

What Christians Should Know (WCSK)

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To Nigel Elisha:

I strive to be good so that you can be great.

PREFACE

In the book of I Kings, we are introduced to the prophet Elijah for the first time. This legendary figure arrives on the scene at a bleak time in Israel's history. Drought and famine have struck the land, forcing even the wealthy to scavenge for food, much like dogs. The king and queen blatantly defy God's commandments and openly sanction the worship of false deities. Those deities include the alleged gods of rain and agriculture during a time of no rain and starvation. God is trying to tell the people something, but they choose not to listen. As a result, God calls Elijah to serve as His human instrument to turn the people away from apostasy and back toward Him.

It is for this reason that we find Elijah atop Mt. Carmel in I Kings, chapter 18. The people of Israel are gathered there to see a showdown among the gods. On one side stands Elijah—he alone stands for the one true God. On the other side are 850 prophets of false gods. At stake is the heart of the nation of Israel. The wager centers on who can call out and receive an answer from heaven. If the false prophets receive an answer, then their gods win. If Elijah does so, then god really is God—Jehovah or Yahweh; the God of the Bible; the God of Israel; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

On top of the mountain, in the midst of the confrontation, Elijah then asks one of the most powerful questions in the entire Bible to all those looking on: “How long will you waver between two opinions?” (I Kings 18:21a, NIV).

Although Elijah was outnumbered; although he was mocked and ridiculed; although he lived on the fringes of society; and although he was regarded as “out of touch,” “antiquated,” and “backward,” he stood for truth and had a single-minded dedication to THE LORD. Elijah couldn't help himself because his name literally means, “My God is Yahweh.” He acted based on his God-given identity, so no matter how “unpopular” the truth was, he stood firm *in* the truth. Elijah fully understood that when you live in a world that doesn't honor God, you will be misunderstood and labeled in derogatory ways. Turning toward God and resistance actually go hand in hand, and although the messenger is human, *the message* is omnipotent.

Elijah represents all those in modern times unafraid to stand for the truth in a world full of opinions. Just as the prophet did, we find ourselves fighting an uphill battle in which many so-called religious leaders have adopted a more “digestible” version of the gospel to attract followers and secure secondary gain. Moreover, just as King Ahab and Queen Jezebel did in the time of Elijah, many in positions of power and authority now openly sanction syncretism and half-truths to formalize their power and solidify loyalty. These clever individuals need not preach heresy—they simply substitute for the whole truth a vacuous, Christ-less form of subjective “spirituality” in which faith has become what *I* want to believe. What is said from the pulpit therefore is indistinguishable from what is said in a corporate boardroom, at a self-help seminar, or at the paid conference of a motivational speaker. Subsequently, in contemporary America, *spirituality* is on the rise, while *Christianity* is in steep decline.^[*] This situation comes as no surprise; at our core, we are not physical beings trying to adapt to our spiritual selves. We are image bearers of God, spiritual beings attempting to adjust to the physical world. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has placed eternity in our hearts, so it is no wonder that humanity endlessly searches for something bigger, deeper, and more meaningful.

American spirituality is built upon the foundation of *me*, but a house of faith built upon the foundation of self will not stand. In this house, God must compete for my attention and provide personalized incentives. If His performance falls short, I simply move on to the next idol. Rules become nothing more than burdensome inconveniences and a threat to my rugged individualism.

Accordingly, before Elijah goes down in history as a great prophet who turns the people's hearts back to God, those in power label him a "troubler," an instigator, and a bothersome menace. Similarly, in the twenty-first century, if you're not willing to be "controversial," then you're not willing to stand for God and His Word. The Bible shows clearly that obedience to THE LORD has always been a countercultural choice in direct opposition to the status quo. Moses fought against the obsession with inhumane and endless production in the Egyptian economic system, Micah warned that exploitation of others in climbing the ladder of success would bring judgment and ruin, and Jesus informed the religious "authorities" of His time that the accepted interpretation of the Scriptures was a perversion of the truth. Subsequently, in 2015, Christians squabble over many extraneous things, failing to realize that sound doctrine is *the* fight always worth fighting.

Herein lies the problem with subjective religion and multiple opinions: when you spend so much time hopping from branch to branch, you begin to lose focus on *your* real opinion. Accordingly, you become numb both to sin *and* to God. This numbness leads to apathy and the inability to take a firm stand on anything, which is exactly why evil can casually say, "Whatever..." to the question, "How long will you waver?" The response in the text says, "But the people said nothing" (I Kings 18:21b, NIV).

Furthermore, Elijah didn't ask his famous question to atheists. He didn't ask agnostics. He didn't ask any group you might consider "sinners." He asked *Israelites*. He asked a people who knew God, who were aware of God's law, who had a national identity exclusively because of God, and who were living in a land promised to them by God. The story of Elijah isn't an indictment of all those "heathens" who do not know Jesus. It *is* an indictment of those who label themselves Christians or who are members of Christ's church. Throughout the Bible, God always judges those who know Him first, *and then* He deals with those on the "outside." Before we accuse others of anything, we ought to look at the person in the mirror first and foremost. Otherwise, we have promoted ourselves to the position of deity.

A person who refuses to waver between opinions has an unchangeable Christian identity firmly rooted in Jesus Christ. This Christian refuses to compromise, is unafraid of the trouble and challenges that come with transformation, and boldly proclaims that Jehovah is God in a world that is apathetic to sin, responsibility, and accountability. This identity is a fixed point of reference in a world full of confusion; it is the persistent, pervasive, all-encompassing force that steers a person's mind, thoughts, words, and actions. Identity always *precedes* behavior; all action stems and *proceeds from* this core sense of self, and that self is formed in the image of God.

For those who have been wondering what happened with Elijah, well, God allowed him to win the showdown. THE LORD sent down fire from heaven and revealed the true God, bringing everyone to their knees in recognition of the Almighty. As for the false prophets, they were all destroyed.

At the end of the day, neither God nor the Bible needs to be defended by any human being, but susceptible humans need protection against the malicious vipers that purposely pervert, exploit, distort, and capitalize on the Word of God. Jesus never intended for spiritual tyranny to burden the souls of His sheep, nor did He ever intend for His “shepherds” to enslave all those He set free on the cross.

What Christians Should Know (WCSK) is meant to guide you into and along the path of Christ and humbly attempts to mimic what He did for people: to liberate them. It is designed to empower *you* to read, study, understand, and become familiar with the incarnate Word of God for yourself. By knowing and understanding the truth, you will never succumb to false doctrine or the notion that “sort-of-the-truth” is *the* truth. As it says in the beginning of the *Didache*, “There are two Ways, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two Ways.” Anything other than Jesus Christ leads to death. *He* is the path of Life.

WCSK aims to begin the process of transforming *believers in Christ* into *disciples of Christ* as they walk that path. Jesus says, “Go therefore and make *disciples* [emphasis added] of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, NASB). *Matheteuo*, the Greek word for *disciple*, is very interesting because it simultaneously implies an inner role as a pupil and an outward role as a teacher. By implication, to teach well, *you* must first have an ironclad grasp on the subject matter.

What if people came up to you in the street and asked, “What do you believe, and why do you believe it?” Could you answer the questions? What if they wanted you to explain to them the basic, core doctrines of the Christian faith? Could you do so? Could you direct them on where to go? What if someone said, “The Bible is too complicated. I need something to guide me”? What if someone wanted to take a step toward Christ but felt unworthy, intimidated, or overwhelmed by “doing church”? What if you desire to do all the “right” things but often feel like the things you hear don’t relate to you or you can’t understand how what’s preached on Sunday actually matters in your life? What if you go through the religious motions because your parents tell you to but have never taken an honest look at it all *for yourself*?

WCSK is a vehicle for institutional change. It is the nutrition for starving Christians who suffer from doctrinal apathy and the proper sustenance of enduring Biblical truth for believers. This electronic book offers a completely free set of written lessons composed from the original online series published on DLCFC.org and CHESadaphal.com. *WCSK* was developed to provide the basic, fundamental doctrines of Christianity for the congregants of Deeper Life Christian Fellowship. It is intended to be accessible, practical, and applicable to everyone. *WCSK* challenges Christians to rethink *what they think they know* and invites all curious minds to discover (or rediscover) the Word of God, challenging our fascination with cultural fads and moralism. The work forces us to reorient our spiritual walk and aims to expand and enlarge the pool of faithful, eager, and willing followers of Christ who have become so empowered, invigorated, and set ablaze that they can’t help but spread the good news to others.

Of all my father’s sermons, my favorite posed one simple question: “Is your salvation secure?” On the Day of Judgment, the only person to be held accountable before God for all your wrongdoing is *you*. There will be no excuses, no scapegoats, and

no loopholes. It is for this reason that we must never, ever take our walk of faith lightly but rather with the full recognition of the depravity of sin and the irrevocable consequences of leading a life without Jesus at the center. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13, NASB).

I sincerely hope you enjoy and are enriched by the lessons.

May God richly bless you and guide you in your studies.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

Dr. Charles Haddon Elijah Sadaphal

April 2015

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The Five Core Doctrines of the Christian Faith

- 1. There is one God, yet God is three distinct Persons, each of whom is fully God: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit.**
- 2. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man in one person.**
- 3. Jesus bore the penalty of sin in His death, He was a substitute sacrifice for us all, and that substitution atoned for humanity, thereby reconciling us back to God.**
- 4. Jesus was crucified and died on the cross, and on the third day, He rose from the dead.**
- 5. We are saved by grace alone and through faith in Jesus Christ alone.**

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION & WHAT CHRISTIANITY IS

What does this series aim to achieve?

It aims to give those who label themselves “Christians” a basic understanding of what they should know and what Christianity is, based solely on the fundamental concepts that the Bible teaches us. This series aims to educate, empower and vitalize the willing disciples of Christ so that they can enhance their own understanding *and then* minister to others by spreading the good news. The theme of this series is “faith seeking understanding.” The theme verse is Titus 2:1: “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine.”

All scriptures are taken from The New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Further, Biblical references are examples and are in no way exhaustive. The series *What Christians Should Know* (#WCSK) also is not a complete reference but is meant to provide basic beliefs, principles, and doctrines of the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

I. The Crisis

In the 2008 [American Religious Identification Survey](#) (ARIS), 76% of Americans self-identified as Christian and 34% identified as “Born Again or Evangelical.” 15% of those polled identified as atheist, agnostic or having no religious preference. Significantly, ARIS determined that the challenge to American Christianity “does not come from other religions but rather a rejection of all forms of organized religion.”

In the same year, the [Pew Research Center](#) conducted a poll that found that, among American Christians, 52% believed that “at least some non-Christian faiths can lead to eternal life.” Furthermore, of those in this majority, 80% could “name at least one non-Christian faith that can do so.” Only 29% of those polled believed that “my religion is the one, true faith leading to eternal life.” Six percent of the respondents did not know who would achieve eternal life or refused to answer.

In 2014, the Barna Group and the American Bible Society completed a report called “[The State of the Bible](#).” According to this report, four out of five adults (81%) said that morality was on the decline and nearly one-third (29%) cited the lack of Bible reading as the primary cause. The study also revealed that, among American adults:

(i) 81% considered themselves “highly, moderately, or somewhat” knowledgeable about the Bible, yet 43% of this group was unable to name the Bible’s first five books. (This number rose to 69% among Protestants.)

(ii) 88% said their household owned a Bible, but nearly half of adults (46%) read the Bible *no more frequently* than two to three times a year.

(iii) A significant number of people believed that the Bible *was silent* on the following issues: pornography (34%), gambling (23%), same-sex relationships (21%) and the repression of women (24%).

(iv) Half (50%) “agreed strongly or agreed somewhat” that the Bible, the Quran and the Book of Mormon were all different expressions of the *same* spiritual truths.

All of this information points to one disturbing conclusion: Biblical illiteracy is rampant and people don’t know what they think they know, nor do they understand what

they believe. This is a crisis of insurmountable proportions, considering what's at stake. To this I add my own perception that one of the greatest threats to modern Christianity and those *within* the church is religious pluralism (resulting from Biblical illiteracy) and the greatest threat to those *without* is syncretism. Both of these subtle, seemingly innocuous and voluntary forces have managed to do more damage than any army, evil despot or oppressive power in the contemporary era.

II. What Does This All Mean in Practical Terms?

People may say that they believe in God, but that does not necessarily mean that they have an understanding of who God is and what God says. For this reason, this series has three goals in mind:

(1) To bring clarity to those who do not know Christ using an unbiased, free and widely available means. In this way, the series will share with them the basic facts about Christ, the Bible and Christian doctrine. No matter who they are, where they are or what they already believe, they will have unrestricted access to this knowledge at any time.

(2) To combat Biblical illiteracy among those who are somewhat familiar with the Bible, but have not taken the time to sit down with the Word, study it, reflect upon it and become dedicated students of it. The term "Christian" can mean many different things in modern society and this series will challenge believers to scrutinize what they already know and what they think they already know about the Bible. Faith should be grounded in timeless Biblical truth and all believers must consequently have a clear and comprehensive understanding of *what* they believe and *why* they believe it. This is an issue that transcends the emotions and requires earnest, deep and honest introspection.

(3) To nurture *fides quaerens intellectum* or "faith seeking understanding." Some people think they can figure God out on their own without consulting *the* authoritative source. Thus, for them, the ultimate truth is not based on external authority but on internal intuition. Emotion is a part of the human experience, but we must engage reason and intellect *in pursuit* of God in order to deepen and expand our understanding of the One Whom we serve.

Belief always comes first and ultimate wisdom is always revealed, never acquired. While the Christian walk is much more than a mental exercise, it certainly is a mental challenge. The fact remains that details need to be learned, principles mastered, truths discerned and stories told correctly. This is why, in the *Proslogion*, Anselm said, "I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand."¹¹

I hope to reveal that God is a God who transcends race, gender, nation, creed or any other category: A God of one tribe, one race, one culture, one ethnicity, one people or one geographic area is not in fact God, but a construct developed to serve ideological ends.

Now, are there problems in the modern church and with Christians? Of course. The church is an institution that can help people *and* that can harm them. The world often uses the followers of Christ as a barometer for religion's validity, but they should look at Christians through a different lens. It is *because* we are all imperfect and in need of help that we need the grace and strength of Christ in order to work through our human failings. When I walk into an emergency room, I expect to see the sick and when I walk

into a gym, I expect to see the out-of-shape. This doesn't reflect the deficiencies of the institutions, but the fallibility of human nature.

One must understand that God works through messy and complicated human experience in order to produce a flesh-and-bones intimacy with our reality. This intimacy doesn't shy away from tough problems, but works through them. It is for this reason that the Bible depicts love, mercy, grace, family, triumph, peace and liberation, as well as murder, genocide, rape, lust, incest, oppression, social and economic injustice and war. Hence, the Bible is powerful and enriching *because* it's about real life and tells us about real people with real problems and issues. Love is very messy and the Bible is a love story about a caring Father who incessantly chases after His fallen creation in order to bring them back to Him.

Reading the Bible daily and engaging in an intimate relationship with God is one of the only ways to develop *your* own faith and understanding. One of the greatest dangers in the modern world entails allowing someone else to give you his or her theology and passively accepting it as true. This is not to trivialize tradition or to dismiss orthodoxy. In fact, any bold leap forward in the Christian walk is not a revolutionary shift away from the Bible, but an earnest look *back at* the Scriptures—in order to move forward, we must first go back. The issue, then, isn't *whether* we ought to honor tradition. Rather, we should determine *which* tradition will give us life and is therefore worth our total being and complete submission. That tradition is the Bible, the Word of God.

This is a critical step for each person to take because every person who seeks to know the Word must become a disciple of the Word. Education drives knowledge and this praxis requires discipline, focus, determination and strength. Fragile, unintelligible and unexamined beliefs will lead to weak disciples, weak dedication, weak religion and a weak church.

Doctrine means a belief or a set of beliefs that an institution teaches, whereas theology entails the study of beliefs and the study of the nature of God. The root source of all Christian doctrine is the Bible. However, some groups may not accept the Bible as a whole, may emphasize one part or may de-emphasize another. Different denominations will therefore tend to have different traditions and there is nothing inherently wrong with any of that. However, Jesus did not intend for the church to inflict spiritual tyranny on believers while burdening them with the yoke of the institution, nor did He intend for a superstructure of man-made elements to keep people away from Him. Accordingly, the approach I will be taking is that the Word of God is divinely inspired and written by humans through the power and revelation of the Holy Spirit. I do not intend for the doctrine that I teach to serve any ideological end. Rather, I want it to be as true to the *Biblical* tradition as possible and to take each subject and accept it as truth, cognizant that this truth comes in the context of the Bible as a whole. The whole must form the basis for the interpretation of the part and not vice versa.

III. What Is Christianity?

The simplest answer boils down to two words: Jesus Christ.

What Christians should know is that Christianity *is* Christ, Who *is* the centerpiece of the entire Christian faith. Salvation is possible because of Christ. He is the ultimate expression of God's love for humanity and He represents God's atonement of all of our

sins so that we (humankind) can reconcile with God and restore a proper relationship with Him.

Christians should know that God created us out of His abundance and *not* out of a lack or need. He defined His ownership and dominion over everything by giving it all away.

What Christians should know is that Christianity is the final and ultimate narrative of *how* and *why* we all began. Our beginning was not some impersonal, random event that resulted from nothing, but the direct result of God's divine and conscious decision to bring light, life and order into our universe.

Christians should know that Christianity gives the most comprehensive explanation of who we truly are. It is the source of our legitimate identities as sons and daughters of God, formed in His image. It also satisfies, through Christ, the eternal yearning that we have to worship and to fulfill the deepest, most sincere, most fundamental desires of our being.

Christians should know that Christianity reveals to us that the world we live in is not the final testament of our existence. Because of sin, it is a temporary and highly imperfect representation of what was previously flawless. Christianity points directly toward Christ and His example for us of how to live in accordance with God's commands.

What Christians should know is that one of the mainstays of the Christian faith is the Bible. The Bible is more than a book and is God's divine word, revealed to humans through verbal plenary inspiration. The Bible is what God wanted us to know, learn and understand about Him, not as a means to deter or hinder us, but so that we would live our lives abundantly. We are the creation and He is The Creator; he did not give us these rules and regulations in malice. Rather, he sought to protect us, just as a loving father instructs his son and guides him away from harm.

What Christians should know is that God is just and merciful and that there is a constant tension between these two qualities. Because God is perfectly just, He can't simply say "Never mind" to sin. That would contradict His nature and diminish His character. Despite our actions, mercy triumphs over judgment. God's love compelled Him to incarnate as a Man (Jesus) for our sake—that is, in order to reconcile with humanity by re-creating creation and turning the corruptible (humans) back into the incorruptible, God required nothing less than His own substance. By willingly sacrificing Himself, He saved all of us.

Christians should know that John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Christians should know that Luke 19:10 says that Christ came into this world "to seek and to save that which was lost." This has two implications. First, *seeking* is an active, engrossing practice that looks towards others instead of working against them. Secondly, those involved in *saving* must, at the very least, have a basic understanding of the subject matter on which they're ministering.

Christians should know that Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Without the light of Christ and without the Bible, we are doomed to dwell in darkness, confused and alone with no one to guide us. It is *only and irrefutably* through Jesus Christ that anyone can walk in the light, back toward God.

Christians should know that, in John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

What Christians should know is that the concept of the Trinitarian God of the Bible is a unique truth claim. This distinguishes Christianity from other ideologies, religions and forms of spirituality.

What Christians should know is that on multiple occasions, Jesus Christ said, “I am God.”^[2] Period. There is no grey area, no question and no doubt. No other (legitimate and sane) leader of a major religion has ever claimed to be God. This bold truth was so powerful that Jesus willingly died for it. To avoid death, all He would have had to do was recant his statement, but He never did. He died for the truth.

Christians should know that God loves humanity very much. Thankfully for us, however much we curse Him and reject Him, God plays by His rules and not human ones. So no matter who you are or what you’ve done, your Heavenly Father will never turn His back on you. You are His child, formed in His image and destined to conquer darkness with the light and to boldly proclaim your new Christ-centered identity. This in no way diminishes the destructive power of sin, nor does it dismiss obedience. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, grace is not “cheap.” It is costly—involving Christ, repentance, the cross, discipleship and suffering. This is why, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer says, “With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”^[3]

IV. The Importance of Understanding What You Know, What You Believe and Why You Believe It.

In the modern world, “truth” no longer has any objective value and depends on what “feels” right or seems to move us the best. There is certainty in Christ; that is a real-life, tangible incarnation of truth. It is so real and genuine that you can touch, feel and get splintered by the cross on which He was crucified. This isn’t a truth for me alone; it is meant for you too. Indeed, it is *the* Truth that does not change under pressure. It invites you to take a look for yourself and embrace the life-giving power that is the Bible.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve known *about* Christ and *about* the church. However, it was only when I immersed myself in the Word that I truly began to hear. As a consequence, from hearing came faith and from faith came understanding.

I love and follow Christ because He met me in a time of strife and used the crisis to show me that all the knowledge I had amassed, all the wisdom I thought I had and all the “security” I had acquired were formless and void. They were unable to yield any dividends beyond the present, provide comfort beyond the temporal and satisfy my internal yearning for something that transcended my reality. Make no mistake, I didn’t experience a miraculous “shining light” followed by a perfect existence. Rather, my Christian walk is a slow, persistent, day-by-day process and I experience incremental changes in my pursuit to be more like Him. It is a continual process of regeneration that transforms me from the person I am into the person I know I can be, empowered solely by the Holy Spirit, through Christ, to the Father.

Additional Resources to Help You Get Started

Free Bible Online: www.biblegateway.com (Any version you desire).

The Bible on your Tablet or Smartphone: The Bible App from LiveChurch.tv, Logos Bible, or the Olive Tree Bible App.

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

Mark Driscoll, *On the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Mark Driscoll, *On the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

CHAPTER II

WHO GOD IS

What Christians should know is that in order to live an obedient life and enter into a relationship with God, one must have a comprehensive understanding of who God is.

In contemplating God, a logical first question to ask is, “Does God Exist?” Once that uncertainty is successfully addressed, the next question to ponder is, “Who is God?” The focus of this lesson will be on the second question, assuming that all of us have already taken the path in favor of theism, have been illuminated in support of the truth, and now would like to learn more about Whom we serve. In order to address the first question, I will direct you to “For Further Study” at the end of this chapter.

The first place to start when talking about what Christians should know is God. After all, that’s where the Bible starts. Genesis 1:1 says, “In the beginning, God...”

Thus, all Christians should be able to answer the question, “Who is my God?”

As with any other relationship, the closer two people become, the more each gets to know about the other. It is important to realize, however, that God can be known, but this feat is not accomplished strictly by human means, but is part of the revelation of God *to us*. So, a person sitting alone in a room in deep thought won’t be able to “know” God—He *cannot* be known through human wisdom alone.^[4] The first requirement is an earnest desire to know, and then comes engagement with the Scriptures, where true knowledge of God is to be found. Any attempt, then, to understand God without referencing the Scriptures will lead to suppression of the truth, futile thinking, and darkened hearts.^[5]

Hence, in Matthew 11:27 Jesus says, “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom *the Son wills to reveal Him*.” Romans 1:19 says, “Because that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident *to them*.” (In both verses the italics are mine.)

With this idea also comes the recognition that we, as temporal human beings, cannot ever *fully* grasp God, because He is greater than us and eternal. This makes sense because we are the creation, so of course there will be concepts and attributes about Him that are beyond comprehension. This is why in Isaiah 55:9, God speaks through the prophet and says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” The Psalmist says that God’s “greatness is unsearchable,”^[6] His “understanding is infinite,”^[7] and THE LORD’S “knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain it.”^[8] In I Corinthians 2:11-12, the apostle Paul says, “Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God.”

There is a tremendous wealth of information about who God is in the Bible. The Bible teaches us that God is love,^[9] light,^[10] Spirit,^[11] just,^[12] omnipresent,^[13] omnipotent,^[14] omniscient,^[15] eternal,^[16] wise,^[17] timeless,^[18] merciful,^[19] holy,^[20] blameless,^[21] self-existent^[22] (meaning God is un-causable, or in reference to His *aseity*), righteous,^[23] infinite,^[24] personal (Jesus Christ), invisible^[25] (but God did assume visible form, or theophany, as in Genesis 18), knowledgeable,^[26] truthful,^[27] faithful,^[28] good,^[29] peaceful,^[30] slow to anger and patient,^[31] the Creator,^[32] graceful,^[33] jealous,^[34]

wrathful,^[35] willful,^[36] blessed,^[37] beautiful,^[38] sovereign,^[39] and unchangeable.^[40] God's whole being is inclusive of all these attributes, and He is simultaneously and equally all of these things.

In particular, God's omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience all reveal that He exists in a different way than we exist, and that very existence surpasses what we can deduce from the rules of the natural world. He is qualitatively different from us.

The word "unchangeable" means that God's character, promises, being, and purposes were, are, *and always will be* the same. This is the reason why and how we can trust in Him always—He will be good, truthful, perfect, and just eternally. He may, however, change *His response* dependent on particular circumstances. For example, in the beginning of the Book of Jonah, God intended to destroy the evil city of Nineveh because of the extreme wickedness of its people, and He sent Jonah to tell the people that judgment was coming. In response to Jonah's prophecy, in chapter 3, the text says the people of Nineveh believed God, fasted, and turned from their evil ways. In response, Jonah 3:10 says that God *relented* (in Hebrew *naham*, meaning to be moved to pity, to have compassion, or to suffer grief) and subsequently did not harm the city or the people. So, God did not change in being both just and merciful, but He did change what He intended to do based on the situation and also consistent with His unchanging character. Other examples of God changing His mind include the successful intervention of Moses on behalf Israel's apostasy (Exodus 32:7-14) and adding 15 years to the life of Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:1-6).

Many of God's attributes are not shared (e.g., omnipresence), but others are shared with humankind in a limited way simply because we are finite creations whereas He is infinite. These shared characteristics include truthfulness, love, holiness, being just, and being merciful. So while at best, I may be somewhat merciful some of the time, God is perfectly merciful all of the time.

What Christians should know is that one of the exclusive truth claims of Christianity is that God is *both* an unlimited deity *and* a personal deity.^[41] Meaning, not only is He "that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought," but He is also intimate with reality, most perfectly embodied in the Incarnation of God as Man in Jesus Christ (more on that in Chapter 5). Other religions may construct a god who is unlimited but not personal, and others may construct one who is personal but not boundless.

God also is independent of humanity and doesn't need us for anything.^[42] Yet, in view of all of God's marvelous attributes, people are often confused because there are some things God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie,^[43] He can't go back on his covenantal promises,^[44] He can't deny Himself,^[45] He can't be tempted, nor does He tempt anyone.^[46]

When I say that God doesn't need us, it's not meant to depress anyone. What that does mean, then, is that because He lacks nothing, the creation of our world and humankind came out of God's abundance. He didn't make us to fill a void, and after we have all passed away, *God will still be*. And He had meaning and purpose in creating us, so our existence was not a roll of the dice or a mishap one day in a heavenly lab. God delights in His creation,^[47] created us for His glory,^[48] and did so in a totally free and voluntary act, which had been predestined according to His purposes.^[49]

God is a Spirit, and is therefore *sexless* and without human form. Hence, when I repeatedly refer to God as "He," that doesn't mean God is male (although Christ was a

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