

Christian Book Summaries



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THE FAITH:

*What Christians Believe,
Why they Believe it, and Why it Matters*

A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

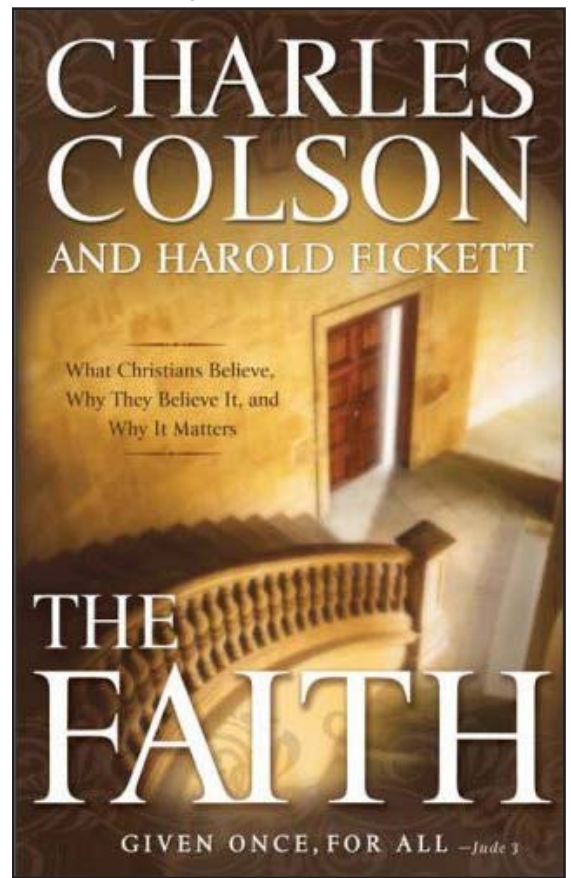
- Demonstrate the basic history and truths of the Christian faith for both believers and nonbelievers
- Help Christians understand the essential, foundational doctrines and beliefs of Christianity so they can defend them and live by them
- Explore some of the challenging issues of today's world and how they relate to true Christian faith

The Book's Message

"If we don't know what we believe—even what Christianity is—how can we live it and defend it?"

Followers of Christ need to lead the way in understanding, articulating, and modeling a clear understanding of the unshakable tenets of the faith that Christians have embraced through the centuries. From the time of the apostles until now, these truths have helped believers find faith, hope, and joy even in times of despair and uncertainty.

When we truly understand the foundational truths of Christianity—from the nature of God, to the human condition, to the work of Jesus, to God's coming kingdom—we will be in a position to defend our faith and touch our world with God's love.



By Chuck Colson and Harold Fickett
Zondervan
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Two Main Points

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GOD *and the Faith*

Everywhere, Always, By All

On a fall day in a quiet Amish community in Pennsylvania, five Amish school girls were murdered by a deranged killer. But before the man pulled the trigger, two of the girls asked to be sacrificed so that the others trapped in the one-room schoolhouse might live.

Although this man ignored their request, continued his horrible killings, and in the end took his own life, the Amish community responded in an almost unthinkable, unbelievable way. The families of the fallen not only forgave the murderer, but also surrounded his widow and children with mercy, kindness, and financial assistance. Shocking the watching world with their incomprehensible love, that community of believers demonstrated the kind of love every Christian ought to practice. They lived out their faith in a tangible way.

Unfortunately, Christians do not always live with such compassion and forgiveness. Too often we profess one thing and do something entirely different in our flawed and broken state. And yet true Christianity is one of the most powerful life-giving and culture-changing forces in all of history. The same gospel, the truth of Christianity given to the apostles, has been a force for good and has provided the answers to all ultimate questions in cultures around the world since its inception at Jesus' resurrection. If you could visit various Christian communities through the ages, you would find that they are united in their core beliefs. ***"They believe that in Christ the world has been rescued from the power of evil and death; they believe in God's sovereignty over history; they make the same use of the Scriptures and of bread and wine and water."***

Orthodoxy is the "right belief"~the core doctrines that unite Christians across time. It is critical to understand our core beliefs, since Christianity and the western civilization it helped to build are coming under attack from both Islam and a cultural atmosphere of anti-theism. We are now truly in a postmodern era in which most people believe there is no ultimate truth. ***"Tolerance, falsely defined as putting all propositions on an equal footing~as opposed to giving ideas an equal hearing~has replaced truth."*** Our culture values political correctness and tolerance more highly than discovering and defending what is true. Tolerance has become the god of the age.

As Christians, we cannot remain complacent or fearful about the situation. We need to lift our eyes to the light of eternal God and His eternal truth that has continually guided Christians in every age. Our faith is life giving and culture building. It protects human dignity and restores justice and freedom; it overcomes evil with good. We must live out this powerful faith in our hurting world.

And yet many Christians have little understanding of Christian beliefs and the reasons they matter. If our faith is not understood, it cannot be practiced. Surveys produced by George Barna and George Gallup, as well

as one I conducted, all show that there is a significant decline in most Christians' knowledge of and adherence to the basic fundamental doctrines of the faith. I now realize that Christians must come to understand that their faith is more than a set of some religious practices or even a personal relationship with Jesus. They must see it as a complete worldview~a thought system for how they relate to God and to the world.

"The faith is a complete view of the world and humankind's place in it."

If Christians hope to find solutions to the challenges of our world, we must return to the roots of our faith. We must be radical, or orthodox, Christians. We need to return to the essential elements that have made up our faith from the beginning. We must rediscover what is ancient and eternal~the truth.

"Hold fast that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all."

~St. Vincent of Lerins

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God Is

One foundational question is the source of origins~where the universe came from. Three theories compete in our culture today regarding this issue. Theory one states that the universe is Godless, that it has always existed, and that it has no intelligible purpose or design. All of life in its complexity is the result of blind chance.

The second theory addresses the obvious weaknesses of the first theory. It seems impossible for the complex and structured world we live in to have developed randomly. This theory postulates that the origin of life resulted from “reason,” or a “Universal Mind.” Not a personal god, but an intelligent, harmonious force of nature.

The third theory is what Christians believe~that the universe was created by a reasoning and personal God. They believe that the beauty and order of the creation is a sign of God’s love for all of humanity. Scientific evidence even suggests that knowledge of God is something born into human beings; we have an innate desire to connect with the Being who created us.

What we choose to believe does matter, because if a personal God created the universe, our lives are infused with meaning and purpose. God is not only rational and purposeful, but He has chosen to communicate with humans through the Bible.

He Has Spoken

No other book in history has caused such controversy or such sacrifice as the Bible, because it claims to be the very words of God. This book, written by men under the inspiration of the Spirit, is God’s eternal view of the world and the source of truth for men and women to live by. True Christians believe in its veracity and its authority. The Bible was assembled over the course of four centuries, in which Christian leaders painstakingly studied, debated, researched, and chose documents that faithfully communicated the teachings of the apostles and other eyewitnesses. The resulting compilation of works was an amazing, coherent, and studious proclamation of the Christian faith.

Archaeologists continue to accrue evidence that the Bible is accurate in its historical details, evidence which only confirms the reliability of this book. ***“Beyond the archaeological discoveries, the truth claims of the Bible are supported by the uncanny coherence and unity of the Bible itself.”*** Within its 66 books written by 40 different authors, there is a remarkable overall unity and consistency.

Even more significant is the impact of the Bible on individual lives and societies. St. Augustine, Martin Luther, St. Anthony of Egypt, and many more~all were transformed by the mere words of Scripture. In my prison ministry, I have witnessed thousands of lives change for the better through the words of the Bible. The Bible is the foundation~the ultimate authority for Christians because it reveals the absolute truth and has power to change lives.

Truth

Christians believe that we can know truth through the Bible, through reason, through our consciences, and through nature. In our relativistic culture, it is highly unpopular to take a stand for objective truth. The main belief of postmodernism is that ultimate truth cannot be known, so many people resist any claim for truth and its ethical ramifications. And yet we must revitalize this doctrine about truth and pull ourselves out of the trap of a false feel-good faith that has no real power. We must return to the creeds that our faith was founded upon. ***“It is the creed that makes me carry out the deed.”***

Why does the truth matter? Without God’s truth, we cannot deal effectively with contemporary ethical questions or cultural issues. Without

a framework of ethics, civilizations drift toward chaos and tyranny, as the horrifying example of Nazism shows. Without clear guidelines of right and wrong, our ethics become utilitarian; we choose what makes us most happy, instead of what is morally right.

“Without a basis for morality, no moral consensus can be reached.”

American culture has largely rejected the Christian God and has chosen the god of tolerance instead. Rather than tolerance meaning respectfully listening to all viewpoints in a search for the truth, it has come to mean the believing that truth cannot be known. The result is that everyone is free to believe and act as they like, except for those who have the chutzpah to believe that they do know the truth. Such a claim cannot be tolerated!

What Went Right, What Went Wrong

The greatest and most pivotal premise of Christian thought is that “God so loved the world...” The history of humanity is just part of the larger cosmic story of good and evil. After Adam and Eve were created by God, they faced the ultimate temptation and chose disobedience, thus passing down to all humanity the legacy of sin. God gave us free will with which we can choose to seek God or to reject Him. Collectively we often blame God for the evil of the world, and yet it is so often human choice that has ultimately caused much of the suffering we see. Even the most ordinary among us are capable of incredible evil. We’d rather blame a bad environment or our dysfunctional families for our behavior. ***“The cause of crime is wrong moral choices, the lack of moral training during the morally formative years.”*** We are responsible for our choices, and Christians acknow-

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ledge our culpability. If we don't understand this, then there is no need for a Savior.

The Invasion

The invasion of Normandy during World War II became the single most important turning point of the war. Although the cost in terms of human lives was very great, the foothold achieved enabled the Allies to ultimately win the victory. In a similar way, God invaded human history in the person of Jesus Christ. Not with massive armies, but in the single life of a fully human man who was also fully divine, God brought His kingdom to earth.

“He was bringing the reign of God on earth~ first through His own ministry and then by establishing a peaceful occupying force, His Church, which would carry on God’s redemption until Christ’s return.”

When I am ministering to prisoners, I frequently tell them about Jesus' first sermon, during which He read this from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Isaiah 61:1-2). You can imagine the immediate connection the inmates feel with this message.

What revolutionary ideas! That God can rule in every heart and that He can reclaim the world with His love. The inmates relate to Jesus' sufferings, and they are deeply touched that He suffered for them~an innocent man for the most guilty of criminals.

I teach prisoners about the two thieves crucified with Jesus~the one who reviled Him, and the other who was sorry for his sins and who asked Jesus to remember Him. It was this repentance and desire to be with Jesus that brought his salvation. Inmates' hearts often break open when they realize that Jesus considered each one of them worthy to die for. They are astounded by His love and grace!

“That is why at the heart of every orthodox confession of faith is the atoning death of Christ, which is the supreme outpouring of God’s love for us.”

But of course the story doesn't end there. It is the resurrection of Jesus that sets Christianity apart from all other religions. **“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (1 Corinthians 15:17).** Although scholars and commoners have challenged the truth of the resurrection for 2,000 years, no evidence has ever been produced that proves it false. The truth of the resurrection is a critical point of our faith. It is His life that gives us new life!

CBS

The FAITH *and Life*

Exchanging Identities

To live out our faith, we must realize what happened to the repentant thief on the cross. His very identity was changed. Christ died to give him His own righteous life. Like the thief, we come to die, giving up our old sinful life, and to receive Christ's own holy life within us. Henceforth He lives in us. This is what salvation, or being born again, means.

“Our past sins are not only forgiven, but we are transformed to live a new life with God’s power and grace.”

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This salvation seems so wonderful~why do so many reject it? Perhaps to some this free gift from God sounds too easy. It sounds counterintuitive. Or maybe we'd rather think we can save ourselves through our own good merits. People fail to take sin seriously, or realize how hopelessly lost they are.

But when someone makes a true confession, there is not only *salvation*, but *transformation*. Sin loses its appeal, and we can no longer live the old way. We genuinely want to live a better life. Salvation is not a ticket to a happy life; it is a life lived out for God's purposes. As Rick Warren says in his famous book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not about you; it's about God." Our faith will drive us to act more like Jesus. It is essential that Christians seek to discover their gifts and determine how they can do the greatest good for others.

Faith like this led Christian leaders such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer to return to Germany in the midst of World War II to support German Christians, in spite of grave danger. His writings, teachings, and personal example encouraged thousands and contributed to the downfall of Hitler's regime. Bonhoeffer sacrificed his life for a cause greater than himself.

In suffering, we come to the end of ourselves, and only then do we begin to truly rely on God's presence for our hope. Suffering for God's purposes is one mark of true Christians.

Reconciliation

Part of the work of the cross is reconciliation, of humans to God, but also of humans to one another. It is forgiveness that makes any kind of reconciliation possible. ***"When practiced, forgiveness is life changing, even world changing."*** Only through forgiveness and reconciliation can the cycle of violence be broken. God's radical act of sacrificing Himself so that we can be forgiven is what compels Christians to forgive others. It can bring about reconciliation between a murderer and his victim's loved ones and bring unity rather than war and division.

The Church

Through His death on the cross, Jesus reconciled us to Himself and also made us part of His Body~the group of all believers across time, which is the Church. Through the Church, God is reclaiming His rule of the world, much of which is still under the influence of Satan. The Church is not a building; it is a community, a group we belong to. We gather with other believers to worship and express our love to God. The Church is the primary means of participating in God's life. ***"When Jesus said the gates of hell cannot stand against His Church, He was foreseeing the people of God, drawn into unity with God and each other through worship, spilling out of our meeting places to spread the Gospel and righteousness."***

These are the marks that identify God's Church:

1. Proclamation. The gospel is proclaimed, both to reach unsaved people and to strengthen the knowledge of the Bible for those who already believe.
2. Sacraments. The sacraments are given as an outward sign of inward spiritual truth. Believers share The Lord's Supper (the Eucharist) to remember the great sacrifice of Jesus, and baptism, to show that a believer has buried the sinful life and risen to walk a new life with Christ.
3. Discipline. Through small groups or mentors, the Church holds believers accountable for their choices and helps them grow in holiness.

4. Community. People in the body experience a deep communion with each other. They are committed to loving deeply and supporting one another throughout the challenges of life.

The Church worships together and reaches out to others with a mission of sharing God's love and truth in a transformational way. Our Church creeds pronounce that we believe in ***"one holy, catholic, apostolic Church."*** This means that all Christians are part of one body, the Body of Christ. We are holy because of Christ's holiness; the Church is "catholic" in the sense of its being universal and open to all (the original meaning of catholic). We are apostolic because our teachings come from the apostles, the disciples of Christ. We have a faith that brings about a new kingdom under God's rule, bringing a faith that brings new life to the world.

"The Church makes the invisible Kingdom visible."

Be Holy~ Transform the World

Making disciples is a critical task for the Church. God says "Be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). The pursuit of holiness is something every Christian is called to. Unfortunately, we as the Church have not always done well in this area. Many people would rather view the Christian walk as a road to a successful life or to self-fulfillment. Too easily we ignore the command to be holy.

Holiness is not a list of legalistic dos and don'ts or a strict adherence to religious duty. Rather, holiness is to become like Christ, to share

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in His work in the world. Holiness means to obey His commands from the heart, to follow His teachings, even when we are still inclined to be sinful. We offer our bodies for His use. We repent when we sin, and we resolve to avoid doing it again. We ask God to give us new desires to replace the old sinful ones. We want the things of God more than our own selfish cravings.

“Sin comes naturally; holiness doesn’t. It requires the constant supervision of the Holy Spirit and constant prayer, study of the Word, and discipline of the individual Christian. But soon we find we can’t live without it. We hunger more for virtue than for vice.”

The key to holiness is learning to think like Jesus, to see the world as He sees it. We take on a Christian worldview, so that we see through the empty messages of our culture and live in God’s reality. If we absorb the cultural messages of the media today, we’ll think that the purpose of life is to fulfill all our selfish desires as quickly as possible. In pursuing the path of holiness, we will learn to see the shallowness of our culture and live for something much greater. We will live for loving and serving others.

I’ve witnessed the amazing things that transpire when believers are intentionally disciplined in close community. A program called InnerChange Freedom Initiative is an intense discipling strategy in which prisoners participate in 18 months of daily spiritual boot camp. Together they go to devotions, meals, classes, work projects, and Bible studies. There is no television nor are there other distractions. There is such strong bonding during this time that some have actually turned down parole in order to stay in the program!

Holiness is our own personal purity of life, but it is also how we influence our culture and the world. We should show God’s love and justice to those around us. William Wilberforce who, in the 18th century, was a man whose passion for social holiness drove him to work tirelessly to abolish the slave trade in England. Or as William Booth—the founder of the Salvation Army—did. He was drawn to help the masses of homeless find hope and live healthy, self-sustaining lives. Like these individuals and so many others who have paved the way, Christians are to live holy lives so that we can bring God’s love, justice, and righteousness to the culture in which we live.

The Sanctity of Life

When we learn to see from God’s perspective, we will be driven to care for the needy and voiceless and to also defend the sanctity of all human life. We will be committed to a new vision for our world that protects the dignity and the inestimable and sacred value of every human being. Ever since the early Church, Christians have defended the defenseless and provided for those in need because they view every life as precious, made in the image of God. Christians have taken a countercultural stance over the centuries and have led various social movements, such as women’s rights, the abolition of slavery, and the struggle against AIDS. A commitment to the sanctity of life is why I have spent three decades bringing the message of the gospel to prisoners, the most marginalized and forgotten people of our culture.

My daughter has sacrificed much for her son Max, who suffers from autism. The challenges they face as a family can be overwhelming. And yet, she will tell you that Max is a blessing, a source of great joy in her life. And so many other parents of disabled children share the same feeling. Why? *“It’s because, whether they know it or not, they are doing God’s work...God gives special anointing to those who care for others—even to those who don’t believe in the God who is blessing their actions. The disabled and the poor end up being God’s gifts to us, for they present opportunities to serve our common Creator.”*

Peter Singer is one of the most outspoken advocates for utilitarian ethics today. He posits that infanticide and euthanasia are good for society because they free up resources so that the majority can be happy. If human life is not ultimately valuable, his argument is logical. And yet most people would feel uncomfortable promoting such practices. We seem to know inherently that every life has value.

“What could be more crucial than whether the worth of a life comes from being created in the image of God or from its usefulness to society?”

Last Things

Christianity teaches that Christ will return someday, in glory and power to make everything new and establish His rule on earth. In my work with prisoners on death row, I have encountered some who are repentant and some who continue to rationalize their actions and have no remorse, no repentance for the horrific wrongs they have done to others. Christians argue over the justice of the death penalty in such cases, but no matter which way you fall on that issue, we all have a deep sense that justice must be done. That wrongs must be righted in the end.

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This desire for true justice~things being made right and fair~I believe is great evidence for the existence of God and for the moral law He has engraved on our hearts.

“How could we possibly live with the unfairness of this world if we did not have a belief that at some point the accounts will be reckoned?”

The concept of biblical *shalom* is what the kingdom of God is based upon. *Shalom* means “peace”~both the absence of war and strife, and the establishment of harmony and fairness. *Justice* means provision for the poor, retribution for wrongdoing, and prosperity for all. Our desire for such a world is a foreshadowing of what will someday come true~it is a taste, a longing for eternity.

So too is our ability to love others deeply and enduringly. Human hope leads us to believe that love should be eternal. Eternal love comes from God alone, and in our love for others we imitate that. Part of the gloriousness of the resurrection is that because Jesus conquered death, we too can live forever. And in living forever, we will be reunited with those we love who have gone before us. Christians believe that death is not the end; it is the beginning of our new, perfected life in heaven. Anyone who freely chooses faith in God will be welcomed into His kingdom. Jesus will someday rule over all.

The Joy of Orthodoxy

“True Christianity is a logical and coherent explanation of reality.”

So why do people complain that Christian faith and doctrine is lifeless and boring? Perhaps we have failed to teach clearly what faith is~it is a complete worldview, a way to see all of life. In addition, I believe that as a culture we are far too self-absorbed and materialistic. We are blinded to what is truly important. We are the richest nation on earth, and yet the most depressed and miserable. When I visit churches in developing countries, I find an incredible joy. The people have found great happiness in their faith because there are no false gods to distract them. They have given their whole lives to the gospel, whereas we are still trying to squeeze in a little faith while staying comfortable in our culture. We fear offending anyone with a faith that is radical.

“Some younger evangelicals and the emerging-church movement, when they shy away from truth claims, are reacting to stereotypes, and so rather than preaching or taking strong positions, they basically want to start a conversation, hoping somebody discovers Jesus.” And yet we are called to a radical Christianity~our roots are bold and countercultural. Orthodox faith is transformational, in individual lives and in culture. All religions are not alike! ***“Truth is an exclusive claim, after all.”***

“To the liberal mind, choice is more important than truth.”

There is great joy in living an orthodox Christian life. There is nothing greater than to know you are part of the great historical movement of God. That you are part of His work of transforming lives and cultures with His truth and love. A strong faith is what will sustain us through times of crisis and challenge. Knowing God and having His Spirit within us will give us an anchor to cling to in times of doubt and pain and struggle. Orthodox living is what leads to righting wrongs, and bringing justice to society, and liberating the down-trodden. True faith is what brings true freedom.

The Great Proposal

Christianity was an indisputable force in the formation of Western civilization. Christian principles are its foundation. Parliamentary democracy has its roots in the election process for abbots of Benedictine monasteries. The ideals of capitalism and the scientific revolution both derived from Christians who were leaders in their fields of inquiry. The first universities were founded by Christians, and they fueled the beginnings of public education. As discussed before, many advocates for human freedoms and rights based their actions on a deep Christian faith.

“The orthodox faith is the one source that can renew Western culture. Why? Because the faith teaches how God can change humanity, and faithful Christians have demonstrated time and again this truth.”

What is the enemy of Western culture today? It is “islamo-fascism,” the extreme radical movement of Islam, a religion that is blind~not informed by or supported by reason. Our culture leans toward reason without faith~which leads to chaos. Islamic faith, which is faith without reason, leads only to tyranny.

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“This is why orthodoxy matters, for a renewal and strengthening of the orthodox Christian faith can provide not only joy and meaning for Christians but a bulwark of sanity and reason against barbarism.”

While we continue to respect and find hope in moderate Muslim leaders, we recognize that both violence and an oppressive culture are inherent parts of the Muslim faith. A Christian worldview alone can put an end to the decay of cultures by providing renewal and regeneration for all people. G.K. Chesterton writes that Christians can be agents of change because of their balanced viewpoint. They know that the world is fallen and that it needs much fixing, but they also know that God is omnipotent and sovereign, and therefore He can restore all things.

“The Gospel is the great proposal: Come to the wedding feast, one and all...the promise He holds out to individuals and nations alike ... a Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy forever in the Holy Spirit.”

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