

Antioch School *Growing Disciples*

Christian Basics 1 Knowing God – Revelation

He is There and He is Not Silent

That is the title of a book written in 1972 by Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer, a Presbyterian minister from the USA, went with his family to Switzerland in 1948. A ministry which came to be known as L'Abri developed as disillusioned and puzzled young (and not so young) people came to wrestle with the ultimate questions of the meaning of life.

The title is responding to two important questions – “Is there a God?” (put in other ways, “Does life make sense?”, “Is there a meaning behind everything?”) and “If there is a God, how can we know him?”

It is important that we see that these are questions that face everyone in the world. Sometimes we think of them as questions that only “religious people” ask. But really they are basic questions for the average Australian, whether watching the TV news or engaging in pub conversation.

There is a God!

In Romans 1.20-23 Paul wrote, “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made. So those people have no excuse at all! They know God, but they do not give him the honour that belongs to him, nor do they thank him. Instead, their thoughts have become complete nonsense, and their empty minds are filled with darkness. They say they are wise, but they are fools; instead of worshipping the immortal God, they worship images made to look like mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.”

We can only know about another person when he chooses to reveal himself to us – in other words, by revelation. Do you know Queen Elizabeth II? Well, we know about her! There is excellent evidence that she does exist, that her parents were George and Elizabeth, that Philip is her husband... Those are not rumours, but well-founded and well-known facts. To be able to say that we really “know” her, of course, there would need to be a further stage of revelation – face to face!

Remember Howard Hughes, the billionaire? He hid himself away. Nobody but a very few had seen him for years. The only photograph of him that the newspapers could use when he died was grossly out-of-date. People could be pardoned for wondering, “Is he still alive? Is he still about?”

Paul is saying that the creation itself bears the stamp of God, gives strong evidence that God is here (see also Psalm 19) – enough evidence to convict those who do not

believe. It is the fool who says there is no God (Psalm 14.1). There are many “evidences” that point to the existence of God.

(1) In every race and every age people have had some kind of religion, have believed in gods, one or many, and this belief has shaped the lives of individuals and societies. It has been said that mankind is incurably religious. Even people who say they have no religion still end up believing in something. Much of what people have believed is grossly wrong and we see in the lives of people, their societies and history itself the effects of wrong belief. Nevertheless, the religious instinct itself bears witness to the existence of God.

(2) The world we live in bears witness to its creation by an intelligent Being. Science debates the “big bang” theory but seems to affirm that there must have been some beginning in time. While science has a lot of speculations about origins, its real specialty is looking at the laws, trying to understand the patterns by which things work. It is striking that secular historians of the modern scientific movement have noted that, historically, modern science arose among people who believed in the God of the Bible and therefore knew that, if they studied the world about them they would find order. While it is not true of every scientist since then, the early “greats” – like Newton, Kepler, Boyle, Dalton, Faraday – were all of them Christians and all believed that their Christian faith was primary and their scientific discoveries secondary. The existence of design and purpose bears testimony to the Creator.

(3) As we look within ourselves, we are aware of a strange feeling of responsibility to an Authority beyond ourselves and beyond society. We call this feeling conscience. Because conscience can be twisted and corrupted, we cannot simply call it “the voice of God”. Even so, there is an awareness that there is a real difference between Right and Wrong and a feeling of obligation to do what we believe to be the Right, whether it suits us or not. The existence of Conscience suggests that people naturally and instinctively recognise that there is a Moral Ruler.

He is not Silent!

While, as Paul wrote, people “have no excuse at all”, the existence of these (and other) evidences about God (what Paul calls “his eternal power and divine nature”) doesn’t mean that people can of themselves come to an adequate knowledge of God and enter into a relationship with him.

There are two important factors here. (1) As already noted, whatever we may come to know about someone, we can only come to know a person if that person chooses to reveal himself. What we have already noted is gathered up in an area sometimes called “general revelation”. It is intrinsic to the fact of creation itself. When I make something, it is in itself an expression of my personality and purpose. The act of creation breaks the silence! God created people in his image (Genesis 1.26) – with a strong creative urge, with the responsibility of oversight and (most importantly) with the possibility of and need for relationship with God. And the picture of life in Eden before the Fall shows God walking and talking with Adam and Eve. There was “special revelation” – the

specific unveiling of his character and will in communication and personal relationship.

(2) But things were different after the Fall. The reaction of the guilty pair was to try to hide themselves from God. And since that time human beings have felt a problem in relating to God. On the one hand, we have this deep urge to reach out to God, to believe in and be submitted to something or someone beyond ourselves. But on the other, we have this urge to hide, to shut ourselves off from God. From God's point of view, there is a problem with the relationship too! He loves and wants to relate to the people of the world, yet their sin puts them under his wrath, under his judgment. So an important part of God's special revelation has to do with "Redemption", and we consider that later.

The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church (para.5) states that "the Church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as unique prophetic and apostolic testimony, in which she hears the Word of God and by which her faith and obedience are nourished and regulated. When the Church preaches Jesus Christ, her message is controlled by the Biblical witnesses. The Word of God on whom man's salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church. The Uniting Church lays upon her members the serious duty of reading the Scriptures, commits her ministers to preach from these and to administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs of the Gospel set forth in the Scriptures."

This statement clearly emphasises that the Bible is not just important for Christian growth, but as the foundation of all the Church believes and does. Let's look at Hebrews 1.1-2.

"God has spoken" We cannot know God unless he chooses to reveal himself. This is true, in a relative sense, about knowing any human person too, but is absolutely true about God. Our knowledge of God comes, not by human investigation or discovery, but by revelation. It comes about because God wants us to know about himself, because he wants us to know his love, because he wants to include us in his family.

"Of old" "in these last days" These words suggest to us that God's self-revelation has come in two major sections, as witnessed by our division of the Bible into Old and New Testaments. God, of course, is consistent in his Being and in his revelation of himself. His revelation was progressive, as people were able to receive it. Not only so, however, for some was preparatory and promise while "in these last days" the revelation has been fulfilment. The writer to the Hebrews is very much focussing attention on the fulfilment "in these last days".

"In many and various ways" Look at the way the Hebrew Bible is arranged. The words on its spine don't say, "Holy Bible", but "Law, Prophets and Writings". That arrangement holds some surprises for us. **Law** – that's surely all about God's rules for living, how God's people are meant to live. And yet we find it couched in the story of God's people, much of it under Moses' leadership as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. **Prophets** – to our surprise, the first section in the prophets is Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, I and II Kings – historical stuff! The books we think of as the

prophets are in a second section. So God is seen to be revealing himself in and through the history of his chosen people, the Israelites – through obedience and disobedience, through kings good and bad, through wars and struggles... as well as through special spokesmen who bring the Lord's word of guidance, warning and promise. And then **Writings**, beginning with the book of Psalms... So God has spoken through poetry and parable, vision and dream too.

"By the prophets" These words remind us that the words were not just immediate. They became "Scripture" – the Word of God written. The writings that we call the Bible were not just accepted "on the spot" as Scripture. In fact some of them were rejected. We think, for instance of the story of King Jehoiakim in Jer.36 – burning Jeremiah's scroll because he didn't like it. It had to be rewritten. Much of what the prophets said would not have had a welcome at the time. But it was kept, and came to be recognised as the Word of God. The three divisions of the Hebrew Bible mentioned earlier represent in general terms the order of the process by which they received recognition. The Jewish Council of Jamnia in 100AD gave formal approval to what we call the "canon" of the Hebrew Old Testament. Looking at the New Testament we have the words of Christ and the testimony of the apostles. There are a number of writings (some of them gathered into a book called *The Apocryphal New Testament*) which never made it – and reading them we can understand why.

"By his Son" We are reminded by these words that revelation was progressive to "fulfilment" in the person and work of Jesus the Christ. He is the Word of God who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1.14). In the Epistle to the Hebrews there is a strong emphasis on what happened "of old" as foreshadowing the reality that would come to be in Christ. This is seen in terms of revelation in chapters 1 and 2, a comparison between Jesus and Moses (ch.3) and Joshua (ch.4) and the Aaronic priesthood (chs 5-8), the covenant and sacrificial system (ch.9), and more.

We can only know about God because he has chosen to reveal himself. The process of this revelation has involved what we call "inspiration". This is not a question of what we find "inspiring", but rather the work of the Holy Spirit within the personalities of the human writers to produce the Word of God written. The expression used by Peter in 2 Peter 1.21 is used, for example by Luke in Acts 27.15 and 17, where they "let the ship be carried along by the wind." Paul calls the Scriptures "God-breathed" (*theopneustos* – 2 Timothy 3.16). This does not mean that the personalities, interests and styles of the human writers became invisible.

In modern times, much study has gone into the human element in the Scriptures – seeing them as discovery rather than revelation. This has led to a radical and tragic change of teaching in which we then set ourselves up to make our own "picture of God". This is not the historic Christian faith which has strongly emphasised the Word of God written and the Word of God incarnate.

Thankfully, God is there and he is not silent!

For reflection...



It does matter what you believe as long as you believe it.
(Paul E. Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith*, Intersivity, 1966, p. 117)

It is sometimes suggested that it doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe something!
Why is correct belief important?

The cartoon's caption seems to be suggesting that there are two kinds of believing. What are they?

- Think about the "evidences" for the existence of God. What is the most important evidence for you?
- The Bible was written so long ago. Why is it still so important for us today?

Prayer Cells



God's revelation of himself is not just for giving us "facts" about himself, but to bring us into a loving relationship with himself. Personal private prayer is an important part of that relationship. There is also strength and encouragement in having a small group of people (a prayer cell) with whom we can pray regularly.

So, in our session plan for each week, we have a place for prayer together. At the end of our Basics course, find one or two other people and form a regular "prayer cell" with them.

Pattern of Prayer

There are a number of important elements in praying. ACTS is a useful mnemonic for remembering them.

Adoration (or Praise) – reflect in awe and wonder on God's greatness and love. Often the words of one of the Psalms can help us express our adoration. (Ps.95.1-5)

Confession – open to God those parts of our lives which conflict with his will. (Ps.51.1-5,10; 139.23-4; 1 Jn.1.8-9)

Thanksgiving – consider with thankfulness God's goodness to us in Jesus and his guidance and help throughout the week (be specific). (Rom.8.28,38-40; 2 Cor.9.15; Eph.5.19-20; Phil.4.6-7; 1 Thess.5.16-8)

Supplication – firstly for others (intercession), specifically bringing their need to God, then for ourselves (petition), coming with our own needs with openness to God guidance and will for us.

Conversational Prayer

Often our praying together (if church, for example) is like a **delegation**. We are together and agreeing with what is said, but one person is presenting it all on our behalf. And our small group prayer has been like a series of delegations – perhaps with each person going through some or all of the ACTS and ending with "Amen".

But our prayer cells can be more like a **conversation**. In a conversation one person isn't "holding the floor" all the time. Rather each person contributes a sentence or two and lets someone else speak. And that person doesn't go right back to the beginning, but continues, adding to the thought of the previous person or leading the conversation to another topic. And the conversation doesn't come to its "end" until all have spoken.

In our prayer cells, let's pray conversationally. First, agree about some of the specifics you want to pray about and decide who will conclude the prayer. Then, following the ACTS pattern, pray a sentence or two at a time. It may be that at some points someone will remember a Bible verse of assurance or promise that can come in as part of God's sharing in the conversation. But the "Amen" doesn't come until the end of the prayer time.

Each week we will be including a brief segment in which we consider one of the world religions or one of the many sect groups in our society. This helps us clarify what we believe and to see the uniqueness of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

We will also share (in brief summary form) the life of a significant Christian leader – past or present.

Understanding Islam

Islam is the correct name of the religion founded in Arabia by Muhammed (c.570-632AD). It contains elements drawn from both Judaism and Christianity, but regards Muhammed as the final revealer of the will of Allah. The Creed is simple – “There is no god but Allah, and Muhammed is his prophet” – but the requirement is total obedience, as the name Islam itself implies. Muslim (or Moslem) means “obedient one”.

Muhammed was born in Mecca and died in Medina. It was in these two places that he received the revelations recorded in the *Qu’ran* (Koran).

Muhammed was deeply dissatisfied with the polytheism and primitive superstitions of his native Mecca and became passionately convinced (perhaps through Christian or Jewish contacts) of the existence and transcendence of the one true God.

His earliest “revelations” (from the age of about forty) urged the moral response of man created by Allah, foretold the day of judgment, and graphically depicted the tortures of the damned and the seductive sights of a very sensual Paradise.

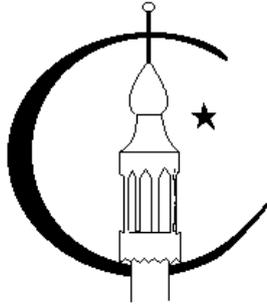
His call to belief in Allah met a poor response in Mecca, and in 622AD he withdrew with some two hundred followers to Medina. This emigration (*hegira*) is regarded as the beginning of the Muslim era.

In Medina he became prophet-legislator and warrior. It has been suggested that Muhammed thought he should gain Jewish support for his message – after all, wasn’t he just restating the one true religion preached by Abraham? But at Medina he found that the Jews repudiated his claims and ridiculed his inaccurate accounts of Old Testament incidents. His message became increasingly hostile to the Jews, and he acted to banish or massacre Jewish tribes.

Muhammed declared war against paganism and, through a series of systematic campaigns, gradually forced the Bedouin tribes into submission. Two years before his death he entered Mecca in triumph and smashed the city’s idols. By the time of his death Islam was established throughout the Arabian peninsula.

Islam continued to expand by conquest for several centuries. Within a century of Muhammed’s death its influence extended from Spain to India. While military conquest is not presently used as a means of spreading Islam, considerable use is made of the oil dollar as part of a fairly aggressive expansion policy.

Islam is divided into a number of sects, the main division being between Sunnite (from *sunna*, “accepted practice”) and



Shi’ite (from *shi’a*, “party”) groups which disagreed over the question of leadership. For simplicity we are specifically considering here the faith and practice of Sunni Islam.

While there are no official “articles of faith”, the summary attributed to the Prophet states that a Muslim must believe “in Allah, and his Angels, and his Books, and his Messengers, and in the Last Day, and . . . in the Decree both of good and evil.”

Religious observances include the “Five Pillars” – recital of the Creed (repeated by Muslims many times a day in every sort of context), Prayer (five times a day – alone, in company or in a mosque), Fasting (during the month of Ramadan, the ninth in the Muslim year – all Muslims except the sick, travellers, pregnant women, nursing mothers and young children are required to fast from first dawn until sunset, abstaining from all forms of food, drink, smoking or sexual intercourse), Almsgiving (the Prophet himself was an orphan and felt keenly for the destitute and needy) and Pilgrimage (every Muslim is expected to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in his lifetime).

Another religious duty is Jihad or Holy War. It is incumbent in general on all Muslims who are adult, male and free to answer any legally valid summons to war against the infidels; and he who dies in a Jihad is a martyr and assured of Paradise.

Christian missionary work among Muslims has always been difficult and relatively unfruitful. This is largely due to the Islamic apostasy law – originally providing death for a man and death or perpetual imprisonment for a woman, or more recently loss of family, inheritance and employment, with considerable danger of death by poison.



Muhammed, founder and prophet of Islam

- c. 570 A.D. born in Mecca
- 622 A.D. the *hegira* or emigration to Medina (regarded as the beginning of the Moslem era)
- 632 A.D. died in Medina

Polycarp of Smyrna c.70-155

Polycarp is described in the sources as a disciple of the apostle John, as one who had talked with other eyewitnesses of Christ and as a faithful pastor. It is striking that the letter to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2.8-11 speaks of this church as one where trouble was being stirred up by so-called Jews. Suffering would come soon. For some, imprisonment. For others, “Be faithful to me, even if it means death, and I will give you life as your prize of victory.”

A very detailed account of Polycarp’s martyrdom is preserved in Eusebius’ *Church History* (325) from a letter written within a year of the events.

Polycarp found refuge for a short time outside the city limits, but he was betrayed by an unfaithful servant and fell into the hands of his enemies. Calm and dignified, he surrendered himself with the words, “God’s will be done.” Then, after giving food to his hungry persecutors, he poured out his heart before the Lord, praying for himself, his friends, the church of Smyrna, and also for his enemies.

The usual test applied to Christians was that they must “swear by the genius of Caesar” – in other words, acknowledge him to be divine. Refusal to do so meant the death sentence. The Jews were the only religious group in the Empire exempt from this requirement. At first Christians had protection under the Jewish “umbrella”. But as the church came to be predominantly “Gentile” and as Jews increasingly dissociated themselves from the Christians, the latter no longer had that protection.

Not only did Polycarp refuse to swear as requested, but he stated openly that he was a Christian. He was threatened with wild beasts and fire – “swear and I will release you: curse Christ.”

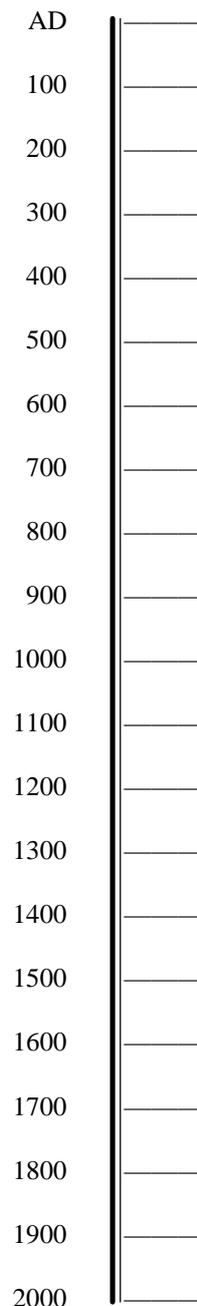
To this threat Polycarp replied, “For eighty and six years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me? You threaten with the fire that burns for a hour and then is quenched; for you do not know of the fire of the judgment to come, and the fire of the eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why are you delaying? Bring what you will!”

The consul was astonished and sent a herald to announce to the people that Polycarp had confessed himself to be a Christian. When the fire was lit and the flames and smoke encircled him, he prayed, “Lord God, Father of our blessed Saviour, I thank you that I have been counted worthy to receive the crown of martyrdom, and that I may die for you and for your cause.”



Figures from Church History

Mark on this chart approximately when the particular Christian leaders lived.



Next week: Knowing God – Redemption

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| • Psalm 19 | • Hebrews 1.1-3 |
| • Jeremiah 1.4-10 | • 2 Timothy 3.10-17 |
| • John 1.1-14 | • 2 Peter 1.16-21 |
| • Romans 1.18-23 | |