

Short Answers
——— *to* ———
BIG Questions
——— *about* ———
God, the Bible,
and Christianity

CLINTON E. ARNOLD

AND JEFF ARNOLD

FOREWORD BY J. I. PACKER



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Foreword

Christian people live under the marching orders that Jesus gave his first disciples: “Go . . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). “Go make learners” is how a friend of mine, brilliantly I thought, rendered that imperative many years ago as a book title. Learners, however, presuppose teachers, persons who make teaching their priority. I still recall the joyful impact it made on me in seminary when I heard a visiting lecturer say, “In ministering to a congregation you have three priorities. The first is teach, and the second is teach, and the third is teach. Never stop teaching.” I could have jumped out of my seat and hugged him, so profoundly right by biblical standards did his words seem to me—and he was making a point that, however obvious, I had not heard made in that place before. Surely no one who reflects on the rich instructive content of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, James, and 1 John, and on the drumbeat of exhortation to teach and keep teaching that is expressed a dozen times over in Paul’s Pastoral Epistles, can

doubt the truth that teachers and teaching are key ingredients in healthy Christianity.

Teaching requires resources, and disciples have produced books of various shapes and sizes to fill this need. These range from over-view beginner books, written to guide new Christians in their new life, to oversize works of reference and detailed topical analysis for purposes of heavyweight instruction. This book belongs in the former category.

Whichever type of resource one sets oneself to write, a complication in communication also arises from the prior effect on the readers' minds of our post-Christian, secularized culture on the one hand and our substandard Protestant church life on the other. When public education, the media, and the worlds of entertainment and industry are all committed to treating Christianity as outmoded, and look now only to science, material advance, and unlimited tolerance of other people's beliefs and behaviors to make the world better; when Protestant congregations are so largely in the grip either of liberal religion or of reactionary fundamentalism; and when the personal turning of individuals to Christ, with minimal doctrinal background, has become the entire goal of so many parachurch endeavors and so much preaching in evangelical congregations—it is no wonder if new Christians in particular find themselves in a mental muddle, gripped by unhelpful habits of mind that have crept up on them unnoticed and that now need to be unlearned.

This book speaks to such people as it finds them. It recognizes the ignorance, confusion, anti-Christian conditioning, suspicion, and initial mistrust that mark their thinking about their faith in Jesus Christ. And this explains the book's layout, for it seeks to start where its readers are, not to take things for granted, and to use language its readers will recognize in making its points. Its fifty chapters subdivide into nine sections, the thrusts of which may be set out like this:

1. Does trusting the whole Bible as truth from God, and believing all its specific teachings as the New Testament fits them together, make sense? (chaps. 1–8)
2. Does a life of believing in God’s goodness and wisdom at all times and in all circumstances make sense? (chaps. 9–13)
3. Is biblical teaching about the supernatural (angels, demons, miracles) credible? (chaps. 14–16)
4. Is biblical teaching about human destiny (death, judgment, hell, heaven) credible? (chaps. 17–20)
5. Does the biblical presentation of the Trinity, the Three-in-One, ever working as a team, make sense? (chaps. 21–26)
6. Does the biblical presentation of Jesus and the Spirit make sense? (chaps. 27–30)
7. Does the biblical account of salvation make sense? (chaps. 31–37)
8. Does the biblical account of the Christian life make sense? (chaps. 38–45)
9. Does the biblical expectation that Christians will regularly attend church and receive the sacraments make sense? (chaps. 46–50)

As a springboard resource for discipling Christians, this book should prove its usefulness over and over again.

J. I. Packer

Preface

Do you have questions about God, the Bible, and Christianity? The truth is, we all do. Some of these questions arise from a lack of information (like, *I don't really know what the Bible says heaven will be like*). Others reflect some doubts in our minds because of things we've heard or experienced (like, *Why does God allow bad things to happen?* or, *Did the Bible change over time?*).

If you find yourself asking a lot of questions about the Christian faith, that's a good thing! Questions are a sign that you are genuinely trying to understand. As we have taught this material in church, we've had to establish one basic rule of thumb that applies to you now too: *there are no bad or off-limits questions*.

In fact, were it not for the people around us asking these questions, this book would not have been written. Clint has heard these questions throughout his time as a professor at Talbot School of Theology, as well as in teaching new believers in local church contexts. Jeff spent years involved in youth ministry and some time as a youth pastor, and now teaches English and logic at a public high school, where he hears these questions over and over. He has also run an evangelism training camp called Unleashed for the past eight

years, where he equips students to answer hundreds of questions people raise. Everyone has questions.

As we've explained the idea of *Short Answers* to our friends and colleagues, we've seen an interesting mixture of excitement and confusion. Many people have expressed how hard it is to go deeper into Christianity without having loads of very heavy books thrown their way and are thrilled at the idea of making that task more manageable. But the idea that we could answer some of these questions in a few short pages confuses others. More than once we've heard something to the effect of "How could you possibly explain that in a few pages?"

Much *can* be said in a few pages. In fact, we think it's important to be able to express theological ideas simply, clearly, and concisely so that anyone can read and understand. But there are some drawbacks. Each of these questions deserves a book of its own. It would be, in some ways, much easier to do that, because then we wouldn't find ourselves having to leave out really good information for the sake of brevity. One of the worst things you can be accused of today is being overly simplistic, but unfortunately the only antidote to that is more words, and therefore more pages.

Thus, *Short Answers* is not meant to be the end of your study; rather, it's the beginning. Let this be the springboard for you to dive into the deep ocean that is understanding God.

So what kind of church is this book written for? Any church that uses a Bible. We are not attempting to promote any particular type of church or denomination; we are simply looking at what the Bible has to say about each of these issues.

Because we are basing almost all of what we say on the Bible, it will be necessary for you to have one. It does not matter which Bible version you get, just purchase one that you can read and understand. At the end of every chapter, we will have a list of key Bible passages and questions on that topic. Remember, you want the answers to the big questions to be rooted as much as possible in what God says, not personal opinion.

Preface

As you study, remember that learning about Christianity is much different than learning about any subject you had in school. Christianity, if true, affects every single area of your life now and for eternity.

One final thought before you begin. Pray and ask God to show you the answers and lead you into the truth. The apostle Paul prayed this for his own churches: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know . . .” (Eph. 1:18 NIV).

1

What Is Christianity?

A Summary of the Christian Faith

Simply put, Christianity is a belief in a person—Jesus Christ—and the meaning, the life, and the purpose we find in him. The term *Christianity* itself is rooted in his name, Christ, showing how essential he is to the belief.

Christianity involves understanding and holding a certain set of beliefs about Jesus Christ. But it also involves giving one's personal allegiance to him, building a relationship with him, and joining him in what he is setting out to accomplish here and now.

Because of his pivotal place in Christianity, Jesus is without a doubt the most hotly debated and controversial figure in history. He has been on the cover of more news magazines and has been the topic of more documentaries than anyone else in history. The book that describes him and his teaching—the Bible—has sold more copies than any book ever published.

So, since Jesus is central to Christianity, if we understand who Jesus was (and is), we understand Christianity. The best way to begin, then, is to ask the question that everyone should ask: “Who is Jesus?”

Who Is Jesus Christ?

Today's culture would like you to believe that it doesn't matter what you think of Jesus, that everyone's opinions about who Jesus is are equally true. As a logic teacher, I (Jeff) find that idea unsound; but as a Christian, I find that view dangerous. It is dangerous because the stakes are too high; if Jesus was who he claimed to be, the consequences are eternal. If the Bible is correct (and, as you will see throughout this book, we have very good reason to believe that it is), then what you think of Jesus and how you relate to him are everything.

The Bible is clear that Jesus is not merely a wise man or a prophet: he is God. John 1:1, in reference to Jesus, says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Colossians 2:9 confirms this by saying of Christ that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (NIV).

But if Jesus is God (see chap. 27), then what about God the Father and the Holy Spirit? Together, these three equal persons compose one God that is commonly known as the Trinity (Confused? See chap. 22 for more). Part of believing in Jesus involves believing in the Trinity, since this is a central part of his identity. God—the three persons of the Trinity—is all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and everywhere (omnipresent). God is also sovereign over everything; in other words, he has authority over everything in the universe.

What Jesus Did and Why It Matters

Jesus's coming was not a random event. He came for a clear purpose: to provide a solution to the greatest problem facing the world. The very people God had created in his image and for communion with him were separated from him because of their sin, starting with the very first human, Adam. God is perfect, and sin is the polar opposite of perfection. In sinning, we have created a massive separation

between us and God, because once we have sinned we can no longer make ourselves perfect, and therefore cannot be in God's presence.

This is not how it was meant to be. Without a relationship with God, we miss out on the one thing we were created for. God created us to have an ongoing relationship with him. Without him, we cannot be fully satisfied, we have no real purpose in life, and we do not experience love in the way we were meant to enjoy it. Without him, we also experience the heavy and painful weight of the impact of sin in our lives.

But Christianity teaches that all is not lost. Jesus did something extreme to fix this terrible problem: he came to die. Jesus entered the world by being born from a virgin named Mary. He identified with us by becoming fully human, yet he remained fully God. Since "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), blood had to be spilled to pay the penalty for every sin committed. Only Jesus, who is infinitely perfect, could offer a sacrifice that could pay for *all* the sin of the earth. He came, lived a perfect and sinless life, and was killed on a cross. But three days later, as evidence that he was neither guilty before God nor simply another wise teacher, he rose from the dead and was seen by many people before ascending back to heaven.

Jesus's purpose was to bridge the divide between us and God. He created a way for us to have a relationship with God. Because of Jesus's sacrifice, anyone who believes in him and his work on the cross has their sin paid for with Jesus's blood and can now stand before God as clean and sinless.

The Beliefs Associated with Jesus

While he was on earth, Jesus said many things that were recorded and became the basis of the New Testament. Put together, the New Testament and the Old Testament (which was already being read when Jesus arrived) make up the Bible. While the Bible was written by the hands of humans, its content was inspired by God and contains no errors, which is why we have a Bible that is not only remarkably

historically accurate, but is consistent from beginning to end despite having books within it that were written hundreds of years apart.

Jesus spent a great deal of time discussing salvation and imploring people to repent. Repentance means turning away from the sin in your life and living the way God intended. Yet Scripture is also careful to say that you cannot earn your way to heaven; to try to do so would be to say that Jesus's sacrifice wasn't enough. People are saved by putting their trust in Jesus Christ. He is the one who saves us based on what he has accomplished through his sinless life and his sacrificial death. When people put their faith in him, they receive salvation as a free gift. Yet this act of believing in Christ implies repentance. When we are saved, the Holy Spirit gives us the power and the will to fight sin and become more like Christ. Although we will never reach perfection in this lifetime, God expects us (and we can expect) to become very different and changed people.

The Mission Jesus Left with Us

Christianity is much more than a set of beliefs. Jesus left us with an important task known as the Great Commission. This is one of the primary goals in life for any Christian. Jesus gives this command in Matthew 28:18–20, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” In the Bible, the good news about Jesus that we share is called the *evangel* (in Greek); the act of sharing good news is called *evangelism*.

Jesus has enlisted those of us who believe in him to help the rest of the world learn about him and the forgiveness and life that he brings. Sharing with others is to be done as an outpouring of the love that we have for God and for the lost. We do this through a

combination of good deeds and sharing what Scripture says about Jesus. Jesus compares us to a lamp that people would use to light their houses; since we have such good news to share, how could we hide this light from the rest of the world?

The Lifestyle Jesus Calls Us To

Christianity, then, is a set of beliefs about Jesus Christ, a restored relationship with the living God, and a commitment to share the good news about Jesus Christ. But Christianity is also a lifestyle; it impacts our daily lives in profound ways.

In Matthew 22, Jesus presents the two greatest commandments of all. They sum up every law and commandment given in the entire Bible. Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37–39). This love that he describes is not simply a feeling we have toward the people around us, but also the way we act on that love. Our love is to be unconditional, in the same way that Jesus loved us enough to suffer and die for us even when we were still unrepentant sinners.

Jesus also made it clear that he cares far more about what goes on in your mind than your outward appearance to everyone. He had little patience for many of the Pharisees—the religious leaders of his time—because even though they followed all the established laws, they were still wicked people on the inside. Jesus calls us not just to “clean the outside” but to tend to our hearts, which he cares about much more.

We are to live out these simple yet tough commands until he returns. Fortunately, we are not alone. Not only does the Holy Spirit dwell within us once we are saved, but God has set up his church to be the body of Christ. Together, we wait for Christ to return, and

on that day he will carry out God's judgment on the world and then finally establish his permanent kingdom here on earth. Those who have been saved will finally get to live in the presence of God—the very thing we were made for!

Key Passages

Jesus Is God

- John 1:1
- Philippians 2:5–11
- Colossians 2:9

What Jesus Wants Us to Do

- Matthew 28:19–20
- Matthew 22:36–40
- Ephesians 5:1–2

What Jesus Came to Do

- 1 Corinthians 15:3–4

The Origin of the Word

Christian

- Acts 11:26

Discussion Questions

1. What has drawn you to want to learn more about Christianity?
2. What has led you to end up studying this book?
3. What questions do you have about the Christian faith?
4. How would you summarize Christianity in a minute or less?
5. Why would Jesus have to die? Couldn't he have just forgiven us?
6. Say you overhear two people talking about religion at a coffee shop. One of them says, "Christianity is just about being a good person." What do you think of that statement? How might you respond if you have the chance?