

Three questions on baptism

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[0:00] Well, I don't know everybody here, but I thought I'd put myself in the position of somebody! who doesn't usually come to church and had come and seen this and heard all this and all! the questions that somebody like that might have. And I thought of three of those questions which I'd like to bring to you just now and tell you what I think the answers are. So the three questions are as follows. Number one, is it true? Is there really a God or are these people just kidding themselves? And if I were to become a Christian and go on one of those courses, is it really just saying, I want you to kid yourself too? Is it all a self-deception or is it actually true? First question. Second question, is it real? Does God really touch people's lives? Is that a real thing or is it some sort of sham, some sort of willpower thing or the stuff that only, pardon me, weirdos get into? Is it real? Third question, is it good?

Does all this, if I were to buy into this, would it be good? Would it make me a, in any sense, a better person? Or actually, would I be signing up to be a more stupid, gullible person, a more restricted person and a hampered, useless person? So those three questions. Is it true? Is it real? Is it good? So let's take them one at a time. So the first one was, is it true? Or are these people just kidding themselves? And it's all a big exercise and big con trick. Well, let me say this.

I'm not stupid either. I know not everything is true. Not everything on the internet is true, is it? Not everything that people believe is true. And I also know that not all religions are true. People might try to say, oh, well, they're all much the same, but actually they're not. And people might say, well, they all lead in the same direction, but actually they don't.

And in asking this question, is it true? That's a fair question to ask because God and Jesus show that they know that some things are true and some things are not. And they know the difference between them. So in the Old Testament, one of the things, if you care to read the Bible, and I do encourage everybody to read the Bible, how can you possibly make up your mind about Christianity if you don't even know the book that it's based on? In the Old Testament, that is to say, that part of the Bible. One of the things that God is often saying is people make up their own versions of God. They are make-believe gods, and they might be in the mind, or they might be carved or manufactured. Typically, an idol in those days would be made out of wood, painted up, and people would worship it. And God would say, well, that isn't true. That's not faith. That's make-believe.

[3:41] And the two are different. And the Old Testament is scathing about idols. And in one place it says, if you make idols, these things that are not God, these things that are not truly God, they are dead and lifeless, and the people who worship them become dead and lifeless.

So God knows that not all these things are true. And Jesus also knows that not everything is true. He too talks about made-up religion. He criticized the religious leaders of his own day.

very strongly and said, you've taken something that is true, and you've added so much to it and made it so complicated. You have taught, as if from God, things that are just rules made up by human beings.

And Jesus was scathing about them. How dare you do that? He called them hypocrites. And he said to them, you nullify, that means to say to make as if it's nothing, the word of God for the sake of your made-up traditions, rules, rituals, regulations.

You nullify the real thing by all the stuff you've added to it. So is it true? Well, Jesus says it's true. Jesus knew there was such a thing as hypocrisy and make-believe, but he also knew there was the real thing. And Jesus hated the way that hypocrisy shut people out from faith in the real thing. So an

answer to point one, don't get taken in by stuff that is just made up. But don't let the made-up stuff shut you out of the real, true thing, which is what we've seen today. Is it true?

[5:48] Question two, is it real? You can go to lots of places where people get emotional and give rounds of applause, as we've done today. But the amount of reality in those things varies hugely.

We haven't just come to participate in a game show this morning, have we? Does God really touch people's lives? Is this just for sort of weirdos and gullible people?

Well, I've got a few answers to this. And the first one is, actually, you are sensible enough, aren't you, to tell whether people's lives are really changed or not? You can tell that, can't you? That is one of the things that Angie said impressed her with her son Aaron, that when he came to Jesus Christ, how many years ago was it now? Six years ago? That something had really changed in him. And that's what impressed you. And if that's happened to members of your family, you know whether it's real or not. Same thing I'd say was, if it doesn't change people's lives, then Christianity is pointless and useless. If it doesn't change people's lives, it's pointless and useless. And number three, you can't tell everything by looking on the outside.

Even the best Christians have their faults and flaws because we're not in heaven yet and are still imperfect. And of course, some people, let's not get taken in by this, might on the outside have exemplary lives and inspiring lives, but in the inside know nothing about God at all.

They're completely wrong with him. Now, what did Jesus say? Jesus said, he says this in John's Gospel, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.

[7:58] So what do we learn from that? We learn that people can't normally see the things of God. So perhaps you've come along this morning, you're a little bit sort of as a spectator, you've seen something. You haven't seen the whole thing for what it really is. Jesus says you can't see it unless God changes you deep inside. That's what born again is about. And it's also true that Jesus is saying God can do that to people. God can touch people's lives so deeply, so powerfully, so radically, so radically, that the only way to put it is they've been born again.

Is it real? Is this a real thing? Answer, yes, it is. God does touch people's lives, really. There is such a thing as being born again. Jesus spoke about it. And you can't do without that unless you're born again. Unless you're born again, you can't see the kingdom of God.

So it's not just for weirdos or nuns or gurus or gullible people, but what it is for is for believers. God isn't asking us to become saints. What he's asking us first of all to do is trust him.

In some ways that's very difficult. In some ways that's remarkably easy. Jesus says, trust me. And it's the believers who are the born again. Is it real? Yes, it is.

Is it good? Is it good? When I was interested in becoming a Christian, which is a long time ago when I was a student, my mum tried to dissuade me. She said, oh, don't get mixed up with that lot.

[10:04] I can't remember her exact words, but there's something like, did she say they're fanatics? Or you don't want to get drawn into that. I can't remember exactly what she said.

But is it good for people to get involved with Christianity? I suppose I could ask the other question the other way around and said, how have you managed without being a Christian?

Have you succeeded yourself without God in making yourself a better person, building better relationships, being more productive, being a wise and good example? How have you managed on that by yourself?

And you might say, I've managed very well, thank you. On the other hand, perhaps a more honest person would say, actually, I haven't lived up to my own standards.

Not even my own standards. I haven't lived up to them. Is it good? Now, notice what God was saying before.

[11:04] You become like what you worship. It's a truth about the human condition. You become like what you worship. So, for example, people worship money.

That is the big thing in their lives. They look to money. They love money. They depend on money. That's what they worship. And that affects people.

They can become dishonest. They can become inhuman. They can care more about the line of zeros on a bank account than the person next door to them.

People worship themselves. I would say we live in a culture of self-worship. Where human, my human rights are the thing.

And you can't possibly contradict that or question that because it's almost like a religion. So, just recently we've seen this. And I'll tell you what I think about it.

[12:10] The Irish referendum to allow abortion. And people have said this is a great step forward in human rights.

And I think it's actually a great step backwards. And because people worship themselves, they're incapable of seeing their wrongness. And what actually happens in the move to make abortion a normal, easy thing, is that what we're actually saying is that babies are not human.

And I think that that is because society can't see something that's staring it in the face and won't accept that anything can interfere with my human rights.

Anyway, you might disagree with me on that. But you become like what you worship. And Christianity is the worship of Jesus. Who's Jesus?

What was he like? This is somebody. Read it for yourself. Come to the Christianity Explored, which, among other things, will take you through Mark's gospel.

[13:25] It is said of that, that when you read it thoughtfully, Jesus steps off the pages and meets you. Who is Jesus?

He's somebody who never told a lie. That's something in itself. He never put himself first. He never had to go back and apologize.

He never cheated. He never found that his feelings got the better of him and led him into foolish things that he regretted afterwards. Jesus never got drunk.

He never had immoral sex. He never got into addiction. That's the Jesus of the Bible. The Jesus of the Bible actually shows us a model of being human.

Just read it and look at the sort of human being he was. Does he not have a perfect way of showing love and showing anger?

[14:32] He shows us how to get angry for the right reasons. We always get angry for the wrong reasons, don't we? He shows us the perfect way of serving others. He shows us the perfect way of dealing with pressures and stresses and opposition and contradiction.

He shows us the perfect way of being himself. He never had any problem with being himself. And he was selfless to the point of giving his life for us.

That's what was said in the quote. Even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

He said that what he did when he died on the cross was to pay the price, the ransom, to expend the effort to set us free. That's the sort of person Jesus was.

That's the sort of thing that he did. And I think the question is, is it good? I think, and you might disagree with me, but I think that if any of that rubbed off on his worshippers, I would say that is nothing but good.

[15:42] Is it good? I think it is. So those are the three questions. Is it true? To which the answer is, you don't have to kid yourself to be a Christian.

It's not making something up. It's submitting to a powerful, upsetting, but glorious truth. Is it real? It's not just for bizarre people and gullible people. God is able to do this amazing thing, this impossible thing. And he can do it for Aaron.

He can do it for Angie. He can do it for me. He can do it for you. And is it good? Well, worshipping Jesus means putting everything into his hands.

All that I am, all that I have, Lord Jesus, I give it to you. That's worshipping Jesus. And the Bible says that it's completely radical. But it is more good than anyone ever dreamed of.

[16:47] Well, I finished my talk. You might think, what next? I'm just going to remind you of the what next. Come to church.

If you want to take some more steps to follow on, come to church regularly. Find out. Nobody's going to force you. Nobody's going to twist your arm. Nobody's going to make you uncomfortable.

Just come along to church. Read the Bible with somebody. If you've never read it properly, give it a go. There's lots of people that will be willing to read the Bible with you.

Or the course that Chris mentioned, the Christianity Explored course. I'll put it up on the screen in a moment. But that's a very helpful course to find out about Christian things. If in your heart you're already a Christian but you haven't got baptised yet, well, what's the problem with going public in the way that Jesus said to go public and get baptised?

It's alright, isn't it? Managed? Yeah. They were added to their number. Maybe you've been coming along to church for a while and you think that my next step is actually I want to be counted in.

[18:05] And I want to put up my hand and say, I belong to this lot. I'm in it with them. Count me in. And we're actually starting a class for church membership very soon. So I meant to ask this.

So you're up for doing a church membership class. And where's Wes? You're up for doing a church membership class. And where's Anna? You're up for doing a church membership class.

So you could think, oh, maybe I would as well. There's other people up for that. Now's a good opportunity. And all of us, we can go on from here, encouraged, strengthened, walking with Jesus Christ.

Let's sing together. So we're going to sing this song and then I'm going to ask Chris Fry if he'd come up and close in prayer. Let's sing together.