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Love Trumps Karma

Group Leaders' Study Guide

If you use this as a 13-week study guide (which is one quarter), then begin the quarter in one of two ways:

1. Cover chapters 1 and 2 the first week (because chapter 1 is basically intro), and then cover one chapter per week for the following twelve weeks.

OR

2. The week *before* the quarter begins, read aloud one or more of the scenarios from chapter 1 in order to make it a “teaser” or preview for the study you’ll begin the next week. Then cover one chapter per week, starting with chapter two on the first week of the quarter.

General Suggestions

1. Let the students discuss and ask questions, even if what they say scares you. They’re thinking it anyway, and they need a place to voice their thoughts. Talking is often a way of thinking out loud. Lots of times, teens talk in order to formulate what they believe. Of course, that’s just the *thinking* teens. The *real* scare should come from those who are *not* thinking, and for that reason are not questioning.

Why is *that* the real scare? Because it may mean that they think they have the answers. And when you’re talking about God, no one *ever* has all the answers. So when non-thinkers are challenged (usually out in the “real world”), their foundation crumbles. Then they either

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begin thinking (when you're not around to bounce ideas off of), or they insist they know it all and isolate themselves from the world so they can live undisturbed in the "in" group and keep the "out" group 'way over yonder.

Oh . . . and you are not expected to know all the answers. Guide the students' thoughts with questions of your own. Wonder along with them. Feel free to say, "I don't know."

Also, studies show that there's more participation in a group, if the arrangement of seating is casual. Like chairs in a circle. Or even better, sitting on couches, bean bag chairs, and the floor. Sitting in rows with everyone facing the front stifles participation. But you probably knew that already.

2. Starting with chapter 3, this guide will recommend a story for you or a student to read aloud to the group. Most readings are short. A few are longer. These readings are optional. If you read at the beginning of your session, it will serve to focus everyone and get you into the topic. Or you may want to save the story to use as a "filler" in case you don't have a lot of participation in the discussion. Of course, you don't have to use it at all, or you may choose to use only a portion of the longer readings.
3. Keep your eyes open for current events that parallel the week's topic; ask the students to do the same. And not just world or national events, but local and school and family-related events. Discuss how they relate to the topic.

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4. Try to set a tone of non-judgmentalness in the group, asking everyone to respect others' opinions. That way no one feels condemned for voicing a thought, and there can be true dialogue. The aim is for everyone to find Truth, and they can't do that if they don't address the questions they have. Everyone needs to know that questioning is part of seeking and that seeking is a valid thing to do. "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). "Seek and you will find" (Matthew 7:7).
5. Pray that God's Spirit will guide everyone into all Truth (John 16:13), and that God will be honored and shown to be the Greatest and Highest, our All in All.
6. Remember that the following questions are suggestions. Feel free to change them, use some, skip others, and add your own questions. You may want to ask the last question first and follow the comments of your group.
7. The point is to get the students to think and talk about what they believe and about how their beliefs integrate into their daily lives. You may want to read them this quote from Frederick Buechner: "It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life's story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others' lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present." As your group goes through this study, each of you has the opportunity to see God's image revealed in every other person in the group. When God is revealed, He is glorified. May He be greatly glorified

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in your group's time together.

8. To stir your own thoughts and enlarge your frame of reference regarding how the current Christian subculture in America does and does not communicate well with our culture at large, read:

Ken Rideout. The Truth You Know You Know. Nashville: NDXPress, 2005.

www.thetruthyouknowyouknow.com

Donald Miller. Blue Like Jazz. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

www.bluelikejazz.com

Donald Miller. Searching for God Knows What. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004.

Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo. Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

www.emergentYS.com

Brian D. McLaren. More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

Dan Kimball. The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

John Fischer. Fearless Faith. Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2002.

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Chapter 1: Is God Playing a Trick?

1. Have you ever had an experience like one of these scenes? If so, tell about it.
2. Have you ever asked questions (or made statements) like these yourself? Are there different questions about God that you've heard or asked yourself?
3. Is there anyone you know who doesn't seem to want you to ask questions (or to make statements) like these? If so, why do you think they don't want you to ask? Why are some Christians afraid to question what and why they believe?
4. Is there a danger in exploring other religions? Explain.
5. Is it *really* important to understand what you believe and why? Why or why not?
6. For the next several weeks, we'll be seeking. Can you think of any scriptures about seeking?

Some are:

Acts 17:26, 27 Romans 10:20 (Isaiah 65:1) Hebrews 11:6

Matthew 6:33 Hebrews 11:6 Matthew 7:7

7. Is there anything in this chapter you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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Chapter 2: Two Dimensions

1. What are some truths that people are willing to die for, or have been willing to die for in the past?
2. Go over the Q&A under “Knowing Truth” and ask for comments or questions.
3. Are there some things you’ve always considered to be Truth that are not Truth by this chapter’s definition?
4. Viewing the Bible as one witness to Truth, yet not the basis for Truth itself might challenge some people’s beliefs. Why?
5. Here’s a true story:

One former missionary said, “Pastors don’t teach the Bible anymore.”

“What do you mean?” asked her son.

“They don’t teach the Bible like Jesus did,” she said.

“You mean like the Sermon on the Mount?” asked the son.

“See?” said his mother. “Jesus taught the New Testament. He taught the Bible.”

Question: What is strange about the mother’s reasoning?

“Jesus was just teaching about God by pointing out the flowers and the birds,” said the son. “He wasn’t teaching the Bible. There was no New Testament when Jesus taught.”

6. Have you ever experienced your “heart burning within you” over spiritual Truth the way the men felt when Jesus met them and talked with them on the road?

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Chapter 3: It's a Head-Gut Thing

Option: Start by reading the story of the Indonesian banker from chapter three.

1. What school courses have you taken that required you to think logically?
2. Go through the Q&A under “Dia-Logos” aloud. Ask for comments or questions.
3. What are some movies or books in which the hero gives his or her life, or at least *risks* his or her life to save someone?

Why do you think we respond so strongly to those heroes in movies and books? Could it be that these types of stories touch the spiritual Truth of the greatest love, which we know at gut-level? Discuss.
4. Have you ever known anyone who thought the way the Indonesian banker did (when he said he couldn't believe in God because of all the evil in the world)? What do you think about Ken's answer?
5. What makes love personal?
6. [Leaders: Don't panic. We're not doing away with the Bible. More about the Bible in later chapters, including why our New Testament is reliable, and including suggested ways to study the Bible.]

What do you think of the statement: “What and why you believe is not based on the Bible”? Is that a new thought for you? Why might it be an unsettling thought for some people?
7. Is there anything in the chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?

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Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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Chapter 4: Becoming Image-Conscious

Option: Start by reading “The Chinese Doctors” (found on the next page).

1. What are some things people do because of being image-conscious?

(Tell the group some things you and your peers did when you were image-conscious teens.)

2. What’s the difference between humans’ image-consciousness and God’s image-consciousness?
3. Why is Love the common denominator among people?
4. Go through the Q&A under “This Kind of Love” and ask for comments or questions.
5. Assign different students to look up and read aloud the reference verses in #2 of the endnotes.
Or you can look them up as a group. Also look up and read Isaiah 65:1, which is about communicating to other nations.
6. How can Perfect Love be the moral standard among humans?
7. Is there anything in this chapter you disagree with and want to discuss?

Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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The Chinese Doctors

This is a true story, told by my friend, Ken Rideout.

Beijing, Communist China

Summer, 1981

A dry, burning breeze blew into the city from the Gobi Desert as I wove through crowds of people, all dressed in faded navy, gray, or black. I was making my way to the Beijing Medical University where I taught English. My class consisted of 50 doctors and nurses, both men and women, ages 32 to 60. These were some of China's most intelligent people. As such, they had endured much suffering during the destructive fury of the Cultural Revolution, which had spread death and cultural ruin throughout China. One of these doctors, described by the others as the best surgeon in China, had told me he had spent the last eight years walking the rice paddies barefooted. Another had said that the Red Guards had taken her husband and children away. She had not seen them for over ten years, nor did she know where they were even now.

But by 1981, China was beginning to emerge onto the world stage from the bleakness and fear of the Cultural Revolution as a new leader attempted to bring the nation into an era of openness. Teams of English teachers from the West had been invited to upgrade education. So here I was in a hot, colorless city. The authorities, who knew I was a Christian but not that I was a missionary, had said I would be allowed to give a Christian witness. But no public gatherings would be permitted.

With this knowledge, I entered my classroom each day and faced this special group of doctors and professors. Their white shirts and blouses were wrinkled. Their drab trousers and

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skirts were faded. On their feet, they wore rubber thongs or well-worn, unpolished leather shoes. Yet in spite of their humble clothing, they had a keen intellect and self-esteem. These amiable doctors and nurses possessed a wholesome respect for their station and accomplishments, and perceived their comrades to be compassionate benefactors of the Chinese.

I assumed that all my students were currently Communist, or had been in the past, for they had spent their lives under atheistic communism. Religious witnessing had been forbidden, and Christians had been marked as ignorant and primitive. In fact, just a few years earlier, learning English or even showing any Western skills with music would have resulted in death or imprisonment. But now the Chinese were being encouraged to study English. They were allowed to question Westerners freely, so they were full of questions, endlessly asking about everything. It seemed that their curiosity about me was never quenched.

One day, one of the doctors asked, “How do you prove God?”

“You do not prove God,” I said. “You *know* God. We prove things in the physical world by experimenting with measurements, weights, chemicals, heat, light, and so on. But you cannot put God in a test tube or measure His dimensions. God is Spirit. Things of the Spirit dimension need no proving, because God’s Spirit bears witness to our spirits. God’s Spirit confirms the truth of His love and His being.”

After some silent thought, the doctors said, “We don’t understand.”

“Should you lie, rob, murder, or cheat me?” I asked. “Should you take my wife by force? Should you rape my daughter?”

“No!” they answered.

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“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes,” they all said. “We are sure.”

“Prove it,” I said. “Prove that these things are wrong.”

Everyone was silent.

“I agree with you,” I said. “We all agree that these things are wrong. I am an American, and you are Chinese. Our language, culture, and political systems are different. Yet on this most important issue for relationship among all people, we agree. There is no need to prove it, for we all know it. It is a self-evident truth, universally understood. Things of the Spirit need no proof, for our Maker has written His image of love and moral righteousness upon every human heart. All over the world, regardless of nation, language, or creed, men and women, adults and children, educated and uneducated, all alike know that such behavior is bad. Each person knows what is good.”

Then I asked another question. “If I love you so deeply that I would die for you, would I lie, rob, murder, cheat, or mistreat you in any way?”

“No,” they said. “You wouldn’t.”

I placed one of my index fingers over the other, forming a cross. “If I loved you like this, so that I would die for you after you put nails into my hands and feet, pierced my side with a sword, or pressed a crown of sharp thorns into my brow, would I ever murder or rob or cheat you?”

Without hesitation, they said, “No.”

“Do you have to prove that?” I asked.

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Again they answered, “No.”

“What kind of a world would it be if we all loved each other with such love?” I asked.

“It would be a great world,” they said.

“We all know that it would be a great world if we loved each other with the love our Creator has given us,” I said. “We believe it, because it is true. God has put within us the knowledge of His love. Whoever our Maker is, He has made us with a common knowledge: Love fulfills all moral and ethical responsibilities toward one another. We do not have to prove it; we know it. This kind of love implies the personal. That’s why we say, ‘God is love, and love is personal.’”

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Chapter 5: God-Seekers

1. Why do we look for what's best, healthiest, most beautiful, most impressive, etc.?
2. What is a mediator? If you've had an experience in which a mediator was used, or an experience in which you've been a mediator, explain why a mediator was needed and what the mediator did in that situation.
3. Do you know anyone who is Hindu? Buddhist (Zen is a form of Buddhism)? Muslim? Taoist? Jewish? What do they all have in common? What do you have in common with them?
4. Had you heard of dharma, the Brahman, and the Tao before? What did you think about these before you read this chapter? Did your thoughts change after reading the chapter? What about the Qur'an and the Torah?
5. What are some other religions of the world? If we were to analyze them, do you think we might find similar concepts? Zen is one of these. Zen is a sect of Buddhism. Many religions have different "sects" (clarify: not sex).
6. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
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Chapter 6: Good Karma, Bad Karma

Option: Start by reading “The Sheik and the Leper” found on the next page.

1. What is law? What is karma?
2. What are some natural laws (or laws of nature) operating right now in this room?
3. Read the Buddhist quote: “Overcome anger by love, evil by good.” Then ask someone to read Romans 12:21. Discuss what is similar. How could they be so similar? [Buddhism was around long before Paul wrote, so they didn’t get it from Paul.] Ask: How did Buddhists and other religions come up with their principles of right conduct?
4. What do you think about a religion creating principles of right conduct for people to follow?
Is there anything bad about establishing principles of right conduct for people to follow?
5. What do Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Islam, Confucianism, and Judaism have in common?
Can Christians ever fall into that same category? Why or why not? Have you ever been in that category?
6. Is there anything wrong with trying to live up to a standard of right conduct?
7. Why would someone believe that reincarnation or rebirth is necessary?
8. Why can’t law (karma) forgive?
9. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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The Sheik and the Leper

As Told by Ken Rideout

Imagine a husband and wife, both lepers. They have eight children. The whole family is begging and trying to eke out an existence from discarded waste. They are shunned as “untouchables.” Now a lordly sheik rides past on his ornamented elephant, attended by royalty and nobility wearing the finest of clothing. This sheik and his attendants are known for their selfish cruelty in their lordship over the people. They would never think of stopping to help the lepers.

As they watch the sheik and his attendants ride past, the lepers wonder, “Why were we born poor and leprous while this cruel group are wealthy rulers?”

Ancient philosophers and religious leaders, good hearts who were trying to be righteous, sought to explain these kinds of inequities. How could God truly be God and allow the world to be in such a state? Different explanations emerged around the world, but they all had a common thread. In the Greek world as well as in Eastern philosophies from India to China, that thread was reincarnation. Here is how they would have answered the lepers: “We all are our karma. We came from our karma. We will be our karma. We cannot escape our karma. You are a poor leper, suffering and shameful, because in your former life, you committed terrible crimes. But this sheik inherited his wealth because of his former karma. Do not be dismayed, because when he dies, the evil karma that he is doing now, he will surely receive in his next life.”

While this explains the leper’s poverty and the sheik’s prosperity, it does nothing to relieve the leper’s misery or to motivate the sheik to use his wealth to alleviate suffering. Each is

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reaping what they have sown in a former life, and they have no choice but to live out the effects of their karma.

To the leper, there was a gulf between him and the rich sheik, a chasm that could not be bridged. He thought he was hopelessly trapped by the law of cause and effect, the karmitic cycle of birth and rebirth. Who could bridge the gap? Who could cross the chasm? The lowly could never have come up to the high position. In order to bridge the gulf, the one in the high position would have had to come down to raise the lowly up.

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Chapter 7: Guilt-Colored Glasses

Option: Start by reading “Lady MacBeth’s Glasses” found on the next page.

1. Have you ever thought of God as angry or condemning?
2. Have you ever done something wrong and then felt like someone was mad at you even though they didn’t know about the wrong you did?

Have you ever felt inferior next to someone whom you thought was better than you, even though no one was putting you down or trying to make you feel inferior?

How did that happen with Adam and Eve?

3. Why do humans see good karma as the way to ultimate happiness (or to God)?
4. If God knew Adam and Eve would eat the fruit, and if He wasn’t angry after they did, then what was the purpose for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?
5. How does the story of Adam and Eve symbolize every human’s story?
6. What glasses do you see God through? In other words, how do you view God and your relationship to Him?
7. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
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Lady MacBeth's Glasses

- Part of Act V, Scene 1 from MacBeth by Shakespeare -

Lady MacBeth arranged for her husband to murder king Duncan so that MacBeth himself could become king. Several years later, Lady MacBeth begins sleepwalking, and she asks a doctor to help cure her. In this scene, the doctor and another woman are watching Lady MacBeth during one of her sleepwalking episodes.

Woman: . . . here she comes! this is her very guise, and upon my life, fast asleep!

Observe her; stand close.

Doctor: How came she by that light?

Woman: Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually. 'Tis her command.

Doctor: You see her eyes are open.

Woman: Ay, but their sense is shut.

Doctor: What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

Woman: It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her to continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady M.: Yet here's a spot. . . . Out, damned spot! out, I say! One; two. Why then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it when none can call our pow'r to accompt? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?. . . Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.

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Chapter 8: God's Problem

Option: Start by reading "The Tiger King" from the following page.

1. Do you agree that it's God's problem about what happens in this world? Why or why not?
2. Go through the Q&A under "Dia-Logos" in chapter 8, and ask for comments and questions.
3. How did the God-man do the work of *life* for us? Discuss the two kinds of life Jesus provides for us: this earthly time-bound life and a resurrected life after death. Together these make up "eternal life," which is a quality of life that begins now and continues forever.
4. Read John 17:3 and discuss the comment that "knowing you (God)" indicates a knowing by experience, not just intellectual fact. "Knowing" used in this way means personal intimacy. Can anyone "know" in this way the Supreme Brahman or Allah or the Tao or any impersonal "essence" called "God"? Explain.
5. How do Christians get sucked into the cycle of karma?
Ask someone to read Galatians 4:8-10, 5:1. The whole letter to the Galatians was written to Christians who were trying to "do good, do good, do good," (to have good karma) in order to bridge the gap to God, instead of trusting Jesus' good karma to do the job for them.
6. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
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The True Story of the Tiger King

- As Told by Ken Rideout -

Ancient Siam (Thailand)

King Sua, called the Tiger King, loved two things. One was his royal barge. (1) From its bow there rose a huge ornamental dragon's head overlaid in gold. The barge was so long, it had to be powered by scores of oarsmen. So precious was this barge, that the king had made a law: If its dragon's head was ever broken, the helmsman of the barge would have his own head cut off.

The second thing the Tiger King loved was his friend Phan Thai Norasin who happened to be the helmsman for the royal barge. The king was very proud of Phan Thai's skill and loved the challenge of maneuvering his huge barge through the narrow canals.

One day the Tiger King raced his barge through the canals, around the bends, all the while asking Phan Thai to go faster and faster. In spite of Phan Thai's skill, the barge sped along too fast to make one of the curves. The dragon's head struck the limb of an overhanging tree and broke off.

The King was immediately grieved. "Never mind, Phan Thai," he said. "It was not your fault. No one could have made that turn at the speed we were going. The accident was unavoidable."

Now Phan Thai Norasin loved King Sua and was deeply loyal to him. He knew that if the king set aside the law, the people would think their ruler was showing partiality. They would accuse King Sua of abusing his authority by deciding which laws he would follow and which he would ignore. So Phan Thai said, "No, my King. I have broken the law, and the

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penalty is death. You must follow the law and execute me.”

Still the king said, “No, it was not your fault.”

But Phan Thai insisted. “As a king, if you do not keep the law, you belittle the law and prove yourself to be partial. You would be breaking the law yourself. That could undermine your authority as king.”

The Tiger King anxiously pondered this dilemma. At last, he had an idea. He had a statue made of Phan Thai Norasin. Then he had the executioner cut off the head of the statue. “There!” he said. “The law has been fulfilled.”

“No,” said Phan Thai. “The law has not been fulfilled. The statue is not me. It was I who broke the law.” He continued to insist that he must be executed to fulfill the law’s just demands.

The king agonized over the decision he had to make. He himself had commanded the royal barge to go faster. Now he felt responsible. But the law was the law. It could not mediate for the violator. It could only punish. As history tells it, the Tiger King finally executed his dear friend Phan Thai Norasin.

This story, taught to school children throughout Thailand, is a fascinating analogy of mankind’s universal comprehension that people need a mediator to go between them and the wrath of the law, to make a way of approach to an unapproachable God. King Sua saw the need in this instance, and agonizingly looked for a way around the requirement of the law. But a statue which looked like Phan Thai Norasin could not mediate, and mercy could not be extended. Even the king could not set aside the law.

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1) The royal barge is still used by the King of Thailand on special occasions. Even today, it can be seen in Bangkok.

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Chapter 9: In the Skin

Option: Start by reading the poems found on the next page.

1. So what is incarnation?
2. How can we say that everyone believes in incarnation?
3. List some attributes of agape love. Have you ever known someone who was kind, but had an agenda; in other words, they were using kindness to get something, and they really didn't have love?
4. Do you agree that Love trumps karma? If so, how does Love trump karma?
5. Ask someone to read Romans 8:2. Point out that "the law of sin and death" in this verse is the "law of karma": you sin, you die. Discuss why and how the consequence part of that equation (die) has been erased for us. Discuss what that means to each person every day.
6. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

Here are two books you could look at if you want to see how people have proved that God came to earth as Jesus:

1. More Than a Carpenter by Josh McDowell
2. The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel

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Incarnation According to Poets

“And the Word Was Made Flesh”

Light looked down and beheld Darkness.

“Thither will I go,” said Light.

Peace looked down and beheld War.

“Thither will I go,” said Peace.

Love looked down and beheld Hatred.

“Thither will I go,” said Love.

So came Light and shone.

So came Peace and gave rest.

So came Love and brought Life.

- Laurence Housman, 1865

Incarnation

Blow cold against the flame,
Throw sand upon the spark;
You cannot keep the Light
From shining in the dark. . . .

No matter how untamed
Your ill intent may run,
You cannot stop the Pulse
That beats behind the sun.

- Edith Lovejoy Pierce, 1904

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Chapter 10: New Age, Old Stuff

Option: Start by reading “The Tibetan Temple” on the following page.

1. Are you or anyone you know into Zen or Taoism or Buddhism or New Age? What’s good about these religions? They existed before Jesus was born. Did Jesus come to condemn them? Why or why not? (See John 3:17.)
2. What’s the difference between the New Age or Zen concept of God and the Christian concept of God? Why does it make a difference whether God is personal or impersonal?
3. What’s wrong with saying the Energy’s source of strength and beauty is in each person?
4. Why is it a problem to say that God can be whatever or whoever you believe?
5. How is christ in every person?
6. How is the christ, the image of God in each person, like a dormant seed? How does this seed reach its full potential?
7. Read and discuss Colossians 1:15 and Hebrews 1:3.
8. What did Peter realize that was so important? Have you ever had that kind of “aha” moment about Jesus?
9. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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The Tibetan Temple

- As Told by Ken Rideout -

An American woman, pale and shaking, staggered out of a Tibetan Buddhist temple, saying, “I didn’t know that this is what it was like.”

Watching her was a group of people who had come to pray for the nation of Tibet. Their leader, a young lady from New Zealand, totally knew what was happening. The teachings of the Dali Lama were becoming popular in America, where they were called New Age philosophy. The woman leaving the temple had liked the New Age message, because it had seemed gentle, kind, and tolerant. Like many other Americans, this woman had felt she could expand her understanding of New Age spiritual thought by coming to Tibet. What she had found was very different from what she had expected. She had found spiritual oppression, grotesque images, darkness, and an emphasis on the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth. The reality of it had overcome her. What she had found was not the Truth. It was not the image of God’s love.

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Chapter 11: The Three-Letter *S* Word

Option: Start by reading “Hill Tribal Village” from the next page.

1. What do you think of and how do you feel when you hear the word *sin*? Why is *sin* “missing the mark”?
2. Is social convention important? Why or why not? What makes *sin* different from going against social convention?
3. What is “positive law”? When does positive law move into the area of governing *sin*?
4. Why might it be wise to take social convention seriously? Why might it be wise to take positive law seriously?
5. Why might someone think it’s right to murder someone else or steal from them?

(In the chapter, I stated that when people think of this in terms of whether someone should murder *them* or steal from *them*, they know it’s wrong. There might be an exception to this: If a person feels guilty for having murdered someone, he might say it would be right for he himself to be murdered. That shows that the person is thinking in terms of karma: You deserve to reap what you sow.)
6. Take the example of cheating, and substitute a different wrong. Follow the reasoning all the way through.
7. Why is the “Golden Rule” a good gut-level test of right and wrong?
8. Why would people rather use the word “inappropriate” instead of the word “sin”?
9. How can we neutralize *sin*?

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10. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?

Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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Hill Tribal Village

- As Told by Ken Rideout -

Mountains loom before a group of tribal Christians and me as we trek to a remote animistic village. We start our long climb by truck, but end up on foot. At last we arrive at a compound surrounded by broken fences originally intended to guard the deteriorating bamboo buildings with their decomposing leaf and grass roofs. Garbage litters the walkways. Dogs are skinny. Pigs are bony; they've obviously not received their daily diet of chopped banana stalk. Water buffalo look as though it's been some time since they've been led into the forest for their daily grazing so that they will have strength to plow the fields.

As we walk through the village, we pass a specially designated long house. The unmistakable stench of opium and marijuana drifts from this hut into the air around us. We know what we would find if we made the short climb up a bamboo ladder into the smoke-filled room. Filthy, unkempt men and women lie all over the floor, smoking from their handmade bamboo opium pipes. Children three to ten years old, sit beside some of the smokers, taking a free puff whenever they want.

Generally, the smokers are not happy to be engaged in this occupation. Only the physical addiction and the frustration of daily living drives them to smoke opium in the evenings. But then the hangovers of the following mornings often make them sleep instead of going to work in the fields or to hunt for food. By neglecting their work, these villagers only increase their misery and the fear of the demons which they perceive as bringing about their troubles in the first

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place.

The villagers will sacrifice their chickens, pigs, or water buffalo to these evil spirits in order to heal whatever sicknesses they get. So now they can't sell their crops for money, because they haven't grown any crops. Plus, they are sacrificing to demons the animals that could provide them with food. All of this makes money scarce. So in order to get money, they sell their children to white slave peddlers who visit them periodically looking for girls and young men. Some villages make money by building special brothels to entertain and serve tourists, providing them with opium, marijuana, and sex. Often there is not a girl above the age of eleven in the village, because all the older girls have been sold into prostitution. The rest of the children looked scared.

Usually no one will look at us or speak until we find the headman or shaman. But we have guitars, and we sing songs that the children can pick up quickly. "God loves you and I love you," we sing. As we sing the verse over and over, the children begin to come. Soon they are laughing and joining in. We are like television to them, good entertainment. The women come next. The men at first only peer out from the doors and windows. Eventually, though, the men come closer so they can hear more clearly.

We ask where the headman is, and we go to his home. He sits cross-legged in front of an earthen hearth, and we join him there. The women and children crowd in, and a few men may come. The headman makes himself a cigarette. After a brief salutation, he asks us why we have come.

"We have come to tell you about the love of God," we say. "We know you believe in

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God.”

Actually we know that the tribal people may believe in two gods, one male and one female. These people are animistic, which means they “worship” demons or spirits. But they do not love the demons. Instead, they fear and placate them. For example, if a man comes home sick, he will go to the shaman and tell him about the illness. The shaman may ask him which tree he stopped to urinate on in the jungle. Then they will take some glutinous rice, some fruit, and maybe some whiskey to offer up to the demon of that tree so the demon won’t make the man sick anymore. If the wife is sick, the husband will go to the shaman and maybe offer up a water buffalo.

So we ask the headman, “Do you know about the love of God? Do you know God loves you?”

The shaman takes a puff of the cigarette. He looks at the ceiling, then spits through a crack in the floor. “No. I don’t know that God loves me.”

“Do you know that God will forgive your sins?” we ask.

He takes another puff. “No, I don’t know that God will forgive my sins. But maybe he could. . .”

“Did you know that God will send His Holy Spirit so that you will have a whole new spirit and be worthy to be called the child of God? Then you will not be afraid of the demons anymore. The Holy Spirit is more powerful. He will make the demons flee.

“You sacrifice water buffalo and chickens to appease the demons. Do you know that God gave His Son as a sacrifice for your sins so that there will be justice in washing your sins

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away? Then the sin you now love, you will hate. The good you now shun, you will do.”

“I did not know that,” the headman says.

We explain, “Our sin is taken away, and we have been born of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. We have not come into this village to buy your daughters and your sons. We have not come to buy your opium or to sleep with your women. We have come with a different spirit, the Holy Spirit of God. Look! This is a Spirit of joy. A Spirit of goodness. Have you ever heard of this Holy Spirit?”

“No,” they say.

“Do you know how to have him come down and dwell in you?”

“No,” they say.

“This is the good news that we bring. For God will give his Holy Spirit to all those who will receive His love. This forgiving love is revealed in His Son Jesus Christ. He will drive out the evil spirits that are in you and will bring you joy. He will cleanse you of your sins, so the sickness of sin will not take over your village as it has done. This Spirit is not a spirit of fear, but of thankfulness and joy in the love of God. When this Holy Spirit comes into you, it is possible for you to come into the Kingdom of God and let Him reign in your life. And if you sin again, which you will, He will give you forgiveness and cleansing, allowing you to come back to Him again, all new.”

[Notice that Ken and his friends do not come into the village condemning sin or pointing out sin. Instead, they bring the good news of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit works on the people’s hearts to

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show them that they are missing the mark.]

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Chapter 12: Getting to the Root of Things

(Note: To gain a background on the research that establishes the historical validity of the New Testament, you might read The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? by F.F. Bruce. The answer is, of course, yes. This book will give you a foundational understanding of why.*)

Option: Start by reading “What Is This Book?” (Found after the notes on the next page.)

1. Why do you think lots of Christians believe that the Bible is the foundation of their faith?
Discuss the advantages and disadvantages in thinking that way.
2. Remember the song “The B-I-B-L-E”? How could our standing *only* on the B-I-B-L-E hide the Truth from some people?
3. Go through the Q&A under “Going to the Roots” in this chapter, and discuss it.
4. Is a person’s belief in evolution important to God’s acceptance of him or her? Is it important to our acceptance of that person becoming a Christian? Why or why not?
5. Is the Bible the Christian’s rule book? Why or why not? What’s the Bible for**?
6. Is the Bible important? Why or why not?
7. What is *your* belief rooted in?
8. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

*Here is some helpful background info from The New Testament Documents, pp. 10-11:

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“There are in existence over 5,000 Greek manuscripts [mss] of the New Testament in whole or in part. The best and most important of these go back to somewhere about AD 350 [Although other fragments date as early as AD 130. - KH] Perhaps we can appreciate how wealthy the New Testament is in manuscript attestation if we compare the textual material for other ancient historical works.”

Caesar’s *Gallic War*,

written between 58 and 50 BC: 10 mss, the earliest from 900 years after Caesar

The History of Thucydides and the History of Herodotus

written around 488 - 400 BC: 8 mss each, the earliest from AD 900

The above are just a few examples.

“Yet no classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest MSS of their works which are of any use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals.”

**See Brian McLaren’s discussion which includes the following:

“In the recent past we generally began our apologetic by arguing for the Bible’s authority, then used the Bible to prove our other points. In the future we’ll present the Bible less like evidence in a court case and more like works of art in an art gallery. The Bible will become valuable not for what it proves, but for what it reveals.”

Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, 93.

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What *Is* This Book?

- As Told by Ken Rideout -

In today's world, there are still many people who can't read. Some live in remote areas and have no concept of the printed word. Using a book to prove Truth makes no sense to them. A missionary who worked in Papua New Guinea told me about a visiting preacher who spoke to a group of villagers who couldn't read. As he talked, he held up the Bible. Afterward, one of the villagers picked up the Bible, turned it this way and that, and flipped through the pages with a look of curiosity. The missionary said, "We might as well have taken the Sears catalogue into the village. It would have meant more to them, because at least it would have had pictures."

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Chapter 13: So What's This Life For?

Option: Start by reading "The Chief End of Man" from the next page.

1. Would you agree that life on earth is a global schoolroom? Why or why not?
2. What's the 1-2-3 of life?
3. Why is it important to BE first, and then to DO?
4. What's the most important rule, according to Jesus? Why is it the most important? What's the second most important? Why is it not first?
5. How is God already showing you what to DO?
6. What's the concept of Pro-Glo? How does it work?
Can you think of other stories in the Bible that demonstrate this concept?
7. What's the B-factor? How is it like a mirror?
8. What's *your* glory?
9. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?
Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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The Chief End of Man

A well-known seventeenth century creed (from the Latin word that means “to believe or trust) states:

The chief end of man is to glorify God

and

enjoy him forever.

(The Westminster Shorter Catechism)

What does that mean?

The purpose of human beings is to show how great God is and to enjoy God forever.

In his book Desiring God, John Piper says that a better way to state this creed is:

The chief end of man is to glorify God

BY

enjoying him forever.*

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*Desiring God by John Piper, Multnomah Books, 1986, 1996.

Chapter 14: Dancing with the Divine

Option: Start by reading “The Final Exam” from the next page.

1. Read the quotes about prayer. Which one(s) sound the most inspiring or interesting to you?
Why?
2. Have you ever done any meditation? If you haven't, after reading this chapter, do you think you could? If so, what would you start meditating on: a psalm? the Job scriptures listed in this chapter? something from your own daily Bible reading?
(You might suggest going through the book of John, one chapter at a time and choosing a verse or two from each chapter to meditate on.)
3. Describe the difference between the micro and macro of worship. What makes something we do “worship”?
4. What are some ways to find “treasure” in the Bible? Do you know other ways not mentioned in this chapter?
5. Why is it really not correct to say, “I’m going to church” or “Which church do you go to”?
6. Why might it be easier to die than to live? Have you ever had the thought that just as your life is for God’s glory, your death will be for His glory too? Do you think that’s true?
How can someone’s death show who God is (in other words, how can a death glorify God)?
7. Read John 5:24. What does that have to do with your life right now?

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8. What are *your* thoughts about heaven?
9. Look up and read aloud the scriptures on the diamond.
10. Is there anything in this chapter that you disagree with and want to discuss?

Is there anything you strongly agree with and want to discuss?

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The Final Exam

- As Told by Ken Rideout -

A Thai town off the coast of the Gulf of Siam

For awhile, I taught in a Bible Institute attended by students from small Thai villages. All the students were Christians, though many were first generation Christians who had come from animistic or Buddhist homes and had little understanding of the Bible or of the life of Christ.

About 70 freshmen were enrolled in my class. I began our first meeting together by asking, "How many of you believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God?"

They all raised their hands.

"How many of you believe that God loves you, cares for you, and will forgive your sins?"

All of them raised their hands.

"How many of you are saved by the grace of God and cannot save yourself?" I asked.

Again, all hands went up.

"How many believe that Jesus Christ lived and died for us, carrying our sins to the cross so that we can have a hope for a resurrection from the dead to eternal glory, just as Jesus Himself did?"

All hands went up.

"How many believe that you have been born again of the Holy Spirit of God, and that you are a new creature in Christ, that the old man died and the new lives, and that the blood of Christ cleanses you from sin on a continuous basis?"

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They again affirmed their belief by raising their hands and saying, “Yes!”

I said, “See? You know the whole Truth. If I stood here for a million years and taught you every day, I could not teach you one new Truth. You know the Truth already and have no need for anyone to teach you. The Spirit of God teaches you all things.”

The students grinned at me. Some laughed.

“I can teach you the Bible,” I said. “I can teach you about the books of Genesis and Psalms. I can teach you the books of the gospel of Christ. I can teach you Paul’s letters to the Romans, the Ephesians, the Colossians, and his other books. I can tell you about Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, about the miracles Jesus performed, about how He was crucified. But I cannot teach you the Truth. You already know all things, because you have been anointed of the Holy One of God who teaches you all things.

“Moses is not the truth,” I continued. “King David is not the Truth. Jerusalem is not the Truth. Peter and Paul are not the Truth. Only God is Truth. This Truth you already know 100%.”

Then I had them read scriptures:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth . . .

When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.

John 14:16, 17 and 16:13, NLT

I asked, “How much Truth did Jesus promise that the Holy Spirit would teach you?”

“All Truth,” they said.

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“The writers of the New Testament did not have to go to college or to a school of higher education in order to write the most famous book in all the world,” I said. “The Holy Spirit gave them what they were to say and write. How would you like to have such an understanding of the Truth of God as promised in these verses?”

“We would really like that,” they said.

“For many years I, too, wanted such an understanding,” I said. “But when I was a young man, my Bible teachers taught me that these promises were only for the apostles of Jesus. Then one day, God spoke to me through a scripture:

You have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you, so you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you all things, and what he teaches is true -- it is not a lie.

1 John 2:27

“By the time John wrote this, most of the apostles, if not all of them, were dead. So John wrote this to all Christians. So if we listen to God's Spirit in us at every moment, with every problem, we will know the loving, kind, understanding, compassionate thing to say or do. Sometimes we may not have the physical data or thoroughly understand the spirit of a person we must make decisions about, so sometimes our hearts can be right and our decisions wrong. In any case, we will know how we ought to meet the problems of every day with honesty and integrity, just as God is honest. This is the Truth that Jesus speaks of. God is Truth. Jesus said, ‘I am that Way; I am that Truth; I am that Life.’

“So,” I said, “tomorrow we will have a final exam on the Truth of God.”

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The students looked shocked.

I said, “You don’t have to worry about this, for the Holy Spirit will guide you as you answer the questions.”

The next day, I gave my students 125 to 150 questions to be answered yes or no, such as:

- o Did God create the world?
- o Did God do it out of love?
- o Does God love you?
- o Does God forgive your sins?
- o Does God have grace and mercy for you daily?
- o Should you strive to be righteous and holy every day?
- o Should you be kind?
- o Should you forgive your neighbor of his sins against you?
- o Should you lie?
- o Should you murder?
- o Should you steal?
- o Should you take your neighbor’s wife and commit adultery?
- o Should you deceive another person for sexual gratification?
- o Should you be lazy?
- o Should you cheat on tests in school?
- o If I loved you as the life of Jesus Christ shows us how to love, would I do any of the evils listed above?

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- o If I love you as Jesus has shown love, will I be willing to live for you, to help you, to lay down my life for you so that you may live?
- o If we so loved, would we make our world a better world?
- o . . .and so on

Such questions can go on into unnumbered thousands that apply to the particular situations we face in life. But the Spirit of Truth is the promised teacher who gives us guidance. He is faithful and will always advise us about how we ought to live. Paul said, “I count all things as dung for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ.” For the knowledge of Christ is a living, vibrant Truth guiding us moment to moment for each situation.

While Bible study would dynamically reinforce the Truth my students already knew and would prepare them for the challenges of life, and while it would show them how other great men of God, and even Jesus Himself, met life’s challenges, the point I wanted my students to understand was that increasing their knowledge of the Bible through study would not increase the Truth they already knew in their hearts.