

YOU CAN'T ASK THAT!

50 TABOO QUESTIONS
ABOUT THE BIBLE,
JESUS,
AND CHRISTIANITY

EDITED BY CHRISTIAN PIATT



chalice
press

Saint Louis, Missouri

An imprint of Christian Board of Publication

Copyright © 2020 by Christian Piatt

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact
Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978)
750-8400, www.copyright.com.

ChalicePress.com

Print 9780827244313

EPUB 9780827244320

EPDF 9780827244337

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
Introduction	1
Questions:	
Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect, handed down directly from God to humanity without error?	3
Aren't women treated poorly throughout the Bible? Why would any intelligent modern woman today even want to read the Bible?	9
How can a God be all-loving yet allow people to be thrown into hell?	13
What does the Bible really say about homosexuality?	15
Why haven't any new books been added to the Bible in almost two thousand years? Is there a chance that any new books will ever be added? Why or why not?	21
Did God write the Bible? If so, why didn't God simply create it miraculously, rather than using so many people over thousands of years to write it down?	25
How do we reconcile the Old Testament command for vengeance (eye for an eye) with Jesus' command to turn the other cheek and love our enemies?	29
Is there a right or wrong way to read the Bible?	33
Does God justify violence in scripture? What about genocide?	37
Hell, Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus are all labeled as "hell" by most Christians. Are they really the same? Are they all places of fiery torment? Are such things to be taken literally, metaphorically, or as myth?	40
How can we begin to take the Bible literally when it seems to contradict itself so often?	44
Are Lucifer, the Adversary, Satan, the Beast, and the Antichrist all the same? If so, why use so many names? If not, what are their different roles, and who is in charge?	48
Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute?	50
Are there any mistakes in the Bible? Like what?	54
In some cases, Paul (the purported author of many New Testament books seems to support women in leadership roles in church, and in others, he says they have no place. Which is it? And why the seeming contradiction?	58
Are some sins worse or better than others?	63

If people have to be Christians to go to heaven, what happens to all of the people born before Jesus or who never hear about his ministry?	66
Why would stories about a father murdering his daughter (Judg. 11) or handing his daughters over to a crowd to be raped and killed (Gen. 19) be included in the Bible?	69
Why would God send Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God, dying for the sins of the world, instead of just destroying sin or perhaps offering grace and forgiveness to the very ones created by God? Why does an all-powerful being need a mediator anyway?	73
Many Christians embrace the phrase, "I believe Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and I accept him as my personal Lord and Savior," but I can't find this anywhere in the Bible. Where did it come from?	79
In John 14:6, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Do people have to choose to follow Jesus to go to heaven? And what does it mean to choose his way?	83
What happened during the "missing years" of Jesus' life, unaccounted for in the Bible?	88
Why should I believe that Jesus was resurrected? What does it mean to the Christian faith if he wasn't resurrected?	91
Does it really matter if Jesus was born to a virgin or not? What if Mary wasn't a virgin or if Joseph (or someone else) was the father?	96
Did Jesus really live a life without any sin? What do we base this on? And does it matter? Why?	99
Why did Jesus cry out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from the cross? Did God really abandon him? If so, doesn't this mean that Jesus wasn't actually God?	103
Aren't Jesus' miracles similar to other healings and miracles recorded outside the Jewish and Christian tradition?	107
When Jesus participates in the Last Supper, doesn't that mean he's eating his own body and drinking his own blood?	111
Did Jesus understand himself to be God, like God, in line with God, or something else? Did he understand this from birth? If not, then when did he begin to understand it and how?	113
If Jesus could resurrect people, why didn't he do it more often?	117
Was Jesus a pacifist?	120
Did Jesus believe God wanted him to be crucified? If so, why did he ask God, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" in the garden of Gethsemane?	123

Was Jesus ever wrong? About what?	127
Jesus forgave people of their sins before he died. How could he do this if he actually had to die in order to save us from sin?	129
Jesus broke certain biblical laws by healing on the Sabbath, associating with non-Jews, and not keeping all of the kosher laws. So how do we know which rules to follow and which are irrelevant to us today?	132
Can you be LGBTQ and be a Christian? A minister? More denominations and Christian communities are welcoming LGBTQ people, as well as ordaining LGBTQ as ministers. Is this really possible?	137
Preachers such as Joel Osteen preach about Jesus wanting us to be rich. Where does this belief come from? Wasn't Jesus poor? Didn't he tell rich people to give everything away?	141
Are Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Spiritists, Christian Scientists, etc., really Christians? Who gets to decide?	144
Do Christians have to be baptized? Why do some sprinkle while others immerse? Which one is "right"?	146
If all Christians basically believe the same thing, why do they have so many different denominations? And if there are so many denominations struggling to survive, why don't they just combine with other ones?	148
Can someone be both an atheist and a Christian? If "Christian" actually means "follower of Christ," could someone be a student of the life of Jesus without accepting the claims of his divinity, or claims of the existence of any divinity at all?	150
What do Christians believe about disaster and suffering in the world? If God has a plan, why is suffering part of it? How do Christians reconcile suffering in their own lives?	153
It seems like most Christians focus a lot more on issues of sex and sexuality than any other issues. Why?	155
I hear Christians say all the time that, good or bad, everything happens for a reason. What about genocide? Famine? Rape? What could the reason possibly be? Does there have to always be a reason?	159
Where does the idea that so many Christians and political leaders maintain about the United States being a Christian nation come from? Do all Christians believe this?	162
How is it that so many Christians support—or even call for—wars when one of the names for the Christ they supposedly follow is "Prince of Peace," and Jesus urged love for enemies and nonviolent responses?	165

How do some Christians use their faith to oppose abortion, while also supporting the death penalty or personal gun rights?	169
Many Christians describe themselves as “evangelical.” What does that mean? Is that the same as being conservative?	172
Do Christians still believe that wives should submit to their husbands? What do they mean by “submit”?	175
Is the Christian God the same God as the God of Islam and Judaism? If not, what’s the difference? If so, why have three separate religions?	178
What do Christians believe happens after they die, and why? Do they believe they are judged immediately and are ferried off to heaven or hell? What about purgatory?	180
To be a Christian, is it necessary to believe that Jesus really (as in factually) healed the blind, made the lame to walk, rose from the dead, and ascended into somewhere called heaven, where he sits with someone he calls his Father? And, if not, why do Christians recite a creed that says that?	184
Why is the church growing in Africa and Asia, but declining in Europe and the U.S.?	187
Why is personal/individual salvation emphasized so much more in modern Christianity than global transformation of the world into the just peace realm of God’s commonwealth? How can one person be saved while others continue to suffer?	189
Why do so many evangelicals seem to feel the term “social justice” is a bad thing? Why is it generally associated with leftist political activism?	193
Many Christians read and study the King James Version of the Bible. Some believe it is the best and most accurate translation there is. Why? Can I read a different translation? What about paraphrases such as The Message?	196
What does it actually mean when Christians say they believe that Jesus is the Son of God? And how, if at all, is this different from when other people are called “children of God”?	199
Do all Christians believe Jesus died for their sins? What exactly does this mean, and where did the belief come from? If some Christians don’t believe this, what do they believe about the crucifixion?	202
Contributors to <i>You Can’t Ask That</i>	206

FOREWORD

A few years ago, I traveled to Jordan with Christian Piatt and a group of faith writers and church leaders. We stood together in the rubble of ancient ruins, explored biblical landmarks, and visited places of spiritual significance. It was the trip of a lifetime, but of all the incredible things we saw and did, it's the least remarkable place that I think of most often.

At our first stop, the tour bus pulled off the highway into a small gravel lot. Traffic sped past us on one side, filling our lungs with dust and exhaust fumes, and on the other side, a polluted stream trickled along. There was garbage and graffiti everywhere, and on the far side of the creek, an odd pair of pants had been perfectly laid out to dry in the dirt. We took it all in while our tour guide gathered us close enough to be heard over the road noise and explained that we were standing where Jacob wrestled an angel by a river, as told in Genesis. It happened right there. Next to a filthy freeway underpass... where someone lost their pants.

I looked to Christian, my fellow skeptic, who looked back at me with a proper side-eye, like, "*Really?*"

I had so many questions.

At every stop throughout the trip, our tour guide spoke about theology, archeology, geography, and history with great authority, as if there was no doubt he spoke truth. Most of the people in the group embraced his teaching with gusto and then confidently passed the information along to their churches, readers, and families as stated fact. It was amazing to see how quickly a trash-strewn patch of gravel by the side of the road became the undisputed wrestling mat of Jacob and an angel.

Each night, I met Christian and a few of our doubt-filled cohorts at the hotel bar, where we talked too loud, drank too much, and asked all of the big, scary questions the day's travel had inspired. Questions like, "If I believe Jacob *literally* wrestled an angel at a truck stop in Jordan, do I have to take everything in the Bible literally?" and, "What if I don't believe the Bible is literal *at all?*"

In my own journey, I've found few things as encouraging as other people's questions. It's just nice to know I'm not the only person with questions about Jesus, and sex, and heaven, and all of those weird Bible stories full of incest and foreskins and stuff. As my faith has evolved and my questions have grown both bigger and more nuanced, I've had few friends who are as eager to explore complicated questions as Christian Piatt.

You Can't Ask That is a perfect example of Christian's ability to challenge the mysteries of faith without settling for easy answers. He did the hard part by posing our messiest questions to a variety of wise, experienced leaders, and gathering their thoughtful responses together in one place. Reading this book reminded me of the late night, whiskey-driven chats we shared in Jordan. During that trip, I found the most compelling questions, honest conversations, and informative responses happened at the hotel bar with Christian and our circle of friends.

In *You Can't Ask That* I think you'll find that Christian Piatt has dared to ask and seek answers to some of your own big, scary, taboo questions. I hope these pages and the wealth of insight and resources they contain will help you to feel seen and understood, and even more, that they may help you see and understand others. But if any of the questions or answers start to make you squirm, just think of this book as a chic hotel bar or a toasty firepit where you're chatting with a circle of friends.

Among friends there are no taboos.

— Jamie Wright
Author of *The Very Worst Missionary:
A Memoir or Whatever*

INTRODUCTION

But Why?

There's a three-letter word that can cause entire institutions to shiver to their collective foundations. In systems where uniformity and compliance are necessary for survival, this tiny word can seem to chip away at the cornerstone, propping the whole thing up.

And yet it's one of the first words every one of us learns as toddlers.

Anyone who has been around children for long knows how tedious the word can be, but for the kid, it serves as a key that helps open the door to a world of understanding.

WHY?

As a student in parochial school, I was taught the value of debate, critical thought, and rhetoric. But then when I got to church, I was expected to listen, accept, and not challenge what I was taught.

In fact, when I asked one too many questions, they threw me out. Even chucked a Bible at my head during youth group in case I wasn't getting the message.

My questions posed a threat.

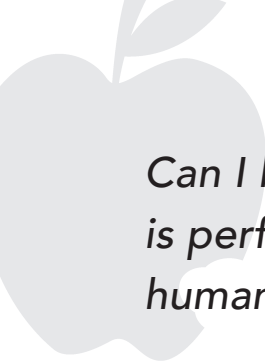
Ideally, though, questions present an invitation into shared exploration, discussion, and growth. All that is required for us to make this shift is to let go of the need to be *right* for the sake of the possibility to be *changed*.

The 50 questions in this book were pulled from the Banned Questions series. I've presented multiple responses to each question in this volume because there isn't necessarily one "right answer." Instead, the questions themselves are the most important thing, followed by what new paths those questions lead us along.

What will we find? How might we change? The only way to know is to ask the hard questions and see where we end up.

Why not?

— *Christian Piatt*



Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect, handed down directly from God to humanity without error?

.....
Craig Detweiler

A Absolutely. Scientific principles have only been applied to the Bible for a couple hundred years. An earlier era understood divine inspiration as a different kind of truth. Shoehorning the Bible into scientific standards may actually reduce the profound gifts that the Bible provides. Shakespeare is not intended to be crammed into a test tube. Surely the Bible operates on an entirely different plane and claim to authority.

For example, we know that love is a powerful, elusive, but tangible reality. Artists and musicians have given us countless ways to describe such a profound truth. Drugs have enhanced the physical side of sexual performance. Yet medical breakthroughs cannot make us more loving. Becoming more loving is a lifelong quest, rooted in prayer, perseverance, and careful attention to others.

Following Jesus (the core Christian route) involves so much more than the minutiae of the Bible. We may memorize countless verses, but we are still called to put them into practice. Jesus seemed so interested in how our convictions turned into tangible differences for our communities. He gave little time or attention to those who tried to trap him into semantic arguments about obscure interpretations of the Torah. The Bible speaks into our hearts and minds with both veracity and variety. It is meant to woo, to persuade, to challenge, not by nailing down the details but pushing us toward applying timeless truths for today.

.....
Jason Boyett

A Of course. Belief in the inerrancy of scripture—inerrancy is the theological word for the idea that the Bible is without error—is not a requirement for salvation. Let me be clear: A Christian is not someone who believes in the perfection of scripture. A Christian is someone who follows Jesus Christ.

Remember, the earliest Christians didn't even have the Bible as we know it. They had the Law and the Prophets on ancient scrolls. Certain churches had letters written by Paul. A few may have had the gospel accounts to read (and many certainly had other noncanonical gospels

available, such as the gospel of Thomas). But they most likely wouldn't have made a big deal about whether or not these texts were free from chronological or scientific errors because they just didn't think that way.

The idea that the Bible's authority is tied to its lack of mistakes is an Enlightenment idea. In the grand arc of history, that's a pretty recent concept.

That's not to say the Bible isn't inspired or authoritative. It certainly is inspired in that it tells us the story of Jesus, from Genesis to Revelation. It is authoritative in that it is God's primary means of communicating with us. But the Bible is not part of the Trinity; to exalt it above the Christ whose story it tells, and whose salvation it reveals, is a bad idea.

.....

José F. Morales Jr.

A Nowhere in the Bible does it say that one must believe in the Bible (let alone believe it's perfect) to be saved. Moreover, the Bible doesn't claim authority for itself within its pages. That's why I contend with my fellow Christians who say that one must believe in the "authority of the Bible." For me, the awesomeness of the Bible is that it points beyond itself.

And to what does it point?

First, the Bible points to the authority of God—not of the Bible! God is supreme above all, creator and sustainer of all life—life now and beyond the grave. I always say that the most important words in scripture are the first four: "In the beginning, God . . ."

Second, the Bible points to the good news of salvation. Now, salvation is defined in many different ways throughout scripture. So we should become familiar with the broad stroke with which the Bible paints salvation: God saves in creation, in gathering a community, in political liberation, in acquiring wisdom, in healing, and in the washing away of sin. In his book *Salvation*, Joel Green summarizes it best: Salvation is "God drawing near"—drawing near in creation, in the Temple, in Christ.

And we draw near to the Bible, the written word, because in doing so, the Living Word, whom Christians know as Jesus Christ, draws near to us (see Lk. 24:13–32). "They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he [Jesus] was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'" (Lk. 24:32).

God indeed has drawn near to save us—believe it!

.....

Nadia Bolz-Weber

A A World Religions professor of mine in seminary told a story about New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan being asked what it takes to be a Christian. His answer? "If you're dipped, you're in." What

Crossan was saying is that your baptism makes you Christian. And when we are baptized, it is in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that we are not baptized in the name of the Bible. Why is this? Because the Bible is not the fourth person of the Trinity, even though it is often treated as such.

Again, this is where Lutherans get in trouble with some of our other Christian brothers and sisters. We believe that God claims us and names us as God's own in the waters of baptism. The action is from God toward us, not from us toward God.

For a really great treatment on the difference between viewing the Bible as Divine Reference Manual and viewing the Bible as Living Word, see *Making Sense of Scripture* by David J. Lose.

.....

Christian Piatt

A There are two things to consider when dealing with this question: church history and human nature. One of the biggest reasons that Martin Luther resisted the authority of the Catholic Church the way he did, ultimately sparking the Protestant Reformation, was because he believed that people should not be beholden to the church in claiming what they believe about God.

So at the foundation of every non-Catholic Christian church is this value of the individual freedom of belief, at least in theory. But in reality, we humans aren't big fans of letting go of control, and church is certainly no exception. Although Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and all other Protestants supposedly have the liberty to interpret scripture without organized religion interceding and telling them what to think, we find plenty of examples where this still happens.

You know that old saying about those who don't learn from history being doomed to repeat it? For all the benefits of the church, we sometimes have selective amnesia when it comes to remembering where we came from.

Some religious leaders will say you can't be a Christian without claiming the perfect, inerrant authority of scripture. The good news is that you get to decide for yourself whether you agree with them or not.

.....

Joshua Toulouse

A The Bible says that all scripture is inspired by God, or it can be translated as "breathed" or "spirited" by God. But nowhere do the scriptures claim to be handed down directly from God without possibility

for error. While some traditions have understood scripture this way, it is certainly not a requirement for Christianity.

I choose to see the idea that scripture is inspired by God to mean that God inspired the writing of the scripture but also respected the humanity of those who were doing the writing. God recognizes that we are not perfect, and therefore nothing we create will be perfect either.

It is helpful to consider too that the inspiration of God regarding scripture doesn't end when the writing is complete. God is also inspiring those of us who hear or read scripture today. With this understanding, God is kept active in scripture, in that scripture can speak to us in new ways and on different levels now as opposed to when it was written.

The breathing or spiriting of God in scripture occurs today, just as much in our receiving of scripture as it was in the writing.

.....

Becky Garrison

A This concept of reading the Bible line by line is a relatively new way of interpreting scripture that would have been totally foreign to pre-Enlightenment Christians. Even the most die-hard literalist acknowledges that when Jesus was speaking in parables, his audience knew that he was using metaphors and symbols.

To reduce the poetry, metaphor, symbolism, and other literary devices present in this holy book to a point where the Bible becomes a technical how-to manual misses the mystery behind the myriad ways that God has spoken to humanity throughout history.

.....

Jim L. Robinson

A Of course! Christianity is not based on one's affirmation of scripture or the correctness of one's doctrine; rather, it's based on God's grace and our trust in that grace.

I don't buy the exact description of "inerrancy" that's such a crucial belief for some Christians. On the other hand, I believe that any perceived "errors" are not really in scripture but in human presuppositions about the texts.

The Bible is a human witness to the presence and grace of God. God interacts with humans and sometimes (by way of divine inspiration) some humans get it. They perceive and understand that presence and write down their experience. Down through history some of those writings have been collected to provide a standard by which succeeding generations can evaluate their own experiences.

As to “handed down directly from God,” that’s again a matter of definition. Yes, I believe that God is the source of the truth in scripture, but I don’t believe that God dictated it word for word. The truth and the validity of the Christian witness are proven in the arena of history where God interacts with humans. We are known by the fruits we bear.



Scriptural References

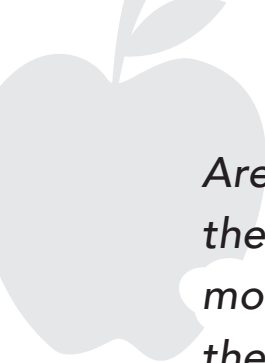
Matthew 7:24–29; 28:19; Mark 1:21–28; Luke 24:13–32; 2 Timothy 3:15–16; 2 Peter 1:20–21

Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

- Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Hendrickson, 1999).
- Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).
- Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (HarperOne, 1997), especially chap. 7, “Salvation: What on Earth Do We Mean?”
- Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperOne, 2003), especially chap. 3, “The Bible: The Heart of the Tradition.”
- Ed Cizewski, *Coffeehouse Theology* (NavPress, 2008).
- Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don’t Know about Them)* (HarperOne, 2010).
- Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne, 2007).
- Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995).
- Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What’s So Good about the Good News?* (HarperOne, 2007), especially “Introduction” and chap. 1, “We Start with the Bible.”
- Joel B. Green, *Salvation* (Chalice Press 2003).
- N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting beyond the Bible Wars* (HarperOne, 2006).

Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. If you are saved by the Bible's lack of errors, what happens if you find a mistake in it?
2. How deep are you willing to go in Bible study? Are you willing to consider sources other than those that support what you already think you believe?
3. What kind of relationship should Christians have with the Bible?
4. Joel Green defines salvation as "God drawing near." How do you define salvation?
5. What makes someone Christian?



Aren't women treated poorly throughout the Bible? Why would any intelligent modern woman today even want to read the Bible?

.....
Rebecca Bowman Woods

A Growing up in the church, I learned the better-known stories of biblical women. By age ten or eleven, I had a few questions, such as: Why was Jacob allowed to marry both Rachel and Leah? Why was it such a big deal to be “barren”? Why didn’t Jesus have any female disciples (or did he)? And was Eve really to blame for . . . everything?

By the time I discovered the really awful Old Testament stories and the New Testament texts commanding women to be silent in church, cover their heads, and obey their husbands, I wanted nothing to do with the Bible, or frankly, with Christianity.

What convinced me was reading about Jesus. Even though the gospel writers were male, it’s clear that Jesus had an ethic of equality when it came to women. They supported his ministry and were among his closest friends. He rescued a woman caught in adultery from death by public stoning and then convinced her that her soul was worth saving, too. Some of his longest conversations in scripture were with women. When most of the disciples went into hiding on Good Friday, the women stayed by the cross, and women were the first to see the risen Jesus.

A closer look at the rest of the Bible shows a steady (if not sparse) line of women who played a role in God’s unfolding story. Alongside the “good girls” whose names I learned in Sunday School are those who challenged the status quo, made the best of bad situations, and followed God’s call to service, leadership, and ministry: Tamar, Deborah, Bathsheba, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Joanna, Lydia, and Priscilla. These and nameless others demonstrate resourcefulness, strength, and courage—all the more remarkable considering their place in ancient culture.

.....
Becky Garrison

A While tradition tends to accord Mary with having found favored status with God (Lk. 1:26–38), let us not forget the women around Jesus who kicked some holy hiney. For example, Anna, the only woman

designated a prophet in the New Testament, possessed the wisdom and foresight to see that this infant before her represented the Messiah (Lk. 2:36–38).

If Jesus truly wanted women stuck in the kitchen, he wouldn't have encouraged Mary to join the other disciples in their discussions. Instead, he would have encouraged her to hang back washing dishes (Lk. 10:38–42). Furthermore, when Jesus was told his family was looking for him, he replied, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" (Mk. 3:31–35). He would not have said "mother" had there not been females as part of his entourage.

All throughout his ministry, Jesus debunked the first-century Jewish tradition that treated women like property. His actions with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4:4–26), the woman about to be stoned for adultery (Jn. 8:1–12), and the female sinner who wanted to anoint his feet with oil (Lk. 7:36–50) marked him as a man who would break every holy law on the books so that women could be viewed as equals in the kingdom of God.

Let us also not forget that Jesus made his very first appearance as the risen Lord before a "lowly" woman (Mk. 16:9 and Jn. 20:11–18).

.....

Craig Detweiler

A• The ancient world was quite patriarchal. Women were rarely afforded the rights and equality we've all come to accept as natural and God-given. Plenty of examples of abuse are found in the Jewish scriptures. Eve is blamed for original sin. Women are rarely counted in ancient censuses. They are not given power, property, or even a voice. In a particularly haunting New Testament passage, the apostle Paul insists, "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:34–35).

So why read the Bible? Women may find themselves strangely moved by Jesus' relationship with the opposite sex. He goes out of his way to affirm the value of women who have seemingly been discarded by their culture. Jesus defends the woman caught in adultery. He pauses to refresh the woman at the well. He stops for a women suffering from an issue of blood. He heals Jairus' daughter. He responds to the cries of Mary and Martha by resurrecting their beloved Lazarus.

If women find themselves discouraged by the ghosts of a patriarchal past, they may find Jesus a surprisingly liberating figure. He upsets the status quo by addressing women, affirming women, and befriending women, regardless of their social status.

.....

Marcia Ford

Many—but not all—ancient cultures were patriarchal societies in which men had all the power and women were treated as possessions. While there were exceptions throughout its history, most notably the elevation of Deborah to the position of judge, Israelite society perpetuated that structure. While some see the Bible as condoning masculine control, others interpret the biblical perpetuation of patriarchy as a way of working within existing cultural norms.

This background is what makes Jesus' attitude toward women so astonishing. Jesus healed, delivered, and saved women as well as men and never discouraged women from following him. There's evidence that the women who traveled with Jesus were largely responsible for underwriting his ministry. Women were treated as valuable human beings, every bit as worthwhile as men.

Those who see the Bible as misogynistic often interpret Paul's teachings limiting the role of women as representative of all of scripture. But they fail to realize how much responsibility women had in the early church and how much the male followers of Jesus—including Paul—relied on women to provide for their ministries and even correct those who misunderstood the gospel, as Priscilla did.

Intelligent women today have much to learn from the Bible once they grasp the stunning message Jesus brought to the women of his day. Never before had anyone, especially a religious leader, offered them the hope and promise of a new way of living that Jesus did.



Scriptural References

Luke 1:26–38; 2:36–38; 7:36–50; 10:38–42; Mark 3:31–35; 16:9; John 4:4–26; 8:1–12; 20:11–18; Acts 2:17; 18:24–28; Joel 2:28–29; Galatians 3:28; Matthew 26:13; Judges 4:4; 5:7, 31

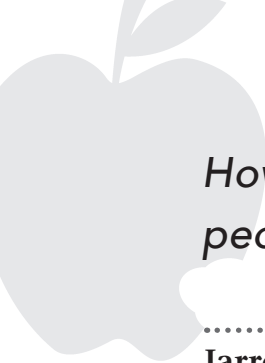
Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008).
- John T. Bristow, *What Paul Really Said about Women: The Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love* (HarperOne, 1991).
- Christians for Biblical Equality: <http://www.cbeinternational.org>.
- Loren Cunningham, David Joel Hamilton, and Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM Publishers, 2000).

- J. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women and 25 Tough Questions About Women and the Church* (Charisma House, 2006).
- Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (IVP Academic, 1995).
- Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn from Them* (WaterBrook, 1999).
- Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1992).
- Virginia Stem Owen, *Daughters of Eve: Seeing Ourselves in Women of the Bible* (NavPress, 1995).
- Lisa Wolfe, *Uppity Women of the Bible* (Four DVD set, available at <http://www.livingthequestions.com>).

Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. How do contemporary Christian women reclaim the legacies of Anna and Mary Magdalene?
2. How has your church used the Bible to either promote women in ministry or deny them participation in meaningful ministry?
3. Imagine being a first-century woman in Palestine who has only known a life dominated by men. What kind of impact do you think Jesus' teachings would have had on you?
4. Matthew 1:1–17, the genealogy of Jesus, includes four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (called the wife of Uriah). Locate, read, and discuss these women's stories in the Old Testament. What do they have in common? Why do you think the gospel writer included them in the genealogy of Jesus?
5. Are women better off today than in ancient times?



How can a God be all-loving yet allow people to be thrown into hell?

.....
Jarrod McKenna

A The Bible doesn't say God is all-loving. In my work heading up an interfaith youth organization in Western Australia, I have often heard my Muslim friends speak of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah, including *Al Wadud*, "The Loving One." The Bible, however, makes a claim not just about an attribute of God but about the mysterious unknowable essence of the Holy Triune God—that God is not just loving, but that "God IS love" (1 Jn. 4:8).

The context of this verse is very important in responding to the question of hell. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Jesus not only reveals God fully but also reveals what it is to be fully human. You don't need to be a historian to know that it's hell when we reject God by living like we were made in the image of something other than the Love revealed in Jesus (1 Jn. 4:9–12). Tolstoy wrote, "Where love is, God is also." It's equally true to say "Where Love is not—that's hell."

Any talk of hell must come in the narrative of the Creator who has acted decisively to redeem all of creation, uniting heaven and earth in the nonviolent Messiah Jesus. We were made by Love, in the image of Love, to participate in the dance that flows between the Holy Trinity that is Love and that we see fully revealed in Jesus to be Love, and this Love will one day cover the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

To not eternally be fully human by participating in the dance of Love that is God is . . . hell. Hell is what happens when we willingly decide to collaborate with the dehumanizing forces of violence, injustice, and misery that will be no more when love is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). That is why C. S. Lewis could write, "Hell's gates are locked from the inside."

.....
Jim L. Robinson

A One explanation is that people make their own choices and reap the consequences. The rules are clear and there are no excuses. Another response would suggest that "hell" is the extension of a primitive reward-and-punishment worldview that is not really consistent with later writings in the New Testament.

The bottom line is that none of us knows the mind of God. We walk by faith, not by sight. No matter what we conclude, there is no guarantee that

we're "right." Unfortunately, there are those who spout teachings about grace but who still believe you have to "get it right" if you want to go to heaven. It's not grace if we have to do anything to get it.

Whatever I say is a statement of faith, not of knowledge. If we knew, there'd be no need for faith. Indeed, from one perspective, the opposite of faith is not doubt but knowledge; and if the New Testament is clear on anything, it is that we are justified by and through faith.

Personally, I prefer to err on the side of grace rather than rules, laws, and prerequisites. I find in scripture a movement away from law and toward grace.

I believe, projecting on the basis of that movement, that God does not "allow people to be thrown into hell." I'm relatively confident that present-day teachings about hell will one day be revealed as a human misinterpretation of scripture—either in the writing, in the reading, or in both. However, that is a statement of faith, not of knowledge.



Scriptural References

Isaiah 11:9; 1 Corinthians 15:28; 1 John 4:8–12

Suggested Additional Source for Reading

- N. T. Wright, *For All the Saints?* (Morehouse, 2004).

Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. What is grace? Are there prerequisites to receiving grace? If there are prerequisites, is it really grace?
2. Can one "fall" from grace? How?
3. Do you believe in hell? What informs your understanding of it?