant view is that everyone is entitled to their *own* beliefs and should believe *whatever works for them* or whatever makes them happy. However, this seemingly generous viewpoint turns very hostile if I try to encourage you to believe the truth I believe.

Where do you think this fear of being told what is true comes from? Is this fear and even hostility legitimate? Why or why not?

How do you think Christians ought to respond to this situation? If we believe that the truth about who God is and who Jesus is applies to all, but the culture we are a part of denies that there even is absolute truth, how should we proceed?

Read Acts 17:16-34 out loud together.

How did Paul handle this cultural environment he found himself in while in Athens? What can his actions teach us about how to approach our culture regarding this issue of absolute truth?

When we look at Paul's life and at Jesus' life before him, we see the examples we must emulate. No matter what cultural environment we find ourselves in, we must never compromise on our convictions. We must never allow the thinking of others to influence

our conviction that God is the only God, that Christ is the way to salvation, and that the Bible is God's Word. At the same time, there is a way to approach those who do not understand this truth that is very different than the way the Church has approached them historically. The way of Christ is the way of humility, patience, understanding, and love. It is the way that seeks to hear before being heard, that seeks to be injured before it would injure, that seeks to lay down its own life. If we follow Christ, we must be willing to be slow to speak and quick to listen, we must approach the culture with humility instead of arrogance, and we must be willing to be injured and persecuted before we would injure even one for whom Christ died.

How do you feel you have been doing at this?

Has your desire for the truth to be known ever led you away from this way of Christ and toward a combative approach?

Spend some time praying for each other, that you would each learn to:

- hold fast to your convictions in the truth of Scripture, despite what is preached in our culture
- allow the truths about God to be real in your life as you love him and seek him and not merely theoretical
- not get caught up in rhetoric and a desire to be right, but simply have a passion to share the truth that you have found
- approach your neighbors, loved ones, and the culture at large with the humility of Christ

## Questions Week 4

We are in the fourth week of our series "Questions" where we've been wrestling with some of the big questions about God, faith, and life. It's our hope that this series will be

incredibly helpful no matter where you find yourself in your journey of faith. Because no matter who you are or how long (or short) you've been trying to follow God, you will have questions. Some of these questions, if not addressed honestly and fully, can lead us to unhealthy places.

This week we want to address a question that strikes at the very nature of God. It's a question that has gained more and more prominence in our culture and it's a something which can be a huge obstacle for many people both inside and outside the church. Perhaps the most direct and simply way of putting it is this: Is God a male chauvinist? What this question really gets down to is how does God view women?

For some people this question might seem ancillary to their faith, something which might be interesting to discuss but which, ultimately, doesn't really matter. For other people, this is a make or break question which defines whether or not they will take God and his claims seriously. After all, if God looks down on women as being inferior or somehow less worthy than men, then about half of the world's population are less than the other half. So, what does God think about women?

For many people who come face to face with this question, they gravitate toward two passages from the Bible which seem to take a very dim view of women, and specifically toward women's roles in church – that women should be silent in the churches.

*As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

*1 Corinthians 14:34-35*

*A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.*

*1 Timothy 2:11-12*

There two passages from the Bible seem to paint a very clear picture of God's view of women, especially as it relates to their role during a church service. People who wrestle with the chauvinist question tend to use these passages to either reinforce or undermine their view of God with relation to women. But that's like learning about marriage from the

Bible by using the passages about divorce. These statements about women remaining silent in church must be taken seriously and we'll look at them in their due time, but there's something else we should look at first.

The place where we should begin our discussion about God being a chauvinist is with a much broader view of women in the Bible. What we really need to get is a clear view of what women did in the Bible. If you were to make a chart listing all the roles and activities of women in the Bible, of all the things women did, you might be surprised at how long that list would become.

Think of some of the more obvious and familiar women from the Bible, women like Miriam, Deborah, Esther, Priscilla, Junia, and Phoebe. This of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the influence she had on Jesus and James and the early church. Many more names could be invoked, all to answer the question what did women do in the Bible.

What did these women in the Bible do? They prophesized, they taught, they were apostles, they were local church mentors. What we can safely say is, at a minimum, what we see women in the Bible doing is enough to grant that there were exceptions to the impression women are inferior. I hope to go beyond that word "exception" in the pages that follow, but for now it is a place to begin. Some people take the passages we read before about women being silent in church as the end of the conversation about how God views women, but are we letting these two passages override what we see women doing in the Bible? Whatever Paul, the author of those two passages meant, he did not mean that what we see women in the Bible doing are no longer obsolete. If our goal is to be biblical, to follow and understand and do what the Bible teaches, then we must answer the question what did women do in the Bible?

Let's begin at the beginning. What we see at the very beginning of the Bible is that God created male and female in his image as mutuals, made for each other, and they were at one with each other. Yet, when sin entered the picture, what we see is this oneness and mutuality became a rivalry for power. We read after sin entered the world in Genesis 3:16 "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." The entrance of sin in the world, often known as the fall, caused both men and women to seek dominance over the other. The first thing to note is that God's desire for people was love, oneness and mutuality, not the dominance and power struggle we often see in our world, church, and lives. The story of the Bible is actually a story of God's redemption in Jesus of the world

and people as new creations. If there is any place where this mutuality should be restored it is among Christians and in the church, where we are called to live as God dreams for us.

Let's move to look briefly at three women from the Old Testament to begin answering the question what did women do in the Bible. The fact that these three names are not household names is part of the concern. If we are to be biblical in our understanding of God's view of women, it's possible we aren't taking into consideration the concrete examples we have in the Bible. These three women are Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah.

Miriam, sister to Moses and Aaron, was a spiritual leader of the people of Israel. We see Miriam leading the Israelites into worship (Exodus 15:21). Miriam was the one who fetched Moses from the Nile River when he would have otherwise been left for dead. As Moses' older sister, she is in a unique position, one which we see in an interesting story from the book of Numbers. Miriam is becoming jealous of Moses' increasing authority. She says to Moses, "Hasn't he [God] also spoken through us?" The answer is an implied yes, he has, which is the only reason she has a case to make against Moses feeling superior to her. God tell her that God speaks through prophets through dreams and visions, but God speaks with Moses face to face. Again, what this implies is clear. Miriam was a prophet.

While we certainly shouldn't condone Miriam's actions, it is again the fallen nature seeking dominance over others, but what we see is that Miriam was in a position and had enough authority to think she, even she, could call Moses into question. Her sin was envy, not being a woman, and her sin was no different than we see with other Old Testament leaders.

Deborah is a fascinating character in the Bible. If you've never read her story, take some time to read Judges 4-5. What we see is she akin to being the president, the pope, and Rambo all rolled into one. Like Miriam, Deborah was a prophet. "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time" (Judges 4:4). The word leading is the word that means judge of Israel. This term combines the idea of national leadership, judicial decisions, and political and military power. What did Deborah do? She spoke for God as a prophet, she exercised leadership over all of Israel, and she was a military commander who led Israel's armies to victory in battle. And don't be fooled into thinking her takes were secular, she was a spiritual leader of the entire people of God.

All of Judges 5 is called the "song of Deborah" and it gives us a tremendous amount of insight into how God was working through her. The people of Israel began to drift away

from God, until Deborah “a mother in Israel” arose and stirred the nation into action and raised an army. The people begin to cry out to Deborah, that she might give them God’s word through song and lead them. As Israel stands in battle against Canaan, God uses Deborah to lead his people to victory. And the land, the Bible tells us, had forty years of peace under Deborah. Deborah’s courage is undeniable. Her zeal for God is obvious. Her capability to call people to battle and to inspire people to follow God is clear.

Which leads us to Huldah. During the reign of King Josiah, the long-lost Torah was found in the temple. He has the Torah read to him and he falls apart in repentance, realizing how far the nation had wandered from God’s call and how much they had failed to live according to God’s will. But what should he do? To which of God’s prophets should he consult and discuss what his next steps should be? He has options. He could consult with Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, or Huldah. The first four have books in the Bible as prophets of God. But the king chooses the female prophet, Huldah, above the rest. She was not chosen because no men were available, but because she was truly exceptional among the prophets.

She affirms that the scroll the king found was God’s Torah. She also, without fear, tells the king how God’s wrath was against the disobedience of the nation, but that God was pleased with the king’s willingness to humble himself before God. All of this is found in 2 Kings 22.

But maybe you’re thinking, what about women in the New Testament. After all, that was then, this is now. What we see is that women in the New Testament pick up where women from the Old Testament leave off with new responsibilities.

Let’s look at four women in the New Testament, some of which you may have never heard of before: Mary, Junia, Priscilla, and Phoebe. These women will give us a picture of what women did in the Bible.

Let’s begin with Mary. Mary was the mother of Jesus, the mother of the Messiah, which is no small thing on a resume. She was given the role of helping Jesus, and his brother James, to grow and mature. While I don’t think Mary was the only influence on Jesus’ life, surely there was many, she did clearly have an effect on him. We can see this even more clearly in the life of James. Read Mary’s Spirit-prompted Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and compare

what you find to the opening words in the letter from James (James 1:9-11). Mary clearly had an effect on her son.

One more point about Mary which we need to understand is, where do you think Luke got the material to write the first two chapters of his book about Jesus? There were only a few possible sources. The only person who knew the whole story, including Gabriel, the angel, coming to visit was Mary. Whether Luke got this material directly from Mary (which is highly possible) or from other's Mary told her story to, the only reason we have the first two chapters of Luke's account of Jesus' life is because of Mary. What did Mary do? She influenced her sons Jesus and James and provided information to Luke of how to begin his account of Jesus' life.

Do you know who Junia is? Paul writes "*Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was*" (Romans 16:7). Think about what these words mean. Junia is called outstanding among the apostles. Junia was an outstanding (woman) apostle, though, to be sure, being a woman had nothing to do with it, it was about her intelligence, her calling, and her giftedness.

Unfortunately, some people didn't like the idea of a woman being an apostle, and so when they copied the Bible they changed Junia (a female name) to Junias (a male name). But exhaustive research makes it clear the original writing is of Junia, a woman.

Junia was a leader and outstanding among those who were most looked up to and honored in the church. Read what John Chrysostom, a preacher from the late 300's, has to say about this passage.

"To be an apostle is something great. But to be outstanding among the apostles – just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worth of the title apostle."

So what did Junia do as an apostle? She would have been a traveling missionary, and she would have had large roles in evangelizing, teaching, preaching, and establishing and leading churches.

We know more about Priscilla than we do about Junia. She was from Rome but was kicked out when Claudius ordered all the Jews to evacuate. They became friends with Paul and they began to make tents together (Acts 18:3). This led to them traveling with Paul to Ephesus, where Priscilla and her husband Aquila “explained to [Apollos] the way of God more adequately” (Acts 18:26). A couple of details to notice. Priscilla’s name is almost always listed first, before her husbands. This is very unusual in the ancient world, leading many to believe she was the leading figure. Second, she knew her Bible and theology well enough to explain the gospel to Apollos, a leading figure of the early church. Just a few verses later, she is able to refute the claims of some Jews by opening up the Scriptures to them. Maybe this is why Paul also calls Priscilla and Aquila “co-workers” in Romans 16:3. It is clear that Priscilla is a theological teacher who preached the gospel and worked pastorally with leaders of the early church.

Finally, we encounter Phoebe in the book of Romans. Paul writes of her:

*I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.*

*Romans 16:1-2*

Phoebe was a deacon, which is the same word used in the Bible, whether the person is a man or woman, for a leader in the church. Deacons are often connected to the ministry and service of the Bible in Paul’s letters (see 1 Corinthians 3:5-9). Her tasks may have included visiting the sick, giving relief to the poor, and financial oversight. At some level Phoebe was a minister and also a significant one, since Paul asks that they receive her, something akin to rolling out the red carpet. It is possible, as some believe, that Phoebe was a courier of Paul’s letter to the Romans, which is why he wants her to be received so openly. Since the courier had the responsibility of explaining the letter they bore, and to answer any questions about the letter, Paul wanted people to know who bore the letter for him.

So what did women do in the Bible? They spoke for God. They led the nation of Israel in every department. They guided the nation of Israel back to the path of righteousness. They spoke prophetic words on behalf of God. They influenced the creation of the Bible. They were involved in missionary work. They were teachers of the Bible. They were church planters. They were benefactors. They were leaders.

So what about those two versus we read at the beginning of this guide? We need to remember to read them within the story of the Bible. For example, read all of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and list out all the commands given. You'll find seven: (1) Men should pray with their hands lifted up, (2) Men should pray without anger or disputing, (3) Women should dress modestly, (4) Women should not have elaborate hairstyles or wear gold or pearls or expensive clothing, (5) Women should have good deeds, (6) Women should be silent and quiet, and (7) Women should not teach or have authority. The question becomes, why do put so much weight on some of these and not others? Is it possible we've taken something which was specific to a single church and a single community and made it apply to everyone, especially since we see examples of women who do teach and who weren't silent? Remember, the Bible was written into a specific context. It was believed that the restriction on wearing gold and expensive clothing was a way for prostitutes to advertise themselves in the ancient world, something which would clearly be inappropriate for a church service. But does that mean women should not wear gold now?

I think not.

The truth is this; God is not a male chauvinist. He is not interested in having women placed below men. He is not interested in limiting how women can serve him. God does not limit how he gifts and equips women. We know this because of the way he gifted, equipped, and used women in the Bible to accomplish his ends and goals. The same is true today. If we want to understand God as he is revealed in the Bible, we have to come to conclusion that he does not view women as inferior to men at all, but as mutual partners in his work.

## Small Group Guide

### Week 4

1. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "chauvinist?"
2. Who are some famous male chauvinists?

3. To what degree or in what situations have you come face to face with the question of whether or not God is a male chauvinist?

Many people draw conclusions about God's attitude toward women because of the two passages: 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12

4. What is your reaction to these passages?
5. In what ways do they seem to imply God is a chauvinist?

Throughout the reading for this week we looked at examples of women from the Bible, namely the stories of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Mary, Junia, Pricilla, and Phoebe.

6. Of these stories, which were you familiar with and which were unfamiliar to you? Why do you think this was the case?
7. What is your reaction to the impact these women have in the Bible?
8. What conclusions, if any, can we draw by learning about these women?
9. Taking everything into consideration, do you think God is a chauvinist? Why or why not? How would you explain yourself to someone who disagreed with you?

Questions  
Week 5

*How to use this guide:*

*This weekly devotional guide is intended to help further our thoughts on the topic of the Sunday morning message. There are questions throughout the reading that can also be used in a small group setting or for discussion.*

We are in the fifth week of a series called Questions, where we've been trying to honestly and openly address some of the big questions about faith, God, and life. Last week we began a discussion to address the questions "Is God is a male chauvinist?" We looked at some specific examples of women in both the Old and New Testament who emphasized how God chose to utilize the giftedness and skill of women to future his kingdom and to bring glory to himself. We also saw the way God used women to found his church and to lead people back to him through Jesus Christ.

If you didn't get a chance to listen to last weeks message or to read last weeks devotional guide, I'd encourage you to do so, as we will be building upon that material for this week.

**[Q] What was your reaction to the message and devotional guide from last week? To what degree do you wrestle with the question of whether or not God is a male chauvinist?**

We are going to continue our discussion we started last week by taking a closer look at some of the most difficult passages from the Bible, passage which seem to imply that the church is to treat women significantly differently than men.

All of the passages we'll be looking at today come from the New Testament portion of the Bible. The New Testament contains several different types of books, and we will mostly be looking at book which at in fact letters written to young churches in the first century written by a man named Paul. Paul's main goal with these letters is to help brand new Christians understand what it means to follow Jesus, including some specifics on what behaviors is acceptable and which is not.

Two such passages from the Bible are particularly troublesome, as they seem to say that women should never be placed in a position of authority over men and that they should remain silent during a church services. If this were indeed the case, it would be easier to see

where some people have made the claim that the church is chauvinistic. If they are not true, then how do we reconcile what appears to be fairly straightforward commands found in the Bible.

We read in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35:

*Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

**[Q] What is your first, gut-level reaction to this passage?**

Knowing what we looked at for last week and that women had a significant role in the early church, this instruction by Paul seems surprising. After all, Paul wrote in this same letter of 1 Corinthians instructions on women prophesying in the church. One can't prophesy or pray in public and remain completely silent; prophesying, by definition, means speaking in public. We read in 1 Corinthians 11:5 that all women who pray and prophesy with their head uncovered dishonors her head. We also know from the book of Acts, a record of the early church, that women had and exercised the gift of prophecy in the church.

So, what do we do with this surprising instruction from women to remain silent? If Paul gave instructions for women to prophesy in public and we know the early church had women prophesying and praying in public, how can Paul suddenly say women should remain silent? Is he contradicting himself? Is this an example of Paul being inconsistent with his teaching?

Many people believe Paul's instruction for women to remain silent is a special kind of silence. Paul isn't silencing all women in all situations, which would be contradictory to his own teaching and the examples of women in the New Testament. Paul himself gives clues to what this special silence might be about in the passage we read before.

The silence Paul is instructing toward women in church services is with regard to asking questions. Remember, Paul wrote, "If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak [to inquire about something they don't yet understand] in the church."

Why would Paul place this restriction against asking questions? The best answer is that women were not as theologically or biblically educated as men and so when they heard what was being taught, they had questions. Paul thinks these sorts of questions should best be dealt with elsewhere, probably because it interrupted the church service. The implications of Paul's instruction of silencing women become clear. This is a temporary silencing which is dependant on women's understanding of what is being taught and women's questions. Once a woman has been educated to the same level as men, they would then be able to speak in an assembly of Christians.

**[Q] Why do you think a restriction on asking questions during a church service might be needed?**

Notice as well that this passage places the responsibility of educating women on Christian men and leaders. This would have been a very progressive instruction in the ancient world.

What Paul is really advocating in this passage about silencing women is that there needed to be learning before speaking. This is something which still hold very true for today, people who are still in the very beginning phase of learning about God and Jesus should not interrupt a church service with their questions. If they have questions, those should be dealt with in private where they can be thoroughly addressed. We must also pay special attention to the fact that women today are not uneducated. Actually, some women know significantly more than male pastors!

In the end, what this passage is stressing is not women being silent, but the need for education. Knowing the Bible and theology is a basic need for those speaking during a church gathering. Once those basic criteria are met, anyone with gifts should be encouraged to use them to build up the church and the body of believers.

**[Q] What do you think this passage might mean for us today?**

A second passage which creates difficulty because of it's instruction toward women is found in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 where we read:

*I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.*

*A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.*

**[Q] Again, what is your first reaction to reading this passage?**

This is a very challenging passage, not just because of what it seems to be saying with regard to women speaking or having authority over men, but also because of some of the cryptic and just plain odd things in it.

It is worth taking a moment to look at the historical significance of this passage to the church, including its use in shaping how the church has understood the role of women in church. This passage has been used innumerable times to restrict the role of public teaching or preaching to men alone. Since this passage has such an enormous impact, it's worth taking a closer look. Let's look at a brief sketch of what's taking place in this passage.

The first thing we notice is Paul expects the women to whom he is speaking to dress modestly, and by that he means they are not to dress elaborately or seductively but are to instead focus their attention on living lives filled with good deeds. What we need to understand this passage is some context of what is happening in the ancient world when Paul penned this letter.

**[Q] Why is it important to understand the context of the Bible while reading a particular passage?**

Paul is concerned with the influence of “the new Roman women” who threatened the reputation of the church. We must understand that when Paul wrote this letter there was a gender and sexual revolution happening in many of the major cities of the Roman Empire, often called “the new Roman woman.” There are three features of the new Roman woman worth noting for the purposes of our discussion.

First, the new Roman woman was expressing her newfound freedom in immodest, sexually provocative, and extravagant dress. You can imagine what this might entail when you keep in mind that Rome was not very conservative to begin with. Yet, these women were

flouting even the limits of the Romans. Second, the new Roman woman was noted for snatching the podium for public addresses and teaching. Third, there was a rise in the Artemis religious fertility cult. People who belonged to this cult would surround their worship with eunuch (castrated men) priests. Part of their worship was to eliminate normal sexual relations, including marriage, childbearing, and childrearing. This extended to public practices of abortion and contraception.

Paul had deep concerns about how the new Roman woman might jeopardize the holiness of the Christian church and how it might affect its mission. There were people who said Christianity was nothing more than a fertility cult, akin to the Artemis cults, and Paul needs to be sure people are learning and hearing the right sort of things during church services.

**[Q] What are ways you could envision the practices and teaching of “the new Roman woman” being disruptive and destructive to the early church?**

What you'll notice throughout the rest of 1 Timothy is Paul is concerned with the dangers of false teachers and with a need for orthodox teaching. Notice what Paul write about sensuality among younger widows (1 Timothy 5:11-12), about busybody teachers who go from house to house speaking nonsense (1 Timothy 5:13), and with the virtue of marriage (1 Timothy 5:14). When you set these passages in the context of the new Roman woman, it sheds a new light on what is taking place.

In 1 Timothy 2:11-12, Paul writes that women should learn in humbleness, submission, and being quiet, and they shouldn't exercise authority over men. What Paul is saying is that women should learning from those who know, and only then does he say they are not to teach or exercise authority. Learning women, and this now sounds very similar to 1 Corinthians 14, are to “be quiet.” This doesn't mean women should always assume a posture of learning and never be teachers. What Paul is saying is not for women to always remain silent, but to learn before they teach.

Paul them relates the situation between men and women to the relationship between Adam and Eve. Adam was formed first and Eve was deceived first, Paul writes. This is a puzzling passage, to be sure, and it is worth being honest enough to say so. It is possible that Paul here is also responding to the claims of the new Roman woman, who could have been

claiming a gender reversal where women subordinated men and that women were created first. But the meaning of this portion of the passage is unclear.

Finally, in one of the most odd passages in the entire Bible, Paul states that women will be saved through childbearing. Some people think it is possible Paul is referring to the fact that Jesus was born of a woman, and that it was through childbearing that salvation came for us all. Other think this was a response to the new Roman woman's avoidance of marriage and the growing attraction on the part of the new Roman woman to terminate their pregnancies. Paul wants women to know that being wives and mothers are worth vocations. Again, the meaning of this passage is not entirely clear.

**[Q] Why is it important to admit when a passage in the Bible is unclear? What are our other options if we will not admit it is unclear or that the meaning is uncertain?**

Let me sum all this up. Paul is responding to a new social group often known as the new Roman women who were advancing counter-Christian ideas. Paul was deeply concerned with the reputation of the gospel and mission of the church. Paul feared that Christian women might be associated with this offensive side of behaviors now being seen in women throughout Rome. And so, Paul turns to the women in Ephesus, in particular to a group of young widows, and urges them to live lives of holiness and to learn before they start teaching.

I think we must conclude that when Paul instructs women to be silent he is not addressing all women but a specific group of women. Paul is concerned with untrained, morally loose, young widows who, because they are theologically untrained, are teaching destructive ideas. Paul doesn't say they shouldn't teach, but that everyone, men and women, need to learn before teaching.

**[Q] Why was learning before teaching so vital to the early church? How is it still vital today? What does this mean for us?**

Always keep in mind when reading the Bible that context is everything. A little information about the ancient world and a glance at 1 Timothy 5 is all we need to get a much better view of what Paul is truly address with 1 Timothy 2. While I'm not naïve enough to think I've resolved all the issues of questions surrounding these two very challenging passages, I hope you feel much more equipped to wrestle with them yourself

and to thoughtfully engage with the question of what did Paul truly intend to say when he penned these two passages.

Questions  
Week 6  
Day 1

*Read: Ecclesiastes 4:11-12*

We are in the last week of the series “Questions” where we’ve been trying to engage with difficult questions that often come up in our lives. All throughout this series we’ve been encouraging everyone to write down his or her own questions for us to address. This daily reading guide will be looking at one question that arose over and over again which is: “Why do I need the church as long as I love God?”

There is a statement you sometimes hear where people love God and love Jesus but really don’t want anything to do with the church or “organized religion.” What this person often means is that they like the idea of something spiritual and bigger than themselves, but they have no interest in any “human institutions.”

This thought has become popularized within our culture by the level to which we live individualized lives. We are now completely able to live our lives without ever leaving our houses. We can have food delivered, we can download movies to watch, we can pay all our bills online, we can text message our friends, and we can buy new clothes (most likely in a larger size if we never leave the house), all from the comfort of our couch.

What this means for us is that we are capable of living our lives in complete isolation and we can become convinced not only is this acceptable, its preferable. After all, why do we need other people? Other people complicate things. Other people can be annoying. Other people can hurt us or betray us or disappoint us. Who needs the hassle?

Well, for one thing, the Bible says *we* do. The Bible says we need the hassle of other people in our lives. There is no mistaking God knows how annoying and difficult human relationships can be. There is no doubt God knows how painful they can become. Yet, what is affirmed over and over again is that we need to gather together with others. We'll be taking time this week to look more closely at what the Bible has to say about going to church versus simply believing all on our own.

**Have you ever wrestled with the question mentioned above? Do you know anyone who is currently wrestling with it?**

## Questions Week 6 Day 2

*Read: Hebrews 10:19-25*

So what does the Bible have to say about going to church? If I believe in God, read the Bible, and pray, what difference does it make if I go to church?

The Bible addresses this very thing in a book called Hebrews. Hebrews is a letter written to Jewish Christians, that is, people who were Jewish but who came to accept Jesus as their Savior and Lord. While there are parts of this letter that can be confusing or difficult for modern readers, there are other parts that are crystal clear.

In Chapter 10, we begin to see what our faith should look like. Starting with verse 19, the author describes how we are set free by the blood of Jesus, who was given up as a sacrifice for us, and that because of this sacrifice we now have access to God. So what should our reaction be to this wonderful news?

We should draw near to God with confidence and with pure hearts, since the curtain separating us from God has been torn down. We should also hold onto the hope we profess with all of our strength, because we know that our hope is in God and God is faithful. This all sounds pretty good and exactly like we'd expect.

Now let's slow down and look closely at verse 24 and 25 which reads:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

So how should we react to the loving gift of God that set us free? We should think about, ponder, and come up with ways to help each other become more loving. We should look for ways to help each other do good deeds.

And we should also continue to meet together. We should not give up gathering together, but we should come together and encourage each other because there is a day coming when Jesus will return and time will end. Since this day is closer now than it was yesterday (and will be even closer still tomorrow), we should live with an sense of urgency to help each other.

The Bible tells us not to give up meeting together. Don't give it up. Some people have fallen into the habit of not gathering together with others, but don't let that be your story, the Bible tells us.

Perhaps the reason some people have given up meeting together (both today and back when this letter was written) is because they don't feel any urgency. Hebrews says that we should feel the need to meet together all the more because we never know when Jesus will return. How much urgency do you feel?

Perhaps people give up going to church because they have the wrong mindset about church. Church should be inspirational and enjoyable, but what we see in the Bible is that church is also not just a spectator sport. We are called to gather together not only to be encouraged ourselves but also to encourage and build up others.

Whatever the reason, it's clear that the Bible teaches we should never give up gathering together.

**What is your reaction to the idea that we should not give up meeting together? Have you ever given up church or been tempted to do so? What is your urgency? What is your mindset toward church?**

**Questions**  
**Week 6**  
**Day 3**

*Read: John 13:34-35, Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:11*

There is one phrase that comes up over and over again in the Bible. It's a short phrase, so it's easy to miss, to skim right over, but we must not. And it's a phrase that makes it clear that the Christian life cannot be lived fully in isolation.

The phrase is: "one another."

Over and over again, we are commanded to do something with or for "one another." We are told to love one another. We are told to pray for one another. We are told to devote ourselves to each other, to honor each other, and to be humble to one another. We are told to be kind to one another, to submit to one another, and to forgive one another. We are told to encourage one another, to spur one another on, and to show compassion to one another.

If you wish to serve, honor, and show your love for God, you cannot do it alone. Over and over again, God makes it clear that the only way to fully live out the Christian life is within a community of believers.

Some people want God and not the church. Some people want to worship God alone, without the intrusion of other people. Some people want to follow God in isolation. The

Bible makes it clear that this is not possible and even if it was, it is not preferable. There are times when being alone is a benefit to our faith. But over the course of our lives, our faith is played out most completely within the midst of relationships.

**To what degree do you think the Christian life can be done alone? To what degree do you try to live as a Christian alone?**

**Questions**  
**Week 6**  
**Day 4**

*Read: Matthew 16:18, Matthew 28:16-20*

I understand that the church has wounded some people reading this. Whether it was through some purposeful act or through neglect, many people have scars from the church. I could not be more sorry about this.

The church is a collection of imperfect people who sometimes say, do, and condone terrible things. I wish it wasn't true, but it is. And if you've been wounded by the church, I want you to know how sorry I am.

But I really hope, whatever your experiences with the church might be, that you don't give up on it. Sometimes people have a bad experience with church and use that experience as a way of validating or supporting their negative feelings toward the church. "You see," someone might say, "it's just like I thought it would be."

Imagine if we did this in other areas of our lives. Imagine if you had a bad doctor's appointment, so you stopped believing in modern medicine and going to the doctors. Or imagine that school didn't begin the way you had hoped, and so you wrote off the educational system and dropped out of school.

It wouldn't make much sense. We don't seek out or enjoy these bad experiences, but we are able to evaluate these experiences apart from the whole. But that's what we sometimes do with church. If we have a specific bad experience with the church, we write off the entirety of the church. I hope that's not our story. No church is perfect (not even CCC, though we do our best to the best we can). But it's most often through the community of faith that we are able to draw nearest to God and to see him working in us and in our world.

And remember, the church was Jesus' plan to reach a hurting world that needs God. The church was not a human invention, but is God's plan to help people drawn near to him.

Have you or someone you know even been “wounded” by a church? How do we sometimes treat the church differently than any other area of our life in this regard?

## Questions Week 6 Day 5

*Read: John 14:6, John 18:38*

One final thought as the “Questions” series comes to a close. I hope this series has been a great opportunity for you to engage with some of the difficult questions of faith. Yet, for some people these sorts of questions are very threatening.

This shouldn't be the case for us. Questions, even hard questions, are not the enemy.

I hope that we all become the sort of people who are always seeking out the truth. Because in the end, we are told that the truth isn't an idea or an answer, but the person of Jesus.

During his life, Jesus was asked the question, “What is truth?” But in the end, it wasn't a real question, just a rhetorical one to prove a point. The irony is that all the while Jesus is standing right in front of him. Jesus the Truth.

I hope we live out a different story. I hope our questions are real, genuine questions, not flippant or rhetorical ones. I hope our questions are honest and heartfelt. And I hope we allow our questions to lead us to the truth. I hope our questions lead us to the Truth, to Jesus.

**What is something that you've learned or an area in which you've grown throughout this "Questions" series?**

**Questions  
Week 6  
Small Group Guide**

1. Name a time when you had a bad experience with a doctor or a teacher.
2. In general, how would you describe your experience with the church (positive, negative, indifferent) and why?

Read: *John 13:34-35, Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:19-25*

3. What is your reaction to the idea that we should not give up meeting together?
4. Have you ever given up church, or been tempted to do so? Why?
5. To what degree do you think the Christian life can be lived alone?
6. To what degree do you live out your life alone?
7. What is one thing you've learned or one area in which you've grown throughout the "Questions" series?

