

1. Contending for the Faith

Aim: To encourage us to stand firm for the faith.

Discuss: We live in a world where there is much confusion when it comes to spiritual truth. How many different religions and cults are you aware of? [discuss] Do you know the difference between what the Bible says and what others believe? What experiences have you had in this area? Can you use the Bible to stand firm for the truth and refute error? This series of studies will endeavour to help you in this.

Example of Martin Luther

In 1521, during the Reformation, Martin Luther was questioned by the Catholic authorities before the emperor in regard to his teaching (which they called heresy). He was called to recant, but instead, he said:

Unless I am convinced by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments that I am in error—for popes and councils have often erred and contradicted themselves—I cannot withdraw, for I am subject to the Scriptures I have quoted; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. It is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. So help me God."

What do you think of Luther's stand, even in the face of possible death? What did he stand on?

Luther stood firmly on the Word of God. He was convinced of its absolute authority and truth, and was able to use it to reveal the serious errors that had come into the church. The Emperor later on said "How can a single monk [Luther] be right and the testimony of a thousand years of Christendom be wrong?" The fact is, he stood on the Word of God; Christendom had replaced the Word of God with the words of men.

Considering the Scriptures

What did the Holy Spirit lay on the heart of Jude? (Jude 3)

He laid on Jude's heart the need for him to compel fellow believers to "contend for the faith". *Contend* means "to make a strenuous effort in" or "to struggle for". We are called to put all our effort into making sure the faith is upheld. To uphold the faith means to stand for the truth of the faith.

Why did Jude have this concern? (Jude 4)

He knew that there were many false teachers around who did not teach the truth, and who sought to mislead others from the faith. Jude says "they have crept in unnoticed", indicating how they subtly work. We need to be aware of this, and to contend for the truth. What is at stake if we don't (read 1 Tim 4:16)?

Are we to contend for the many aspects of our faith equally? (1 Cor 15:3-4; Rom 14:1-4)

We need to distinguish between the essential truths of the faith and the non-essentials. When it comes to the essentials, we must "contend for them". When it comes to the non-essentials, we must learn to live in peace.

What are some of the essentials of the faith, for which we should contend for?

Eg: Jesus: His divinity and humanity, His substitutionary sacrifice, His bodily resurrection, His return
Salvation: by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ - not by good deeds or keeping the law, etc

Bible: inspired of God, authoritative and inerrant - not to be added to or taken away from, etc.

What are some non-essentials of the faith that we should not "contend for" (Rom 14:5, 14-19)

Eg: the day of the week we worship, whether we should eat meat or not, etc. In such cases, we are responsible to work out what our belief is from a Biblical view, but we must also remember to bear with one another and maintain the peace (Rom 14:19).

Consider Ephesians 4:11-13. What is the result when the teaching gifts are used properly?

God's people are built up (encouraged) and made mature in Christ. This includes growing in the knowledge of the faith and of the Son of God, so that they are no longer tossed about by false doctrines, and by the trickery of men. Instead, they can be like Luther, standing firm on the Word of God.

Are we growing in the faith? Are we teachable? Are we grasping God's truth more and more?

How are we to "contend for the faith" when it comes to essentials? (Ephesians 4:15; 1 Peter 3:15)

We are not to "contend for the faith" in a rude and arrogant way. Instead, we are to speak the truth in love, and we are to treat people with gentleness and respect. Be firm and uncompromising, but gentle and loving.

Application: We need to be able to discern error and refute it, and to have the confidence to share the truth with others. But do we really know the truth sufficiently? Do you read and study the Bible regularly/daily? Only then will we not be tossed about, and we will be able to contend for the faith.

Summary: Let us know God's Word so that we may be able to "contend for the faith".

2. The Truth about Jesus (Part 1)

Aim: To help us know the truth about the divinity of Jesus Christ.

Discuss: The religions of the world, and the cults, all go wrong when it comes to Jesus. Many people in our society have a wrong view of Him as well. They may have some things right, but what do they have wrong about Him? [discuss]

The Bible tells us that many "stumble" over Jesus (see 1 Peter 2:6-8); they fail to see who He really is. What would you declare about Jesus if someone asked you about what you believe about Him? [get people to share] Would you be able to back up what you say through verses in the Bible? Christians declare Jesus to be divine – let us consider why we say this.

Jesus' Divinity

What do we learn from John 1:1-2? [The "Word" is a title for Jesus, as John 1:14 makes clear] The Greek literally says "the Word was with the God, and the Word was God". The use of "the" is important. The first part of the phrase is telling us that Jesus was with "the God" (ie, with the Father). However, "the" doesn't appear in the second half; for good reason. This is telling us that Jesus was not "the God" (ie, not the Father), but was God in the sense of His nature and character.

How does John 1:3 confirm the truth in John 1:1 that Jesus is God?

It plainly tells us that Jesus is the Creator of all things – this automatically makes Him God.

What do the following verses confirm about Jesus?

Phil 2:6 Jesus has the same form or nature as God, so much so, that He could have grasped equality with God the Father, but He chose not to.

Heb 1:3 Jesus is exactly like God; absolutely identical in nature.

Col 2:9 Jesus lacks nothing that God the Father has – He is 100% divine

John 14:8-10 Jesus can say "if you've seen me, you've seen the Father"

Isaiah 9:6 This prophecy confirms the divinity of Jesus; consider the titles being given to Jesus

What do we learn about Jesus from Colossians 1:15-17?

He is the visible image of the invisible God (the Father), the Creator of all, and the Sustainer of all – thereby making Him God. Jesus is called the "firstborn"; this word can refer either to birth order or to priority in importance (eg, David was the last born to Jesse, but the firstborn in Psa 89:27). In verse 15, "firstborn" clearly refers to Jesus as having pre-eminence over all things, as verse 16 explains.

Who is worshipped in Rev 4:8-9, Rev 5:9-12, and Rev 5:13? What does this indicate?

God the Father is worshipped, as well as Jesus (the Lamb), and they are worshipped equally. Yet, only God is to be worshipped, indicating Jesus' divinity.

Consider Rev 1:8 and Rev 22:12-13,16. Who spoke these words? What does this show?

Both the Father (in 1:8) and Jesus (in 22:12-13) declare themselves to be "the Alpha and Omega". This is a divine title using the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to refer to how God is eternal; no beginning and no end. Since Jesus used this title, it shows that He is eternal (and therefore, divine). Consider also Micah 5:2 – what does this say about Jesus' origins?

Some argue that Jesus is a mighty angel. Read Hebrews 1:5-14. Is this so?

Definitely not! Jesus is far superior to all the angels. Indeed, He is their Creator (Col 1:16) and the object of their worship (Rev 5:11-12)

Some argue that Jesus was a prophet only. Is this so? (consider John 8:58; 17:5)

Unlike any prophet, Jesus existed before He was born. He was around when Abraham walked this earth. He was with the Father before there was a world. He also often used the divine phrase "I am" for Himself.

What do we read in 1John 5:20 as John nears the end of his letter?

He affirms that Jesus is the true God, as well as eternal life.

In John 20:26-29, what confession is given to Jesus? Did Jesus correct Him?

Thomas said to Jesus "My Lord and my God". Jesus didn't correct Thomas, for what he said was absolutely right, and He made it clear that all who come to this same belief are truly blessed.

Application: Would you be able to show someone the key verses in the Bible that clearly declare Jesus' divinity? Unless we can, we cannot adequately "CONTEND FOR THE FAITH".

Summary: Jesus is God and is to be worshipped as God, together with the Father.

3. The Truth about Jesus (Part 2)

Aim: To confirm the essential truths about the person, life and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Discuss: Besides the deity of Christ, religions, cults and people of the world also attack many aspects of Jesus' life and what He did? Can you name some of the things people attack or deny? [eg, the miracles, the purpose of His death, His resurrection, etc]. Are you biblically able to counter attacks on the Lord?

Jesus Christ was fully human

Some claim that Jesus was divine, but that He wasn't really human. Look up the following verses.

John 1:14; 1 John 4:2 Jesus came in the "flesh"; ie, He became human.

Hebrews 2:14 All humans share in "flesh and blood"; Jesus also took on our "flesh and blood".

Matt 8:24; Matt 4:2-4; John 19:28; Luke 22:44 Jesus suffered from tiredness, hunger, thirst, temptation, anguish and pain, showing us that He was truly human.

Why should we affirm the humanity of Jesus Christ? (1 John 4:2, Heb 2:14-15)

It is heresy not to believe that Jesus came in the flesh, and besides, Jesus had to become a human, otherwise He would never have been able to represent us and die for us; our salvation was dependent on it.

Jesus' Miracles

Why should we affirm Jesus' miracles? What was the purpose of them? (John 2:11, 3:2, 20:30-31)

They were a sign to point people to who Jesus truly is, and so that people may believe in Him.

The prophets did miracles as well. What distinguishes Jesus from the prophets?

(cf. Lk 7:12-14; 1 Kings 17:19-22)

The prophets had to call on the Lord to do miracles, whereas Jesus could do them by His own authority (subject to the will of His Father), showing that He was far greater than the prophets; indeed, He is God.

Jesus' Death

What are some of the (wrong) reasons given by people as to why Jesus died?

[He was executed for challenging the authorities; He wanted to give us an example of sacrificial love]

Consider the following verses: what do they tell us about Jesus death?

John 10:17-18 18:4-8 Jesus freely laid down His life for us; it was not taken from Him by force

Acts 2:23 God had fore-ordained Jesus' death; it was God's plan

What special thing occurred while Jesus was dying? (Isa 53:6; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24, 3:18)

God the Father placed our sins on Him. He was the only perfect one, without sin, yet He became sin for us.

Why were our sins placed on Jesus? (Isa 53:5; Romans 3:25-26; 1 John 2:2, 4:10)

Our sins were placed on Jesus, in order that He might bear the punishment or penalty for them. The wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), and Jesus paid that penalty through dying and shedding His blood (Heb 9:22) for us. As a result, God can justly forgive us of our sins when we trust in Jesus (1 John 1:9).

NB: The word "propitiation" is used in some verses and in older translations; it means "to turn aside God's wrath". Jesus' death made it possible for God's wrath against our sin to be averted from us.

What great declaration did John the Baptist make about Jesus? (John 1:29)

Jesus was the Lamb of God (God's Lamb or God's sacrifice), given purposefully to take away our sins. Like how lambs were sacrificed in the Old Testament so that people could be forgiven of their sins, Jesus was God's Lamb, by which we can be truly and fully forgiven (Heb 10:1-4, 11-14).

Jesus' Resurrection

Many say that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Does it matter? (1 Cor 15:12-19)

It greatly matters; if Jesus did not rise from the dead then we are still in our sins and heading for hell. Christ's resurrection was essential so that we might stand justified (right) before God (Rom 4:25).

What convinces you that the Resurrection truly happened?

[Many eye-witnesses – 1 Cor 15:5-8; Jesus appeared in various places, at various times, to various people; the tomb was empty; the final proof will be when He returns]

Application: The life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus clearly confirms that He is God's Son and our only Saviour from our sins. If we should fail to contend for who the Lord is, then He will be reduced to nothing more than another religious leader – but He's God and our only Saviour.

Summary: It is of the greatest importance that we declare the true Lord Jesus (1 Cor 15:3-4)

4. Salvation and the role of grace, faith and works

Aim: To affirm the role of grace, faith and works in salvation.

Discuss: A core belief of our Christian faith that is undermined or denied by almost every religion is that of salvation – how are we saved? And specifically, what is the role of faith and works? If God asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say? [discuss]

What is salvation?

What does the Bible mean when it speaks of a person being "saved"? (Rom 5:6-10)

Although "salvation" has many different aspects, one of the central actions is that we are saved from our sins and God's just punishment for them. This is why Jesus died and rose again (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

What are some of the ways the Bible speaks of our salvation? [discuss]

Salvation also involves being: justified – being declared right before God (Rom 5:1); reconciled – having peace with God (Rom 5:10); redeemed (Eph 1:7); born from above (John 3:3) / born of God (1 John 4:7); receiving forgiveness (Acts 2:38) and eternal life (John 3:16); being united to Christ (Rom 6:3-5). These are not actions we do, but actions God does to and for us out of His great love for us.

What are we like before we are saved? How does God view us? (Eph 2: 1-3, Rom 3:10-12)

Before we are saved, we are dead in our sins, dead towards God and under God's wrath. We were slaves to sin, did not seek God and were unable to please God in any way (Rom 8:6-8).

How is a person saved?

On what basis does God save us? (Eph 2:4-9)

The Bible makes it clear that it is entirely by God's grace that we are saved – that is, by his unmerited and undeserved favour. There is nothing good in us to merit His favour and we've done nothing to deserve it. What we deserve is His just punishment, but out of His great love, His salvation comes as a free gift.

Can we do anything to earn our salvation? (Eph 2:8-9, Rom 3:27-28, Titus 3:4-7)

Absolutely not! Our salvation is not on the basis of works, but comes as a gift entirely of God's grace, so that no-one can boast - all the glory goes to God alone. Even if it were possible to live a perfect life from this point on (which it isn't!), God still needs to deal with our past sins which we cannot undo.

How do we receive God's gift of salvation and eternal life? (Eph 2:8, John 3:36)

We receive God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus and His saving work. Jesus is the object of our faith. Because Jesus died for our sins, God can declare us to be in the right and offer eternal life because He has transferred our penalty to Jesus. Faith is the hand that reaches out and accepts the gift He offers.

What about in the OT? Was salvation received through faith, or by keeping the law? (Rom 4:1-5)

Salvation has always been by faith in God and what He has revealed, even with Abraham. However, in the NT, the object of our faith has been more clearly revealed – Jesus and His work at Calvary.

Does "faith" or "belief" mean knowing the facts about Jesus and agreeing with them?

Believing involves having right knowledge, but agreeing with facts is not enough (James 2:19). True faith involves personal trust/reliance on Jesus to save us, and results in action - submitting our life to Him.

Where does obedience or good works fit in?

Where do good works and obedience fit into the Christian life? (Eph 2:8-10, John 14:15)

Good works are the result of our salvation, not the cause of it. We obey God because we love Him, not because we want Him to love us. Works are the fruit of what God has already done within us, and we do them out of gratitude for what He has done for us. What is your motivation for obeying God?

Can we be saved without good works? (Eph 2:8-10, John 14:15, James 2:14-26)

James makes it clear that faith without works is dead (2:17). True faith doesn't just reside in the head, but shows itself in obedience. If there is no fruit, we must question whether we have saving faith.

What does James mean when he says we are justified by works? (James 2:24)

"To justify" has several meanings. It can either mean (a) to declare or make someone to be in the right (eg God justifies us), or (b) to prove or demonstrate that a person is (already) in the right (eg to justify yourself (Luke 10:29)). It is clear from the context that James has the second meaning in mind – good works prove that our faith is real and that we are truly right with God. Does your faith show itself in obedience and good works?

Summary: We are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus. Praise God for His amazing grace.

5. Salvation – other truths about our great salvation

Aim: To deepen our understanding about our great salvation in the Lord Jesus.

Discuss: Last week we considered God's salvation and the role of grace, faith and works. What are some other aspects of our salvation that people undermine, deny or add to? *Discuss.* [eg the role of repentance, whether baptism is required to be saved, the completeness of Jesus' sacrifice, etc].

Our role in salvation

God saves us by His grace, out of His great love for us. But we are not completely passive in the process. What is our role in being saved? (Mark 1:14-15, Acts 20:18-21, Rom 1:16-17).

In order to receive God's gift of salvation, we must (a) "repent" and (b) "believe" in the gospel (that is, have faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour).

What is repentance? Is it a work we do? [discuss] (Acts 3:19, Acts 26:20)

Repentance is not a work we do, nor a new leaf we turn over, nor even just feeling sorry (2 Cor 7:10). To "repent" means to turn back to God. It refers to an inner change of heart about our sin and a commitment to turn back to God. Changed behaviour is the fruit of repentance, not repentance itself (Luke 3:8).

What does it mean to believe or have faith in Jesus? (Rom 10:9-10, 1 Cor 15:1-4, John 3:36)

Believing in Jesus includes believing that He is the Son of God, trusting in Him as our only Saviour who died for our sins and rose again and submitting our life to Him out of love for Him. True faith results in obedience to Christ – faith that does not produce obedience is dead (James 2:17). Note the link between faith and obedience in John 3:36 – the one who does not obey shows he does not have saving faith.

Do you have to be baptised with water to be saved? (Acts 2:37-38, Acts 16:31, 1 Peter 3:21-22).

Absolutely not! While water baptism is closely connected to conversion in the NT, it occurs after a person has come to faith in Christ (note the birth of faith in Acts 2:37 before Peter's call to be baptised). Faith in Jesus is the key, not baptism (eg John 3:16, John 3:36; Acts 16:31). If water baptism was required for salvation, it would become a work we must do, which the Bible rules out (eg Eph 2:8-9).

Are there any examples which show that water baptism is not required for salvation? [discuss]

Eg: The thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43); Cornelius received the Spirit before baptism (Acts 10:43-48).

The completeness of our salvation

How complete is Jesus' sacrifice for our sins? (Heb 7:24-27, 9:12, 1 Peter 3:18)

When Jesus died for our sins, He died once for all. His perfect sacrifice was sufficient to cover all past, present and future sins. No further sacrifices or offerings are required.

Do we have to wait until judgement day to be sure that God will accept us? (Rom 5:1, 5:9-11)

The Bible confirms that we have already been "justified" or "declared right" by faith in Christ. We receive Christ's righteousness through faith in Him, and God's verdict of "Not guilty" on Judgement Day is now declared to us in the present so that we have full assurance of our standing before God.

Is our salvation under threat when we sin? What should we do? (1 John 1:8-9)

Since we still battle with the sinful nature, Christians still sin, but we sense conviction now when we do. Since Jesus has paid the penalty for all our sins, no further payment is required. What God wants is for us to "own up" and confess our sin with a sincere heart. And when we do, He will forgive and cleanse us.

What is the danger of trying to add to what Jesus has done? (Gal 1:6-9, Gal 2:16, 2:21-3:4)

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul writes against those who insist that circumcision must be added to faith in Jesus for salvation. Paul says that to try to add anything to the work of Christ is to believe a different gospel, since it implies that Jesus' death was not completely sufficient, and therefore, Christ died for nothing. Whoever adds to "faith alone" for salvation is accursed, and those who follow it do so in vain.

Our salvation has been accomplished in full, but have we received it in full? [discuss]

The Bible speaks of our salvation as past, present and future – we have been saved (Eph 2:8), are being saved (1 Cor 1:18) and shall be saved (Rom 5:9-10). Jesus accomplished our salvation in full in His death and resurrection, but we live in the "now-but-not-yet". We experience salvation now, but not in all its fullness until Christ returns and the new creation is ushered in (Heb 9:27-28, 1 Peter 1:3-6).

Application: Does your life show forth the fruit of true repentance and faith? Do you trust solely in Jesus for salvation and His sacrifice for your sins? Do you eagerly await the fullness of your salvation?

Summary: **Jesus has accomplished our salvation in full. Fully trust in Him and live for Him.**

6. The Bible

Aim: To help us see the Bible as the Word of the living God; inspired and authoritative.

Discuss: All that we believe in regard to the Lord Jesus and salvation is based solely on what the Bible says. As a follower of Jesus, we are basing our whole life and our eternity on the words of this book. Is this reasonable? Can we be confident that the Bible is truthful and accurate? [discuss]

Consider: *How do your non-Christian friends view the Bible? What do they think of it? What would you say to them if they asked you what the Bible is?*

On the surface, the Bible contains 66 books that were written over more than 1500 years by about 40 different authors. The first part, the Old Testament, is in Hebrew, and the second part, the New Testament, is in Greek. But the Bible is much more than just that. Look up the following verses:

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired (God-breathed) by God Himself
(that's why we call the Bible God's Word)

2 Peter 1:20-21 The Holy Spirit moved men to speak (and record) God's words

Psalms 119:160 It is truth and it is everlasting (cf. also John 17:14-17)

Isaiah 40:7-8 It endures forever (cf. Matthew 5:18, 24:35)

Hebrews 4:12 It is powerful, cutting deep into our soul (cf. Jeremiah 23:29)

Isaiah 55:10-11 It is effective and it accomplishes great things

Some say it's not right to prove the Bible by quoting from it. How can we answer this objection?

This objection is inaccurate. That's like saying you can't prove that the Prime Minister lives in the Lodge by looking into the Lodge. It is looking into the Lodge that will provide the necessary proof. In the same way, as we look into the Bible we will see the proof to believe it to be God's Word.

What proofs are there that the Bible is true and reliable, and that it is the Word of God?

Fulfilled prophecies – eg, the many fulfilled prophecies concerning Jesus (Gen 3:15; Isa 7:14, 9:1-7, 53:1-9; Micah 5:2; Isa 53:1-9, etc), the fulfilled prophecies of nations and peoples (eg, Isa 13:1ff), and the present fulfilling of the end time prophecies (2 Timothy 3:1-5) before the coming of Jesus
Jesus quoting the Bible – eg, Jesus often said "it is written" (cf. Matt 4:3-10), confirming the Old Testament scriptures; He even acknowledged the human author, at times (Matt 19:4-8), and quotes right back to Genesis 2

Archeology – archeological discoveries that verify various places that the Bible speaks about (eg, the discovery of Sodom and Gomorrah, when it was considered that these cities were fictitious)

History – other books give proof that what the Bible says did happen (eg, the writings of Josephus confirm that Jesus existed, that He died, and was reportedly raised from the dead)

Consistency – anyone who reads the Bible finds that it is one amazing consistent story about what God has done to bring us back to Himself through His Son Jesus Christ – it reads as one book

Accuracy – the Bible accurately addresses our human predicament of sin and death, and gives us the reason for these things, and what God has done to rescue us (no other religious book does this)

Changed life – many have read the Bible and been completely transformed after giving themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ, who the Bible points us to

Some argue that there was more revelation given after the last book of the Bible was written (eg, Muslims and Mormons claim this). Is this true? (Hebrews 1:1-2; Revelation 22:18-19)

No! Jesus and His apostles completed God's revelation to us (cf. Ephesians 2:19-20). We do not believe the claims of other religious groups that more extra-Biblical revelation was given.

Some claim the Bible cannot be trusted as it has contradictions. How should we answer?

The Bible has many *seeming* contradictions, but many can be harmonised. For example, there are four differing accounts as to what was written on the sign above the cross. However, there is no contradiction if the full message read: "This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews." Note: Many who claim the Bible is full of contradictions have not read the Bible for themselves; we ought to encourage them to do that.

Application: The Bible has stood the test of time; it has survived from ancient times by being copied and preserved, it has survived edicts for its destruction, and it has survived severe criticism. It still remains as the book that has been copied more times than any other, translated into more languages than any other, and read more than any other. It has had a profound effect upon more people than any other.

Summary: The Bible is God's Word. Do we read it, live by it, and heed it? (Psalm 19:7-11)

7. Contending for the Faith against Jehovah Witnesses (Part 1)

Aim: To affirm the truths of the Christian faith against the teaching of Jehovah Witnesses.

Discuss: Jehovah Witnesses claim to hold to the teaching of the Bible. In some areas, they believe the same as Christians, but in many other areas, they do not. What has been your experience of Jehovah Witnesses, and what areas have you found they differ to your understanding of the Bible? [discuss]

NB: JW's use their own Bible (the New World Translation) which has been altered to suit their beliefs.

The person of Jesus

Jehovah Witnesses deny that Jesus is divine. They believe that He is the highest of God's angels (Michael, the archangel), the first creature ever created. How would you answer? [discuss]

- John 1:1, Col 2:9, Heb 1:3: Jesus is truly divine. **Note:** The JW Bible incorrectly changes John 1:1 to read "...and the Word was a god."
- Micah 5:2: Jesus is eternal (ie, uncreated). Col 1:16: All things (no exceptions) have been created by Him. **Note:** The JW Bible has been altered to read: "by Him all *other* things were created".
- Heb 1:5-9, 1:13: Jesus is far higher than any angel (see also the Handout)

Does Pro 8:22 show that Jesus was created, as JW's claim? What is this verse speaking about?

Hint: Look at context. The context of chapter 8 is speaking of the Lord's "wisdom". Cf 8:1, 8:12, 9:1. Wisdom is being personified, not Jesus (note the references to "her" in 8:1-3, 8:11 – it cannot be Jesus).

Does calling Jesus "firstborn" (Col 1:15) show He was created? How would you answer?

The term "first-born" can either mean first in time, or first in rank/pre-eminence. (eg, Psalm 89:27 – see Study 2). The context of Col. 1:15-17 clearly shows pre-eminence is intended here, not first in time.

Jehovah Witnesses believe it is idolatry to worship Jesus (Isa 42:8). Are they right? [discuss]

- John 5:23, 17:5. The Father is honoured when we honour His Son, and He shares His glory with Jesus.
- Heb 1:6, Rev 5:13. Both the Father and the Son are to be worshipped.

Read John 14:28. If the Father is "greater", does this mean that Jesus is not equal with God?

No – the Bible clearly declares elsewhere that Jesus is divine. Context is important here. Jesus is speaking at a time when He had humbled Himself (Phil 2:8) and was (temporarily) made a little lower than the angels (Heb 2:9) to be our Saviour. Thus, He could speak of His Father as being "greater" in terms of position, and also comfort the disciples that He was going to His Father shortly.

What salvation is and how we obtain it

The JW's give lip service to salvation in Christ, but believe it is based on right knowledge of God and obedience to His will (ie, their works program). What does the Bible teach? (Eph 2:8-9, Rom 3:28)

The Bible makes it clear that we are made right with God through faith in Jesus, apart from any works we do so that no-one can boast. We do good works because we love God, not for God to accept us.

What biblical example/s could you give to show that a person is saved apart from works?

eg, thief on the cross (Luke 23:42-43), Philippian jailer (Acts 16:29-31).

JW's teach that Jesus' death was a ransom payment for Adam's sin to make the perfect human life that Adam lost available to the "faithful". What does the Bible say? (Isa 53:5, Rom 5:9-10, 1 Pet 2:22-24)

One of the central actions of Jesus' death was to save us from our sins and God's righteous punishment for them. Jesus was standing in our place, taking our punishment, to reconcile us back to God.

Can we have assurance of salvation in this life? (John 5:24, Rom 5:9-10, Eph 2:8).

Absolutely. If we have fully trusted in Jesus' death and resurrection for our sins, we have already passed from death to life – we "have been" saved. We can now have absolute confidence that God will accept us.

The Return of Jesus

The JW's believe that the return of Jesus happened invisibly in 1914 and He is now ruling through their Watchtower organisation. Is this possible? (Matt 24:30, 1 Thess 4:16-17, Rev 1:7).

The Bible declares that when Jesus returns, it will not be a quiet affair. It will be accompanied with a shout, the voice of the archangel, and God's trumpet will be blaring to announce His arrival. The dead will be raised. Since every eye will see Him, His return cannot be invisible.

Summary: Let us hold fast to the essential truths about Jesus and our great salvation.

Memory Verses: John 1:1-3; Col 2:9; Eph 2:8-9

NB: On the other side of this sheet is a handout from an ex-JW in helping you to witness to them (in love)

8. Contending for the Faith against Jehovah Witnesses (Part 2)

Aim: To affirm the truths of the Christian faith against the teaching of Jehovah Witnesses.

Discuss: Jehovah Witnesses often appear to know their Bible well, and can rattle us by throwing verse after verse at us that appear to back up their claims. How do you normally approach a discussion with them about your faith? *Discuss your experiences.*

The name of God

The JW's insist that you must use God's personal name when you speak to Him (which they believe is "Jehovah"). How would you answer? [discuss] Consider Matthew 6:9

Jesus taught us to call God "our Father". Jesus never used the name "Jehovah" in the Gospels, but called God "Father". If it is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for us! [NB: God's "personal" name is based on Exod 3:14; it is YHWH in the Hebrew (pronounced Ya-way) - "Jehovah" is a hybrid name]

The Trinity

The JW's deny the Trinity. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, they teach that He is just an invisible, impersonal force. Is this right? John 14:16-17, 15:26, 16:13; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 2:10-11

The Scriptures affirm that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of Jesus. He comforts, helps, speaks, guides and even knows the depths of God. He is clearly more than some impersonal force. [NB: It is unhelpful to use the word "Trinity" with JW's, since the word itself is not found in the Bible]

The bodily resurrection

The JW's deny Jesus' bodily resurrection. They believe His body became non-existent at death, and He was raised a "spirit being". How would you answer? (Luke 24:36-39, John 2:19-21, 20:25-27)

Jesus affirms before the resurrection that His body would be raised, and confirms afterwards that He was not just a "spirit" being. He can speak, eat, has hands and feet, and still bears the scars of the crucifixion.

How important is it to believe in a bodily resurrection? (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

If the dead are not raised (ie, physical resurrection), Christ was not raised, and our faith is useless. In 1 Cor 15:12, the phrase "Resurrection of the dead" literally means "resurrection of the corpses".

Does 1 Cor 15:35-44 confirm that we are raised as a "spirit" or with a new physical body?

This passage clearly confirms that we are raised with a new physical body. Even though the resurrection body is called a "spiritual" body, this doesn't mean that our body will only be spirit anymore than a "steam train" means that a train is only steam. It most likely means that our body will be "powered" and given life by the Spirit (like a steam train is powered by steam). Our resurrection body will be something like Jesus' (Phil 3:20-21), since He is the first fruits from the dead (1 Cor 15:20). His new body has both a same-ness and a radical new-ness (eg hands, feet, voice, but now imperishable, no more pain, etc).

What happens after death?

The JW's believe that upon death, a person is completely unconscious and inactive until our soul is raised at the final Judgement (known as soul sleep). What does the Bible say occurs after death?

- Luke 23:43, 2 Cor 5:6-8, Rev 6:9-10: The spirit of a believer enters the Lord's presence upon death.
- Luke 16:22-24, Rev 20:13: The spirit of an unbeliever enters Hades upon death (different to hell). Hades is a holding place for those awaiting the final judgement, and appears to include torment.
- John 5:28-29: Both believers and unbelievers await a bodily resurrection when Jesus returns, when our spirits will be reunited to a new body.
- Rev 20:11-15: For anyone whose name is not written in the book of life, hell (also known as the Lake of Fire) is the final destination for all eternity.
- 2 Pet 3:13, Rev 21:1-8: For believers, our final destination is life in a new heavens and new earth.

JW's believe (as do some Christians) that "hell" is where the unrighteous are annihilated; there is no ongoing existence. What does the Bible teach? Mark 9:47-48 (Isa 66:24); Matt 25:41,46; Rev 20:10

The Bible affirms that hell is a place of eternal punishment and eternal torment for those who refuse to submit to God's rule and believe on His Son. It is the same place that the devil will suffer forever in.

Application: Do we have a heart to reach JW's? Do we speak to them in love (Eph 4:15), with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15)? They are in need, and will perish in hell without saving faith in Jesus.

Summary: Let us hold firm to the truth of the faith, and seek to share the truth in love with JW's.

Memory Verses: 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 20:15.

9. Contending for the Faith against Mormons (Part 1)

Aim: To affirm the truths of the Christian faith against the teaching of Mormonism.

The foundation

Mormonism began in 1820 when Joseph Smith had a supposed visitation by God when he was fourteen years old. Smith was instructed not to join any of the current organised churches, but to prepare to establish God's "true" church. When Smith was seventeen, he claimed to have been visited by the angel "Moroni", who directed him to a set of gold plates engraved in "Reformed Egyptian" hieroglyphics (a language which has never been discovered). These plates contained the story of a lost tribe of Israel who migrated to America in 600BC, the ancestors to the American Indians. Smith was also given two transparent stones which enabled him to read the hieroglyphics in English, and once translated, the angel took the plates back to heaven. This translation was later printed as The Book of Mormon, and then Smith began organising the "true" church in 1830. Mormons believe that immediately after the NT period, all true believers died out until Smith was ordained by God to re-establish the true church of Jesus Christ – hence known as the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints.

If you were a Mormon, would you have any concerns about the foundation of your faith? For example, how could you verify that the Book of Mormon is true? [discuss]

When it comes to Christianity, what is our foundation? (Eph 2:19-20, 2 Tim 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20-21)
Our foundation is the Bible's testimony of who Jesus is and what He has done. We believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and absolutely truthful and reliable in what it says.

What confidence can we have in the claims of the Bible? [discuss] [Leaders: refer to Study 6]
We can have absolute confidence in the Bible and what it says – eg consider some of the following: 40 different authors and yet reads as one book, fulfilled prophecies, Jesus and the apostles quoting the OT as given by God, archeological discoveries and other historical books confirming details in the Bible....

The person of God

When it comes to God, the Mormons believe that "*As man is, God once was.*" This means:

- God the Father was previously a man in a prior existence.
- Step by step, He eventually progressed to godhood and inherited his own universe.
- God still has a body of flesh and bones, and while all-knowing and all-powerful, cannot be all-present.
- There are an infinite number of gods with their own worlds - these too were previously men.

In other words, God is an exalted man.

In what ways does this contradict what the Bible teaches about God?

- Psa 90:2, Rev 21:5-6: The Father has always been God. There was never a time when He was not.
- Mal 3:6, James 1:17: God is unchanging – He does not progress to something better over time.
- John 4:24, 1 Tim 1:17: God the Father is Spirit – He does not have a physical body.
- Isa 45:20-22, Psa 96:4-5: There are no other gods besides the Lord God.

With respect to the Father, Son & Holy Spirit, the Mormons believe:

- The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit comprise three separate and distinct gods.
- The Father is the highest, having progressed to being God of this universe (by a council of other gods), while Jesus and the Holy Spirit are His spirit children, as is Satan which makes him a brother to Jesus.
- Jesus is the first born child (which gives Him pre-eminence over the rest of creation), and Jesus received a physical body by the Father having physical relations with his earthly mother.

What does the Bible teach us about the Godhead?

- Deut 6:4: The Lord is one God, not three separate gods.
- Isa 9:6, John 1:1-3: Jesus is not a created being. He is the Creator of all and has always existed.
- Col 2:9, Heb 1:3: Jesus is identical in nature to God and lacks nothing that God the Father has.
- Matt 1:20: Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary directly by the Holy Spirit.
- Heb 9:14: The Holy Spirit is also eternal – that is, He has no beginning and no end.
- Col 1:16: Satan is no brother of Jesus – he has been created by Jesus.

Summary: Mormonism paints God as an exalted man. The true God is anything but an exalted man – he is holy, transcendent, eternal & unchanging. There is no-one like Him.

10. Contending for the Faith against Mormons (Part 2)

Aim: To affirm the truths of the Christian faith against the teaching of Mormonism.

Discuss: Mormons claim that they believe the Bible, and make out that they are the same as us. Has this been your experience? *[discuss]*

Extra-biblical revelation

The Mormons do regard the Bible as Scripture, but... they also believe the following:

- There are, in fact, four books to be regarded as Scripture – the Bible (King James only), Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price.
- The Bible is missing "*plain and precious parts*" which the other books complete.
- The President of the Mormon Church (known as "the Prophet") is God's spokesman, and all his teaching is to be accepted as scripture, as if from God's own mouth.

How should Christians respond to such claims? (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:19-20; Hebrews 1:1-2)

We believe that Jesus and His apostles completed God's revelation to us. God's revelation reached its climax through His Son, and the foundation has been laid by Jesus and the apostles & prophets. To teach new revelation is to lay another foundation, rather than build upon the one already given.

Salvation & our future

Central to the Mormon faith is the goal of progressing to being a god in the next life and inheriting and ruling over their own planet. Their catchphrase is: "*As God is, man may become*". *[discuss]*

When it comes to the next life, Mormons believe:

- All will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, except high level Mormons who commit apostasy and will be banished to "outer darkness". Some may receive punishment for a time before entering the Kingdom.
- There are three levels in the Kingdom of Heaven – the highest level is for faithful Mormons; the middle level for Mormons who have not lived up to the church's requirements, as well as other clean living religious people; the lowest level is for people who have lived unclean earthly lives.
- The ultimate reward is to qualify for the highest level, and then progress to godhood where a Mormon will rule and populate a separate planet with his wife(s).

What does the Bible teach about the next life?

- Matt 7:13-14 – Not all will enter heaven. Only a few will enter, but many will perish.
- Rev 20:10, 20:15 – "Eternal" torment awaits all whose name is not written in the Book of Life.
- Rev 21:1-8 – Ultimately, all believers will live in a new heaven and new earth, and the rest of mankind will be in the lake of fire.
- Rev 22:3 - In the new creation, believers will be serving God, not aspiring to be Him.
- Matt 22:23-30 – We will not be bound by marriage relationships in the next life.

To receive full salvation, a Mormon must enter the highest level of heaven. He does that by repenting and believing in Jesus.... plus being baptised into the Mormon church, and faithfully keeping the Mormon requirements such as abstaining from alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine; tithe and attend weekly meetings; support the Mormon prophet; and other requirements.

What does the Bible say about how we receive God's gift of salvation? (Rom 10:13, Eph 2:8-9)

The Bible makes it clear that we are saved through faith in Jesus and His saving work. Works do not earn our salvation, but are the fruit of it. Baptism doesn't save us either (eg the thief on the cross).

Mormons also believe the following false doctrines:

- The fall of man was one of the great steps taken by Adam to eternal exaltation and happiness.
- Perfectionism is possible in this life, and should be our aim.
- Mormons can redeem their dead loved ones from the grasp of Satan by being baptised on behalf of them, since baptism is regarded as the very gateway into heaven.
- Some branches of Mormonism hold to polygamy, but not all.

Summary: *What does the Bible say about such teaching? (Acts 20:28-30, 2 Peter 2:1-3)*

The Bible warns us to be on guard against false teachers. We must contend for the faith, but at the same time, reach out in love to those who have fallen prey to false teachers and will perish outside of Christ.

11. Contending for the Faith against Muslims (Part 1)

Aim: To consider the teaching of Muslims in relation to our Christian faith.

Discuss: Imagine that a Muslim family has just moved into the house next door. What would your reaction be? [*discuss*] What do you understand about the Muslim faith (known as "Islam")? [*discuss*]

Islam and its Prophet

Islam is the world's youngest major world religion (established in 622AD). It has more than 1 billion followers (1 out of 6 people). It was founded by Muhammad, who is claimed by Muslims to be the last and greatest prophet of God. He was born in 570AD in the city of Mecca. At the age of 25 Muhammad married a 40-year-old widow named Khadija. She was a very wealthy woman. Therefore, Muhammad became financially independent, and spent much of the time meditating. In 610 AD, Muhammad claimed to have received the first of many revelations through the angel Gabriel. Khadija convinced him that they were from God. The content of these revelations were recorded in the Qur'an. In 619AD Khadija died. Over the next years, Muhammad married several women. His favourite wife was A'isha. Muhammad married her when she was seven years old, and consummated the marriage when she was nine. In 622AD there was an assassination attempt on Muhammad's life. He and his followers fled to the city of Medina. Muslims celebrate this date as the beginning of Islam. Muhammad considered that this persecution was the same that Moses and Jesus faced, which encouraged him in his cause. Over the next 9 years Muhammad and his followers engaged in "holy wars" overtaking cities for the purpose of military might and the expansion of Islam. In 630AD Muhammad and his followers – 10,000 men – invaded Mecca and established it as the holy city of Islam. He became the most powerful religious and political leader in Arabia. In 632AD he died of an illness.

Compare the founder of Christianity with the founder of Islam (look up the Bible verses).

Jesus Christ

His coming was prophesied many times (eg, Gen 3:15; Isa 9:6)
 Born 4-6BC supernaturally (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:20; Luke 1:35)
 Greatest teacher (Matt 7:28-29; John 7:45-46)
 Saviour (John 1:29) and Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6)
 God's Son (Luke 4:41, 9:35, 22:70; Mat 27:54)
 Died approx 30AD by laying down His life (John 10:17-18)
 Died for a purpose; to save us from our sins (Isa 53:4-6)
 Rose again and is at the right hand of the Father (Heb 12:2)
 Coming back in power & great glory (Lk 21:25-27; Acts 1:10-11)

Muhammad

His coming was not prophesied
 Born 570AD by normal means
 Military man
 Man of war
 Prophet
 Died 632 AD from an illness
 Died without purpose
 Still dead (and in a tomb in Medina)
 Not coming back

Muslims view of Jesus

Muslims have a high regard for Jesus Christ as a prophet of God, who was sent to guide Israel with a new scripture; the Gospel. Jesus was born to Mary as the result of virginal conception; a miraculous event. To aid him in his quest, Jesus was given the ability to perform miracles. According to the Qur'an, Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad when He said, "a prophet will come after me". (Sura 61:6).

[Note: Nowhere do we find Jesus saying this in our Bible. John the Baptist said similar words when he spoke of Christ's coming; see John 1:15]

Muslims believe Jesus was neither killed nor crucified, but rather he was raised alive up to heaven (like Elijah). Another body (which was so similar to Jesus as a picture of Jesus) was crucified, but not Jesus. Jesus now occupies an inferior place in heaven. He will return to earth near the day of judgment and reign as a Muslim king for around forty years, after which he will die. Muslims will then bury him in the city of Medina in a grave left vacant beside Muhammad. Like all prophets in Islam, Jesus is considered a Muslim, as he preached for people to submit to God's will. The Qur'an states that all who regard Jesus as being Divine are 'infidels' and a special place in hell is reserved for them.

What are your thoughts on a Muslim's view of Jesus? [discuss] Who is Jesus? (Matt 16:13-17)

Like for Simon Peter, when God the Father reveals to us who Jesus is by His Spirit, we come to realise that Jesus is more than a prophet. He is God's Son (making Him one with God – John 5:18); He is the Christ (the promised Saviour); He is our God and Creator (John 1:1-3); and He is the Lord (John 20:28).

The Qur'an

The Qur'an is known as the book of Islam. Muhammad did not write down his revelations, but gave them orally. While he was alive he was God's mouthpiece. However, after his death, the Muslims compiled the Qur'an. The Qur'an is about four-fifths the length of the New Testament, is divided into 114 chapters and consists mainly of a series of short teachings.

Muhammad is not considered by Muslims to be the founder of a new religion, but the restorer of the original faith of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and the other prophets, and that the Qur'an (which came from his revelations) is the precise words of God. Muslims believe that Jews and Christians distorted the revelations God originally gave to the prophets by either altering the text, or introducing a false interpretation, whereas the Qur'an perfected God's revelation. *"This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion". Qur'an 5:4* Islam respects the Law of Moses, the psalms of David, and the four Gospels, but believes that the Qur'an supersedes these and stands alone in its authority and absoluteness. Muslims consider the Qur'an to be the greatest and final of all revelations.

What do you think a Muslim's view of the Bible is? [discuss]

They believe the Bible is a book where God's truth has been distorted and corrupted by Jews and Christians. They believe God restored the truth by giving Muhammad the final revelation, which he faithfully recorded in the Qur'an. Therefore, to a Muslim, the Bible is corrupt, but the Qur'an is truth.

What are the grounds for the Muslim's claim that the Bible is corrupt? [discuss]

It's solely based on the words of one man - Muhammad. His view of the Bible, and his supposed revelations that went into making the Qur'an, go unchallenged by a Muslim.

What is your view on the Bible? What convinces you that it is inspired and is the truth? (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19-21)

The Bible was not written by one man, but by more than 40 men and over a 1500 year period. It has amazing prophecies, and the fulfillment of prophecies, and it reads as one book, and points us to one person – the Lord Jesus.

Note: Obviously, these truths about the Bible weren't convenient for Muhammad to accept, especially in regard to what he wanted to achieve through Islam [discuss].

Consider the following contradictions between the Qur'an and the Bible:

1. The Qur'an says that Christians hold Mary as part of the Trinity (Surah 5:1160).
2. The Qur'an says a servant of Pharaoh built the Tower of Babel (Surah 28:38, 40:25). But the Bible states that the Tower of Babel was built before there were Pharaohs.
3. The Qur'an says that King Saul lead Gideon's army (Surah 2:249). The Bible makes clear that Saul was not even born at the time of Gideon's army.
4. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was not crucified. Instead the crucifixion was a scam for appearance sake (Surah 4:157).
5. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus taught people in His old age (Surah 5:110).

What do these serious contradictions indicate about the Qur'an?

They indicate that the Qur'an is not inspired like the Bible (2 Tim 3:16).

Consider the following points about the Qur'an, and look up the Bible verses and discuss:

1. Muslims believe that God does not reveal himself personally. He only has revealed his will and his will is found in the Qur'an. (cf. Exod 33:10-11, 34:5-8; John 14:8-11)
2. In Islam, "The word became a book"; in Christianity, "The Word became flesh". (John 1:1-18)
3. Muslims believe that any translation from the original Arabic is to be viewed with suspicion; only in the Arabic does the Qur'an contain fully the words and testimonies of God (cf: the Bible is translated into many languages, and if faithfully done, we believe it continues to accurately declare God's truth)
4. Muslims kiss the Qur'an, place it on their foreheads, and store it on the highest shelf in their homes (cf: the Bible is not to be worshipped, but it directs us to Jesus, so that we may believe in Him and worship Him; John 5:39-40, Luke 24:25-27)

Summary: Muslims have been blinded by Satan (2 Cor 4:4) to the truth about Jesus and His Word. May we have a heart to pray for them and reach them with the Gospel of Jesus.

12. Contending for the Faith against Muslims (Part 2)

Aim: To consider the Muslim faith in relation to our Christian faith.

Discuss: In our society we see Muslim women fully covered in their dress (called *hijab*), and we hear of terrorists that attribute their activities to the cause of Islam, and we read of countries under Sharia (Islamic) law, where people are put to death if they convert to Christianity? What is your reaction to these things? [*discuss*] Let us continue to consider the Islam faith.

Muslims view of God

Allah is the Arabic name for God, and according to Muhammad's teaching, Muslims believe the following:

1. Allah is absolutely one: The Qu'ran declares "He is God, The One and Only; God, the Eternal, Absolute; He begetteth not, nor is He begotten: And there is none like unto Him". Therefore, he is not triune, and so it is blasphemous to raise Jesus or the Holy Spirit to the level of deity.
2. Allah is absolutely sovereign, to the point of determinism; that is, he causes people to do good and he causes people to do evil, and Muslims must bow to and accept everything as being God's will. For example, a Christian who was converted from Islam gives the following testimony: "Our father used to say, "If you fall and break your leg, say, 'Allah wills it,' because he caused it to happen."
3. Allah is absolutely unknowable: He is not a personal god, offering a personal relationship to those who follow him. For Muslims, Allah is distant and beyond reach. He is beyond the understanding of man so that only his will may be revealed and known.
4. Allah is absolutely the judge; he will reward all good and punish all evil. He is not gracious and forgiving, or kind and loving. He is not "a father" and is not to be addressed as "Father".

Is Allah the same as our God? What does the Bible declare about our God? [look up the verses]

1. God is one (Deut 6:4), yet we also know that there is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are all divine (Matt 28:19; John 1:1; 2 Cor 3:17), and who are one (John 10:30; 14:8-11); indeed, in glory the Father and the Son are worshipped together (Rev 5:13).
2. God is sovereign (Psalm 103:19; Dan 4:34-35), but He never causes anyone to do evil, nor does He tempt anyone (James 1:13-14). However, He can use evil to accomplish His purposes (Acts 2:22-23).
3. God is absolutely knowable; we may not know Him fully, but we can know Him and walk with Him (consider Gen 5:21-24; Exod 33:10-11; Phil 3:7-11). We can know God because we have been made in His image (Gen 1:26-27), and because God has reconciled us to Himself through His Son (2 Cor 5:18), after we had sinned and had become His enemies (Rom 5:8-11; Eph 2:13). Indeed, Jesus declared that eternal life is knowing God (John 17:3).
4. God is absolute judge, but when we turn to Jesus for salvation, we become a child of God (1 John 3:1-2; Rom 8:15-16). God becomes our Father ("Abba Father"), and no longer just our judge. But to those who do not believe in Jesus, they will find God to be their judge only.

Clearly, Allah is not the same as the God of the Bible.

The Islamic way

There are five pillars in the Islamic faith that form the framework for the Muslims' life and discipline. Successful and satisfactory adherence to the pillars satisfies the will of Allah, and forms the basis for the Muslim's hope for salvation along with faith in Allah's existence, the authority of Muhammad as a prophet, and the finality and perfection of the Qur'an. These five pillars are non-negotiable. They are:

1. The Confession of Faith (Shahada)

This is the declaration that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet. It must be held until death, and repudiation of the Shahada nullifies hope for salvation. These are the first words a Muslim baby hears upon being born. A Muslim is commanded to repeat the creed multiple times everyday of his or her life. If at all possible, these are the last words a Muslim is to hear before dying.

2. Prayer (Salat)

Muslims are required to pray five times each day – before sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, sunset, and prior to sleep. Praying involves several positions, at least one of which involves kneeling with the forehead to the ground. They must face Mecca when praying. Muslims are required to go through certain cleansing rituals such as washing out the mouth and nostrils before prayer. Praying in a mosque is 25 times greater than praying at home or elsewhere. Prayer is an expression of submission to the will of Allah.

3. *Almsgiving (Zakat)*

Every Muslim is required to give 1/40th of his income. It comes in the way of a tax that is used to care for the poor, carry on religious warfare, maintain mosques and spread Islam. By doing so, the Muslim's remaining wealth is purified.

4. *Fasting (Sawm)*

Every Muslim is required to fast during Ramadan, June/July (the holy month commemorating the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad). During sunrise to sunset there is no smoking, eating, drinking or sexual intercourse (what happens in between sunset and sunrise is another matter).

5. *Pilgrimage (Hajj)*

All Muslims, who are economically and physically able, are required to journey to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, and they must circle the Ka'aba stone seven times, each time kissing the sacred black rock (which is thought to be a meteorite). The Ka'aba is the holiest site of Islam. Muhammad taught that it was the original place of worship for Adam and where Abraham was commanded by Allah to offer Ishmael as a sacrifice (our Bible states that Abraham was commanded by God to offer up Isaac, and this was near Jerusalem, at Mount Moriah – Gen 22:2; 2 Chron 3:1).

What is the basis of salvation for a Muslim?

One becomes a Muslim by repeating the Shahada, but whether or not one actually goes to heaven is dependent on how well a person has kept the five pillars. Salvation is purely based on works. Because of this, they can have no assurance of salvation.

What is the basis of salvation for a Christian? (Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-5)

Salvation is a free gift of God which we receive when we put our faith in God's Son Jesus as our Saviour and Lord (John 1:12-13, 3:16) It is not at all based on works (Rom 3:20, 28), but on what the Lord Jesus did for us (Isa 53:5-6). As a result, we can have assurance of salvation (John 3:36, 5:24; 1 John 5:11-13).

Other matters in regard to the Muslim faith

Various groups: There are two major branches of Islam. The minority, known as Shi'ites (15%), believe that religious leaders should be political rulers, while the majority of Muslims, known as Sunnis (85%), believe that politics and religion should be kept separate.

Jihad: The term jihad or "struggle" is regarded by some as a physical struggle, and by others as a spiritual struggle. Those who see "jihad" as a physical struggle enforce the Qur'an's permission to slay those who oppose Islam on the promise that Paradise awaits those who die fighting for this cause. For such Muslims, the more they follow the Qur'an the more murderous they become and the more terror they spread.

In contrast, what should happen to a Christian, the more he follows the Bible? Matt 5:43-48

He should become more loving, praying for his enemies; not killing them. Cf. Matt 5:9, 26:47-52

Women: Islam has a low view of women. Males are considered superior to women. Muhammad considered women genetically and legally inferior to men. He went so far as to say that most of the people in hell would be women. Women must cover themselves for modesty, and not make eye contact with a man. A man has the right to divorce his wife; the wife has no similar power.

What does the Bible teach about women? (Gal 3:28, 1 Peter 3:7)

Women are joint heirs with men and are equal to men. We have differing roles, but we are equal. Indeed, in Genesis 2:18-24, God didn't make Eve inferior to Adam, but his complement and partner.

Sin: The most serious sin is considering Allah to be more than one (they consider Christians guilty of this). Original sin is viewed as a "lapse" by Adam. Man is considered weak and forgetful but not as fallen.

According to the Bible what is the most serious sin? (Matthew 12:31-32)

The most serious sin (the unforgivable sin) is blaspheming the Holy Spirit. This is to deny the Spirit's testimony that Jesus is God's Son; that He is divine. Muslims commit this sin by their wrong view of Jesus.

Final Judgment: The world will be judged at the end of time by Allah. The good deeds and obedience of all people to the five pillars and the Qur'an will serve as the basis of judgment.

According to Rev 20:11-15 what is the basis of judgment?

The basis of judgment is whether we had our name in the Book of Life or not, and this is determined by whether we put our faith in Jesus or not. If we didn't, we shall be condemned. If we did, we shall be saved.

Summary: Islam is founded on one man's word – Muhammad. Sadly, he has deceived many to not believe in God's Word, the Bible, and to not accept Jesus to be the Son of God, and our only Saviour.

13. Contending for the Faith against Buddhism

Aim: To consider Buddhism in relation to our Christian faith.

Discuss: What do you know about Buddhism? Why are many drawn to it? [*discuss*]

Introduction: There are presently over 650 million followers of Buddhism. It was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, a prince from modern-day Nepal, who lived about 563–483 BC. He became known as Buddha (means "enlightened one"). He rejected the belief in a personal, creator God who controlled the eternal destiny of human souls, because of the difficulty he had in reconciling this with the reality of suffering, judgment, and evil in the world. Hence, Buddhism is not so much a religion, but an atheistic philosophy by which to live by. It is well known for its monks, monasteries, and for meditation. Buddha's teachings are known as *Dharma*, and the oldest and most authoritative scriptures are contained in the Pali Canon.

Consider Buddha's difficulty in believing in God? Is this a common difficulty others have today?

Many people reject the existence of God because they argue: "How can there be a God when there is suffering and evil in our world?" This is especially argued when God is considered to be good and loving.

How would you answer someone who rejects God because of suffering and evil in the world?

1. God exists, no matter whether we can make sense of our world or not – Psa 19:1-3; Rom 1:18-20
2. The Bible tells us that death, suffering and evil are in our world because of the fall (Gen 3:1-19); ie, man's sin brings about the present condition; not God (He made everything very good – Gen 1:31)
3. God is just and holy. When man sinned, He justly subjected the world to decay and suffering (Rom 8:18-23) as a form of punishment (Gen 3:17-19)
4. God is in control, but He allows humans to express their "fallen" free will within set boundaries. If He were to control all things by removing suffering and evil, He would have to wipe out sin, which means all people would have to be destroyed (like in Noah's day – Gen 6::5-7)
5. God is good and loving, for by His great mercy He has provided a way of salvation for us through His Son the Lord Jesus (Eph 2:4-5; 1 Peter 1:3). Although the Creation groans, God will restore all things.

Basic Beliefs: The essential elements are summarised in the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and several additional key doctrines. The Four Noble Truths affirm that (1) life is full of suffering; (2) suffering is caused by craving; (3) suffering will cease only when craving ceases; and (4) this can be achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path consisting of right views, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right contemplation. Other key doctrines include belief that nothing in life is permanent, that individual selves do not truly exist, that all is determined by an impersonal law of moral causation (karma), that reincarnation is an endless cycle of continuous suffering, and that the goal of life is to break out of this cycle by finally extinguishing the flame of life and entering a permanent state of pure nonexistence (nirvana).

Consider the "Four Noble Truths". How do they compare with Christian truth?

The Bible affirms that this life is full of suffering (death, decay, etc – Rom 5:12). It's also true that much suffering comes from cravings (James 4:1-3). But the Bible goes one important step further by saying that cravings come from sin, and in particular, our sinful nature (Gal 5:16-21). Our sufferings will not end when cravings cease, even if that be at death, for the Bible tells us that people will suffer more terribly in hell (Matt 13:41-42). However, if we trust in Jesus we will go to heaven and no longer suffer (Rev 21:3-4).

Buddhists have the "Noble Eightfold Path" to be set free from suffering. How are Christians set free?

Christians are set free by faith in Jesus (John 8:31-36); it's not work-based like that for a Buddhist. Also, our freedom is far greater. Through Jesus we are set free from the guilt and power of sin, and we will one day be set free from death to enjoy eternal life (it's not just about escaping suffering).

What verse would you use to discount the belief of reincarnation, which Buddhism holds to?

God has declared in Heb 9:27 that we are appointed to die once, and after this comes judgment.

The goal of the Buddhist is to reach nirvana – a state of non-existence (death). What is our goal?

The Christian's goal is life (John 5:24; 10:10); not death. We have the hope of being raised to life and to live in God's paradise with a new body (1 Cor 15:50-57), all because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Note: Buddhism is related to the New Age Movement, and is attractive to many westerners because of its emphasis on meditation and finding one's self. However, it is a philosophy that leads to death.

Summary: Buddha claimed to be the enlightened one, but the only truly enlightened one is Jesus, the Son of God (John 1:1-9), who is the light of the world (John 8:12), and He leads us to life; not death.

EXTRA NOTES ABOUT BUDDHISM:

Three Main Schools

Buddhism is broken up into three main schools:

1. Theravada or the "Doctrine of the Elders" (38%): This is followed in Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. It is closest to the original doctrines. It does not treat the Buddha as deity and regards the faith as a philosophy—not as a religion or type of worship
2. Mahayana or the "Greater Vehicle" (56%) is strong in China, Korea, and Japan. It has accommodated many different beliefs and worships the Buddha as a god.
3. Vajrayana, also called Tantrism or Lamaism, (6%) is rooted in Tibet, Nepal, and Mongolia. It has added elements of shamanism (a religion that practices communication with the spirit world) and the occult and includes taboo breaking (intentional immorality) as a means of spiritual enlightenment.

Bridges for Evangelising Buddhists

The Gospel can be appealing to Buddhists if witnessing focuses on areas of personal need where the Buddhist belief system is weak. Some major areas include:

Suffering: Buddhists are deeply concerned with overcoming suffering but must deny that suffering is real. Christ faced the reality of suffering and overcame it by solving the problem of sin, which is the real source of suffering. Now, those who trust in Christ can rise above suffering in this life because they have hope of a future life free of suffering. "We fix our eyes not on what is seen [suffering], but on what is unseen [eternal life free of suffering]. For what is seen [suffering] is temporary, but what is unseen [future life with Christ] is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:18).

Meaningful Self: Buddhists must work to convince themselves they have no personal significance, even though they live daily as though they do. Jesus taught that each person has real significance. Each person is made in God's image with an immortal soul and an eternal destiny. Jesus demonstrated the value of people by loving us so much that He sacrificed His life in order to offer eternal life to anyone who trusts Him (Rom. 5:8).

Future Hope: The hope of nirvana is no hope at all - only death and extinction. The hope of those who put their trust in Christ is eternal life in a "new heaven and new earth" in which God "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4).

Moral Law: Because karma, the Buddhist law of moral cause and effect, is completely rigid and impersonal, life for a Buddhist is very oppressive. Under karma, there can be no appeal, no mercy, and no escape except through unceasing effort at self-reflection. Christians understand that the moral force governing the universe is a personal God who listens to those who pray, who has mercy on those who repent, and who with love personally controls for good the lives of those who follow Christ (Rom. 8:28).

Merit: Buddhists constantly struggle to earn merit by doing good deeds, hoping to collect enough to break free from the life of suffering. They also believe saints can transfer surplus merit to the undeserving. Jesus taught no one can ever collect enough merit on his own to earn everlasting freedom from suffering. Instead, Jesus Christ, who has unlimited merit (righteousness) by virtue of His sinless life, meritorious death, and resurrection, now offers His unlimited merit as a free gift to anyone who will become His disciple (Eph. 2:8–9).

Desire: Buddhists live a contradiction—they seek to overcome suffering by rooting out desire, but at the same time they cultivate desire for self-control, meritorious life, and nirvana. Christians are consistent—we seek to reject evil desires and cultivate good desires according to the standard of Christ (2 Tim. 2:22).

When Witnessing to Buddhists

1. Avoid terms such as "new birth", "rebirth", "regeneration", or "born again", as a Buddhist thinks of reincarnation when these terms are used. Use others such as "endless freedom from suffering, guilt, and sin", "new power for living a holy life", or "promise of eternal life without suffering".
2. Emphasise the uniqueness of Christ (Son of God).
3. Focus on the Gospel message and do not get distracted by details of Buddhist doctrine.
4. Understand Buddhist beliefs enough to discern weaknesses that can be used to make the Gospel relevant and appealing (consider the above section "Bridges for Evangelising Buddhists").
5. Share your own testimony, especially your freedom from guilt, assurance of heaven (no more pain), and personal relationship with Christ.

14. Contending for the Faith against Roman Catholicism (Part 1)

Aim: To affirm the truths of our Christian faith in the light of Roman Catholicism.

Discuss: When people hear the word "church", many think of the Roman Catholic church. What similarities are you aware of between Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism? *[discuss]* What differences are you aware of? *[discuss]* Do you think Roman Catholicism is more like a denomination of Christianity (eg, like Baptists or Anglicans), or a separate religion or cult? (eg like JW's)? *[discuss]*

Background

Where did Roman Catholicism come from? Firstly, the term "catholic" simply means "universal". The early church used this term to distinguish itself from individual sects and heretical groups that started to arise. Secondly, during the first few centuries, smaller churches looked to larger churches for guidance (remember, the NT wasn't finalized in written form until after 300AD). Five main centres provided Christian leadership, and Rome (being the largest) was looked to more and more for leadership in various controversies. This led to the formation of Roman Catholicism.

Three positions of leadership developed in the church over the first few centuries: bishops (overseeing multiple churches in a region), presbyters or elders (overseeing a local church) and deacons. In 590AD, the then bishop of Rome (Gregory I) claimed authority over all other bishops, and the title "Pope" (which means "father") was increasingly used. Successive popes claimed more and more authority, eventually claiming to be the "*Vicar (or Representative) of Christ*" on earth, and claiming their teaching was infallible (ie, free from error) when they spoke in their official capacity. The apostle Peter is regarded by Catholics as the first "Pope", citing Matthew 16:18-19 as proof.

Disagreements saw two lines of Popes in the 1300s and 1400s with separate followings until the split was healed. In the 1500s, the Reformation gave birth to Protestant Christianity when some started to read the Bible for themselves and saw major discrepancies with the practices and beliefs of the church.

The role of the Church

The Catholic Church teaches that church Tradition is equal in authority to Scripture. Is this biblical? (Mark 7:5-13, Col 2:8, Eph 2:19-22)

Our foundation is the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the corner stone. We must be careful not to add to the foundation. The final authority must not rest on the words or traditions of men, but on the Word of God. All other practices must be weighed in the light of God's Word and we must come under it.

Catholics believe that interpreting God's Word has been solely entrusted to the Pope and his bishops, and his official teaching is infallible and authoritative. Does the Bible support this? [discuss]

The only infallible source of authority referred to by Jesus is God's Word itself – Matt 5:18, 24:35 (cf. 2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:20-21). The Apostles were given a special ministry by the Holy Spirit to lay our foundation (John 14:25-26, 16:12-15), but there is no promise of ongoing infallibility for later generations.

Catholic doctrine teaches: if a person knowingly refuses to join the Church, they can't be saved. "Outside the Church, there is no salvation." Does the Bible teach this? (Rom 10:9-10, 1 John 5:11-13).

Salvation is not linked to being a member of a particular church or denomination. Salvation is solely dependent on our response to Jesus - by repenting and believing in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

Salvation and works

The Catholic church also teaches that people who do not know the Gospel of Christ, or His Church, through no fault of their own, but seek God and try to do His will as best they know, can achieve eternal salvation. What does the Bible teach? (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, 1 John 5:11-13).

There is only one way we can be reconciled to God – it is through faith in His Son Jesus. If we do not have Jesus, we do not have life. The Bible gives no exceptions, because we are all born into sin.

The Catholic church teaches that water baptism is necessary for salvation. In baptism, a person is freed from sin and reborn as God's child. Is this right? (John 3:16, Acts 16:30-31, 1 Peter 3:21-22)

While water baptism is closely connected to conversion in the NT, it occurs after a person has come to faith in Christ (NB: Catholics practice infant baptism, in which case the child does not have faith yet). Faith in Jesus is the key to salvation; not baptism. If water baptism was required for salvation, it would become a work we must do, which the Bible rules out (eg Eph 2:8-9).

(See reverse side ...)

Catholics believe that, when accompanied with faith, good works merit for ourselves (and others) the attainment of eternal life. Do good works contribute towards salvation? (Rom 3:28, Eph 2:8-9)
Absolutely not! Salvation is a free gift we receive by faith in Jesus. Good works are the fruit of our salvation; not the cause of it. We obey God because He has saved us; not because we seek to save ourselves.

Summary: "Scripture alone" and "Faith alone" are essential truths for authority and salvation.

15. Contending for the Faith against Roman Catholicism (Part 2)

Aim: To affirm the truths of our Christian faith in the light of Roman Catholicism.

Discuss: The Bible speaks constantly about the person and work of Jesus Christ as central to our faith and life, and a personal relationship with God. In what ways do you think the practices of Roman Catholicism (or perhaps even our own tradition) might cloud or take away from this personal relationship?

Mary & the Saints

Roman Catholicism holds to the Trinity. But it also views Mary (the mother of Jesus) very highly. While she is not considered divine, they do heap tribute and honour upon Mary, exalting her as the Mother of Redemption and "Queen of Heaven". What emphasis does the Bible give to Mary? [discuss] Neither Jesus or the Apostles ever exalt Mary. She is only mentioned once (in passing) outside of the Gospels (Acts 1:14). Even when John peers into heaven in Revelation, Mary is not mentioned - the focus is of all creation (which includes Mary) giving honour and glory to the Father and the Son (Rev 5:11-14). By exalting Mary (or any other person), we end up taking our focus away from the Lord Jesus.

Roman Catholicism teaches that Mary was conceived immaculately (ie that she was preserved by God from the stain of original sin), and lived a sinless life. What is the Bible's view? (Rom 3:23) The Pope decreed the immaculate conception in 1854, but there is no basis for it in the Bible. On the contrary, the Bible says that everyone has sinned. Everyone, that is, except Jesus (Heb 4:15). Just like us, Mary needed Jesus to save her too. It even appears that Mary, for a time, did not believe in Jesus – see Mark 3:20-22 followed by vv31-32. By elevating others, we end up lowering our view of Jesus.

Roman Catholics often pray to Mary and the saints to intercede for them before Christ's throne, based on Rev 8:3-4. Do we need to pray via saints? (Luke 11:1-4, 1 Tim 2:5, Heb 4:14-16, 7:25, 10:19-22) Jesus taught His disciples to pray directly to the Father. Jesus is our mediator and our high priest who always lives to intercede for us. God desires a personal relationship with us where we draw near to Him in prayer, confidently knowing that He will hear and respond to us - we don't need others to do it for us.

Sin & purgatory

Although Roman Catholics can confess their sin directly to God, they are taught that a person must also confess to a priest for absolution. The Church teaches that priests have the power to forgive sins in God's name, and confession means a person will receive the Church's guarantee of forgiveness (not available from private prayer), special grace from God and a more compassionate hearing from God since the priest mediates for them. What does the Bible say? (1 John 1:7-2:1)

Jesus encourages us to go directly to God to seek forgiveness, not through another person. Jesus is our priest and mediator (1 Tim 2:5) – we do not need anyone else to mediate. Since Jesus paid for our sin once-for-all, God assures us of forgiveness when we confess to Him. If we have sinned against another person, the Bible also encourages us to confess to that person and put things right (James 5:13-16).

Roman Catholicism groups sin into two categories: "Mortal sins" are serious sins deliberately and knowingly committed and deserving of eternal punishment. This includes murder, adultery and apostasy. "Venial sins" are less serious sins or those committed in ignorance. If a mortal sin remains unconfessed at death, it results in loss of salvation (this usually includes suicide). Less serious sins that remain unconfessed at death only receive temporary punishment. Does the Bible make this distinction?

The Bible does not group sins into eternal punishment and temporal punishment. Sin is sin (eg Rom 6:23, James 2:10). However, if a person has truly come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus has already paid for our sins, once and for all (1 Peter 3:18). This includes past, present and future sins. And God gives us the assurance that whoever believes on Jesus already has eternal life and will not come under judgement (John 5:24).

However, the Bible does speak of a sin that leads to death – 1 John 5:16-17. It is unclear what John is referring to, but the context of 1 John suggests the reference may be to people who once confessed Jesus but now deny that He is the Christ (1 John 2:18-22) and came in the flesh (4:1-3). Jesus also spoke of an unforgivable sin - Matt 12:31-32. The context suggests that He is not referring to murder or adultery, but willfully rejecting the witness of the Holy Spirit and attributing His work to the devil (Matt 12:22-24).

Roman Catholicism teaches that in addition to Heaven and Hell, a third state exists called "purgatory". Purgatory is a state of temporary, painful punishment for those destined for heaven but have died with unconfessed venial (less serious) sins. Purgatory "purges" or purifies the soul to make it ready for heaven. Punishment can be shortened by people on earth offering prayers, giving money to the church and doing penance. The early Reformers took particular issue with the selling of "indulgences" – these were payments to the Church for priests to pray for the early release of their loved ones from purgatory. One slogan used by the Church was: "When the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." According to the Bible, is purgatory real?

- 2 Cor 5:8, Phil 1:23 - Believers who die go directly to be with the Lord.
- 1 Peter 3:18, 1 John 1:7 - Believers do not suffer for sins before they enter heaven – Christ has paid the full penalty for sin and applied it to all who receive Him as Lord and Saviour.
- The Bible does speak of a holding place called Hades, where those who die outside of Christ await the final judgement (Luke 16:19-31). However, there is no crossing over once a person enters it (v26). Hades will eventually be thrown into the Lake of Fire (what we called "Hell" – Rev 20:14)

Application: Rejoice in the completed work of Jesus, and rest in the assurance that our sins have been fully paid for. Face death with certainty, knowing that we will immediately be with the Lord. And confidently approach God in prayer, knowing He will forgive and cleanse us from all sin.

Summary: By faith, let us fix our eyes solely on the Lord Jesus (Heb 12:2), who is our Mediator, our Intercessor, our High Priest and Saviour.

16. Contending for the Faith against Roman Catholicism (Part 3)

Aim: To affirm the truths of our Christian faith in the light of Roman Catholicism.

Discuss: Reflect on the teaching of Roman Catholicism we have considered over the last few weeks. How do you think the Lord Jesus and the apostles would view their teaching and practices in the light of how the truth of God is seriously distorted with the practices of men? Consider Jesus' response to the Pharisees in Mark 7:6-8 and Paul's response to false teachers in Col 2:18-23. We must be on guard against such distortion, for the sake of preserving the Gospel of grace.

The role of the sacraments

Roman Catholicism teaches that a person must participate in certain religious ceremonies performed by their priests to receive the benefits of what Christ earned on the cross. These activities are called sacraments, and include water baptism, confirmation, penance/confession, eucharist (mass), marriage, anointing the sick / last rites and holy orders (special powers for priests and bishops). It is taught that God's grace is received through performing these activities, regardless of the state of the person participating. Is this biblical? How does it distort a person's relationship with God? [discuss]

The Bible makes it clear that God's grace is not something we earn or merit through any work of our own, be it keeping the law or performing religious ritual. It is something God gives freely to us through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 3:19-28; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7). By claiming that God's grace is received by practicing the religious ceremonies of the church, Roman Catholicism makes its institution and practices the primary focus for a person, rather than a personal relationship with God through faith in the Lord Jesus.

Roman Catholicism teaches that if anyone says that the sacraments are not necessary for salvation, they are to be accursed. How does this undermine the true Gospel? [discuss]

In effect, Roman Catholicism says that faith in Christ is not enough, because its religious ceremonies are also required for salvation and the blessing of God. This makes people dependent on the Roman Catholic institution and holds them under its power, instead of being dependent solely on the Lord. Paul would condemn any such teaching, because it is completely contrary to the true Gospel (cf Gal 1:6-9 – the issue in Galatia was that people were teaching that circumcision was required in addition to faith in Christ).

Of the special religious ceremonies (sacraments) practiced under Roman Catholicism, what special practices did Jesus directly instruct His followers to observe? (Matt 28:19-20, 1 Cor 11:23-26). Are they necessary for salvation?

Jesus commanded two special practices for His followers: Water baptism (after putting our faith in Christ) and regularly observing the Lord's Supper with fellow believers (Acts 2:42; Acts 20:7). In Scripture, it is very clear that they are to be practiced, not for salvation, but out of love and obedience to the Lord. Salvation is purely based on God's grace, and we receive it through faith in Christ (Acts 16:30-31). Also, for both baptism and the Lord's Supper, the emphasis is never on just the outward action, but on the inward response of the heart.

The sacrifice of Christ and the role of the priests

Mass (what we think of as "the Lord's Supper") holds a special place in Roman Catholicism. They tell people that when the priest prays over the bread and wine, the elements are mysteriously transformed into the actual body and blood of the Lord Jesus (even though the outward form still looks like bread and wine). This is called transubstantiation. Jesus is then re-sacrificed on an altar in the church during the ceremony. It is taught that physically eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus unites us to Him, and the blessings of His death are received afresh, including forgiveness of sin and the favour of God. Is this Biblical, and in what ways does it take away from the work of Christ? [discuss]

The Roman Catholic teaching on mass is far from Biblical. Firstly, Jesus was sacrificed once for all (Heb 7:26-27, 9:11-12, 9:24-28) and His sacrifice was sufficient to cleanse us completely of all our sins (past, present and future). What blasphemy to think that a priest can re-sacrifice Jesus on a church altar! Also, when we partake of the Lord's Supper, we do it not to have our sins removed and to receive grace from God (for salvation), but we do it to remember Jesus' death for us (1 Cor 11:23-26). Sadly, the Roman Catholic practice of mass makes the forgiveness and favour of God dependent on an outward action, rather than on faith in Christ, and it ties people to rituals and practices of the Church rather than to Jesus

Priests play an important role in Roman Catholicism, and it is a special role reserved only for some. They are never to marry, they are to be referred to as "Father", they are considered to be mediators between God and man, they are authorised to teach the Word and hold public worship, and are responsible for ministering to God's family. Is this Biblical?

- 1 Timothy 4:1-3 – it is a doctrine of demons to forbid marriage (which includes forbidding marriage to certain believers such as priests). Note: Peter is considered by the Roman Catholic church to be the first pope (pope's cannot marry), but Peter was married (Matt 8:14)
- Matthew 23:9 – we are not to call anyone "Father" in a spiritual sense, for all believers have only one Father; to do so causes us to take our focus away from our personal relationship with God (who alone is our Father), and to direct it back to a man
- 1 Timothy 2:5 – we have only one mediator between God and man – the Lord Jesus Christ. To give priests the role of mediator takes away from Jesus; who alone has that role. In essence, this essential role of Jesus is replaced by the role of a man.
- 1 John 2:27 – our true teacher of the Word, and who rightly teaches us the Word, is the Holy Spirit, and not some priest. He teaches us as we read His Word, as well as through God's people who have been given the gift of teaching and exhorting (Eph 4:11-12)

What problems can you see with elevating the role of the priest in the Roman Catholic church?

It holds the people under the power of the priest, and only through the priest can they experience God and receive God's benefits. But this is meant to be Jesus' role. He alone is the One we are to be under, and through whom we receive God's benefits (Eph 1:3). Also, in another sense, all of us are priests (1 Peter 2:9; Rev 5:9-10); that is, we all have the same status and role of serving in God's Kingdom and serving God's people with our spiritual gifts for the building up of the body of Christ.

Devotion to objects

Roman Catholicism teaches that objects (relics) that have come into contact with either Jesus or departed saints are to be honoured and treasured, because God bestows special blessing through them. Relics include the bones, ashes, clothes, and personal possessions of saints and even things such as wood from the cross. Roman Catholic churches who build a chapel near or on a relic will receive special favour from God for its priests to dispense, as will individuals who own or honour relics of special religious significance. What effect do you think such teaching has on people? [discuss]

It takes their focus off Jesus again and onto things that cannot ever help us in our relationship with God. It also causes people to worship images and objects, thinking that this is what pleases God and the way to receive God's blessing, rather than to grow in faith and knowledge of the Lord Jesus (2 Peter 3:18).

Summary: Roman Catholicism has replaced Christ with a powerful religious system that ministers out God's grace, favour and salvation through the priests. Let us be on guard to never diminish the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. He is the pre-eminent One (Col 1:15-18), and all God's benefits are found in Him (Eph 1:3), and are received by directly dealing with Him, who is our approachable great high priest (Heb 4:15-16).

17. Contending for the Faith against Humanism

Aim: To affirm the truths of our Christian faith in the light of humanism.

Discuss: Our modern-day society is influenced by many different philosophies. What's some of the main ones that have had a major impact upon us? [*discuss*] In this study, we will consider humanism.

Introduction to Humanism

Consider the following quotes by well-known humanists: Ashley Montagu "Absolute truth belongs only to one class of humans—the class of absolute fools"; Julian Huxley "We must now be prepared to abandon the god hypothesis and its corollaries like divine revelation or unchanging truths, and change over from a supernatural to a naturalistic view of human destiny". What message is being declared?

There is no such thing as absolute truth or divine revelation. Truth is relative and changing. Those who hold to the Bible being divine revelation and absolute truth, are to be considered fools.

Consider these quotes by other humanists: George Gaylord Simpson "Man stands alone in the universe, a unique product of a long, unconscious, impersonal, material process with unique understanding and potentialities. These he owes to no one but himself, and it is to himself that he is responsible. He is not the creature of uncontrollable and undeterminable forces, but is his own master. He can and must decide and manage his own destiny"; Richard Leakey "The fruits of intellectual and technological endeavour . . . give us just an inkling of what the human mind can achieve. The potential is enormous, almost infinite. We can, if we so choose, do virtually anything". What attitude lies behind these statements, as well as the first two humanists we considered?

Behind their statements is a proud and arrogant attitude that humans are free to determine their own destiny, and that we can accomplish anything we please. In other words, there is an attitude of self-sufficiency. It is no surprise that many humanists are evolutionists; they either do not believe in God, or they desire to "cut themselves loose from the apron strings of God".

These attitudes are not new; they have been around for a long time. What do the following Bible passages teach us (Psalm 2:1-3 and Romans 1:18-25)?

There is a willful resolve on the part of man not to have God in his life, and instead to be free of Him and to replace Him with something or anything else. It is a concerted effort to escape any ultimate responsibility, and to find a way to allow each person to "do his own thing." In essence, man seeks to de-throne God by suppressing the clear truth that there is a God, and to elevate himself to the position of God.

The Tenets of Humanism

In 1933, humanists set forth their credo in Humanist Manifesto I, and again in 1973, in Humanist Manifesto II. Humanism is not just a system of thought that stresses the importance of mankind. Rather, humanism is a subtle, disarming, and sophisticated way of saying "atheism." In the preface to Humanist Manifesto II, it says: "As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-healing God . . . is an unproved and outmoded faith". It goes on to say in the manifesto itself: "As non-theists, we begin with humans, not God, nature, not deity. . . . Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves".

*Discuss the above statements. What conclusions can we draw? [*discuss*]*

Not only is God denied, but the whole notion of us needing to be saved and rescued, is also denied. Therefore, the Gospel message of salvation is particularly targeted as foolishness. This is affirmed by the humanist philosopher and former editor of The Humanist magazine, Kai Nielsen, who said "In cultures such as ours, religion is very often an alien form of life to intellectuals. Living as we do in a post-enlightenment era, it is difficult for us to take religion seriously. The very concept seems fantastic to us. . . . that people in our age can believe that they have had a personal encounter with God, that they could believe that they have experienced conversion through a 'mystical experience of God', so that they are born again in the Holy Spirit, is something that attests to human irrationality and a lack of sense of reality". Ie, people who accept Christian truth are out of touch with reality, irrational, and unreasonable.

Humanism boasts in its wisdom and knowledge. They claim Christians are foolish. What does God's Word say in regard to the wisdom of man (which includes humanism)? (1 Cor 1:18-25; 3:19-20)

Those who are foolish are not Christians, but humanists and all those who do not accept the message of the cross. It is the wisdom of this world (such as humanism) that is truly foolish.

Humanists have failed to grasp one of the most basic truths. What is it? (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10)

The fear of the Lord is both "the beginning of knowledge" and "the beginning of wisdom". Without belief in God we are fools (Psalm 14:1), and without the fear of Him, we still are fools (Luke 12:16-21).

There is absolute truth and true wisdom? Where is it found? (1 Cor 1:30; John 14:6)

It is found in a person; the Lord Jesus Christ. True wisdom is in Christ (1 Cor 1:30), and He alone is the way, the **Truth**, and the life (John 14:6). It is His truth that will make us free (John 8:32).

Christianity versus Humanism

Humanism and Christianity are mutually exclusive, diametrically opposed systems. Humanist writer Corliss Lamont stated: "Passing to the New Testament, we see plainly that its theology, taken literally, is totally alien to the humanist viewpoint". Humanism states that matter is eternal, there is no God, man and his environment are the result of evolutionary forces, ethics is situational, no one can possess absolute truth, there is no life after death, views of salvation are illusory and harmful, man is the most important thing in the universe, man has no soul, and there is no heaven or hell.

Christianity, on the other hand, teaches the exact opposite of these things. The Bible speaks of an eternal God, man's immortal soul, heaven, hell, a promised and planned salvation, and the absolute nature of truth. It places man in his proper place in the universe—as a specially created being (Genesis 1:26-27) made a little lower than the angels (Psalm 8:4-5). Man is not "up from the slime" as humanism advocates, but instead is "down from heaven." In addition, Christianity correctly teaches that ethics is not situational, but is based on God's Word since in that Word we find "everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Far from being situational, the ethical system of the Bible is governed by revelation provided by the Creator. It is opposed to what humanism advocates (abortion, homosexuality, extramarital and premarital sexual activity, etc.).

Why do we find societies (particularly societies in the western world) in the state they are today?

It is because of humanism. This dangerous philosophy has permeated through every part of our culture.

How prevalent do you think humanism is in our society? [discuss]

It is everywhere: it is in our education systems (teachers are taught a humanistic approach); it is in our modern parenting models; it is in our health systems (psychologists constantly use humanistic teaching); it is in our political systems, our media, etc. We are immersed in it. It is more entrenched than we realise, and it has had a greater impact than we think. Fueled by evolutionary belief, and a high view of what man can achieve, humanism has entered many hearts and minds.

Consider a quote from Tim LaHaye's book, The Battle for the Mind. He says "Our present society is in a state of moral decay, not because the majority . . . love degeneracy, but because the influence of humanism has been greater on our culture than the influence of the church". [discuss] Why is this?

The church has largely failed to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). We have failed to uphold the truth, both in word and deed, by which we set God's standard to the world, as well as point people to the One who is the truth and who is the Life; even Jesus Christ. As a result, the world has gone unchecked down this road of humanism.

What danger does Paul speak of in Col 2:8-10? Why?

We are warned of the dangers of human philosophies, such as humanism, for they can enter the church and pollute us. In the end, they can turn us away from our Head and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Has the modern-day church been affected by humanism? [discuss] If so, in what way?

We may not hold to the atheistic teaching of humanism, but generally, the church has been greatly affected by humanism. For example, many have relegated the Bible to being relative truth, rather than it being divinely inspired and absolute truth; ethics are based on circumstances and situations, rather than on God's truth; human methods are looked to, rather than the power and work of Christ. Let us be aware of the state of Christ's church, and repent of our ways and turn back to Christ (Rev 3:1-3; 15-19).

Summary: Humanism is a very dangerous philosophy that seeks to de-throne God, and to put mankind on that throne. It seeks to destroy the Gospel of Jesus, and to play down our need for Him to save us. In reality, it is a dangerous philosophy from Satan to blind our minds to the truth that is in Jesus (2 Cor 4:4). May we shine the light (2 Cor 4:6) and be faithful in pointing people to Jesus our Lord.

18. Contending for the Faith against the New Age Movement

Aim: To affirm the truths of our Christian faith in the light of the New Age movement.

Discuss: People in our society are influenced by a relatively new movement called the New Age movement. What things are you aware of that are associated with this? It is quite popular. Why? *[discuss]*

History and Introduction to the New Age Movement

The New Age Movement emerged from the late 1960s, although elements can be traced back to earlier times. It gained momentum in the 1980s with the Harmonic Convergence (alignment of the planets) on the 16-17th August 1987. The term "New Age" refers to the change from the so-called astrological Age of Pisces (dominated by Christian belief) to the new astrological Age of Aquarius, which is supposedly the end of Christian belief (post-Christian era), and where there will be peace and enlightenment, and the reuniting of man with god (not the God of the Bible). Practically, the New Age Movement (NAM) is a collection of eastern-influenced metaphysical ideologies, theologies and philosophies that are bound together by universal tolerance and moral relativism. The NAM is the natural progression of humanism; away from absolute truth, and the belief that mankind can "save" himself.

The two main principles of the NAM are evolutionary godhood and global unity. Evolutionary godhood is based on the assumption that man has physically evolved, and now needs to spiritually evolve. This occurs as we enter new spiritual horizons through New Age practices. Global unity is the belief that man's spiritual evolution through "correct thinking", "correct knowledge", and various spiritual experiences will lead to perfect peace and harmony, between man & man, man & nature, and man & god.

Comparison of NAM beliefs with Christian belief

God:

- The New Age god is omnipresent, but not in the way Christians think. He is in everything, and everything together makes up god. There is nothing that is not god. Therefore god lives in all of us; including objects such as trees and rocks. This is called pantheism.
- The New Age god is impersonal and distant. He does not reveal himself through revelation, nor does he have specific requirements in regard to morality, belief, and behaviour.
- The New Age god is benevolent; he will not condemn or judge anyone. He is sympathetic and loving.

What differences exist between the God and Father of our Lord Jesus and the New Age god?

- Our God is "wholly other", which is conveyed in the word "holy"; there is no other like Him (Isa 46:9-10). He is distinct and separate from all Creation, and all Creation exists because of Him (Rev 4:11).
- He is personal and has revealed Himself to us through divine revelation (Heb 1:1-2). Because He is personal, He can be known (Gen 5:22-24; Exod 33:11). Because we have been made in God's image (Gen 1:26-27), and through what Jesus has done to reconcile us to God, we can know God (John 17:3).
- He is just and righteous, and not just benevolent and loving. There is a day of judgment, in which He will judge us righteously (Acts 17:30-31).

Man: Man is the central figure in the NAM. His nature is good, and he has divine qualities, by which he can progress toward a kind of godhood. Man is also his own saviour, and in this new Age of Aquarius, he will usher in peace and harmony and spiritual enlightenment.

Note: Because the average New Ager believes himself to be divine, he has a right to create his own reality. Eg, if a person believes in reincarnation, that's fine because that is his reality. If someone else doesn't, that is alright too because that is someone else's reality. They can each have a different reality.

What is God's declaration about man, in contrast to the New Age belief?

The Bible tells us that man is not inherently good; we have a sinful nature (Eph 2:3; Rom 7:14-20), and that this came about through the Fall (Rom 5:12). Therefore, no one is good (Rom 3:12, 3:23; Jer 17:9). Also, man is not divine, but a creature that God created (Psalm 100:3; Isa 44:24). It is true that we were made in God's image, but only so that we could relate to God. We are not divine, and never will be.

Note: The New Ager who believes in his own divinity, usurps the authority and position of God. He is also still listening to the lie that the devil spoke to Eve about how she would be like God (Gen. 3:5). In elevating himself to godhood, the New Ager must lower the majesty and personhood of the true God.

Salvation: For the NAM, salvation is self-achieved through understanding your natural godlikeness and goodness, with proper knowledge. This leads to people being in tune with their divine consciousness, and

being in harmony with their reality. The NAM argues that we need to be saved from ignorance; not sin; knowledge is what saves, not Jesus; Hell is not a place, but a state of mind brought about by ignorance.

What is the Bible's position on true salvation?

Salvation is not correct thought, but deliverance from the consequence of sin (Rom 6:23), and deliverance from damnation (1 Thess 1:9-10; Rom 2:5, 5:9). Salvation is found in no one but Jesus alone (Acts 4:12).

For the NAM, salvation leads to "global unity" between man & man, man & nature, man & god".

- Man and man: it is to have harmony and mutual love and acceptance for each other. New Agers look forward to a world where there will be spiritual unity and a harmonious political and economic whole.
- Man and nature: it is to be in tune with nature, based on the philosophy that man and nature are on an equal level (as we have all evolved). New Agers have a name for the earth; Gaia. Gaia is to be revered and respected. Note: Gaia was the name of the primal Greek goddess of the earth.
- Man and god: it is to be freed from our past belief systems and to see that man is divine by nature, and to work together toward unity of purpose, love, and development, with the final goal being the realisation of our own goodness (this is known as godhood).

How would you reply to the NAM's view of "global unity"?

- Only in the Lord Jesus, who is the Prince of Peace, can we have true harmony between man and man. New Agers open the door for one world leader who will bring peace and harmony; the Bible knows such a leader as the Man of Lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3-4), or the Anti-Christ (1 John 2:22).
- We are to live in harmony with nature, but we are above nature, and are never to worship it. We were called to rule over it (Gen 1:26-28; 2:15), but one day it will be renewed (Psalm 102:25-26; Rom 8:18-21), and salvation for us will be dwelling with God on a new earth (Rev 21:1-4).
- Only through the death and resurrection of Jesus can we be reconciled to the true and living God. True salvation is not the self-realisation of our own goodness, but the realisation that we are not good, and need Jesus to save us from our sins. When we place our faith in Jesus, our sins are forgiven, we are made right with God, and we receive the gift of eternal life (John 5:24).

Other matters:

- New Agers believe in no moral absolutes (just like humanists); they encourage the same sort of thinking as found in the book of Judges (Judges 21:25) – consider what that led to.
- Many New Agers believe in reincarnation. But the Bible declares in Heb 9:27, that all are appointed to die once, and then face judgment. There is no reincarnation, nor are there any second chances after death.
- For New Agers, a miracle is a correction in thought. It is not God's intervention into this world to perform His will, but the realisation of the true reality that "god" is all and that you are "god".
- New Agers have spiritual tolerance for all "truth systems." Yet they strongly oppose Christianity when we declare salvation only in Christ (John 14:6, 10:9; Matt 7:13-14). They see us as divisive and exclusionary.

New Age Practices and Christian Practice

The NAM uses various practices such as astrology; positive thinking; eastern world practices like meditation, yoga, reflexology; astral projection; contacting spirits so they may guide you; crystals to purify your body's and mind's energy systems; visualization where you use mental imagery to change your reality. These are used to help people discover their divine consciousness and reach their godhood. There are countless books, shops, crafts, and even music and other things, that promote NAM practices in order to draw people in.

What is God's view on these things? What does the Lord call us to do? (Acts 2:42)

The Lord condemns all such practices. We are called to devotion to the Bible, to fellowship, to communion, and to prayer. We are called to simply follow Jesus (John 10:27) and to do what He says, and to have nothing to do with these evil practices (behind which is Satan himself).

Note: New Agers admire and respect Jesus. This is because they view Jesus as a man who excelled in spiritual evolution and progression. Do not be fooled. They believe in a very different Jesus to us.

Summary: Fuelled by humanism, the NAM seeks to absorb all religions, cultures, and governments, into one spiritual, socio-economic unity. It is very popular because it removes personal accountability/responsibility (there is no right or wrong), and encourages people to determine their "potential" and destiny (it's all up to you). But it de-thrones the true God, removes our need of Jesus for salvation, and blinds people to the reality that they are heading for hell.