

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

DISCUSS AND APPLY

Discuss – questions to help understanding

1. How should Christians live in the world today? What challenges do they face where you live?

Read 1 Peter 2:9-25

2. What do verses 9-10 say about the identity of Christians and why God has a people of His own in the world?
3. What two aspects of living as strangers in the world does Peter emphasise in verses 11-12?
4. Christians are to honour the authorities ('the emperor' in verse 17). What do verses 13-15 say about how and why we should do so?
5. Above all, Christians are to fear God (verse 17). What does verse 16 say about the implications of giving God the reverence He is due?
6. Verses 18-20 are written to Christians who have no choice but to live as slaves. What principles are found there that might apply to how Christians are to do their work in paid jobs?
7. Why does Peter bring the focus back to Christ and the gospel (verses 21-25)? How are the lifestyles of Christians to be shaped by the gospel and how do they help others to understand it?

Apply – questions to help personal application

- Do you think Christians and churches have been broadly a force for good or for bad in the history of the world since the time of Christ?
- How did the gospel come to the country where you live? Who were the pioneers? What did they do well and what could they have done better in seeking to reach people in your culture?
- What false teachings are you familiar with in the area where you live? How can you recognise false teachers and how can you help people to hear the true gospel of Jesus?
- Think about your workplace (if you are employed) and your citizenship. Are there any aspects of how you live, work and relate to authorities that are inconsistent with being a Christian (e.g., dishonesty)?
- What challenges might you face in work and in society where you live because you want to be faithful to God? Are you prepared to suffer for Him if it is necessary?



PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Has the Church been a force for good or bad?

This is a difficult question to answer without bias. The answer depends in part on what we mean by ‘the Church’. If we mean the body of Christ under His direction, then I would argue strongly that its impact has been overwhelmingly good. Christians have been good citizens, working hard and contributing to society. Individual Christians have pioneered health care, science, social reform and education. Where people have acted in Jesus’ name in ways that do not reflect the teaching or example of Jesus as found in the Bible, this cannot accurately be said to be ‘the Church’ at work in this sense. In another sense, however, the Church is a human organisation or institution that can be faithful or unfaithful to Christ, its head. At times in history the institution of the Church (or churches) has acted in ways that do not reflect the gospel, especially where it has used power over the State. Even when we consider the institutions of the Church, however, there has still be much good done in history, especially in founding hospitals and educational institutions and in bringing stability to societies in times of threat, social upheaval or political instability. The Church is imperfect in following its Lord, but it has laid the moral foundations for European culture and society, contributing many of the values, especially the worth and equality of individuals, that have now become global values. Christians make excellent citizens, upholding honesty and fairness, giving to charitable causes and shunning criminal behaviours.

Should Christians welcome a secular state?

Western nations, especially in Europe, are becoming increasingly secular, meaning that they do not expect or, in some instances, allow religion to have a place in public life. In a secular state, religion is a private affair and people are free to believe what they want, but there should be no prayers in public buildings, no power in the hands of unelected religious leaders and no privilege for any particular belief system. This is a very different situation from the historical experience in Europe, where most countries have had an officially established Church that is recognised by the State. Christians may have slightly different views about the degree to which the Church should seek to influence the State. Some warn that it always leads to a compromise of the gospel (there is certainly much historical evidence of this); others say that we should use whatever influence we have to further Christian values. Whatever we think, however, we must be wary of a drive towards secularism if it leads to freedom of speech being curtailed. Christians are called to give glory to God and to make the name of Jesus known. Our faith must not and cannot be ‘forced’ upon anyone and we should not want to join in a pretence of being a ‘Christian nation’ if most people do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, but we cannot accept a situation in which religion cannot be discussed or the gospel cannot be preached. We should avoid causing unnecessary offence to people, but we must humbly speak of God and His truth. Christ is Lord over everything and loyalty to Him will inevitably impact our politics and our work as well as our private lives.

Is there a simple way to recognise a false teacher?

False teachers can be recognised in one or more of four ways. Firstly, their teaching may be out of line with the Bible and the historic teachings of the Church. If they refuse to acknowledge the supreme authority of the Bible or to say they agree with the ancient creeds of the Church (formulated in the early centuries of its history) or if they promote another book (or their own statement of values or beliefs) as if it is equal in authority to the Bible, alarm bells should ring. Secondly, they may bring glory to themselves rather than to Jesus. If a teacher speaks little of Jesus and allows himself to become the centre of attention, we should be concerned about his motivation. Thirdly, their lifestyle may not be consistent with a servant of the gospel. This will be especially evident in the way they use money (are they getting rich through ministry) and power (do they frequently fall out with others and control others rather than empowering them)? Another area to watch is their relationships with the opposite sex. Fourthly, false teachers will often major on things that are relatively minor in Scripture and may be critical of others who keep their focus on the central truths of the faith. Healthy teaching centres on Jesus, His cross and resurrection and the call to repentance and faith.