
THE FAITH — GIVEN ONCE, FOR ALL

Christianity fails today because it isn't being explained. It isn't being explained because people don't know what they believe. They don't why they believe it and they don't why it matters.

Charles Colson

The past not only shapes the present; it can also show us the future. We can see much further ahead by standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. This discussion guide is dedicated to upholding *the faith* that was “once for all entrusted to the saints”—those essentials that all true Christians have always believed, and what C. S. Lewis called “mere Christianity.” It’s our deep conviction that this faith is what Christians need to live out and defend in the midst of the extraordinary challenges of our time.

Before You Begin

This session is planned for 50 minutes, including two DVD segments and 12 discussion questions (some of which also include follow-up questions). If time is a constraint, feel free to select only those questions most pertinent to your group discussion.

The Scripture and synopsis preceding each question or questions are designed to provide a short summary of the content covered in this session. While it is not necessary to read this material during your actual group meeting, you and your group members will be better prepared to take your discussions to a deeper level if you are able to read and meditate on these reflection sections in advance.

Also, if possible, read the prologue and chapters 1–4 of the book, *The Faith*, prior to the session. These corresponding chapters provide a more in-depth explanation of the concepts addressed in this session’s DVD segments, the reflection sections, and the group discussion questions that follow.

DVD Teaching Segment (20 minutes)

Use the space provided below to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

DVD Group Discussion (25 minutes)**Everywhere, Always, by All**

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James, to those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ: Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance. Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

Jude 1–3

Most professing Christians don't know what they believe, and so can neither understand nor defend the Christian faith—much less live it. Many of the things we tell nonbelievers do not represent real Christianity. And most nonbelievers draw their impressions of the Christian faith from the stereotypes and caricatures that popular culture produces. The challenge of anti-theism and radical Islam could not come at a worst time for the Church, because most Christians do not understand what they believe, why they believe it, and why it matters.

In what ways is Christianity misunderstood by the non-Christian world and why is this a problem for the Church? How is our culture's definition of Christianity a poor representation of orthodox Christian beliefs?

Orthodoxy

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Hebrews 2:1–4

It may seem odd to rely on the ancient roots of Christianity at a time when progress is so exalted. But progress does not always mean discovering something new. Sometimes it means rediscovering wisdom that is ancient and eternal. We all find our identity in our roots. Visit nearly any family and you'll see pictures of grandparents and earlier generations. People go to great lengths to trace their ancestry. Adopted children seek their birth parents. Where we come from tells us who we are, and so it is in the Church.

We call the core beliefs that have united Christians through the ages *orthodoxy*, or “right belief.” Understanding this faith, once entrusted for all, is critically important today, for we live in a time when Christians and the beliefs they uphold are under assault.

If we are to face today's grave threats to the Christian Church, we must look across the sweep of Christian communions, Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox, to find the original consensus of the early Church; that is, those

essential elements of our faith that, from the beginning, all true Christians have believed.

2 What is meant by “Christian orthodoxy”? Why is it absolutely essential for Christians to understand our biblical and historical roots?

Competing Worldviews

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Ephesians 4:17–18

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Colossians 2:6–8

Everybody has a worldview . . . some basic premises that you think about life and you say, “Ah, that informs what I do and how I see things.” Christians must see that the faith is more than a religion or even a relationship with Jesus; the faith is a complete view of the world and humankind’s place

in it. Christianity is a worldview that speaks to every area of life, and its foundational doctrines define its content. If we don’t know what we believe — even what Christianity is — how can we live it and defend it? Our ignorance is crippling us.

3 Do you agree that we all, Christians or not, go through life with a worldview that informs everything we think, say, and do? Why or why not?

4 In what ways is Christianity — and the Western civilization it helped build — under assault by the aggressive anti-Christian worldviews of secularism (anti-theism) and radical Islam? Does this matter? Why or why not?

God Is

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

Psalm 19:1–3

One of the Christian faith's most persuasive contemporary critics is Sam Harris, who articulates the powerful doubts that we all recognize in our moments of soul searching. In his book *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he wondered what God was doing when hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and how sad it was that people there died praying to an "imaginary friend."

My thoughts have been as dark at times. During one of those times I was at a friend's home in western North Carolina. One morning I got up early and was greeted by the magnificent sight of the Blue Ridge Mountains rising out of the mist, the sun throwing the shadows of the lower peaks against the higher summits, the foliage glistening with dew. There was no explanation for what I was seeing—the intricate details of nature, genuine beauty—apart from a creator God. This could not be an illusion, an accident, or the result of some random process. While the other planets are sterile and lifeless, this one throbs with life and beauty. *God is*. I knew God exists at a deeper level than I had ever known anything in my life before. His existence didn't depend on my feelings, either. I might feel desperate, weary of praying, ready to throw in the towel, but God still is. There is no other explanation for reality. What I saw, I realized, was the answer to what I had thought were unanswered prayers.

5 Do you agree that our view of Christianity must move beyond a very individualized, personal relationship that is "between me and God," to the realization that "God is" no matter the circumstances? Why or why not? What dangers lurk behind a belief system that rests primarily on personal experience or feelings?

God Has Spoken

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16–17

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

2 Peter 1:20–21

Simply put, the Bible is the rock on which the Church stands or falls. It is the ultimate authority for all Christians—Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike. It is revealed propositional truth. The texts were written by men under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and thus are revealed to us. It is propositional because it makes a series of claims. It is truth because it is from God, and thus must certainly be true; God could not have spoken something that is not true because that would be contrary to His nature. This is why all true Christians take the Bible as their ultimate authority—and why no Christian should ever be hesitant to defend it.

6 How important to one's faith is one's attitude toward God's Word? What hinders Christians from learning, applying, and defending the doctrines and truths found in the Scriptures?

Absolute Truth

“You are a king, then!” said Pilate. Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

John 18:37

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

John 14:6–7

The question of truth—of a common and knowable reality that exists independently of our perception—is the great fault line of Western culture today. The dominant point of view dismisses the idea. The fastest way to provoke scorn from most university professors is to use the words *reality*, *truth*, and most of all *absolute truth*. Why does this view of truth breed such animosity? Because rebellious human nature resists truth’s claims. If something is really true, it must be true not just for the person saying it but for the person hearing it. And the fact is, we don’t want to obey a higher authority from any quarter—especially what purports to be from God—for fear it will impinge upon our personal autonomy. We cling to the idea that we create our own truth.

7 In what ways does our postmodern culture deny objective truth? Fifty-four percent of evangelical Christians believe there’s no such thing as *absolute truth*. What do you say? Give reasons for your response.

8 Is it logically consistent to believe in the revealed Jesus of Scripture and the absolute claims he makes, and at the same time deny that absolute truth exists? Why or why not?

Truth vs. Tolerance

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:1–4

What Jesus teaches is that reality is not what we subjectively make of it, or what our culture may believe. There is objective truth, and we are able to apprehend it with our senses. We are not a dream in the mind of God, an illusion, as Eastern religions and some New Age philosophies teach.

What’s really at issue here is a dramatic shift in the prevailing belief of Western cultural elites; we have come into a postmodern era that rejects the idea of truth itself. If there is no such thing as truth, then Christianity’s claims are inherently offensive and even bigoted against others. Tolerance, falsely defined as putting all propositions on an equal footing—as opposed to giving all ideas an equal hearing—has replaced truth.

9 How has a false definition of “tolerance” replaced a desire for “truth” in Western culture? How is this loss of truth offensive to God?

10 How is the postmodern world’s pressure toward “political correctness” and “tolerance” silencing Christians and Christianity today? Share an occasion when you feared being seen as bigoted or offensive by others because of your biblical beliefs.

Deeds ... Not Creeds?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:1–3

This distaste for doctrine has led some postmodern Christians to adopt the mantra, “We want deeds not creeds.” But wait a minute. For over thirty years, the movement known as Prison Fellowship has been taking the Gospel into the prisons, demonstrating the transforming power of Christ to turn the most reviled sinners into saints. No one would argue that these have not been worthwhile deeds. But if the creeds we believe in are false, then our efforts have been totally misplaced; we cannot be sure that our deeds, however noble, are really good. It is the creed that makes us carry out the deed—that keeps us going into the most rotten holes in the world—and gives us the message we preach. The same is true of any Christian movement based on faith.

11 Why must our good deeds be the fruit of our creeds, even if the result is the same?

12 Why do you think it is important for Christians to correctly defend and live out the essential doctrines of the faith that have been entrusted to us, and what are some of the potential consequences of not doing so?

DVD Closing Segment and Prayer (5 minutes)

Use the space provided below to take notes on anything that stands out to you.

Before the Next Session

In between your group discussions, set aside some alone time to prayerfully reflect and meditate on the material covered in this session. You might wish to review all of the reflection sections preceding each question, or select the particular Scripture verses and corresponding synopsis you feel God is speaking to you about. As you meditate and focus on God's Word, let his truth fill you. And as you pray and invite the Holy Spirit to transform and renew your mind, consider what God may be teaching you. What new insights have you discovered; what fresh perspectives have you gained? Use the space below to journal these things.

Also, in preparation for session two, if possible read chapters 5–6 of the book, *The Faith*.