

When Christians Get It Wrong

Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we're enthusiastic about starting this new study. Help us to be objective observers of our religion, recognizing the mistakes we frequently make. Be with us as we endeavor to be the disciples you would have us be. In your Son's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5fQ6OhWkHs> from 3:33-11:14 up until the point Hamilton says "...it's not just about people of faith, it's about all of us")**

- In what ways do you see Christians as being "so unlike your Christ"?
- What have been your feelings about John Lennon's song *Imagine* (e.g., the line that includes "...and no religion too")
- Is evil more a *human* problem than a *religious* problem?

- **Read Luke 15:1-2**

- **Chapter 1 – When Christians are UnChristian**

- Hamilton talks about meeting with a parishioner's son, John, who expresses serious problems with the Christian faith.
 - What does this say about the parishioner (Tom)?
 - What does this say about John?
 - What does this say about Adam Hamilton?
- Can you describe a "John" you've encountered with similar misgivings?
- [Barna Group's findings](#) on perceptions of non-Christian young adults toward Christians:
 - 91% - anti-homosexual
 - 87% - judgmental
 - 85% - hypocritical
 - 75% - political
 - 70% - insensitive
- What are the biggest surprises here / which of these are the most troubling to you?
- [read Jim White *unChristian* quote from Leader's Guide just prior to Group Discussion]...
"The only way to regain our footing is to remind ourselves –and others– that an authentic Christian is simply someone who has made the decision to believe in Jesus as his forgiver and then attempt to follow him as his leader. But *nowhere* in this series of events is perfection or sinlessness."
 - What are some of the ways to change this perception that being a Christian means being perfect?
- The parishioner's son John speaks of a youth trip where things broke down in discussion on the bus (topics included sex, drugs, who was gay, etc.)
 - Do you think John would have a similar experience with a youth group from our church?
 - Is this a problem that can be fixed or is it just "kids will be kids"?
- Hamilton recalls a post-eulogy encounter where an attendee asked why he didn't tell the parents their son was in hell.
 - This seems unconscionable. Have you ever experienced this level of insensitivity from a professed Christian?
- Jesus drew sinners and judged the religious.

- What examples can you think of where Jesus interacted with sinners? *Tax collectors, Mary Magdalene, Samaritan woman at the well, paralytic man lowered through the roof*
 - Do you think this was a matter of more being expected of the religious, or that Jesus considered the religious as farther from God's purpose than the sinners?
 - Four Expressions of Hypocrisy (have people ready to read from Matthew 6, 7, & 23)
 1. Wrong motives (Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18)
 - Can you give examples of doing good things for the wrong reasons?
 2. Pointing out the sin of others without seeing our own (Matthew 7:1-5)
 - When is it OK to point out someone's sin?
 3. Majoring in minors (Matthew 23:23-24)
 - What are the minors we major in? What are the "tiniest, least consequential of things" over which we choose to fight?
 4. Being two-faced (Matthew 23:25)
 - What are some of the most troubling examples of Christian hypocrisy to you?
 - [17] "non-religious people...do not expect Christians to be perfect"
 - Rather, they fault us because we don't recognize our hypocrisy
 - What would you say to a non-believer who posed this to you?
 - John and Adam Hamilton provide examples of Christians getting it right (non-judgmental Margie and charitable hair stylist Kathy)
 - Characteristics: love, give, seek justice, demonstrate kindness, and befriend those outside the church rather than condemning them
 - Who are the Christians you know who get or got it right?
 - How are/were people drawn to, rather than repelled by, their faith?
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer** (either your own or the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide)

References for material:

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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer**

Creator of the Heavens, inspire us this hour to better appreciate your handiwork with the backdrop of science. Keep us focused on your purposes for us as part of that handiwork. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Read Ecclesiastes 8:17**

- **Chapter 2 – Christians, Science, and Politics (up until the Postscript section)**

- John was turned off by the approach many Christians take to science
 - What do you think might be at the root of Creationists who insist on the literal interpretation of the Bible? Could it be fear of being wrong?
 - Why is it hard for some Christians to accept, as John did, that “the miraculous complexity” of science and evolution is evidence of the divine?
- [24] “scientists act as God’s docents, whether they believe in God or not. By helping us understand God’s handiwork, they add to the majesty and glory of creation”
 - How has science helped you understand God and His handiwork?
- Hamilton discusses the slow acceptance of scientific findings by Christians (e.g., sun at the center of the solar system)
 - What scientific findings today do you feel will eventually be accepted by all Christians?
 - *Age of the earth (Hamilton talks about wanting to “laugh or cry” when hearing Christians use the Bible to claim its age is 10,000 years)*
 - *Evolution of human species*
 - *Commonality of DNA across humanity*
 - *Sexual orientation as genetic*
- Science answers “what” and “how”... theology answers “why”
 - Describe the frustration if your focus is on only one of the two: science -or- theology

- **Video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5fQ6OhWkHs> from 11:14-22:17 up until Hamilton says “We all struggle with this.”)**

- What was your reaction to the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021?
 - Do you think this served as a unifying event (i.e., against the protesters)?
 - What is the difference between these rioters and the 18th century U.S. revolutionaries?
 - Are we so impressionable that we’re easily called to evil action by strong speakers?

- **Chapter 2 (Postscript: Politics and Religion)**

- Do you feel any of your political beliefs on social issues are deemed by some Christians as incompatible with the Christian faith?
- Have you ever felt excluded by a church or group of Christians for your political beliefs?
- How is Christianity more or less a political rallying cry than it was for your parents?
- Hamilton mentions Christians forwarding slanderous email (remember the book was written in 2010).
 - How is social media impacting the relationship between Christianity and politics?
- [36] “Christians get it right when they work for justice, and when grace, truth, and love mark their political activities.”
 - Where have you seen evidence of such grace, truth, and love in political events?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer** (either your own or the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide)

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Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord, sometimes we have difficulty appreciating the extent of your mercy, including to non-Christians. Your mercy exceeds our understanding, and yet we are so grateful for you extending it to us. In Your Son's name we pray. Amen

- **Chapter 3 – When Speaking of Other Religions**

- We tend to see the world as “us” vs. “them.”
 - For you, which groups of people, including religious groups, fall under “them”?
- Have a volunteer read Acts 11:2-18
 - What are your key takeaways from this passage? *There's a message of inclusivity here. As a Gentile, I am one of “them,” and Jesus still grants me repentance.*
- Hamilton covers three schools of thought on interpreting the expanse of God's mercy...
 - *Christian Universalism – all are reconciled to God*
 - *Christian Exclusivism – you must accept Jesus to enter heaven*
 - *Christian Inclusivism – Jesus died for our sins, but God can grant salvation to anyone He chooses*
 - What are the pluses and minuses you see for each of these?
- A Jesuit priest, Karl Rahner, proposed the concept of the “anonymous Christian”
 - *People who are not Christian, and haven't even heard of Christ, can be saved through Christ*
 - *Faithful practitioners of other faiths have responded to a divine beckoning*
 - How do you feel about this?

- **Closing Prayer** (either your own or the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide)

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Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, help us to better come to grips with the bad things that continue to happen all around us. Moreover, in the face of all this, help us to be the instruments of your loving will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Activity**

- Recall a difficult or painful time when others reached out to you with expressions of comfort
 - What was helpful?
 - What was hurtful?

- **Read Romans 8:28** – “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

- What do you think Paul is trying to get across here?
- What is he *not* saying?

- **Have a volunteer read Luke 13:1-8**

- What is Jesus' message here?
- Why do you think he told the parable of the unproductive fig tree immediately after answering the questions about why people had suffered?

- **Chapter 4 – When Bad Things Happen**

- *“Theodicy” = theo [God] + dike [justice]*
- Is the difficulty to reconcile a loving God with human suffering the greatest challenge to faith?
 - If not, what other challenges might rise to this level? *Exclusionist policies; hypocrisy*
- Can you think of a time when someone inappropriately attributed a bad event to being “God’s plan”?
- Why do you think some Christians believe that everything must be happening according to God’s plan?
- Are there times when you feel God is punishing you for your failures?
 - In retrospect, what do you think of this line of reasoning?
- In what ways does the Old Testament reinforce this attribution of suffering with sin?
 - In what ways does it refute it? *Job; recurring redemption of Israelites after they stray time and again*
- [63] Hamilton states “When Christians begin to suggest that suffering is God’s punishment for sin, I wonder if they are not in some sense negating the cross of Christ.”
 - How does this ring true for you?
- Hamilton describes the “Determinism” belief that God is responsible for all events
 - Why might some Christians adopt this attitude? *Relieves them of the burden of accountability*
 - How would you respond to a Christian who claimed that God “micromanaged” all aspects of life?
 - Is determinism too much for God?
 - How might it be in His and our best interests to avoid controlling everything?
 - How might determinism make God a monster?
- Is it fair to attribute all the good to God, but not the pain? (i.e., good things are not “coincidences” but “God-incidents”)
- How much of a plan do you think God has?
- *Hamilton recalls the 2010 Haitian earthquake*
 - *God wasn’t the source of this natural disaster*
 - *God was the source of comfort and hope in the face of the disaster*

- *“If you take God out of the equation in Haiti, you still have an earthquake with 200,000 people dead, but you have just removed the single most important source of comfort and hope.”*
 - **Closing Prayer** (either your own or the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide)
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Chapter 5

- **Opening Prayer**
Lord God, help us to be open to embracing all of your children. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.
- **Video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNnr6WGn-KU> (0:45-11:05[end])**
 - Reflections?
- **Chapter 5 – In Dealing with Homosexuality**
 - 2007 Barna study – 91% of young adults label Christians as anti-homosexual
 - 2010 Pew Forum study – 63% born after 1981 accepting of homosexuality; 35% of those 65+
 - 2023 Public Religion Research Institute (nonprofit, nonpartisan independent research org.)
[Annual American Values Survey](#)
 - 67% support same-sex marriage
 - 74% of white mainline Protestants
 - 52% of Black Protestants
 - 68% of Hispanic Roman Catholics
 - 44% of Hispanic Protestants
 - 73% of white Catholics
 - 86% of religiously unaffiliated
 - Do any of these numbers surprise you?
 - White vs. Black
 - Hispanic Protestants vs. Hispanic Catholics
 - What might be behind the differences?
 - There was a slight decrease in those supporting same-sex marriage from 2022 to 2023
 - Why do you think that might be?
 - In the book, “John” equates a ban on LGBTQ marriage with a ban on biracial marriage.
 - In what ways are the two issues the same? Different?
- **Have a volunteer read Acts 10:1-17**
 - Hamilton uses this story to illustrate Peter’s epiphany that the *rules are changing*.
 - Why do you think God gave Peter this vision?
 - What do you think is at the root of God’s instruction that the rules need to be changed?
 - Have you experienced similar epiphanies in your life that have caused a fundamental change in your beliefs?
- **Chapter 5 (Continued)**
 - Hamilton points out Biblical verses related to slavery and the treatment of women as examples of not representing God’s *timeless* will.
 - How do we determine what of the Bible is context- or time-sensitive and what is God’s timeless will?
 - Hamilton suggests this is done by mapping them to Jesus’ two greatest commandments
 - Does this work for you?
 - [87] “Most Christians on both sides of the question of homosexuality believe in the authority of the Bible.”
 - To what extent do you use the Bible as an authoritative reference?
 - Read Leviticus 20:13 – “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.”

- Hamilton points out that even traditionalists don't subscribe to at least part of this verse – that of killing offenders
 - Are these Biblical debates simply a matter of where people choose to draw the line?
 - Does this suggest that everyone is indeed interpreting the Bible – even literalists?
 - [93] Almost everyone in Hamilton's church raised their hand when asked if they had a gay loved one.
 - Could it be that these close exposures are required to alter our interpretations of God's will?
 - Does God place these people in our path to motivate such change?
 - **Closing Prayer** (either your own or the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide)
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Chapter 6

- **Opening Prayer**

Loving Father, we've spent the last several sessions talking about how we Christians continue to stray you're your will by 'getting it wrong.' This day, let us celebrate the good being done in your name on behalf of the Christian faith. For it is in your name that we pray. Amen.

- **[Just for fun] Video** – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFduNE4pXAQ>

- *Our class did this series in the throes of COVID. When I was searching around for Adam Hamilton videos, I accidentally stumbled across this humorous parody on a familiar song from the musical Hamilton. Perhaps your group will get a kick out of this message in retrospect, now that we're all "back"!*

- **Video** – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5fQ6OhWkHs&t=720s> [25:27-35:25]

- Reflections?

- **Chapter 6 – When Christians Get It Right**

- [97] “Most of the New Testament was written to Christians who were ‘getting it wrong.’”
 - Is this the way you feel?
- **Have volunteers read:**
Matthew 22:34-40
1 John 4:11-12, 16, 19-21
 - Can you do one of the commandments without doing the other?
 - Which of the following questions do you tend to ask yourself more often:
 - What will happen to me if I stop to help?
 - What will happen to this person if I don't stop to help?
- Hamilton's observation is that being a Christian basically boils down to *love*.
 - How does this simple message help or hurt the cause?
- “When Christians get it right, they practice sacrificial love.”
 - What are examples of sacrificial love you've seen first-hand?
 - What is being sacrificed?
- [105] Hamilton says that in all his travels to troubled countries, nearly all the people he met doing humanitarian work were Christians.
 - Do you think this is true, or might Hamilton have a bias in his perspective?
- [106] Hamilton includes the Robert Louis Stevenson story of watching a lamplighter and saying “I'm watching that man out there knock holes in the darkness.”
 - In what ways does this analogy work for you with regard to what Jesus asks us to do?

- **Postscript on “God and Public Schools”**

- Could any treatment of religion in public schools work?
- In what ways can Christians have a positive influence on schools to “get it right”?

- **Other reflections on the book?**

- **Closing Prayer** (either your own, the one Hamilton provides in the Leader Guide, or Hamilton's prayer in the above video starting at 35:27)

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