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There are some things we need to know as Christians. Let's start with what Christians don't believe about the Bible. Christian theologians, through the ages, have not believed the Bible should be literally interpreted in all respects, and Christians need to know that.

Consider Saul. According to our reading, "The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul King over Israel." Taken literally, that would seem to mean that Saul had behaved in ways that God had been unable to predict, making God a less than perfect judge of character who cannot see the future. That would put God on the level of our former president, the first George Bush, who didn't understand what he was getting when he appointed Justice Souter, and was later sorry.

Some modern theologians don't believe that God can see the future, and they are free to defend the literal interpretation. Classical theologians affirmed God's knowledge of events before they happen, so they gave this story a non-literal interpretation. I'm with them.

Atheists love to read the Bible literally, combing it for stories where God gets angry, or jealous, or tells someone to do something that even you and I know no one ought to do – like when God tells Abraham to kill his son. They lift these stories up and say "Behold your God. Ha."

But we know the biblical writers for what many of them were: story tellers. Walt Disney assigned human qualities to rabbits, mice and orphaned deer: they fall in love, and dance, and play piano. Likewise, the Bible sometimes attributes all too human qualities to God, like jealousy, fickleness, and rage. That would put God on the level of Queen Elizabeth I who, great though she was, occasionally acted out of spite when her love interests undermined her better judgment.

When the Bible tells a story where God plays the part of a human ruler acting out of spite, or on a whim, we do not accept that as a literal description. Nor did Calvin, Aquinas, Augustine, and Gregory of Nyssa. That's something Christians need to know.

It is a good thing, too. How awful it would be to think that God were as fickle and arbitrary as the average human being. We're friends one day and enemies the next. Our life stories are littered with the residue of broken promises. If God were like that, we would all be in a fix. But Christians don't believe that God is like us in such respects.

We *do* believe that there are human-like qualities in God. For example, from our experience of life, we are familiar with intelligence, faithfulness and love. And we believe that, in a manner analogous to the way that they exist in us, these qualities exist in God. Before the world was made, and after it is gone, God is faithful, loving . . . wise.

It isn't only Christians who believe there is intelligence in God. The philosopher Antony Flew, a famous atheist for years, is an atheist no longer. His latest book is titled *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Mathematics and the laws of physics changed his mind. He writes:

“The important point is not merely that there are regularities in nature, but that these regularities are mathematically precise, universal, and ‘tied together.’ Einstein spoke of them as ‘reason incarnate.’ The question we should ask is how nature came packaged in this fashion. This is certainly the question that scientists from Newton to Einstein to Heisenberg have asked — and answered. Their answer was the Mind of God.”<sup>1</sup>

Believing there is intelligence in God is almost easy. You can get there with a telescope and slide rule. But where do we come up with God's faithfulness and love? For that, you will need the Bible. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,” it says in the Epistle to the Hebrews, “but in these last days he has spoke to us by a Son.”<sup>2</sup>

God has spoken by a Son. And what has God said? God has said: “This is who I am.”

God is Christ-like. Paul said this of Jesus: “He is the image of the invisible God . . . [In] him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .”<sup>3</sup> This is the center of our faith, and our assurance of God's faithfulness and love.

So we don't base our trust in God's faithfulness and love on our unfiltered experience of life. Ours is a guided interpretation. We read our experience of life by the light of Jesus Christ, following his footsteps. That's what makes us Christians.

We have trouble putting this in words. When we try to talk about it, it usually comes out sounding wrong. Once in a while, someone will come along who can say it for us. T.S. Eliot perhaps, C.S. Lewis, or Martin Luther King. But articulate or not, we have this understanding in our minds, and hold it in our hearts.

It is a source of tremendous strength, and solace. I hope that each and every one of you is finding that. If you haven't found it yet, then dig a little deeper. I promise you, it is there. There is no limit to the comfort and the strength of knowing God in Jesus Christ. Yes we hurt, we fear, we suffer. But, after Christ, pain and fear and suffering can never be the same, because “the sufferings of the present time are not as worth comparing with the glory yet to be revealed.”

We put our dog to sleep two weeks ago last Friday, a minor sorrow in the grand scheme, but one that most of you will understand. I have never been the kind of man who tried to hide his tears. When we took Tegwyn to the vet I cried and didn't care who saw it. Is it foolish to imagine that we will meet our dogs and cats again in heaven? Christians need to know that it is never foolish to trust the ones we love to the good Lord's tender mercies.

Dogs, of course, are much more easily lovable than people. They live in the sweet spot of our natural affections. With other human beings, love comes with complications. (Can I get an Amen?) We love each other, sometimes so much it hurts, but even then we cannot keep from disappointing, mistreating even, those we love. The church has a good, all-purpose word for this. The word is “sin.”

We assume that every person here for worship, every Sunday, is in some respect a sinner—a disappointer and mis-treater. So, in just a few minutes, just like last week, just like next week, we will all kneel down together, you and I, and join in the confession. We will say to God. “We have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.”

Why would we assume that all of us, week-in, week-out, have need for this confession? It is because loving God and neighbor are very difficult for us to do.

In Walker Percy’s novel, *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Thomas More describes himself as a “bad Catholic.” He believes in Christ, he says, and goes to church on Sundays, but he loves women first, whiskey second, music and science third, God fourth, “and my fellow man, hardly at all.” (By story’s end, much of this has changed.)

As for me, I’m probably a pretty good Episcopalian. I love God with part of my heart quite sincerely. There are some other parts of my heart that seem to be reserved for other interests, and looking out for number one. My love for neighbor plays to mixed reviews.

This is no reason to be ashamed. Love of God and neighbor cuts against the grain. There are disciplines involved. Through these disciplines we are cultivating habits: habits of prayer, and habits of service. These habits can be quite effective, but they will not make us perfect, not even for a day.

That is our assumption.

And this is our faith: Although we will fall short in love of God and neighbor, God loves, accepts us even so. . . . God welcomes our prayers, blesses our efforts, forgives our mistakes.

It is not that we imagine God to be indulgent and permissive.

It is that we believe the Christ-like God has laid a claim on humankind. The human species, we believe, holds a certain promise, and God intends that we fulfill it. We believe that God is patient. God knows our limits, and the shadows in our hearts, and God is glad to work with this material.

To help us, God has intervened. In the person of his son, God has taken to himself the burden of our deficiencies in love. In one of the great, “comfortable words” of scripture:

“This is a true saying, and worthy of all people to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

How does he save us? By showing us that God is love, he saves us. By his teaching and example, he saves us. By the hope he brings, he saves us. By his faithful death, his glorious resurrection, from our fears and sins, he saves us. This salvation is for anyone who is ready to receive it.

You are created in the image of God. You are a lamb of Christ’s fold, a sinner of his redeeming. Whatever else is true of you, these facts are the first and last truth of your existence.

Embrace that truth. Find its solace and its strength. Let it draw you ever closer. Let it strengthen you in goodness. Let it fill your soul with happiness and peace.

And may its blessings be upon you: today, tomorrow, and forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Flew, with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (Harper Collins e-books, 2007), 1156

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 1:1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Col. 1:15–19.