

What We Believe and Why

Study & Teacher Guide

What *We Believe and Why* is typically used in a few different ways: by an individual as a way to understand the Christian faith in an organized and deeper way, by mentors training those who have been called into ministry and need systematic theological training but not a full load of seminary coursework, and by adult study classes and small groups.

There are six key areas of learning that happen in the course of studying *What We Believe and Why*. Frankly, the book can be read quickly and these key areas either missed or grasped incompletely, so I'm going to list them explicitly in the hope that they will be appropriated fully and used intentionally and robustly in the course of our Christian lives:

- 1** How to think rigorously and theologically, and discern between the essential and the important. This ability will equip Christians with a skill that will be valuable for their entire lives as believers, and help guard them against both heresy and hubris.
- 2** How to intentionally engage in a Life in Christ, learning to live and love as He taught, demonstrated and commanded. This begins with being saved, proceeds through a life of willing and sometimes difficult sanctification, and leads to a life of glory into eternity. For the individual and the community of believers, this is who Christians are.
- 3** How to comprehend the wide variety of Christian beliefs in the world in a way that is both astute and fair. Shallow understanding and caricature are impediments to love and truth in the whole Body of Christ.
- 4** How to understand and value key concepts developed by tradition and theologians without allowing them to become idols or the cause of evil speech. Theology can be a valuable help in understanding God, Scripture and Biblical principles. It can also be used in ways that harm others and wrongly cause division. The text shows how to avoid this.
- 5** How to wrestle with other Christians who differ from us, allowing both of us to grow in our understanding of the Gospel and each other. Iron sharpens iron, but only when rubbed in a certain way. Otherwise iron damages iron. The method of interacting with others so that both are sharpened is set forth practically and biblically.
- 6** How to genuinely respect, love and protect other Christians, especially those who differ in tradition, theology and practice. This is a step beyond even the most productive debate, and teaches us how to embody what Jesus desired for us in His prayer in John 17.

The goal is to sharpen the Christian mind and strengthen the Christian heart. The sharpening of the Christian mind is to help it discern clearly all that it sees

in light of the Gospel. The strengthening of the Christian heart is to help it carry out Jesus' commands to love God, neighbor and even enemy, especially when that is very, very difficult.

If you are an instructor using this book for a class, and especially if you have language skills in Hebrew or Greek, or significant knowledge of theology, church history and church polity, there are many, many places in these pages where you can expand upon what is here, take your students even deeper, and explain (in the broader context of the whole Church) why your tradition or teaching might emphasize certain doctrinal or worship distinctives.

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Some of the instructions in the chapters listed below, such as “Write an in-depth paper...” are primarily intended for individuals being trained for ministry and whose preparation is therefore more intense and demanding. These exercises can then be scored by the mentor to assess the depth of understanding of the student – since that student may well be called upon some day to explain the faith, or defend it, and needs to be well-equipped.

Other instructions are really intended to spark reflection and insight, to ignite conversation and exploration. It is often true that we Christians have beliefs or concepts about the faith that we assert, but we don't really understand why we believe them. The book provides explanations for much of this, of course, but asking readers (especially in a class or small group) to think about or explain these things out loud builds confidence and competence.

One final note: as you know if you've completed the book, it has a strong emphasis on the value of vigorous discussion and debate, but strongly cautions against personal attack in such “wrestling.” Attack can be overt, such as “You're a heretic if you believe that,” or subtle, as in rolled eyes or a demeaning attitude. Truth is, all of us have some ideas about the faith that ultimately we will learn were mistaken. And we learn better when we feel safe in expressing an idea or opinion if we are not put down or marginalized when we get it wrong – by an instructor or another member of the group. Of course it is alright to correct someone who is way off base, but be sure to do so in a way which makes them know they are valued and welcomed. We should each make that the standard of mutual respect that all members of the group are expected to follow.

My thanks to Judy Davis for her work in creating this guide. I hope it is a blessing for you.

–George

Rev Dr George Byron Koch

Chapter 1 – What We Believe and Why

1 *Theology*. React to this term without looking it up.

What comes to your mind when you encounter this word? Vital? Unnecessary? Exciting? Dry? Best left to professional theologians? Or is it something everyday Christians could be doing? *Should* they?

What really matters and what doesn't?

2 Could *you* do theology – working through the essential and important elements of the faith, knowing *what* you believe and *why* you believe it?

Look at the last two full paragraphs on page 1. Could theology possibly be not just theories about faith, not just an academic pursuit, but a way to more fully embrace the *living* of faith? What might this mean?

Why are we bothering with this at all?

3 Have you ever been in this situation? (top of page 2)

“Even on those matters of faith we may feel strongly about, there is often a challenging opposing voice—sometimes quite sarcastic, and too often from other Christians—that attacks what seems precious and vital to us.”

4 Have you ever been that voice?

5 What really matters and what doesn't? This book will deeply engage this question, and at times it may be unsettling. Why might we be willing to suffer this?

6 Comment on Thomas Aquinas. (page 2-3) What do you think about his effort to summarize the faith, and his personal experience of the Holy Spirit? How might this apply to the author's efforts in writing, and your efforts in reading and doing theology?

7 See the paragraph on page 3 that begins, “As a foundational principle...”

Explain these key purposes of theology in your words, then consider whether there are others that should be included. What we're looking for here are answers to the question, “Why are we bothering with this at all?”

8 Note the author says, “It will begin with some basic theology...” For some readers this may seem *too* basic, and for others it may be the first time of really having certain classic ideas of the faith explained in a clear and concise manner. One reader said, “I've been hearing these concepts since boyhood, but it wasn't until I spent 2 hours with this book that I really understood what they meant.” Many terms used easily by theologians and by well-studied Christians are really incompletely understood by others.

Take a few moments to share terms you've heard but perhaps didn't fully comprehend. They could be as simple as "salvation," as complex as "sanctification," or as denominationally varied as "veneration."

9 How about this frank admission:

"Before we go on: There are any number of common Christian beliefs that I will reject or defend, about which others who are well-regarded in the Church have taken a different view. Oh well."

Though he goes on to say his effort will to be orthodox and be true to Jesus, does this raise concerns about what will come in the pages ahead? If so, how will you deal with ideas, theologies, practices or traditions that might be at odds with yours? (Actually, the book deals with this in depth later on, but engage the question here on your own!)

*Are you
willing to use
the wonderful
mind and
heart with
which our
Creator has
gifted you?*

10 The author says we should be "willing to use the wonderful minds and *hearts* with which our Creator has gifted us."

This is one place in the text where the author points to one of the six key areas of learning at the top of this Study Guide, "The goal is to sharpen the Christian mind and strengthen the Christian heart." Take this as a cue to be alert to similar places in the text where these key areas stand out. It will help in understanding the overall structure and method of the book.

11 The author says, "Test what I write with Scripture. Test what I write with the leading of the Holy Spirit." What does that mean to you personally? Do either of these seem more important, and are they independent of one another?

12 Read the paragraph beginning, "Then we will begin to go deeper and wider..." and ending, "even across significant divides."

Is this even a worthwhile goal? What might it cost us? What might we gain?

13 Define "truth" according to the author. (page 5)

14 What happens when we define truth as a principle, independent of God or Scripture or the teachings and commands of Jesus?

15 Can truth as a principle or concept become a distraction or idol, or is all truth God's truth?

16 Explain simply, in your own words, "essentials" and "non essentials." (page 6)
Explain "if and only if."

*What are the
key differences
between what
is essential
and what is
important?*

- 17** What is the difference between “essential” and “important”? Can something be *really important* without therefore becoming *essential*?
- 18** What is the danger of declaring *important* things – in life or in the faith – as *essential* if they are not? How does this error show up in partisan debate? In church disputes? In our own words and behavior?
- 19** Is it helpful to discard everything except that which is essential? This might seem courageous and radical – but is it actually helpful and hopeful in the end? Argue one side of this as rigorously as you can. Then switch and argue the other side of it. Then examine how you constructed each argument.
- 20** What have you discovered about the key differences between what is essential and what is important? How will you be able to apply this in your life of faith, in your study, in your daily living?
- We will get into this in more depth later in the book, but for now please consider that this understanding can prove to be a valuable tool for insights into the faith, in the understanding and interpretation of Scripture, and in “doing theology.”
- 21** Page 4, “Outline of This Book,” sets out what is ahead in your reading and study, chapter by chapter. Though it isn’t explicit in the outline, the contents actually fall into some broad, related categories: method (how we understand), the elements of faith and belief (including denominational distinctives and histories), understanding the nature of religious concepts (which are not the same as revelation or Scripture), and reconciliation.

Chapter 2 – Salvation

- 1 Explain in your own words what “salvation” means. (pages 9, 15, 16)
- 2 From where did the term “born again” come? Define it in your own words.
- 3 Why does Nicodemus seek out Jesus? (pages 10-11) (John 3:1-21)
- 4 What does becoming a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven require? (pages 12-13)
- 5 John 3:16. Explain the context. (pages 14-15)
- 6 What do we need to do to inherit eternal life? How does this apply in your own life? (page 15) (Luke 10:25-28)
- 7 What is your reaction to the author’s invitation, “To be plain, if you’ve not yet set your heart on him, not yet trusted him, not yet said, ‘Yes,’ you can do it anytime, anywhere. You will be heard and accepted immediately. Even now.”?
- 8 How does salvation change a person’s life here on earth?

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”

Chapter 3 – Sanctification

- 1 What is essential to salvation? (pages 18, 19, 27)
- 2 What is sanctification? (page 19)
- 3 How do they differ? (pages 19-22)
- 4 What is “The Common Error”?
- 5 Define Modalism. (page 25)
- 6 “His act was complete.” (page 25). What does this mean to you?
- 7 Can we lose our salvation by sinning? Discuss. (page 27)
- 8 Can we abandon our salvation? What might this mean?

*“Why bother
with the
trials and
tribulations
of being like
Jesus?”*

Chapter 4 – Glorification

- 1** Define Glorification. Have you heard much discussion on this topic before?
- 2** What is meant by being rewarded in heaven? Give your written opinion of this topic in 2-3 pages, supporting your information with Scripture.
- 3** What questions did this chapter on Glorification raise in your mind?
- 4** Did you find parts of it unsettling? If so, which?
- 5** What does Glorification mean to you individually? Give examples.

Chapter 5 – Why Bother to Be Good?

- 1** Define Sanctification. Contrast it with Salvation and Glorification.
- 2** *“If we’ve gained forgiveness and eternal life with God through our salvation, why bother with the trials and tribulations of being like Jesus? It got Him killed. Who needs the trouble?”*
Give a detailed answer to this question.
- 3** Compare Sanctification to self-improvement.

Chapter 6 – Living With Believers

- 1** What things that we do as Christians are misdirection from loving each other – that look religious or holy but are actually not loving? What do *you* do that is this way?
- 2** Read the second half of page 45.
Is the author overstating his case? If so, in what way? If not, how are we to respond to offenses, dishonor, sarcasm and disrespect? Have you been guilty of such actions? Do you object and speak up when others behave in this way? Do you fear being the next victim of such treatment? (These are hard questions!)

*Why is it so
hard to love
one another?*

- 3** Reflect on Matthew 5:43-48. What does it say to *you*?
- 4** Reflect and comment on Colossians 3:8-17.
- 5** Take up the author's challenge on page 47 to make a list.
- 6** Write an in-depth paper (no more than 5 pages double spaced) regarding the following:
Why is it so hard to love one another? Give an example from your own experience of a person (no real names please) who was a real challenge, your first reaction to that person, your action toward them in working to love them in the way Jesus would have us love, and their response to your efforts (positive or negative or both.) If the person continued to be mean-spirited and annoying, what did you do? If the person changed by being loved by you, what was the result of that change?

Chapter 7 – Living With Unbelievers

- 1** What is the fundamental reality of Who Jesus is and what He did for us?
- 2** What does God desire for every human being?
- 3** What do we (believers) have of value to say or show to unbelievers?
- 4** Explain forensic and metaphorical views of the crucifixion.
- 5** Who was responsible for Jesus' death?
- 6** What action did God take for us?
- 7** Define "evangelism." What *isn't* evangelism?
- 8** How do we live with unbelievers? Can you cite examples, good and bad, of how you or others have treated unbelievers? What effect did it have on their view of Jesus or his followers?
- 9** Jesus said people should know we are His followers because of what? What does this look like in daily life?

Chapter 8 – Prayer: Images & Icons

- 1 Did this chapter make you “squirm”? Why or why not?
- 2 Explain what “pray without ceasing” means to you.
- 3 Does your church have images as a part of its décor or worship: paintings, pictures, statues, icons, stained glass windows, and so on? All of them, some or none?
- 4 What do you think of churches that have fewer or more than yours does? Discuss images and icons including the original purpose for them and the purpose of them for us.
- 5 What was the original purpose of statues and stained glass windows?
- 6 Define “saint,” both in common usage and in scripture.
- 7 Explain the difference between worship and veneration.
- 8 How can images help or hinder our faith?
- 9 Define “religious concept” as it is used at the end of Chapter 8.

*Who can we
pray to? Who
shouldn't we
pray to?*

Chapter 9 – Prayer: To Whom?

- 1 Did this chapter also make you “squirm”? Why or why not?
- 2 Give a specific Biblical example of God working through people. Give an example in your life of God working through people.
- 3 Why and how do we pray for others?
- 4 Does your church or tradition believe in praying to saints? Explain the concept, whether you agree with it or not. Does God listen to such prayers?
- 5 Should we pray for ourselves? Why or why not? Do you pray for yourself?
- 6 Can we pray directly to God the Father, God the Son, or to God the Holy Spirit? Why or why not?

Chapter 10 – Prayer: Object, Posture, Purpose & More

Does posture affect prayer?

- 1** Does it matter whether we pray specifically to the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit? Why or why not?
- 2** Give an example of counseling disguised as prayer and advice disguised as prayer.
- 3** Define prayer.
- 4** How does posture affect prayer? Do you have a specific posture that you feel brings you closer to God?
- 5** Why do we pray? Give at least 3 reasons.
- 6** Is prayer one-way? If not, how does God speak to you?
- 7** What does your church or tradition believe about “speaking in tongues”? What about those that disagree with this?
- 8** What are the 4 key parts of prayer? Explain and give examples of each. Are there other important elements?
- 9** What does it mean to “never stop praying”?

Chapter 11 – Rule Following & Transcendent Love

- 1** Have you found yourself caught up in pride? How about “inverted pride”?
- 2** “Who am I to ... *(fill in the blank)* ... ? How does God answer that?”
- 3** Define what “obedience to God” IS and IS NOT.
How do ritual actions and superstitions factor in to our obedience or lack thereof? Specifically discuss the difference between something done as a regular part of religious ritual (whether prayer, singing, kneeling or whatever), and those same actions done to gain God’s favor.
- 4** What is the key reason for true obedience to God?

*“Love your
neighbor as
yourself”*

Where is the line between obedience out of thanksgiving, and obedience to manipulate God’s response to us?

5 Discuss the first great Commandment. Why does this go beyond simple obedience to rules and laws?

Discuss and give examples of *transcendent love*.

Chapter 12 – Obedience & Love

1 Define “magical thinking.” Give a Christian example of faulty or magical thinking.

2 Do our prayers have to be done “just right” for them to work? What implications does this have for how we or *others* pray?

3 What does “in Jesus’ Name” mean? Be specific.

4 How do people try to manipulate God? How have you done this in the past (including rituals, special words, special postures, etc.) Be specific.

Why do you think you did this?

Chapter 13 – Covenant: Abraham

1 Define Covenant in your own words.

2 For what did Jesus criticize the Pharisees?

3 What does “righteousness” mean in Scripture?

4 Explain in your own words God’s Covenant with Abraham.

5 Define “seed of Abraham.”

Chapter 14 – Covenant: The Law of Moses

- 1 What is “the Law” and where can it be found?
- 2 Why was the Law of Moses given by God?
- 3 What is the key purpose of the Law? How is this made manifest in your life?
- 4 How does God define “righteousness”? How should we respond?
- 5 What sets us free?
- 6 How can we *show* that we love God?
- 7 Is the New Testament meant to replace the Old Testament? Explain.

Chapter 15 – Covenant: Jesus

*“We are called
to covenant.”*

- 1 How is *covenant* defined by Jesus? How does this relate to Jesus saying, “This is my blood of the New Covenant”?
- 2 Where does the New Covenant first show up in the Bible? Why is this important?
- 3 “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.”
Discuss and explain.
- 4 Define, in your own words, “life in Christ.”
- 5 What does it mean to “believe in God?”

Chapter 16 – Faith

- 1 Define “faith” in your own words.
- 2 In what/whom do you have faith and why?
- 3 What brought you to have this faith?

*Peace, Mercy,
and the Breath
of Life are gifts
that come to
us when we
begin to live in
covenant.*

Chapter 17 – Peace, Mercy, Breath of Life

- 1 Give an example of something you have done because of this faith.
- 2 Define “peace” as you have experienced it.
- 3 What do you think “freedom in Christ” means and does not mean?
- 4 Discuss “relationship with God.”
- 5 What has the mercy of God done for us?
- 6 Why do we need the Holy Spirit living in us?

Chapter 18 – Heresy Explained

- 1 Define heresy. What are some things that cause heresy?
- 2 Define the following words:
 - heterodoxy
 - Arianism
 - Docetism
 - Donatism
- 3 Why were the writings of St. Augustine important to the Church?
- 4 What was his main concern?

Chapter 19 – Heresy Continued

- 1 What are the two commandments that Jesus declared supreme?
- 2 What is the one sin that Jesus calls unforgivable? What does Augustine say about it?
- 3 What do Mormons believe?
- 4 What do Jehovah's Witnesses believe?
- 5 Define:
 - Gnosticism
 - Montanism
 - Humanism
 - Theism
- 6 What was the Greek approach to human life and the world? Explain.
- 7 React to "A Severe Critique" in a five page paper. How do you see these issues affecting the Church in history and in our own time?

Chapter 20 – Trinity

*"Hear, O Israel:
The LORD our
God, the LORD
is One."*

- 1 What is Trinity, according to the Christian faith?
- 2 Define monotheism.
- 3 Define and explain "echad."
- 4 Define Concept as used in this book
- 5 Define ontology.
- 6 What do Christians believe about the Trinity? On what evidence is that based?
Discuss thoroughly in a 5-8 page paper.

*We don't just
meet just
words on
paper in the
Scriptures...
We meet Him.*

Chapter 21 – Bible Authority

- 1 State at least 3 reasons that it is logical to believe that what we read in the Bible is what the authors wrote.
- 2 Define “original autographs.”
- 3 Define “Apocrypha.”
- 4 What does the Holy Spirit have to do with Scripture?
- 5 How do the two great Commandments relate to the authority of Scripture?
- 6 Write a 3-5 page paper expressing your thoughts about the authority of the Bible.

Chapter 22 – Religious Concepts

- 1 As Christians, what is our part of the Covenant? What distracts us?
- 2 Define, discuss, and give examples of religious idolatry.
- 3 What is the on-going, underlying theme of both Testaments?
- 4 Explain how *Concepts* differ from *Scripture*.
- 5 What fueled the Church’s development of detailed and extensive philosophical Concepts?
- 6 Discuss how and if Doctrine can be idolatry. Include examples from baptism and communion. Are there others?

Chapter 23 – Reconciliation

- 1 What should the life of a Christian be? What should it not be?
- 2 Compare the transcendent love of God to simple obedience to rules.

*We act
like things
matter and
people don't.*

- 3** Comment on the quotation from Gödel on page 227
- 4** How did Jesus Christ react to blind following of rules? (see page 231)
- 5** What is reconciliation about and not about?
- 6** Explain agape love.
- 7** What are the major steps towards reconciliation?
- 8** What does *forgive* mean? What happens to you when you really forgive?
- 9** Comment on the quote from *Why We Need Hell* on page 244 (footnote 24).
- 10** Comment on Romans 14:1-19 on pp. 247-8 (footnote 30).
- 11** Comment on Titus 3:1-11 on page 248 (footnote 32).
- 12** In a 3-5 page paper, based on the information on pp. 249-254, talk about how Jesus taught. (If you're on an ebook, this material begins with What Jesus Taught between footnotes 33 and 34).

Chapter 24 – Application & Haverim

- 1** Define:
 - essential
 - non-essential
 - liberty
 - charity
- 2** What is the path of life for a Christian?
- 3** What can we do to reconcile?
- 4** What 4 steps can we take to get closer to reconciliation?
- 5** What does loving each other mean?
- 6** Define charity-agape-love.

Explain in detail what Jesus means by love. Give examples, both biblical and personal.

7 Define *haverim*. Do you have examples in your own life, and in your faith?

8 Define *ahav* and give examples.

9 Explain what *havering* is in *yeshiva*. How does the Holy Spirit fit into all of this?

10 According to the author, what is “the flaw in our approach to God”?

11 According to the author, what are the essentials? What are the non-essentials? Do you agree or disagree? Why?