

Christianity 101 - The Gateway to Encountering God

All kinds of people in all kinds of cultures over thousands of years have come to the humbling conclusion that **there really is a God who made us**, who loves us, and who we can know right now. But we can't experience God on our own terms just as we can't truly experience another person on our own terms... we don't get to make up the God we want, but we can encounter the God who is. This God, the Lord of Heaven and Earth, is a disturbing God. Encountering this God will not leave you unchanged.

Christianity is about a way of living life in relationship with God. Like any relationship it includes believing and doing. I believe certain things about the people I love. The more accurate my perception of them, the better I am able to know them and love them. But real love is not just belief or empty words - it also involves action - doing real acts of love. So what I believe and what I do really matters. Could it be that just as there are physical principles (like the law of gravity) that govern the physical universe, so too there are basic spiritual principles which were meant to govern my soul? What if there was a path waiting for me, a path not of my own making, but made by the One who made me?!

Here are some stepping stones on the way to growing in a relationship with God. These steps are part of an ancient path - they are the essentials of what Christians have believed, across different centuries, cultures, denominations, and languages. They form Christianity 101. Think of them as a series of doorways to step through. If you can embrace the first principle, then you are ready to step through the door to the next principle.

Special thanks to First Presbyterian Church of Ambler, PA for the content of Christianity 101.

STEP 1

~ God loves me and knows me by name

But if that is true, Why is it that most people are not experiencing this relationship with God?

Christians believe that there is more to reality than just the material world. Imagine light from outside breaking into these 'not so perfect' lives of ours...

God cares about you as a person. He created you in His own image. You are priceless in His eyes. He put you here for a purpose. Because of this, there is a greater meaning and purpose for our lives than what we can conjure up for ourselves.

The Bible puts it this way:

God's Love

"God so loved the world that He gave His One and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God's Plan

[Christ speaking] "I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly" [that it might be full and meaningful] (John 10:10).

STEP 2

~ I feel cut off from God

But if that is true, How can this gulf be bridged?

Most of us have had times when our heart seemed as cold as stone...

You and I are separated from God

Most of us have been harmed in some way by others. But when we are brutally honest with ourselves we see hurtful ways in ourselves too. The wrong things we do separate us from God somewhat like the way we feel distant from another person when we are estranged from them. The Bible calls the wrong things we do "sin". To sin means to miss the mark. We have done things which we shouldn't have done, and we failed to do things we should have done. Because we are cut off from God, we cannot know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

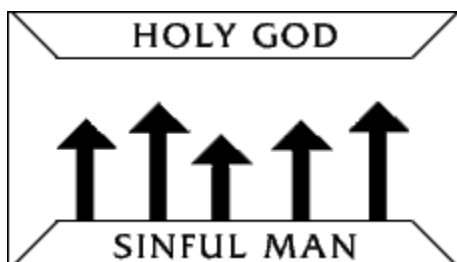
I do wrong things

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Everyone was created to have fellowship with God; but, because of my stubborn self-will, I chose to go my own independent way, and fellowship with God was broken. This self-will, characterized by an attitude of active rebellion or passive indifference, is an evidence of what the Bible calls sin.

I am separated from God

"The wages of sin is death" [spiritual separation from God] (Romans 6:23). I may not like the word 'sin', but the truth is I feel separated from God. And there are days when I feel like my heart is made of stone...

This diagram illustrates that God is holy and we are sinful. A great gulf separates us from God. The



arrows illustrate that we are continually trying to reach God and the abundant life through our own efforts, such as a good life, philosophy, or religion - but we inevitably fail. It's like we are all trying to jump across the Grand Canyon. Some leap much further than others, but it is still just a tiny fraction of the total distance to the other shore. All the world's religions lay out a pretty basic moral code: Help the poor, Don't lie, Be kind to others, Don't have sex with another person's spouse, etc. So the religions are good at identifying the problem... but how are we doing in solving the problem? Religion doesn't seem to be able to give the strength

and wisdom needed to actually live out the moral laws it gives us. If I am not strong or good enough to reach God from my side - how can I encounter God? Only if God reaches down to me from His side...

STEP 3

~ Jesus came to restore our relationships with God

But if that is true, Then why am I still separated from God?

What if it was not so much about me figuring out God, as it was that God is reaching out to me?

Jesus Christ is God's provision for my sin and separation.

Christians believe that God entered into Human History so that He could speak and act in a way that we could understand. He came as a baby and was born in a rough wooden shed to a poor young girl. He

shared the human experience with us. His name is Jesus Christ. Through Him I can know and experience God's love and plan for my life. Religions try to reach up to God, but Jesus is God stooping down to us. I can't know God on my terms, I can only choose to know God on God's terms. Jesus did what was necessary to restore my relationship with God.

Jesus Died in my Place

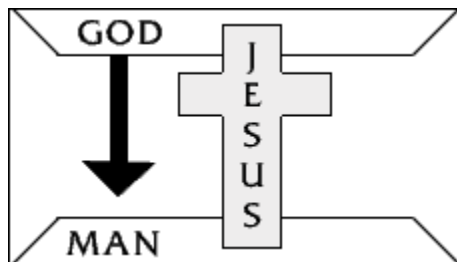
"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

Jesus Rose From the Dead

"Christ died for our sins...He was buried...He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures...He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred..." (1 Corinthians 15:3-6).

He Is the Only Way to God

"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me'" (John 14:6).



This diagram illustrates that God has bridged the gulf which separates us from Him by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. Imagine a Judge who finds me guilty of some crime. I also happen to be homeless. Instead of sending me to jail, he steps down, pays the fine for me and then takes me into his own home to live with him. That is what God did for me in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is not enough just to know these three principles...

STEP 4

~We must each individually receive Jesus Christ

But how do I do that?

What if God has been knocking on my door all this time, waiting for me to open up and let Him into my life?

Christianity is deeply about community. But it is community built upon a particular conviction. It is made up of individuals who have personally decided to follow Jesus - regardless of what nation or denomination or church they belong to. We have a deeper relationship with each other because each of us has a relationship with God. I must be willing to make Jesus my Savior and Lord; then I can know and experience God's love and leading in my life. Any meaningful relationship requires that both people commit to the other. God is already committed to you, but you have to decide if you are willing to be committed to God. I can't be good enough to win God's love - God already loves me. The question is - will I love God back?

We Must Receive Christ

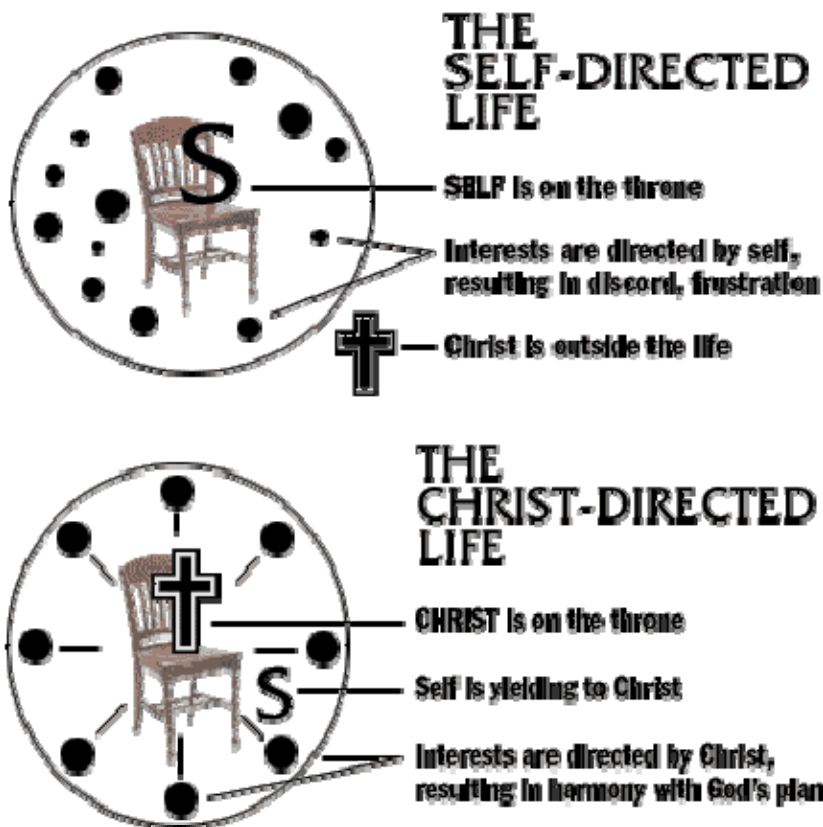
Imagine someone is standing at your door. You have to decide whether you are willing to receive them - that is, are you willing to let them come into your home. The ancient Christian scriptures say: "As many as received Jesus, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12)

We Receive Christ Through Faith

Faith means trusting the other person, like when I say "I am putting my faith in you." If you are rock climbing you need to have faith in the person holding the other end of the rope. You won't be willing to jump unless you really trust that the other person has the strength, the wisdom, and the character to save you. The ancient Christian scriptures say: "By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).

We Receive Christ by Personal Invitation

We have to choose if we trust the person at the door enough to let them in to our homes. We have to decide if we trust Jesus enough to let Him into our hearts. In the ancient Christian scriptures Jesus says: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him" (Revelation 3:20).



OK, the diagrams above are a little retro, but here's the idea: The two circles above represent two kinds of lives... Which circle best describes your life? **Which circle would you like to have represent your life?**

STEP 5

~ I can have a new relationship with God right now

Now What?

I can make this the day I give my life to God's keeping ...

You can change your relationship with God by receiving Jesus Christ by Faith Through Prayer ...

(Prayer is talking to God)

The word "gospel" means 'good news!' The good news is that I don't have to earn my way to heaven. I don't have to be good enough to live a Christian life to be a Christian. The truth is, I couldn't measure up even if I tried. The new life that Jesus offers (starting right now and stretching out to eternity) is a free gift that the God who loves me offers to me like a Christmas package waiting to be opened.

The gift Jesus offers is new life, so the key question is are you at a point where you are willing to trust Jesus with your life? In other words, are you at a point where you feel ready to ask Jesus to be both your Lord and your Savior? This is risky stuff. Let's unpack it. To accept Jesus as your Savior means you are trusting Him to save you from the disease of your sin as you would trust a doctor to save you from a physical disease. To accept Jesus as your Lord means you are willing to make Him the King of your life - the leader you are willing to follow - regardless of where He leads you. He is like the ultimate coach who will take you where you need to go even if it is uncomfortable. If you feel you don't know enough about this Jesus to make such a radical decision, there are two things you can do to find out if He is worth such a commitment. First, get a hold of a Bible and read the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) to get to know more about Him. Second, find a good church in your area that feels like home to you. Get to know people who claim to know Him and see what you can find out.

It is good to explore things carefully, but of course, the truth is, a person never has enough information to make this choice safely. It is as if someone who loves you is asking you to jump to them from a burning house and you have to decide if you trust them enough to do it... but you won't know if you made the right decision until after you jump. If you are willing to leap and trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior you can begin this new relationship right now by praying. God knows your heart and is not so concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart.

The following is a possible prayer:

Jesus, I need You. I want you in my life. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. Right here, right now, I open the door of my life to you and I ask you to come in. Right here, right now, I claim You as my Savior and Lord. Please take control of the throne of my life. I give it to You. Make me the kind of person I was always meant to be. Please show me how to live this new life, and give me the strength to follow You. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. **Amen.**

Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? If it does, I invite you to pray this prayer right now, out loud, to Jesus. If the prayer above captures the desire of your heart, please contact us at info@arpcusa.org and tell us about it - we will be glad to send you materials free of charge to help you grow in your relationship with God!

STEP 6

~ I can begin to live like a follower of Jesus

Some people begin the journey by trying to live the way Jesus did. Others begin the journey by trusting Jesus as their Lord and Savior - believing that He is who He said He was. The key is to realize we can't earn the new life Jesus offers - we can only accept it from Him with a thankful heart. But in the end, we must both DO and BELIEVE to know the full life that Jesus came to give us. This includes:

Learning more about Jesus through reading the Bible for yourself (start with the chapters entitled Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) A great book to help you learn about the faith is "Christian Basics - An Invitation to Discipleship" by John Stott.

"Oh God... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Psalm 119:105)

Helping and loving those around you - especially the poor

"...feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner..." - Jesus (Matthew 25:35)

Spending time worshipping God

- "Worship the LORD with reverence...and rejoice with trembling." (Psalm 2: 11)
- "Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy." (Psalm 33:2)

Often you can turn to the book of Psalms in the Bible and find verses that you can turn into your own personal prayers to God. Spending time worshipping God changes us in ways we can't imagine. Ancient Spiritual Disciplines can be very helpful in worshipping God.

Getting connected to a local Christian church. God never intended for us to try the Christian life alone. Christianity is about traveling through life with fellow believers. You need to do the risky business of trying to find a church that you can call home.

- "...Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near." (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Living a Moral Life What we do with our bodies really matters. How we treat others really matters. The choices we make in this physical world totally effect our spiritual health and growth. Some things you can't know until you experience them. For example, there is a peace and joy an alcoholic will never know until they walk away from alcohol. It is the same with many other issues in life. God gave us the 10 commandments not the 10 suggestions - because He knew that some choices lead to spiritual death. God gave us rules not to take away our joy but to increase it. For many people the most important step they can take in their relationship with God, the thing that opens up doors and changes everything is the decision that they have to change the way they have been living - make a change in their moral behavior - and that they will have to depend totally on God for the strength to do it. We all have to stand at the crossroads and decide: "Who am I going to be?"

- "...My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word. Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law. I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD; do not let me be put to shame. I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free." (Psalm 119:28-32)

Trusting in God's love and power

- "I know in whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day." (2nd Timothy 1:12)
- "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him..." (1st Corinthians 9)
- "For the word of the LORD is right and true; He is faithful in all He does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of His unfailing love. By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of His mouth." (Psalm 33:4)
- "Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen." (Jude 1:24)

Which of the six habits listed above do you think are the ones you most need to grow in? What steps can you take to grow in that area?

We welcome you to join us at Albemarle Road Presbyterian Church to explore answers to your questions and develop your faith through worship, Bible study, mission, and fellowship. Please explore our site for more information or contact us directly.