

“Our questions really matter. Yet our questions should cause us to seek for the truth and not just end the conversation at our query. That’s what J.D. Greear does here. He asks the questions—and proposes clear answers—about key issues of the Christian faith. *Essential Christianity* will be a key resource for those considering the faith and for their friends who want to share it with them.”

ED STETZER, Executive Director, The Billy Graham Center,
Wheaton College, Illinois

“My heart was skipping with excitement as I read this book. J.D. writes with simplicity and grip—he teaches clearly because he understands deeply. This book will show you a devastating critique of the human condition that will ring true to your experience of life; and then it will reveal to you the overwhelming wonder of God’s solution in Jesus Christ. Whether you are an honest seeker or a mature pilgrim, I cannot commend this book highly enough to you.”

RICO TICE, Founder, Christianity Explored Ministries;
Senior Minister, All Souls Langham Place, London

“If you’re wondering what on earth to believe in a confusing and often disappointing world, *Essential Christianity* could be just the lifeline you need. In it, pastor J.D. Greear peels back the layers that can get piled on top of Christianity and helps us see the 1st-century original, which offers life-changing hope to billions around the world today—including you.”

REBECCA MCLAUGHLIN, Author, *Confronting Christianity:
12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion*

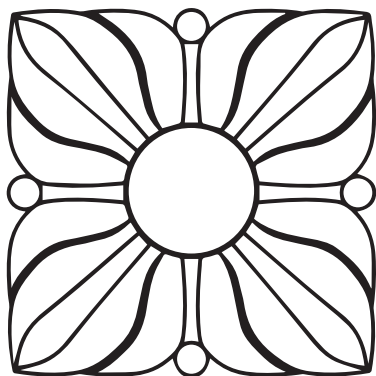
“J.D. Greear has a rare gift for really getting into the mind of the modern skeptic. He gets out in front of every key question and objection to Christianity and answers each one with compassion, honesty, and a great sense of humor. I bet even the surliest and most self-assured atheist wouldn’t mind sitting next to Greear on a plane—and would never be quite the same after their conversation.”

MOLLY WORTHEN, Associate Professor of History,
University of North Carolina; *New York Times* columnist; Author,
Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism

“Every generation needs a voice to present the central tenets of the Christian faith in a way that is both contemporary and timeless. With *Essential Christianity*, J.D. Greear shares the good news using simple, direct language and explanations first laid out by the apostle Paul. A compelling and helpful guide for anyone exploring their own faith journey.”

DAN CATHY, Chairman, Chick-fil-A

ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY



J.D. GREEAR

To my mother, Carol, who went home to be with the Lord during the writing of this book. Because of you, Mom, from childhood I have “been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make [someone] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15).

And to Steve Roberson, who faithfully called me back to Christ during my high school years.

And to Tim Keller, who taught me to love the gospel all over again, and that (as Martin Luther said), “to progress in the Christian life is always to begin again.”

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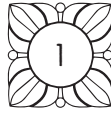
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ANNOUNCEMENT

What is Christianity, in a Sentence?

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...” (Romans 1:16)

For \$1,111 an hour, Carissa Schumacher helps you connect with Jesus.

The fee purchases entry into Carissa’s Los Angeles studio, where a gospel-style choir warms up the eclectic ensemble of enthusiastic enquirers—including a few megastars like Jennifer Aniston and Uma Thurman, both regulars at Sister Schumacher’s.

When the singing ends, a hushed silence falls over the room, a keen sense of anticipation filling the air. Carissa enters dramatically, taking her seat before the crowd, where she sits quietly and stares out, just long enough to make you slightly uncomfortable.

And then, at long last, Jesus speaks through her. At least, according to Carissa that’s what’s happening. Carissa’s Jesus prefers to go by “Yeshua”—which is not too strange, given that that was what his mom probably would have

called him in Palestine 2,000 years ago. More curiously, her Jesus speaks with a British accent. (Evidently he understands that Americans grant you an automatic 15-IQ-point bonus if you wield the Queen’s English.) Even to some of her followers, it all feels a bit strange. But yet they keep coming. One explained, “The Yeshua-channeling thing is way out there, and for some people, it’s going to be insane, but... everything she’s communicated to me just resonates.”¹

Resonates. In our age, that might be the most important word in evaluating spiritual experience. And an authentic spiritual experience is what so many of us are still looking for.

THAT UNSHAKABLE SPIRITUALITY

What strikes me about this story is not only that people pay \$1,111 to spend an hour with Carissa’s Yeshua, but that even in uber-secularized California—home of Silicon Valley, Hollywood, Stanford University, and U-Cal Berkeley—people are still seeking a connection with the divine.

After all, for more than a century, atheists have prophesied the coming of a brave, new world where belief in God is no longer necessary. Religious decline, they say, is the inevitable result of scientific progress, and soon religion will be enshrined in the museum of historical artifacts along with the sundial and the gasoline engine. The Beatles’ John Lennon captured the growing consensus back in 1966 when he said, “Christianity will go. It will

¹ “In Good Spirits”; <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/style/carissa-schumacher-flamingo-estate-los-angeles.html> (accessed July 7, 2022).

vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right."

It's just that someone forgot to tell the Millennials.

Despite the best efforts of John Lennon, Ricky Gervais, and the New Atheists (Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and so on), Millennials and Gen Z-ers have just not been able to imagine there's no heaven. A recent *Washington Post* article notes that as knowledge of science has grown, religious fervor has grown right along with it.² That growth is not always reflected in "traditional" religious affiliations, but it's there and it's unmistakable. The future seems bright for religion: demographers predict, based on current trends, that the 21st century will be more religious than either the 19th or the 20th.

In that article, Jack Goldstone, a professor of public policy at George Mason University, concludes, "Sociologists jumped the gun when they said the growth of modernization would bring a growth of secularization and unbelief. That is not what we're seeing ... People need religion."

The spiritual side of existence still resonates with us, even in our "secular" age.

2 "The world is expected to become more religious—not less," Sarah Pulliam Bailey, *The Washington Post*; April 24, 2015; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/04/24/the-world-is-expected-to-become-more-religious-not-less/> (accessed July 7, 2022). See also "Religion is Dying? Don't Believe It": <https://www.wsj.com/articles/religion-is-dying-dont-believe-it-nones-others-surveys-faith-institutions-atheists-agnostics-practice-minority-11659017037> (accessed September 5, 2022).

DECONSTRUCTION

What is *not* growing, however, is confidence in institutionalized religion. And so, growing side by side with our increasing thirst to engage with the spiritual is a movement called “deconstruction.”

The basic idea behind deconstruction is that religious claims are often thinly-disguised power grabs—leaders leverage religious institutions to maintain power. And sadly there is plenty of evidence to support this theory: organized religion has been used to justify and perpetuate bigotry, slavery, systemic racism, misogyny, genocide, and many other societal evils.

Religion has proven, in fact, to be a quite potent political tool. The media now uses “Christian” and “Evangelical” primarily as political classifications. So it’s hardly surprising that many assume that Christianity’s primary function in our society is the protection and propagation of Western, white, suburban, middle-class values.

For others, Christianity is less about power or politics and is instead about personal fulfillment—in the end, it is little more than a self-help strategy, a way to become a better and more fulfilled you. Skim through the titles of the most popular Christian books of the last couple decades and you’ll find ample evidence of this, too.

For these and many other reasons, deconstruction is not an altogether bad movement. It’s hard to dispute the claims that religion has often been commandeered to serve the interests of the powerful, to further a political agenda, or to cater to the existential felt needs of the consumer.

Deconstruction's purpose, however, ought to be to recover the truth behind the artificial constructs. Deconstruction's goal cannot be to deconstruct *everything*. If everything is deconstructed, eventually you'll be left with nothing, and nothing is a great place for power-grabbing "strong men" to thrive. As C.S. Lewis said in his book *The Abolition of Man*, written in 1943:

*"You cannot go on 'seeing through' things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque ... a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see."*³

In other words, the purpose of sweeping out the lies is to get to the truth. Healthy deconstruction means separating truth from the unhealthy, artificial constructs that so often surround it.

Now, in saying that, I certainly don't mean to imply that every religious institution is corrupt. Full disclosure: I'm a pastor, and so I lead a "Christian institution." I just want to acknowledge that some of the energy behind the deconstruction movement is legitimate, and that our institutions have sometimes been an impediment to truth rather than the conduits of it. Having run up against the shadow-side of such institutions, many truth-seekers have felt forced to look outside of them for authentic spirituality. Which leads us back to Carissa and her sessions offering you a connection with Jesus. All of us need something to make sense of life

³ *The Abolition of Man* (Oxford University Press, 1943).

and give it purpose. If you happen to have \$1,111 in your wallet, why not spend it on finding something that works for you?

Here's why: in the end, we need more than spirituality that resonates; we need truth, because things that aren't real will eventually fail us.

Think of it as like trying to live on one of Jennifer's or Uma's studio sets. At a glance, the scenes they depict look so real—picture-perfect buildings, office spaces, living rooms, and greenery. The problem is that none of it is real. For a while, you can play-act like it is, but if you actually tried to live on a set, eventually you'd get pretty frustrated.

For something to sustain you for the long haul—throughout life and eternity—there has to be a reality behind the resonance.

So, before you empty out your bank account and head to LA, it's probably wise to take a beat. Carissa Schumacher's "Yeshua" may resonate, but is he real? For a thousand bucks an hour, are you encountering the real Jesus or just Carissa with a deeper voice?

With apologies to Jennifer and Uma: you're hearing from Carissa, not Christ.

But how do I know that?

Is there a way to know the difference between authentic and artificial spirituality?

And if institutions have failed you, is there a place you can still look to find truth?

If Carissa's sessions are not really Christianity, what is? And who gets to decide?

After all, Christianity sometimes has a “31 Flavors” feel. Conservative, liberal, Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal, evangelical, non-denominational, high church, low church, Anglican, Baptist, etc., etc. If Christians can’t even agree among themselves on what Christianity is, how can you be expected to know which version is “correct”? Where should you start in your quest for authentic spiritual experience?

I want to help you navigate those questions, in a book organized not around my thoughts, insights, and experiences but around what the architects of Christianity said about it. A book about Christian essentials, back before all the institutions, hierarchies, protocols, and politics. What the Bible-writer Jude called “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3): The core. The essence. For those first Christians, the Christian faith was not a philosophy or an experience that merely “worked for them.” It *did* work for them—it made sense of life, and gave purpose in life, and gave peace about eternity—but the reason it worked was *because it was true*.

To access that core—that *Essential Christianity*—there is no better source than a letter that the early-church leader, or apostle, Paul, wrote to the first church in Rome.

PAUL’S LETTER TO ROME AS ESSENTIAL CHRISTIANITY

This book is not a commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans. Instead, it uses the major talking points of Paul’s letter to construct a framework of Christian essentials. I’m asking, “If Paul were writing the book of Romans today,

to people living in a 21st-century Western post-Christian culture rather than people living in a 1st-century Roman and Jewish culture, how would he write it?"

There are multiple reasons why I chose this approach. For one, throughout church history, Paul's letter to the Romans has been regarded as the clearest, purest, most in-depth explanation of Christian basics ever penned. Paul writes this letter to his highly cultured, well-educated friends in Rome, trying to explain why he's willing to stake his whole life on its truth.

Second, study of this letter has led to almost every Christian renewal in history. Back in the 4th century Augustine of Hippo, who is commonly regarded as one of the church's most important theologians, was transformed by one verse in Romans.⁴ He later said that through his study of Romans, "all the shadows of doubt were dispelled." The 16th-century Protestant Reformer Martin Luther said that in Romans we find the "most important piece of the New Testament," the doctrine on which the church "rises or falls," and it was his exposition of Romans that led to the Protestant Reformation and the modern mission movement.

Third, Paul's logic in this book is so meticulous that, for its first 100 years or so, Harvard Law School required its first-year students to work their way through Romans to see how Paul built an argument, anticipating and answering objections along the way. In systematic fashion, Paul shows the coherence and reasonableness of the Christian message, setting it apart in the vast marketplace of spiritual ideas. It's amazing how often

⁴ Romans 13:14: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

you'll think of an objection to what Paul is saying and then find that in the next verse he starts answering it.

Finally, I believe Paul's line of reasoning in Romans is (as a non-Christian friend of mine told me recently) "surprisingly relevant" for those who aren't sure about Christianity. After all, Paul himself started out as a hardcore skeptic—the idea of the resurrection of Jesus was just as outrageous to him as it might be to you.

It may seem like a wild notion for you to consider that a 1st-century writer can meaningfully speak to your 21st-century questions and problems. But, if nothing else, Romans proves (to quote my seeking, not-yet-believing friend again) that "the fundamental anxieties and questions of the human condition have not changed in 2,000 years."

THE GOSPEL: FUEL FOR TIRED CHRISTIANS, TOO

If you are already a Christian, please don't see this book as something only for non-Christians. After all, Paul's primary audience in Romans is *Christians*: "all those ... called to be saints" (Romans 1:7). The gospel, he explains, is not just how we *begin* the Christian life; it's also how we *grow in* the Christian life.

Quite often I talk to Christians who feel weary and dry in their spiritual experience—tired of plodding along through all the rituals and forms that make for the supposedly faithful Christian life; tired of the division and politicking they see. Maybe that's you. You have no problem with consenting to the facts of the gospel, but your experience with it seems to be missing something. In Romans, the apostle Paul shows us how to experience

the gospel as power *now*—power in our trials, doubts, struggles, and questions.

The gospel is not just the diving board off which we jump into Christianity—it’s the swimming pool in which we swim. See this book as your invitation to rediscover the goodness, the excitement, the liberation, and the power of the Christian life. That’s how Paul meant it for the church at Rome.

It’s like Martin Luther said: “Any progress in the Christian life comes from beginning again”—by going back to the gospel.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

“Gospel” is one of those words that Christians often use but rarely define, but it’s basically shorthand for the essential Christian message. Today, that word has almost exclusively religious connotations, but when Jesus and the apostles first started using it, it wasn’t a religious word at all. If an emperor won a great battle, for example, he would send heralds out with a “gospel” (literally, “good news”) about his victory. “I have good news,” the herald proclaimed: “Our emperor has won for us a great battle—we no longer need to live in fear.” Early Christians commandeered that word to encapsulate what Jesus had done. Our King has won a battle for us, and now we are invited to join in his victory and rest in his peace.

This gospel announcement is the heart of Christianity. We can get a lot of other things wrong, but if we get the gospel right, we have Christianity. Without it, whatever we have (no matter how much it resonates), we don’t.

So what is this gospel announcement?

Paul starts off Romans with this short explanation. The gospel is the good news about...

- who Jesus is
- what he's done
- what he brings⁵

That's how he organizes the book of Romans. Based on that, here's a workable definition we can use, then, from this point forward:

God, in an act of grace, sent his Son, Jesus, to earth as a man so that through his life, death, and resurrection he could rescue us, reign as King, and lead us into the eternal, full life we were created to enjoy.

Let's briefly break that down.

God...

The gospel begins with God. God exists, and he's been moving and speaking throughout history. That's already a big claim, and we're only one word in! How can we know he's there? What is he like? How do we know when he's speaking to us? We'll come back to that in chapter 2.

... in an act of grace...

That word "grace" means "undeserved kindness." Grace, properly understood, is what makes Christianity different from every other spiritual approach. Grace is the entire

⁵ He's the "Son of God in power" (Romans 1:4). He's defeated death for us by dying under our curse and rising again (Romans chapters 3, 5, and 6). He brings a new creation in which former enemies are reconciled, friends live in love, and peace reigns (chapters 12 – 16). Thanks to Michael Bird for this helpful breakdown.

basis of the gospel: the melody line around which all other Christian truths are played.

C.S. Lewis, the author of the acclaimed *Chronicles of Narnia*, was also an Oxford University professor and a convinced atheist who became a Christian in his thirties. One afternoon he was walking through the corridors of Oxford when he heard someone call his name from inside a classroom. A group of his colleagues were gathered in a lecture room, listing out on a blackboard all the things world religions have in common—things like morality, accountability, judgment, worship. Knowing that Lewis was a Christian, they challenged him: “Jack (that was his nickname—I have no idea how you get from Clive Staples to Jack), tell us what Christianity believes that is not already listed on this blackboard.” Lewis went in, looked at their list for a moment, walked up to the board, took a piece of chalk, and wrote just one simple word:

“Grace.”

Lewis put down the chalk and walked out without a word. That’s an Oxford don’s version of a mic drop. Two things to learn from that story: one, never try to outwit C.S. Lewis. Two, grace is what distinguishes Christianity from every other religion. Christianity, at its core, is not good advice about what we must go and do for God, but rather, good news about what he’s done for us. It’s not primarily instructions in morality or accountability or goodness but a declaration of grace.

... sent his Son, Jesus...

Or, as the apostle John explains it, God himself became a man and dwelt among us (John 1:14). More on the what and why of this later.

... so that he could rescue us...

The most important thing about Jesus is not what he taught but what he did. Paul's letter to the Romans, in fact, speaks very little about what Jesus taught and a whole lot about what he did. It's not what he taught that saved us, but what he did. The symbol of Christianity is not a lectern but a cross.

Christianity is, in its essence, a rescue religion. Which, of course, raises the questions: Why do we need rescuing? And how can a man who lived 2,000 years ago have done something then that can rescue me today? Great questions. That's chapters 3 to 6 of this book.

... reign as King, and lead us into the eternal, full life we were created to enjoy.

The gospel is not just about what Jesus came to rescue you from, but what he came to rescue you for: the full, eternal life that we were created to enjoy. As Paul explains, the gospel restores us to the life we were made for all along (the subject of chapters 7 to 10). This is what a lot of Christians, as well as non-believers, forget, but it pulsates through almost every chapter of Paul's great letter.

IT RESONATES BECAUSE IT'S REAL

Paul presents these truths not merely as insights that resonate but as realities that are, well, real. In fact, the reason they resonate is because they are real.

That doesn't mean they always come easily or instinctively. Some of what Paul says about the gospel you might find quite offensive. I certainly have.

That was Paul's experience too. He did not start out his adult life as a Christian—quite the contrary. He was the church's fiercest persecutor—he believed Christians were too forgiving of moral lawbreakers and not angry enough about Roman occupation. And yet, one afternoon on a dusty road to the city of Damascus, Paul encountered a power unlike anything he'd ever experienced. He experienced the resurrected Jesus, and in that moment Jesus transformed his life.⁶

It is this power that, he says, he is now “eager” to tell us about (Romans 1:15).

Are you open to what God says, even if it surprises, confronts, and, at times, angers you?

I hope that you are. I suspect that's why you picked up this book. And here's the good news—it won't cost you \$1,111 an hour to read it.

⁶ You can read what happened in Acts 9:1-19.