

TEN

T E N B E L I E F S
A B O U T J E S U S

DIOCESE OF BUNBURY
STUDY NOTES
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TEN BELIEFS ABOUT JESUS: INTRODUCTION

This study series is based on the chapter entitled '10 Key Beliefs about Jesus' in John Pritchard's Book 'Ten: Why Christianity Makes Sense'.

In the foreword to his book, John Pritchard (Bishop of Oxford 2007-2014, now retired) says that writing it has allowed him to "reflect on many years of ministry and offer a kind of distillation of where I've got to about what really matters. I hope it's the kind of book that encourages Christians to recognise the contours of their own faith, and also one they can put into the hands of friends and say, 'See if that kind of faith makes sense'. . . I hope to have represented a generous orthodoxy for the mind and a gracious spirituality for the heart".



The Rev Dr Samuel Wells, Vicar of St-Martin-in the Field, London describes the book as "A perfect discussion-starter and provocation to new or renewed faith".

Each of the ten beliefs in these studies are quoted from pages 61-71 of 'Ten' by John Pritchard. It is not necessary to buy John Pritchard's book in order to complete the studies although you might like to explore some of the other chapters, such as "Ten reasons to believe in God" or "Ten Bible passages that tell the whole story".

HOW TO USE THESE STUDIES

The aim of these studies is to help us to continue to "Learn Christ". The ten key beliefs outlined here take us through the life, death and new life of Jesus. It can be helpful to investigate these afresh through another person's eyes - and hopefully also find new insights. You may not agree with everything John Pritchard says about Jesus. This in itself can be helpful to challenge you to explain why you disagree and to sharpen your own thoughts and beliefs. We have included relevant Bible references in each section to help us explore some of what the Bible says about each belief.

It is not essential to cover all 10 beliefs or even necessarily study them in the order they are given. Studies 7-10 are shorter and you may like to combine studies 7 and 8 and studies 9 and 10. Although these notes have been designed with group discussion in mind, you may prefer to study them prayerfully alone, asking the Lord to use them to help you "Learn Christ" more fully. Some options for further study are also included.

We hope that you will be blessed as you contemplate anew the life and ministry of Jesus and all that he means to you.

Yours in Christ Jesus,

Rev Marion Prowse (Gelorup Parish)

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BELIEF 1: JESUS BROUGHT GOD DOWN TO EARTH

If you are the God of limitless presence, the one who sustains a universe of unimaginable scale, the very ground and rationality of existence itself – then it's going to be hard to make yourself known to those endearing and infuriating specks of stardust called human beings. Men and women need something manageable, something within their own frame of comprehension, something personal. Someone, perhaps? If God were to be understood and be able to make a difference to our lives, there was probably no alternative to God giving himself to us in a human life. Yes, of course it is a paradox, but it's like a performer so entering the genius of a piece of music that he's saturated in the vision and imagination of the composition; he's totally at one with the mind and heart of the composer, and thereby enables others to encounter the music in exactly the way that composer intended, with all the accuracy, passion and love with which he wrote the score. Jesus inhabits his Father's score precisely.

Jesus brings God down to earth. There's no gap between Father and Son. And the incredible thing is that people started speaking of the human Jesus and the everlasting Father in the same breath so soon after Jesus had been seen and known around the fields and lanes of Galilee. In the Acts of the Apostles we find the first martyr, Stephen, commending his spirit to Jesus, not to God. Paul was in no doubt about the exalted role of Jesus Christ - read the first chapter of Colossians and be amazed! It seems that the first followers of Jesus simply couldn't avoid the conclusion that during the ministry of Jesus they had been walking with God. Theologians and ordinary Christians have been trying to work this out ever since.

QUESTIONS

Read John 20: 30-31

1. Why did John write these two verses (what impression do you get of his emotions, and his thoughts about Jesus?)
2. What does John want his gospel to achieve?
3. What does John mean by 'have life in His name?' Is this something that you have experienced or do experience?

Read Colossians 1: 1-22

4. What roles of Jesus Christ are spoken of in this passage?
5. Which verse (or verses) best encapsulate the gospel (the good news) spoken of in Col 1:5?

BELIEF 2: JESUS LIVED A RADICAL, SUBVERSIVE FREEDOM

A wise old Bishop used to say: ‘Whenever people see me off with a casual “Take care,” I want to say to them, “No, no; take risks!”’ Our lives can be too circumscribed with caution, anxiety and the fear of freedom. But Jesus would have none of it. He lived on the edge right from the start of his ministry, challenging the heavy-duty interpretations of religion that kept the scribes and Pharisees in business and taking his listeners on daring journeys of the spirit. He hung out with all kinds of lowlife, insulted the religious authorities, advocated a laid-back attitude to the law, and generally encouraged people to get a life. He taught with reckless freedom and refused to compromise even when he finally went into the heart of enemy country in Jerusalem. If I'd been a disciple I think I'd have been saying: ‘Jesus, couldn't you just back off a little; maybe turn down the rhetoric? Just a bit more subtlety in your choice of targets? Otherwise this is going to end in disaster.’ There's a song in the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* with the discerning title ‘Could We Start Again, Please?’ But Jesus is flying too high and too fast for his disciples to stop him now.

This radical freedom has long appealed to oppressed peoples (slaves in the Deep South, black people under apartheid), the poor reading their Bibles in the shanty towns of South America, students and young people in fashionable revolt in the West. It also appeals to that part of all of us that would love to live more authentically and with fewer self-imposed constraints. In many people there's a free spirit that believes in a larger world where things are done differently, and Jesus speaks to that proto-rebel. He too would probably say: ‘No, no; take risks!’

QUESTIONS

1. What examples of Jesus taking risks are given in this section?

2. How were the following actions of Jesus risky?
 - a. Luke 13:10-17
 - b. Luke 19:1-10
 - c. Luke 19:45-48
 - d. John 12:1-11
 - e. John 12:12-19
 - f. Matthew 9: 1-8
 - g. Matthew 15:1-9

3. Have you had times in your life where you were 'living on the edge' to represent Jesus?

4. What risks might Jesus be calling you to take as his follower and ambassador in the world? (2 Corinthians 5:20)

BELIEF 3: JESUS TAUGHT WITH WONDERFUL IMMEDIACY

Jesus was a master of communication. He didn't start with the dusty conventions of religious protocol but with the stuff of life before people's eyes. His key theme was the 'Kingdom of God' now breaking into the life of the world, but to explore what that meant he spoke of farmers sowing fields and casual workers in vineyards, of children who ran off to make their fortune and people who turn down dinner invitations, of crooked magistrates and victims of Grievous Bodily Harm, of friends who turned up after midnight looking for a bed and people who found treasure buried in a field. It was all so vivid. He was a consummate storyteller and held people spellbound by his style of teaching. Albert Einstein once said: 'As a child I received instruction in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. No one can read the gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word.' It was this personality that had thousands of people chasing around the lake to catch up with him and sit at his feet. In him, the message, the style and the personality came together in a perfect synthesis, and at some unnamed level people knew they were being addressed with an authority that could only belong to God.

This authority had extraordinary spinoffs. They're normally called miracles, though whether they were breaking natural laws, or merely speeding them up, or even appealing to a deeper law of reality (love?), is hard to say. The problem for a sceptical age is that the Gospels are heavy with evidence. Whatever else he did, Jesus healed. He seemed to create a space where God could act in freedom and where unpredictable things could occur (not always; it was tough going in his home town). I suppose as quantum physics and chaos theory disclose a universe of even greater openness, the activity of the God who sustains and suffuses everything shouldn't be a great surprise. The idea of miracle will always be mysterious but it can't be ruled out *a priori*.

QUESTIONS

1. What does Pritchard mean by 'Jesus taught with wonderful immediacy'?
2. Which parables of Jesus can you remember? What makes them memorable for you? Do you think that Jesus' parables, are as relevant today as they ever were?
3. Matt 9:6 says, 'the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins'. What else did Jesus demonstrate authority over? (Matthew 8v1-3, Matthew 8v23-27, Matthew 8 v28-32)
4. Did Jesus delegate any of his authority to his followers? (See Matt 10:1-10; Matt 28: 16-20)
5. Does he delegate any authority to his present-day followers? (John 17: 18-22)
6. What miracles have you witnessed or heard about? How have they impacted your faith?

BELIEF 4: JESUS PRACTISED SIMPLICITY AND HOSPITALITY

When I last moved to a new job we needed one and a half and pantechinons to gather up our possessions from the north of England and proceed slowly down the A1. It was a far cry from the self-drive van we had hired to set up our first home. Part of the freedom of Jesus was the way he could sit light to the preoccupations and obsessions that pull the rest of us out of shape. He's really not bothered about ownership; it's the finding of the last lost object that matters. He's not all that concerned about common sense justice either; it's more important to make sure that every vineyard labourer gets what his family needs than to assess how long he's worked. He sits loose to home comforts too: foxes have warm holes and birds have well-padded nests but Jesus depends on people not sending him packing when he rolls up to tell them about the Kingdom of God (though he seems to have had a few female backers with a bit of money on some occasions Mark 15:41).

...He's never disgusted - never believing that a leper, a prostitute, a woman with gynaecological problems, an epileptic, a soldier from the hated occupying forces, or whoever else, is beyond the circle of his compassion. He never seems to say no. At the deepest level he seemed to be hospitable to anyone and everyone. Equally he'll accept hospitality from anyone - leper (Simon), fraudster (Zaccheus, Levi), leader of the Pharisees (Luke 14), friend (Mary and Martha) or indeed the unknown supporter who owned the Upper Room. This is a man truly at ease with himself and offering that same ease to those of us who, sadly, have so much less imagination.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you think you would have reacted to Jesus' instructions if you had been one of the seventy sent out to evangelise: 'Take no bag, no extra coat.' ie no money or provisions, rely on the hospitality you are offered? (Luke 10 v 1-7)
2. Pritchard suggests that possessions can be traps that take our focus away from caring for people: Do you agree? How do you counter the temptation to make material things over-important?
3. Who offered Jesus hospitality? Luke 14:1 ; Luke 10: 38-42; Matt 26:6 ; Luke 5: 27-29; Lk 19: 1-10; Mk 14: 12-16. What does this tell you about Jesus?
4. What does Luke 14: 12-14 teach about hospitality?
5. Think of people in whose home or in whose company you have felt very welcomed and at ease. What is it about them that gives you this feeling?
6. What would you like to do differently in your own life as a result of this study, with regards to simplicity and hospitality?

FOR FURTHER STUDY (Optional)

You may like to research which women shared their wealth with Jesus and the disciples. (Luke 8:3, Matt 27:56 & Mk 15:40; Jn 19:25; Lk 10:38-9; Mt 27:56-61 ; Lk 8:3; Mark 14:21)

BELIEF 5: JESUS DIED THROUGH TRAGIC NECESSITY

Jesus flew too close to the sun; it was bound to end in melted tears. Jesus had come up against so many vested interests. He came to Jerusalem and put it all on the line. 'This is what God is offering - a Kingdom of untold freedom, justice and joy. Here's the truth. What do you make of it?' And they answered: they wanted none of it. Writer Alison Morgan puts it this way:

The human condition remains the same: we are like flies caught on the sticky threads of an invisible web, trapped by the deathliness of our own worldview. Jesus did not come to fiddle with the web or console those stuck on its threads; he came to shout at the top of his voice that the spider's power was now broken - that we would know the truth and that the truth would set us free.

But as yet, men and women couldn't believe that brave announcement. They had to destroy that which showed them up so badly. . .

The Apostle Paul asserts that 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). It was God himself who was taking the onslaught of hatred, violence and contempt . . . This is the love of a father who'll give his life for his family, or a teacher who'll lose her life to shield her young charges from a wild gunman, of a priest who'll take the place of another person in a queue entering a gas chamber. Evil is real; it has consequences and has to be dealt with, But it doesn't have to be 'bought off'; it has to be defeated. And that's what the cross was about¹

QUESTIONS

1. 'God is offering – a Kingdom of untold freedom, justice and joy.' Who does Jesus want to set free, and from what?
2. 'They wanted none of it.' Why were Jesus' opponents so reluctant to accept his vision of the world as God wanted it to be? What vested interests in our world today might Jesus come against?
3. How appropriate and helpful do you think Alison Morgan's image is: of people being caught in a spider's web of narrow thinking and self-centredness, and Jesus as the one who came to break the spider's power?
4. Read Romans 7: 18-25 and Romans 8:1-16
'They had to destroy that which showed them up so badly.' Do you agree that it is our natural impulse to attack what exposes our weaknesses and guilt, rather than being open to seeing and admitting the truth about ourselves? What is the basis for this wilful blindness? What is the cure?
5. Have we sometimes airbrushed the tragedy and chaos of the cross by rushing ahead to the resurrection (the happy ending)? If so, why have we done this? What is your opinion on this?
6. What does Jesus' death mean to you? What difference does it make to your life?

¹ The last paragraph comes from chapter 3 of John Pritchard's book 'Ten', p24

BELIEF 6: JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD WITH GRACE AND POWER

Now we've hit the intellectual buffers. We might just about cope with a suffering God, but a man, no matter how good, rising from the dead? Pull the other one. And yet we can clearly state that the whole of the Christian faith rests entirely on this one fact. Without this event we would simply have another failed Messiah, hung out to dry in the accustomed Roman fashion, with a few hundred disillusioned followers sliding back to their old life with a mixture of regret and graceful sadness. The resurrection is the single, blistering, whirligig event that changed everything.

And somehow the event has to be located in history, the kind that's open to public investigation and scholarly examination. Much could be said (and has been said: NT Wright's study has over 800 pages)² but at least let's recognise that if there had been an empty tomb but no sightings of Jesus it would have been assumed that the body had been stolen. Similarly, if there had been various eyewitness sightings of Jesus but no empty tomb, it would have been assumed that these were merely the sad but understandable projections of bereaved followers. Only if both factors - the empty tomb and the sightings - were true together could anyone conclude that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Moreover, something astonishing changed a terrified, demoralised group of young men from the north country who wanted nothing more than to avoid capture and slip back to Galilee first thing on Monday morning, into the world-changing band of brothers who would instead capture the imagination of the Roman Empire and eventually of the whole world. That 'something' needed to be a staggering experience, not just a gradual return to optimism. Resurrection fits the bill.

And yet, of course, the resurrection is still an event that remains ultimately mysterious. As David Ford says in *The Shape of Living*: 'There is no ready-made worldview into which it fits...if we think we have a framework that contains it, then we have not grasped the sort of event it is'. What we are left with however, is an event that still ricochets around the world, bringing untold delight and hope to millions.

QUESTIONS

1. What evidence does Pritchard give in this section, that the resurrection actually happened?
2. Do you find this evidence convincing?
3. Read the parts of each gospel which tell of the resurrection. Mt 28: 1-17 ; Mk 16: 1-14; Luke 24: 1-12; John 20. What stands out to you from these accounts?
4. What strikes you about the tone (the indication of emotions or opinion) in which these accounts are written?
5. Pritchard says the resurrection brings 'delight and hope to millions.' Does it bring delight and hope to you? Why or why not?

FOR FURTHER STUDY (Optional)

To explore more about the evidence for the resurrection, you might like to try reading 'Who Moved the Stone?' by Frank Morison or 'The Case for the Resurrection' by Lee Strobel.

² N.T Wright. *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. London: SPCK, 2003

BELIEF 7: JESUS LEFT BEHIND THRILLED, BUT STILL UNCERTAIN, FOLLOWERS

A notice in an Austrian ski lodge said: 'Not to perambulate the corridors in the hours of repose in the boots of ascension'. That well-meaning instruction has something of the same opacity as the Ascension itself. I once saw a performance by the Reduced Shakespeare Company of *The Bible: The Complete Word of God (abridged)*. It was full of wonderful affectionate humour but when they came to the cross, resurrection and Ascension, they told it straight. An actor simply stood on stage and said: 'And then Jesus ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father. And he will come again in glory to judge both the living and dead, and his Kingdom will have no end.' There was a pause and then he said: 'That's pretty cool.' And then the humour went on.

The Ascension is indeed pretty cool, but we're not likely to be able to describe it very well. Whatever happened in time in space, it became clear to the apostles that Jesus was bringing to an end the month or so of sporadic sightings and conversations, the period that Chris Russell describes well as the future 'grazing' against the present. The spatial imagery of going 'up' is simply a conventional way of describing the true destiny of the risen Christ. But in leaving the disciples' immediate presence it could be said that Jesus took humanity to the right hand of God. No longer can we say, 'I'm only human,' because in the ascended Christ we become more truly human than ever, and indeed, therefore, most like God. Bringing that theology back down to earth, the disciples were still not certain what to do with their joyful confidence. Jesus had told them to wait to 'receive power' so they went back to their upper room in Jerusalem: but apart from replacing the now deceased Judas and worshipping in the Temple, they were still left wondering what to do next. Little did they know.

QUESTIONS

There appears to have been as Pritchard says: 'a month or so of sporadic conversations' between the disciples and Jesus after his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15: 3-7). Then Jesus left them to return to the Father.

Read Acts 1: 1-11.

1. How do you think the disciples felt after the Ascension, in this time of waiting for Jesus' promise of 'you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'?
2. Acts 1: 11 says '..... two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said....'This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven.'" What do you make of this statement? What is its significance for you?
3. Pritchard says, "It could be said that Jesus took humanity to the right hand of God. No longer can we say, 'I'm only human,' because in the ascended Christ we become more truly human than ever, and indeed, therefore, most like God". How do you respond to this idea?

BELIEF 8: THE SPIRIT OF JESUS FELL ON HIS FOLLOWERS

It was an ordinary morning. They were clearing away the breakfast things and sorting out the day's jobs. The upper room where they had spent so much time recently was suffering from an excess of male neglect. But then, as from nowhere, came a communal experience of such overwhelming energy and power it seemed as if a gale was blowing through the room and flames of fire were dancing around the disciples. The events of this extraordinary morning are described in Acts 2. What a movie camera would have picked up I've no idea, but the effects of that morning are still being felt today. The disciples were practically thrown out into the world. Never again were they unsure what their task was. The Spirit drove them out to tell the good news of God's unlimited generosity to the whole unsuspecting world. The steam generated in that upper room was converted into power, because the test of this experience wasn't their wonderful feelings but their effective witness.

This kind of experience isn't just locked in the past. God's Spirit blows with reckless freedom through his weary world. John McCarthy was held prisoner for five years in Beirut and it drove him mentally and emotionally to a very dark place, but down there in the pit he had a life-saving experience:

"One morning my fears became unbearable. I stood in the cell sinking into despair. I was on my knees gasping for air, drowning in hopelessness and helplessness. I thought I was passing out. I could only think of one thing to say – 'Help me please, oh God, help me.' The next instant I was standing up, surrounded by a warm bright light. I was dancing, full of joy. In the space of a minute, despair had vanished, replaced by boundless optimism. What had happened? I had never had any great faith, despite a Church of England upbringing. But I felt I had to give thanks. But to what? Unsure of the nature of the experience, I felt most comfortable acknowledging the Good Spirit which seemed to have rescued me. It gave me strength to carry on and, more importantly, a huge renewal of hope - I was going to survive."

The Holy Spirit goes by many names – she³ isn't proud. She is unpredictable, untidy, unconventional, and truly wonderful. And without her we can't live and thrive as Christians but only take a long time to fade away.

QUESTIONS

1. Read Acts 2: 1-40. What is the most startling thing about this event, for you? And the most awe-inspiring or faith-building thing?
2. '...the test of this experience wasn't their wonderful feelings but their effective witness.' When has it been easy for you to tell about your experience of God?
3. The testimony of John McCarthy tells of the answer he received to his prayer for help. Share any time when you remember God helping you in your extreme need.

³ Debate exists about whether feminine or masculine pronouns should be used for the Holy Spirit. For more information see www.christianity.com/wiki/holy-spirit/what-pronoun-is-used-for-the-holy-spirit-he-she-or-it.html

Mother Teresa said: "God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless; hunger, not only for bread, but for love; for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not of clothing only, but nakedness of that compassion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only for a shelter made of stone, but that homelessness that comes from having no one to call your own."

This is a powerful challenge to the church today: if we are following Jesus, the church should be a family where people are loved, cared for, nurtured, welcomed and affirmed.

4. Do we believe that the Holy Spirit can empower us with the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5: 22-23) to reach beyond what is familiar and comfortable and become communities of welcome, hospitality and light? What is a next step you or your church could take, towards this?

FOR FURTHER STUDY (Optional)

There are many instances of the Holy Spirit empowering people in the early church. After each of the instances below, note how the Holy Spirit's power was seen:

- a. Acts 2: 32-41
- b. Acts 3: 1-11.....
- c. Acts 4: 32.....
- d. Acts 6:16.....
- e. Acts 7: 51-60.....
- f. Acts 9: 10-20.....
- g. Acts 9: 36-43.....

BELIEF 9: JESUS CHRIST RELATES TO THE FATHER AND THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE TRINITY

You'd probably rather not go into this in detail. It took the early church many centuries and many furious arguments to end up with the conviction that God is three 'persons' in one God, 'the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal'. For a wonderfully entertaining (and accurate) statement of Trinitarian belief, look up the Athanasian creed on Wikipedia. If you thought string theory was complex... However the essence of the Trinity is that the three 'persons' are a community of mutual love and encouragement, expressing the dynamic joy at the heart of God. Christians don't believe in three Gods, nor that any one person of the Trinity is superior to any other. Rather, the Trinity is a way of doing justice to the experience of Christians that they encounter God in different ways - in the creative love of the father, the saving friendship of the Son, and the sustaining energy of the Spirit. Perhaps the best way of understanding what Christians believe on this is to spend time before Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity. And then to pray.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the essence of the Trinity, in Pritchard's view?
2. How would you reply to someone who said that Christians worship 3 Gods?
3. The picture below is an icon of the Trinity, painted by Andrei Rublev. Look at Rublev's icon for a few minutes, then pray. Share with the group what thoughts or emotions have come to you from this experience.



BELIEF 10: JESUS WILL 'RETURN' AND GATHER ALL THINGS INTO HIMSELF

Here we are up against the limitations of language and the regrettable detail that we are not God. The New Testament poetry of 'a new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), of God gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:10), and the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God (Rev 21:2) - all these are beautiful but forlorn attempts to foresee the unforeseeable. Cosmologists tell us that the universe will probably come to an end in either the Big Crunch or the Big Freeze, depending on whether the universe collapses in on itself or expands until it cools to a state of frozen entropy. Either way, the alternative poetic language of religion sees all this as being within the purposes of God, as the new creation bursts through the old, and Christ is revealed as both Lord and logos - the divine principle of creation - and the Kingdom of God is complete. So God will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). Fortunately, this is beyond our comprehension, and quite a long time off...

QUESTIONS

1. Read Revelation 21:1-2, & Ephesians 1:10. What thoughts arise for you from reading these?
2. Jesus talked a lot about the Kingdom of God. What inklings do you get of what the fulfilled Kingdom will be like with Christ as its head (1 Cor 15:28) from Isaiah 11: 6-10 and Isaiah 65:17-20?
3. Pritchard speaks of scientists' ideas in the sentence beginning 'Cosmologists tell us.....' Do you think 2 Peter 3: 8-13 gives an indication of what might happen?
4. Pritchard ends with a positive statement: 'the poetic language of religion sees all this as being within the purposes of God.' How do Romans 8: 18-23; 8:26, and 8:38-39 add to this hopeful outlook? Are there other Bible verses that also help you have inner peace in the midst of the turmoil of current events and help you live in a state of trusting faith?

TAKING IT FURTHER (optional)

The ten key points here take us through the life, death and new life of Jesus.

- What are the 10 key things about Jesus that attract you to him?
- Or what are your favourite 10 stories about his life, and why?
- Or what 10 questions would you most like to ask him?

Reference

John Pritchard Ten: Why Christianity Makes Sense SP CK, London, 2014