

essentials

the heart of the Christian faith

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essentials

CHAPTER ONE

reveal

PAGE 7

CHAPTER TWO

reject

PAGE 17

CHAPTER THREE

rescue

PAGE 27

CHAPTER FOUR

relationship

PAGE 37

CHAPTER FIVE

response

PAGE 47

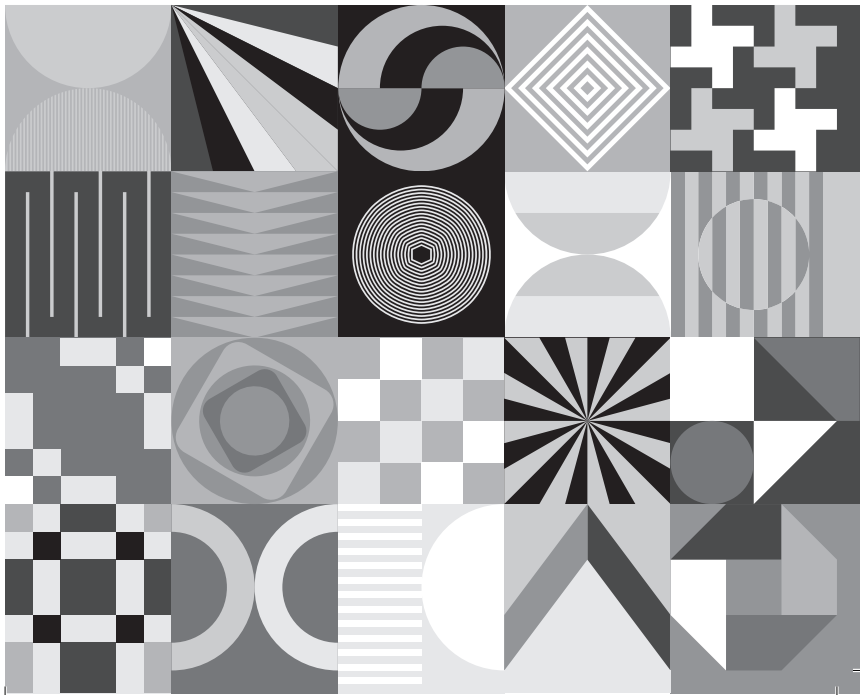
questions

PAGE 51



CHAPTER ONE

reveal





Imagine you are on a train. You look up from your phone and notice a stranger has sat down opposite. How could you get to know them? I guess you could stare at them for a long time. It would be weird, but you could look at what they're wearing and what they're watching and who they're with and see if you can construct an idea of who they are. But at the end of the day it would all be guesswork. What we need is to engage them in conversation. We need them to reveal themselves. And when they speak we need to listen.

The same is true when a new neighbour moves onto your street. Or when a new student joins your course. Or when a new colleague starts working in your department. We can guess all we like. But if we want to find out the truth, we need to have a conversation. We need the person to reveal themselves. We need to hear their words about their identity.

The same is true with God. Most of us would like to believe there is more to life than we can see or touch. The idea of living in a pointless

universe without a personal God who can provide us with purpose and protection is a frightening prospect to many. Whereas the possibility of belonging to and being loved by a caring God is absolutely thrilling. But how can we know the truth? How can we move from wishing it were true to knowing it is true? We need God to engage us in conversation. Everything would change if God turned up and spoke to us. We would be protected from self-delusion and guesswork.

Near the beginning of a short book called Luke's Gospel, there is a staggering claim made about the identity of a man called Jesus.

Listen to how he describes the moment when Jesus' mum discovers she is going to have a baby.

'...God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The

Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

✚ LUKE 1:26-35

Ever had one of those days? You wake up in the morning with a plan, but then something happens that changes everything, and your

life is rerouted. Well, Mary was having one of those days. Minding her own business living out her days in a backwater town in the Roman Empire and then, bang. An angel appears and announces she will conceive, even though she will still be a virgin.

When we hear this we're not supposed to say, 'Well, of course, that's the way it was back then.' Angelic visitors were not the ancient equivalent of pregnancy test kits. Instead, we are supposed to ask, 'What kind of person is announced in such a dramatic way?' The answer is revolutionary! The claim is that Jesus was the Son of God in human flesh.

The word 'God' is a very elastic and elusive term. Lots of people like to talk about God, but not everyone means the same thing. For some God is a lonely individual. For others God is some sort of life-giving power, not personal, but present in some indescribable way, a bit like the force in *Star Wars*. But for Christians, God is much more like a loving community.

The Bible teaches that the God who is responsible for all the good and beautiful things, from the tiniest particle to the grandest planet, is a united family of three persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's what Christians call the Trinity. It's the delightful conviction that for all eternity, at the very heart of the universe, has been a relationship of perfect love. And what we're told in Luke's Gospel is that Jesus is one of these divine three.

This revelation about God's identity is not supposed to confuse us, or send us to our calculators to work out how three can be one and one can be three. Instead, this news is supposed to thrill us!

It's no surprise that most of our songs are about love. That's what we long to experience and that's what we long to see. We may joke about needing a sick bag in the presence of a mushy couple. But genuine loving relationships are what make us smile. Love is beautiful to behold and creates joy in our hearts. So what a delight to hear that

the God who made us exists as three eternal persons, who love each other perfectly.

It's fairly easy to work out why living in a world without a God would be depressing. Our lives would be completely insignificant. Here today, gone tomorrow and forgotten forever. But imagine living in a world where the God at the centre of the universe is a solitary individual. How disappointing this would be! He would know nothing of love for another. He may love himself but he would never have experienced that selfless and passionate giving of himself to someone else. But thankfully the Bible reveals that God is a united family of three persons; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And for all eternity each of the three has loved the others perfectly. What a thrilling truth! And what a helpful truth.

The existence of the Trinity explains why we love certain things. For example, why do we appreciate good friends and enjoy good company? Why is loneliness one of our greatest fears? The Bible says it's because the

God who made us is a relationship of three persons, and we have been created to live in a similar way. That's why relationships are so important to us.

Or consider how music works. Regardless of our musical taste, whether we like rock or classical or dance or heavy metal - why do we prefer the combination of distinct instruments playing together? Because the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have created a world that works like they do.

The amazing news of the Bible, or if I can put it like this, the stop-what-you-are-doing news of the Bible, is that 2000 years ago one of the members of this eternal family, the Son of God, took on human skin and bones in the womb of a Jewish girl called Mary. And then, nine months later, he was born into the world he created.

When a mother holds her child for the first time there is always nervous excitement. But can you imagine how Mary felt as she stared at this wriggling bundle of joy? Because

she was looking down at the Son of God in human flesh.

The implications of this are huge! It means that God has engaged us in conversation. Therefore, we don't have to guess if there is a God and we don't have to imagine what he is like. Because when Jesus speaks he reveals divine truth. The only question is: will we listen to what he has to say?