

What Does It Mean to Know God?

What is Christianity? Some say it is a philosophy, others that it is an ethical stance, while still others claim it is really an experience. None of these really gets at the heart of the matter, however. Each of those things is something a Christian *has*, but not one of them serves as a definition of what a Christian *is*. Christianity has at its core a *transaction* between a person and God. A person who becomes a Christian moves from knowing about God distantly to knowing Him directly and intimately. "Now this is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." —John 17:3. Christianity is knowing God.

Why Do I Need to Know God?

Our desire for personal knowledge of God is strong, but we usually fail to recognize the desire for what it is. When we first fall in love, when we first marry, when we finally break into our chosen field, when we at last get that weekend house—these breakthroughs arouse in us an anticipation of *something* which, as it turns out, never occurs. We eventually discover that our desire for that precious *something* is a longing that no lover or career or achievement, even the best possible ones, can ever satisfy. The satisfaction fades away even as we close our fingers around our goal. Nothing ever delivers the joy it seemed to promise. Many of us avoid the yawning emptiness through busyness or denial, but, at best, there is only a postponement. "Nothing tastes," said Marie Antoinette. There are several ways people respond to this:

1) To blame the things themselves—to find fault with everyone and everything around them. Some people believe that a better spouse, a better career, a better boss or salary would finally yield the elusive joy. Many of the world's most successful people are like this: bored, discontented, running from new thing to new thing, often changing counselors, mates, partners, settings.

2) To blame themselves—to try harder to live up to self-imposed standards. Many people feel they have made poor choices or failed to measure up to challenges and to achieve the things that would give them joy and satisfaction. Such people are wracked with self-doubts and tend to burn themselves out. They think, "If only I could reach my goals, then this emptiness would be gone." But it is not so.

The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not mean that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.

—C. S. Lewis

3) To blame the universe itself—to give up seeking fulfillment at all. These are the people who says, "Yes, when young you are idealistic, but at my age I have stopped howling after the moon." They become cynical and decide to repress that part of themselves that once wanted fulfillment and joy. But they become hard, and they can feel themselves losing their humanity, compassion and joy.

4) To blame and recognize their separation from God—to establish a personal relationship with Him.

How Can I Know God?

In order to form a personal relationship with God, we must know three things:

1) Who We Are

We are God's creation. God created us and built us for a relationship with Him. We belong to Him and owe Him gratitude for every breath, every moment, everything. Since humans were built to live for Him (to worship), we will always try to worship something. If not God, we will choose some other object of ultimate devotion to give life meaning.

We are sinners. We have all chosen (and reaffirm daily) to reject God and to make our own joy and happiness our highest priority. We do not want to worship God and surrender our self-mastery, yet we are built to worship; so we cling to idols, centering our lives on things which promise to give us meaning: success, relationships, influence, love, comfort, etc.

We are in spiritual bondage. To live for anything else but God leads to breakdown and decay. When a fish leaves the water, that which he was built for, he is not free, but dead. Worshipping other things besides God leads to a loss of meaning. If we achieve these things, they cannot deliver satisfaction, because they were never

meant to be "gods." They were never meant to replace God. Worshipping other things besides God also leads to self-image problems. We end

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up defining ourselves in terms of our achievement in these things. We *must* have them or all is lost, so they drive us to work too hard or fill us with terror if they are jeopardized.

2) Who God Is

God is love and justice. His active concern is for our joy and well-being. Most people love those who love them, yet God loves and seeks the good even of people who are His enemies. But because God is good and loving, He cannot tolerate evil. The opposite of love is not anger but indifference. "The more you love your son, the more you hate in him, the liar, the drunkard, the traitor." (E.H. Gifford) To imagine God's situation, picture a judge who is also a father, who sits at the trial of his very guilty son. A judge knows that he cannot let his son go, for without justice no society can survive. How much less can a loving God merely ignore or suspend justice for us who are loved, yet guilty of rebellion against His loving authority?

Jesus Christ is God. Jesus is God Himself come to earth. He first lived a perfect life, loving God with all His heart, soul and mind, fulfilling all human obligation to God. He lived the life you owed—a perfect record. Then, instead of receiving His deserved reward (eternal life), Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice for our sins, taking the punishment and death you owed.

When we believe in Him:

- 1) Our sins are paid for by His death, and
- 2) His perfect life record is transferred to our account.

So God accepts and regards us as if we had done all Christ has done.

3) *What You Must Do*

You must repent. There first must be an admission that you have been living as your own master, worshipping the wrong things, violating God's loving laws. "Repentance" means you ask forgiveness and turn from that stance with a willingness to live for and center on Him.

You must believe. Faith is transferring your trust from your own efforts to the efforts of Christ. You were relying on other things to make you acceptable, but now you consciously begin relying on what Jesus did for your acceptance with God. All you need is nothing. If you think, "God owes me something for all my efforts," you are still on the outside.

Pray after this fashion: "I see that I am more flawed and sinful than I ever dared believe, but that I am *even more* loved and accepted than I ever dared hope. I turn from my old life of living for myself. I have nothing in my record to merit Your approval, but I now rest in what Jesus did and ask to be accepted into God's family for His sake." When you make this transaction, two things happen at once: 1) your accounts are cleared, your sins are wiped out permanently, you are adopted legally into God's family, and 2) the Holy Spirit enters your heart and begins to change you into the character of Jesus.

You must follow through. Tell a Christian friend about your commitment. Get yourself training in the basic Christian disciplines of

prayer, worship, Bible study and fellowship with other Christians. You can contact our church office at **214-224-2500**, and we will be eager to connect you with someone who can help you begin to grow as a Christian. Consider reading: *Go for It*, by John Guest, or *The Fight*, by John White. Both are good books for developing a new Christian life.

If you were created by God, then you owe Him your life, whether you feel like it or not.

Why Should I Seek to Know God?

On the one hand, you may feel very much that you "need" God. Even though you may recognize that you have needs only God can meet, you must not try to use Him to achieve your own ends. It is not possible to bargain with God. ("I'll do this if You will do that.") That is not Christianity at all, but a form of magic or paganism in which you appease the cranky deity to get a favor. Are you getting into Christianity to serve God or to get God to serve you? Those are two opposite motives, and they result in two different religions. You must come to God because 1) you owe it to Him to give Him your life (because He is your Creator), and 2) you are deeply grateful to Him for sacrificing His Son (because He is your Redeemer).

On the other hand, you may feel no need at all or interest in knowing God. This does not mean you should stay uncommitted. If you were created by God, then you owe Him your life, whether you feel like it or not. You are obligated to seek Him and ask Him to soften your heart and enlighten your eyes. If you say, "I have no faith," that is no excuse either. You need only doubt your doubts. No one can doubt everything at once—you must believe in something to doubt something else. For

example, do you believe you are competent to run your own life? Where is the evidence for that? Why doubt everything but your doubts about God and your faith in yourself? Is that fair? You owe it to God to seek Him. Do so.

What If I Am Not Ready to Proceed?

Make a list of issues that you perceive to be barriers to your crossing the line into faith. Here is a possible set of headings:

Content issues: Do you understand the basics of the Christian message—sin, Jesus as God, sacrifice, faith?

Coherence issues: Are there intellectual problems you have with Christianity? Objections to the Christian faith which you cannot resolve in your mind?

Cost issues: Do you perceive a move into full Christian faith will cost you something dear? What fears do you have about commitment?

Now talk to some Christian friend until they are resolved, or contact our church office at 214-224-2500. We will be happy to connect you with someone you could talk to about these matters.

Consider reading:

Hope Has It's Reasons, by Rebecca Pippert (Harper and Row)

Mere Christianity, by C.S. Lewis (MacMillan)

Basic Christianity, by John Stott (IVP).

—Adapted from *Timothy Keller, 1991*

For further information please contact:

Park Cities Presbyterian Church

4124 Oak Lawn

Dallas, Texas 75219

214-224-2500

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