

GOD, CHURCH, ETC



# GOD, CHURCH, ETC

what you need to know

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*for*  
*Jonathan, Samuel, Isobel and Eleanor*  
*with love*



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# preface

## why this book?

I was looking for something that I wanted to give to someone in their teens as a confirmation gift. This is the kind of book I was looking for and couldn't find.

It might not be for everyone, but it does seem that there is a gap in the market – a gap that reflects the increasingly wide gulf between what goes on inside churches, and the lives of those who live around them but rarely enter the building. It is not just that many people grow up without any knowledge of Christian faith, but that their parents, carers and teachers have very little knowledge and experience of the Church and its faith too. For many people, church is simply irrelevant. Then just occasionally something happens which briefly raises questions of what it is all about. Perhaps someone is asked to be a godparent at a Christening, or attends a funeral. Perhaps, briefly, it becomes relevant and questions are asked.

This book is not just for people in that kind of situation though. There are plenty of us who attend church services regularly who do not know why things are the way they are. Often we just accept things, or have not felt the need to ask – or perhaps we think we ought to know about something and are afraid of appearing stupid. The danger is that we become like the disciples of the teacher who tied up his cat during worship. The cat regularly walked into the meeting room and disturbed the disciples. Tying it up solved the problem. After some time, the teacher died. The disciples continued to meet, and so to tie the cat up. More time passed, and then the cat died. The disciples were concerned to follow everything that the teacher had done, so bought another

cat in order to tie that one up during worship too. (Anthony de Mello tells the story in his book, *The Song of the Bird*, published in 1982.)

Losing touch with the original reason for a thing does mean that we are in danger of giving significance to things that don't matter. Conversely, we might throw out something that really does matter.

Most of us will have our own stories of misunderstanding or mishearing things. We laugh at things remembered from childhood, when our understanding is limited. Favourite examples in my family include:

- the naming of God: 'Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name . . .';
- questions about the population of heaven when being taught the Lord's Prayer in traditional language: 'but there aren't any witches in heaven';
- the mystery of whether Jesus was really a reptile – 'As our Saviour tortoise, so we pray';
- and the peculiar hymn to a strangely named and unfortunate looking Teddy: 'Gladly, the cross-eyed bear . . .'

The trouble is, although we might grow out of misunderstandings like these, we might also reach adulthood without necessarily having much more to put in their place. This book is, I hope, a small contribution to increasing that understanding. We may still think Church is weird or boring, but at least we are able to say why things are the way they are, and why it is important that we believe what we do.

### **why a book like this?**

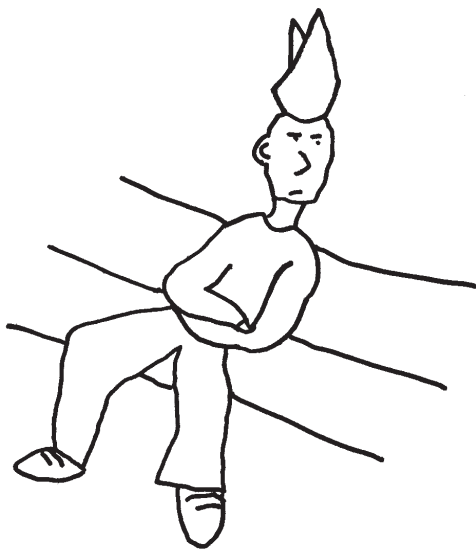
- I didn't want a book that had to be read from the beginning to the end. I wanted something that readers could dip into, find what they want and ignore the rest. That is how internet

## *preface*

searching tends to work, and how many people go about finding information. The internet also has a very high distraction value. Maybe, as with that, someone might begin by looking up one thing here and discover all sorts of other things too.

- It starts with the God stuff, because that is where it all begins. If God didn't matter there would be no Church. What we do in church has to come after and reflect our understanding of God.
- The 'other stuff' is there too, because the whole of life matters to God. What happens in church has to connect with the realities of life when we are not there. Christian faith permeates the whole of our lives.
- However, there is always more to know and more to be discovered. I have no illusion that this book covers everything. Most of the entries will have had whole books written on them in their own right. There are bound to be other bits that could have been included, or more that could have been said. The point though is to have something short, which – hopefully – covers some of the essentials.

All the bits in italics can easily be skipped over. However, the biblical references can be looked up and explored further if desired – perhaps with a commentary or Bible dictionary. The *name trail* is a bit of self-indulgence: I do love *words*. I am not a great scholar of Latin and Greek (although New Testament Greek was compulsory when I studied theology). I do enjoy a good detective drama on TV (as long as it is not too gory). I find that playing the detective and trailing a word to its source often gives me a richer understanding of its meaning. If this is not for you, then just ignore it!



STROPPY  
TEENAGE  
BISHOP

# acknowledgements

Rydal Hall is a lovely place set in beautiful surroundings, and has been for me a haven of peace. My heartfelt thanks go to Jonathon Green and his team for their generosity in regularly making space for me there to think and write. Without that, this book would not be here!

I am grateful for friends and family who have encouraged me to write. Two need a special mention. Thank you Sarah, for perceptive and honest comments given at just the right time. And thank you James, for the sharing of theological thinking and insights amid parental responsibilities and the mundane tasks of family life. This comes with love and gratitude to you both.



# the God stuff

'It starts with the God stuff, because that is where it all begins. If God didn't matter there would be no Church.'



# 1

## names/words used to describe God

### almighty

‘Might’ is strength. Being mighty means being really strong. Someone who is all-mighty is strong and powerful in all things.

Calling God ‘almighty’ should stop us in our tracks. Be warned, though: the might of God isn’t always what we expect.

(see **omnipotent**)

### Christ

First name ‘Jesus’, second name ‘Christ’? No – though it looks like that. It would be better to say ‘Jesus *the* Christ’, because Christ means ‘Messiah’. ‘Christ Jesus’ is ‘Messiah Jesus’: not a name, but a description of who he is.

We have lots of common words that link us to Jesus in this way – like **Christmas**, **Christening** and christened, Christian and Christian name. Saying ‘Messiah’ in place of ‘Christ’ in these words helps us think again about what they mean. ‘We get presents at Messiah-mas.’ ‘My baby cousin is going to be messiahed on Sunday.’ ‘I am a Messiah-person.’ ‘My Messiah name is Jane.’

(see **Messiah**)

### Creator

Maker. God takes stuff and does something with it. Shapes, moulds, forms it into something useful and beautiful.

When we describe God as Creator it is not just about the beginning of the world as we know it. It says something about what God

is like now: always creating. Always bringing about new possibilities. Always being the potter to our worldly clay (see *Jeremiah 18.6*). (see **creation**)

## **Emmanuel (also Immanuel)**

Simply the Hebrew word meaning ‘**God with us**’. (The ‘-el’ bit means ‘God’, and ‘e/immanu-’ means ‘with us’.)

The **prophet** Isaiah speaks of a child named Immanuel, who was given as a sign that God was with the people of Judah at a difficult time (see *Isaiah 7.10–17*). In Matthew’s Gospel, we read that these same words come to Joseph in a dream. In Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us (*Matthew 1.18–23*).

## **Father**

**God** is not remote. God is not just an idea. This is about a relationship: we are the child, God is the parent. Calling God ‘Father’ reminds us that this is real.

Of course, no human father is perfect. For some people, calling God ‘father’ is not helpful because they have not been able to have good relationships with their own fathers. It does say something important about God, though. God helped make us who we are. God delights in us, loves us, nurtures us, guides us, helps us.

Jesus called God ‘Father’. He allowed his Father’s will to be done in him. In giving up everything, the Father’s life and love were displayed for everyone to see.

## **God**

God is personal:

- the one who gave you life;
- the one you can’t hide from;
- the one who loves you;
- the one who was here at the beginning;
- the one who will be here at the end.

‘A god’ is different. To make something ‘a god’ is to make it really important in your life – more important than anything else perhaps. That god will want time and attention, and maybe will get in the way of the real thing.

## **holy**

Pure. Clean. Unspoiled. To be holy is to be set apart for **God**.

About 3,000 years ago God’s people wrote down a set of laws to help them decide what was holy. This is known as the Holiness Code, and can be found in the **Bible** in the book of Leviticus. There, a whole lot of different things and activities are declared to be ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’.

Much later, **Jesus** told his listeners that it went deeper: what is inside a person makes them clean or unclean, holy or not (*Mark 7.14–23*). Holy things don’t spoil the world God has created. Holy things don’t spoil relationships between people. Holy things show the world what God is like.

## **Holy Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is God’s way of being with us now. The Spirit is invisible, like the air we breathe – and like the air, we can’t do without the Spirit.

Think of a flute or trumpet. It may look beautiful and shiny, but unless someone blows through it, it is silent and useless. It is the same with us. The gift of the Holy Spirit was given afresh at the **Pentecost** after **Jesus’ resurrection**. Accepting the gift means that **God** can ‘blow through us’, and we can be useful, beautiful and fulfilled people.

## **Immanuel see Emmanuel**

## **Jesus**

When Mary and Joseph were told that there was a baby on the way, they were told that they had to call him **Jesus** (*Matthew 1.21; Luke 1.31*). Nothing else would do.

cat in order to tie that one up during worship too. (Anthony de Mello tells the story in his book, *The Song of the Bird*, published in 1982.)

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