



# Exploring Spirituality:

## Is It Possible To Know If There Is A God?

**iFOLLOW**

Meeting with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

## About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

### Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

### Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

### Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

### Credits

**Curriculum Development:** The iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition curriculum development was lead by the **Center for Creative Ministry**. **General Editor:** Monte Sahlin; **Assistant Editor:** Debbonnaire Kovacs; **Directional Advisory:** Brad Forbes, Carole Kilcher, Ceri Myers, Cesar Gonzalez, Clayton Kinney, Curtis Rittenour, Dave Osborne, Dave VanDenburgh, Gerry Chudleigh, Jane Thayer, Jerry Thomas, John Appel, Jose Rojas, Kim Johnson, Nicole Chao, Paul Richardson, Rich DuBose, Shasta Nelson, William Sutton; **Pastoral Advisory:** Claudio Consuegra, Collette Pekar, Dave Hutman, Don Driver, Fredrick Russell, Jerry Nelson, Jesse Wilson, Leslie Bumgardner, Loren Fenton, Rebecca Brillhart; **Unit Authors:** Alberto Valenzuela, Althea Pineda, Corienne Hay, Debbonnaire Kovacs, Ed Dickerson, Gianluca Bruno, Gil Bahnsen, Greg Nelson, Jack Calkins, James Whibberding, Karen Collum, Monte Sahlin, Norma Sahlin, Pam Splawinski, Patty Ntuhuka, Reinder Bruinsma, Ryan Bell; **Additional contribution** by Maria Ovando-Gibson; **Additional editing:** Dave Gemmell, Meredith Carter; **Graphic Design:** Mind Over Media; **Layout:** Paul D. Young; **Web Development:** Narrow Gate Media.

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# Is It Possible to Know if There is a God?

*This presentation is designed for people who have not yet come to a point in their spiritual journey where they have decided to become a follower of Jesus.*

## Learning Objectives

1. Be introduced to the philosophical category of epistemology and the change in thinking about epistemology that comes along with the postmodern shift
2. Understand the basics of foundationalism and rationalism as the primary way of knowing in modernity
3. Understand that historically and philosophically there are many other ways to arrive at knowledge besides pure reason
4. Learn ways to have conversations about God in the contemporary context

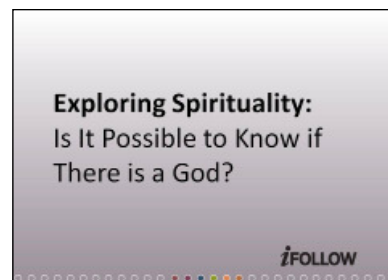
## Content Outline

1. How do you know what you know?
2. Pre-modern ways of knowing
3. Modern ways of knowing
4. Postmodern ways of knowing
5. Contemporary examples of new ways of knowing

## Background Material for the Presenter

**How do you know what you know?** When we have a conversation with someone about God or the Bible we usually ask questions about the content of our faith. People who are curious about faith typically ask content questions as well. Someone may say, “What do you believe?” And underneath the question of belief is usually the question of knowledge, “What do you know to be fact?” But more and more in our postmodern world, people are asking a different question.

People can believe all sorts of things that aren’t true. How do you know what is true? This is not a new search in the postmodern world. People have always asked the “big



questions” about truth and knowledge. These are the questions that are addressed by the field of study known as “epistemology.”

Epistemology asks, “What is knowledge?” In other words, “What is the nature of knowledge?” How does it work? How do people know what they know? How does one arrive at knowledge? On the surface these may seem like simple questions but they are not. Trying to explain theories of knowledge is like trying to define that word you use all the time and know what it means but you just can’t come up with a satisfactory definition.

The answers to these questions have not only changed over time but the answers actually mark historical epochs. A certain set of answers belong to a period we know as pre-modernism. Another set of answers define the era known as modernism. The relatively new questions that are being posed about knowledge and the answers now being given mark of some of the parameters of postmodernism.

To be sure, premodernity, modernity and postmodernity are about much more than epistemology. But epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, lies somewhere near the core.

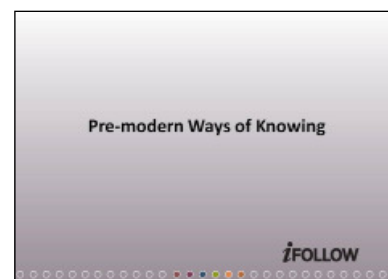
You might be thinking right about now, what does all this have to do with teaching a Bible study? It actually has everything to do with it. If you are speaking to someone about what you hold to be “true” and they are coming from a completely different understanding of knowledge, you may as well be speaking a foreign language.

The core question this lesson seeks to address is: “Is it possible there is a God and is it possible to know?” What this lesson will not be is a exhausted list of “proofs” of God or evidences of God. Many good books have been written on this subject that are worthy of your time. This lesson will talk about ways of knowing that open the possibility that the person you’re talking to could offer a “Yes” to the question, “Is it possible there is a God?”

In short, we will give you the tools to help someone say, “Yes, it is possible there is a God.” Notice, there is a big difference between saying it is *possible* there is a God, and *there is a God*. This language is carefully chosen and is part of the whole conversation about knowing. To the question, “Is it possible to know there is God?” the answer would have to be, “It depends. It depends on what you mean by *know*.”

## Premodern Ways of Knowing

In the premodern era, truth was derived from **authority**. This was the primary source of knowledge about the world. These authorities were usually a god or gods. This knowledge was then mediated to the average person through spiritual authorities (there’s that word again) in the form of religious officials, like priests, tribal leaders, etc. The com-



mon person did not have access to the divine except through these intermediaries.

**Tradition** was seen as unshakable and sacred. The world as a whole was seen as static and unchanging, and the social order was strictly enforced. People had very little means to make sense of the world around them, and so they explained the world they lived in largely through narrative and **myth**. In this way the unknown became known.

So we could say that in a premodern world, knowledge was controlled and dispensed by people in authority, who were almost always religious leaders of some kind, and the form of that knowledge was myth and tradition. In order to survive, societies must make sense out of their physical environment. This was how their world cohered.

Most people acknowledge that the premodern period lasted for about 1,000 years from 500 C.E. to 1500 C.E., roughly parallel with the Middle Ages.

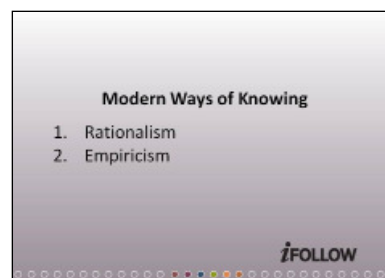
## Modern Ways of Knowing

The transition from the premodern world to the modern world resulted from a variety of technological and scientific advances, among them movable type and the printing press, the telescope and a variety of other scientific discoveries, not the least of which was the scientific method itself.

The beginning of the period known today as Modernity is difficult to nail down, but most people date it from the beginning of the Enlightenment in the mid-17th century. Rene Descartes laid the philosophical foundation for modernity with his focus on doubt as the pathway to knowledge. His famous dictum, *Cogito ergo sum* (in Latin), “I think, therefore I am,” or better, “I am thinking, therefore I exist,” was the bedrock of a new way of knowing. The path to knowledge, he argued was through doubt. You must doubt everything. The thing you cannot doubt (i.e. the fact that I am doubting, therefore thinking) is the beginning of knowledge.

**Rationalism:** Descartes built a philosophical system that distrusted the senses and only allowed for deductive reasoning. Pure reason is the only way to knowledge. From this he arrived at the idea that human beings were autonomous thinking subjects. Isaac Newton later provided the scientific framework for modernity. Newton postulated a world that operates like a machine, based on immutable laws.

Stanley Grenz says, in his book, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, “The postulates of the thinking self and the mechanistic universe opened the way for the explosion of knowledge under the banner of what Jurgen Habermas called the “Enlightenment Project.” It became the goal of the human intellectual quest to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world.”



Grenz goes on to argue that there are certain “epistemological assumptions” that form the basis of the Enlightenment project—that knowledge is certain, objective and good. He says that the quest of certainty places “absolute faith in human rational capabilities.” (Grenz, p. 4) The Enlightenment project goes on to say that knowledge is not only certain and rational but also objective. This means that modernists claim to be able to be dispassionate, uninvolved observers who do not affect the subject of their knowledge. This period also saw all knowledge as inherently good, giving rise to a contagious optimism and the human ability to understand and control nature for our betterment.

**Empiricism:** On the opposite end of things, but arising around the same time, is the theory of knowledge known as empiricism, which essentially argues that truth is known through the experience of a thing. This is not so much subjective experience as it is observational knowledge. That is, truth is known by being perceived through the five senses. If you can see it, touch it, taste it, it exists.

## Postmodern Ways of Knowing

The 20th century saw the demise of the Enlightenment project. In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is certain, objective or good. Behind the idea of the inherent good of all knowledge was a myth of inevitable progress. But after two World Wars and countless other human-made atrocities this myth began to wear thin. As Grenz says, “Members of the emerging generation are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world’s great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents” (Grenz, p. 7).

More importantly for the conversation we are having in this presentation, postmodernism no longer sees truth as purely rational. Rather truth is understood in a more holistic fashion. In other words, there are other valid paths to knowledge besides reason. We will shortly look at some of those paths.

Finally, contrary to the modernist view of knowledge as objective, postmodern thought sees the world as much more relational and interdependent. Again, Grenz: “Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is ‘out there,’ waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory.” (Grenz, p. 7)

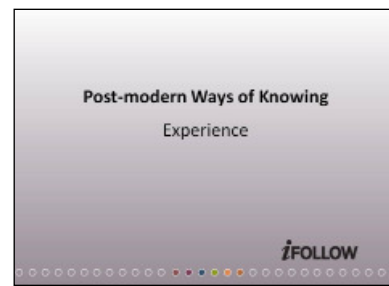
Postmodernism is perceived by some as a threat to Christianity because it tends to view all truth as relative to the knowing agent’s experience. It sees truth as socially constructed. This means that my understanding of truth is a construction of my own personal experience and identity. But there is a difference between saying that there is no absolute truth and saying that absolute truth cannot be known absolutely. Some postmodern theorists contend that there is no absolute truth, in knowledge or in essence. Others argue that

there may be absolutes in the universe, but human being's knowledge of these absolutely is always contingent and relative.

When it comes to Christian theology and practice, we encounter major problems with the idea that absolute truth does not exist. Christianity, Judaism, Islam and other religions all hold that there is a God and that God is absolute. However, there is no problem for Christian theology to say that absolute truth cannot be known absolutely. In recent years some in the Christian community have realized that this "epistemological humility" is precisely the thing we need and indeed required by the teachings of the Bible. Indeed, one key feature of a postmodern epistemology is precisely this humility. Our postmodern context today requires us to be tentative in our truth claims and rock solid in our practice of our faith.

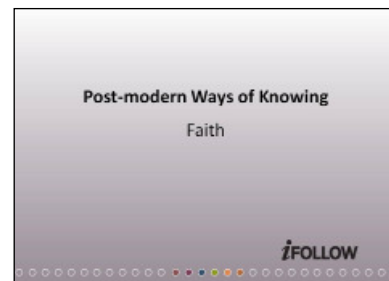
**Experience:** Postmodern philosophy says that the universe is profoundly interactive.

Contrary to Isaac Newton, the universe is not like a machine. New developments in physics like quantum physics and chaos theory teach us that the world we inhabit is far less predictable and more beautiful than we had previously imagined. Therefore, says postmodernism, we can know things experientially. Our experience of life and the world carries real knowledge.



**Faith:** We now know that faith is a part of all processes of knowing. Earlier in this lesson I quoted these words from Grenz, describing modernity—"absolute faith in human rational capabilities." Notice that it is, "absolute faith."

The Bible, of course, teaches that faith is a way of knowing the truth. "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." (Hebrews 11:1-3) "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'" (Romans 1:17) "We live by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7).



For too long, certainty has been overrated. Oddly it is Christians who are the most concerned by the demise of the "myth of certainty." Of all people, Christians should know that a scientific, Cartesian kind of certainty is not a part of the Christian narrative. The author of Hebrews says "faith is being certain of what we do not see." Faith is certainty. Paul says, "The just shall live by faith." Notice also that it is not faith as an abstract principles but something upon which one bases their life. We live by it. That's a different kind of certainty.

Thomas is a good example of an epistemology of faith. Like many who have been raised



on empiricism, Thomas is your classic skeptic. He would make Francis Bacon and John Locke proud. When the other disciples say that they've seen the risen Lord, Thomas protests, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it." (John 20:25)

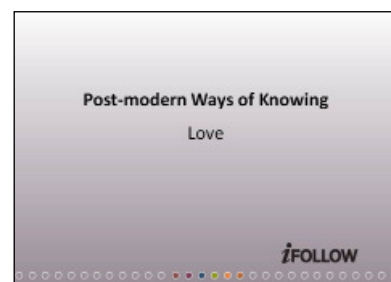
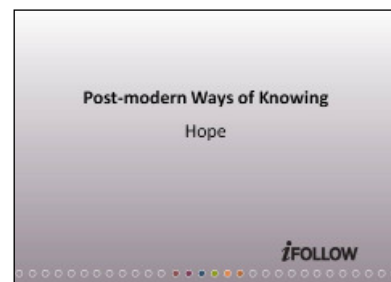
A week later, Thomas gets his wish. Jesus appears in the house with the disciple and this time Thomas doesn't miss out. Though Jesus grants him his empirical evidence—seeing and touching the wounds in Jesus' hands and side—Jesus then invites Thomas to a new epistemology of faith: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (v. 29)

This is not a cop-out or a blind leap of faith. It is rather the acknowledgement that with the death and resurrection of Jesus the world has fundamentally changed. As N.T. Wright has said, in Jesus ministry with the disciples post-resurrection, he is working a "refashioning of epistemology itself, the question of how we know things, to correspond to the new ontology, the question of what God's new world is like."

**Hope:** Hope also, is a way of knowing in a Christian worldview. This is a key theme in Paul's ministry. Notice this definitive passage: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." (Romans 8:22-25).

**Love:** In John 21 we read of the restoration of Peter after his horrible three-fold denial of Jesus. After several days of what must have been utter despair, Jesus encounters Peter on the Sea of Galilee with these words, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:17) Just as Thomas was invited to a new kind of faith that would meet the new reality of the resurrection, Peter is invited to a new kind of love that could believe the resurrection. About this episode N.T. Wright comments:

The resurrection is not, as it were, a highly peculiar event within the present world, though it is that as well; it is the defining, central, prototypical event of the new creation, the world which is being born with Jesus. If we are even to glimpse this new world, let alone enter it, we will need a different kind of knowing, a knowing which involves us in new ways, an epistemology which draws out from us not just the cool appraisal of detached quasi-scientific research, but the whole-person engagement and involvement for which





the best shorthand is 'love', in the full Johannine sense of agape. (Wright lecture, May 2007)

This is what we mean when we refer to an epistemology of love, "a knowing that involves us in new ways." What this means is that you cannot truly know the truth of the resurrection without fully committing yourself to it. The truth of it only opens to those who are captured by God's love expressed in the event itself. It is not surprising then, that the same John who records the remarkable post-resurrection story of Jesus and Peter on the beach later speaks of an epistemology of love in his later epistles.

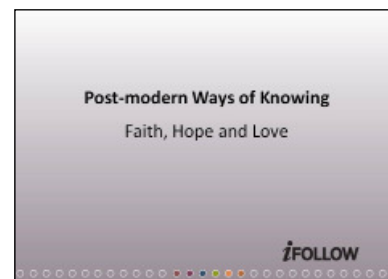
"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." (1 John 4:7-12)

It would be hard to make this any more explicit. "Everyone who loves ... knows God." John understands, love **is** knowing.

Peter Rollins put it this way in his ground breaking book, *How (Not) to Speak of God*. He argues in the opening pages that we need to "recover a more Hebraic and mystical notion of the orthodox Christian as one who believes in the right way; that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike manner. The reversal from 'right belief' to 'believing in the right way'.... Thus orthodox is no longer (mis)understood as the opposite of heresy but rather is understood as a term that signals a way of being in the world rather than a means of believing things about the world. It is an approach that emphasizes the priority of love: not as something which stands opposed to knowledge of God,, or even as simply more important than knowledge of God, but, more radically still, as knowledge of God. To love is to know God precisely because God is love." (pages 2-3).

**Faith, Hope and Love:** three new ways of knowing that are completely open and accessible to anyone who cares to risk everything on an entirely different narrative about the world. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13) N. T. Wright, once again:

That is why, although the historical arguments for Jesus' bodily resurrection are truly strong, we must never suppose that they will do more than bring people to the questions faced by Thomas and Peter, the questions of faith and love. We cannot use an supposedly 'objective' historical epistemology as the ultimate ground for the truth of Easter. To do so would be like someone who lit a candle to see whether the sun had risen. What the candles of historical scholarship will do is to show that the room has been disturbed, that it doesn't look like it did last night,



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Action Plan  
& Presenter  
Notes

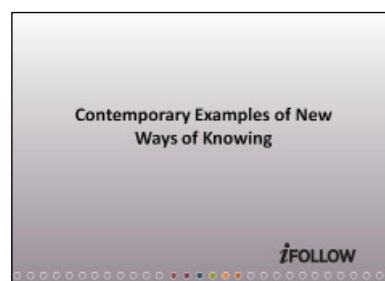
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and that would-be ‘normal’ explanations for this won’t do. Maybe, we think after the historical arguments have done their work, maybe morning has come and the world has woken up. But to find out whether this is so we must take the risk and open the curtains to the rising sun. When we do so, we won’t rely on the candles any more, not because we don’t believe in evidence and argument, not because we don’t believe in history or science, but because they will have been overtaken by the larger reality from which they borrow, to which they point, and in which they will find a new and larger home. All knowing is a gift from God, historical and scientific knowing no less than that of faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love. (Wright lecture, May 2007)

## Contemporary Examples of New Ways of Knowing

One effective way to help people consider the question of God in a postmodern world is to begin with narratives that are more accessible to them than the Bible. Throughout our culture there are signposts of God’s kingdom—evidences of God’s reality breaking into our present age—if only we have the eyes to see them.



One of the most profound ways that we are confronted with the big questions of philosophy is in popular culture.

Not all popular culture, of course. But in some highly thoughtful and well written music, film, theater and other art, we come face to face with these larger questions. Christians would be wise to build conversations in the public around questions raised by popular culture in a way that opens people’s imaginations to God’s kingdom. This is not a time for dogmatic proclamations about “what the movie meant” as if to say, “and the moral of the story is ...” but rather to invite people into the large questions of their existence and sense of participation in God’s creation.

Here are three examples that have been used effectively in the past: *Contact* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), and *The Matrix* (1999). In the handouts you will find three sample sermons that use the questions raised by these films to invite a group of unchurched people to consider the larger questions of belief and faith. I invite you to ask God for the courage to live life in contact with cultural realities that will inform your conversations and stretch and deepen your faith, hope, and love.

## Handouts in this Package

1. Sample sermon “Truman was a Genius”
2. Sample sermon “Truth, Stranger Than Fiction”
3. Sample sermon “Out of the Matrix”



## Additional Resources

- Grenz, Stanley J. (1996). *A Primer on Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- McLaren, Brian D. (1999). *Finding Faith: A Self-Discovery Guide for Your Spiritual Quest*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Meek, Esther Lightcap (2003). *Longing to Know: The Philosophy of Knowledge for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Rollins, Peter (2006). *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press.
- Smith, Huston (2001). *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco.

## Websites

- Wright, N.T., Lecture at The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, May 2007. Can be accessed at: [www.ntwrightpage.com/](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/).

## Film, DVD

- Berman, Bruce (Producer), & Larry and Andy Wachowski (Directors). (1999). *The Matrix* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.
- Guber, Peter and Obst, Linda (Producers) & Zemeckis, Robert (Director). (1997). *Contact* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers.
- Rudin, Scott (Producer) & Weir, Peter (Director). (1998). *The Truman Show* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures.

## Discussion Questions

1. Are you certain there is a God?
2. If you are certain there is a God, how do you know? When did you become certain? If you are not sure there is a God, what makes you unsure? Are you always unsure, or sometimes more or less sure?
3. If you are certain there is a God, are you certain God loves you? How do you know? Do you sometimes fear it isn't so?
4. Share a time when you discussed the existence or possibility of God with a friend who believed differently than you.
5. What is your reaction to those who disagree with you? Does it make you angry? Frightened? Sad? Are you OK with it? Why do you think you have these reactions?

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Discussion  
Questions

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## Group Activities

**Purpose:** To stretch limits and invite conversation and thinking about how, what, and why we know (or think we know) about God.

**Preparation:** Get a DVD or rent one or all of the movies mentioned in the presentation: *Contact*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Matrix*. You will need a large screen TV or video projector.

**Assignment:** Show one or more of the movies. This must be a private showing in order not to break copyright codes. A small group may choose one of the movies, based in part on who has already seen what, and personal tastes of participants. If you have a large enough group, divide them up and show two or all three of the movies in different locations, then get together and discuss all of them.

**Debrief:** Discuss ideas, reactions, what the movies seem to be saying about God or the existence of a God, and how participants felt watching.

**Time:** Each movie is approximately two hours long, and you will need at least another half hour for discussion. You may even interrupt the movie and discuss it in sections.

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Group  
Activities

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# Handout 1

## Truman Was a Genius

**Theme:** What Jesus Taught about Reality, Part 1

### Introduction

**Life is not as meaningful as I had hoped.** Life is not as fun as I had hoped either. But it is fun sometimes. Yet, even when it is fun, the luster wears off. It's like Christmas morning; so much anticipation and over so quickly. Like going to an amusement park as a kid; you can hardly sleep the night before. The next night you're close to depression. Like heartburn after a "great" meal. Like buyer's remorse after an emotional purchase.

Fun and excitement is like a drug. It takes you to the highest highs but then drops you back down to the emptiness that was there before you took the hit.

Life is also more full of activity than I had anticipated. It seems like I'm always going somewhere and doing something. I always seem to be in a hurry. But there's something about my 16 month old that teaches me a thing or two about life. She's never in a hurry. She's always living in the moment. She knows what she needs right now.

Have you ever been hungry for something specific but you couldn't put your finger on exactly what it was? I hate it when that happens! Is it a hotdog or a hamburger? Is it pizza? No, not exactly ... Ice cream? That's good but not exactly what I'm feeling. Isn't that frustrating?

I think life is like that. We are hungry for something that we're not sure what it is. Is it pizza or ice cream? Is it fun and excitement we're after? Is it busyness or feeling important because I have a full schedule? What is it I'm after? I get glimpses of it sometimes. When I eat what I'm truly hungry for I know that I've had it! I want to shout, "That's it!"

The way the sun shines through the trees when I'm really paying attention. My daughter's carefree smile over something so simple. A look between my wife and I across a crowded room. A good book or a movie that touches you deeply. Then something clicks, a bell goes off in your head. You walk out of the theater saying to yourself, "That's what I want ... that's what I'm hungry for." For a brief moment, your soul was aroused.

### What is Real?

In those moments we are prompted to ask, "What is really real?" In those moments we realize that life has not been as meaningful as we had hoped. Marriage didn't turn out like we thought it would ... like we were told it would. Our kids didn't grow up as we hoped they would and we feel to blame. Our jobs leave us empty most every day at 5 p.m. But

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in those brief moments when we taste the greater reality we are prompted to ask, even if only deep in our subconscious ...

**What is real?**

**What is lasting?**

**What is meaningful in life?**

## **The Story of Truman**

I'm sure that's how Truman felt. With every passing year, his heart grew more restless to know the truth. He was increasingly dissatisfied with the trite answers he had been given his entire life. He knew something was wrong with him ... with his world.

You see, Truman was adopted. But unlike most adopted children, Truman was adopted by a corporation. The corporation was a parent organization for a major television network. This network began televising **to the world** live footage of baby Truman from the first days of his life. As he grew, and his world grew, so did the set and the number of cameras necessary to chronicle every moment of Truman's life. In his childhood his father is killed in a tragic boating accident (or so Truman thought) and Truman is terrified of the water for the rest of his life.

Which is convenient for the producers of the show since the set is an island—enclosed inside a huge dome—the largest studio ever built—one of only two manmade structures visible from outer space. As Truman grows and begins attending school it is harder and harder to keep him from wondering what is outside of his little town of Seahaven Island. He wants to travel and see the world.

In High School he falls in love with a girl named Lauren who tries to explain to Truman that his life is a fiction—nothing but a TV program—but he doesn't understand. On top of that, every other actor in the program is instructed to counteract her influence and she is finally removed from the program. Truman is told that she moved to Fiji.

From his high school years until his young married life, Truman is plagued by the memory of Lauren. He longs to go to Fiji and find his first love, but every effort he makes to leave the island is sabotaged. Everyone is against him.

Gradually, Truman catches on. Through a series of bizarre events, Truman comes to the uncomfortable conclusion that he is not right.

For example ...

One day as he is getting in his car to leave for work, a light fixture falls from the clear blue sky.

Just outside his office, his dad (who is supposed to be dead) shows up dressed like a

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bum, but when Truman recognizes him a bunch of people grab his dad and push him onto a bus.

Lauren, as mentioned, tells Truman the truth; that his life is a television show.

One day on his way to work, the radio station he always listens to begins picking up the radio frequency used by the directors of the show.

But even those closest to him tell him he's losing his mind. What he really needs, they tell him, is to relax and be satisfied with the life he has. Watch this clip:

**[Show clip of Truman and best friend on the pier, 56:16 – 59:16.]**

Don't we all do that? We long for Fiji, don't we? Haven't you ever looked at someone and wished that just for a day you could be them? Somehow you thought that your life would be much better if you could walk in their shoes, even if just for a day.

Or haven't you wished that your address were different. That it would all make sense. The pieces of your life would fit together.

But intuitively I think we know it isn't true. Just like Truman knows that Fiji and even Lauren, is not what he really wants.

And just like Truman, the people around us often tell us that our hopes, dreams and longings are nothing more than the neurotic imaginations of a woman with too much time on her hands ... a man with too much pizza and beer in his belly.

We should, they tell us, just get on with life and be satisfied with what we have. After all, that movie that touched us, that book that moved us, is just a story. It's not real.

In his heart, Truman knows that **his** life is not real. Even though to all outward appearances Truman has everything (a wife, a house, a "desk job," all in the quiet, safe town of Seahaven ...

Truman knows what we all intuitively know, **reality is better than safety**. And Truman's life is **not** real. His heart longs for adventure, to experience the whole of reality. But most people don't want to live in that larger reality. They are satisfied with their diminished existence, living safely in their predictable world of absolutes.

But Truman is different. He is determined to know the truth. So he conquers his worst fear—the fear of the water—and sets sail for the truth, not knowing where he is going. For the first time in 30 years, the producers can't find Truman on any of their thousands of cameras. Finally, they locate him. In a sailboat, out on the ocean. Determined to stop him they create a terrible storm. Lightning flashes, the wind whips up the water. Truman is knocked overboard and the boat finally capsizes. Fearing that he will drown—on live TV, no less—they stop the storm and the sun comes out. This is where we pick up the story:

**[Show clip of Truman sailing off into the unknown, 1:28:33 – 1:36:05.]**

Truman was a genius! He figured it out! He figured out that his world was only remotely real, if at all, and he swam upstream to the truth. In the face of every person in his life (save Lauren) telling him he was psychotic, Truman pursued the truth.

The producer of the Truman Show, Christof, tells Truman that there is no more truth out there than in here. Christof also tells Truman that it is safer inside than outside. But Truman disagrees; “Was nothing real?” He determines that the risk of pain and suffering is worth the pursuit of truth. He also realizes that in the real world there is also **the possibility of love!**

### Truman and the Kingdom of Jesus

Believe it or not, this is the teaching of Jesus! Jesus came preaching one message, and it’s found in Matthew 4:17: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”

What does Jesus mean here by the kingdom? We will spend more time unpacking this in other presentations, but for the purpose of introduction, we can say that Jesus came teaching a very simple truth: Reality is not all that it appears on the surface. With the coming of God into the world, in the person of Jesus, came a whole new order of things. A whole new reality.

As we will see in future presentations, nothing is the same in God’s kingdom. Jesus came and taught us that our hopes and dreams, that we hardly dare utter, are real. He came and taught that our longings that we rarely even verbalize have their object in Him. Our life **outside** God’s kingdom is like Truman’s life **inside** his artificial world. To enter God’s kingdom is to live, for real, for the first time. This is what Jesus called the gospel, or the good news. This is life.

However, the enemy of God, who the Bible calls Satan, would have you believe that there is no more truth out there (in God’s kingdom) than in **a life without God**. In fact, Satan would rather kill you with a storm than allow you to find the truth because it would put him out of business. But he can’t keep you from the truth, any more than Christof could keep Truman from the truth.

The reason Truman turns out to be a genius is because, as a simple guy (you might even say, a simpleton)—a normal guy—Truman figures out that what appears to be reality on the surface is not necessarily so.

### The Kingdom is Bigger

One more thing about Truman and the kingdom of God that we can learn tonight: Believing the gospel means believing that what God offers is **bigger, not smaller** than what we experience without Him. It means believing that life in Jesus is adventurous, not boring.

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The life Jesus came to give is not a smaller version or a piece of a larger reality that we go into. Rather, the kingdom of God is the larger reality that we enter when we leave our reduced world, as Truman did.

Jesus put it like this: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

### Conclusion—Set Sail

Our job? Like Truman, set sail every day in pursuit of the truth. Sail straight into your worst fears because on the other side you will find freedom and life. The answers we all want—the meaningful life we all know is out there somewhere—are on the other side of a stormy sea. But we should know by now that **reality is better than safety**. The more we enter into life as it was meant to be, the more scars we may have to show for it, but the richer and more fulfilling our life will be. So, we set sail!

We begin here and now **a quest to understand**. This is our little sailing vessel for the next few weeks and together we will sail into the unknown. Trying to understand more clearly what Jesus was all about. I hope you’ll stay on board and ride out the storm. Because on the other side a full and rich life awaits you. On the other side you may find, as Truman did, **a whole new way to be human!**

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## Handout 2

### Truth, Stranger than Fiction

**Theme:** What Jesus Taught About Reality, Part 2

#### Introduction

Do you ever wonder? Is there a God or someone or something that controls the universe? Or, are we alone in the universe?

Based on your answer to the question above, who am I? What am I doing here? Is there a purpose for my existence? Is anything real? Better yet, is anything meaningful? Or, according to the existentialist philosophy, is everything meaningless?

#### Truman Review

Truman had those questions, remember? When all the chips were down and the last hand had been played, there were some basic questions on Truman's mind. "Who are you?" (speaking to Christof) His answer, ironically, "The creator ... of a TV show."

"Then, who am I?" In other words, "If that's true about who you are then what does that make me?" What we believe about the man who holds the strings says a lot about who we are.

Christoff's answer, "The star!" But Truman doesn't feel like a star. He feels deceived; "Was nothing real?" Christoff says, "You were real." But Truman knows better! For Truman, the safety and security of his predictable, controlled and contrived life was not as important as a real life, even with its dangers and snares.

These were Truman's ultimate questions: Who are you, God? Then, who am I? What is real? Are we alone?

#### Ultimate Questions

What are your ultimate questions?

Jesus, naturally, has a few things to say about reality and meaning, And about who He is and who you are. But before we get into that, let's look briefly at why this issue is so complicated for us.

You are sitting here and I suppose you expect I will give religious and spiritual answers to

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questions about ultimate meaning. Your suspicions are correct. But I also suspect that you want me to give you good reasons to believe.

In order to try to do that I want to turn first to humanities best attempts to answer these questions in the past several hundred years, basically since the Enlightenment (approx 1600). but especially since the mid-1800s.

## Contact

To do this I want to share another story with you, this time about a girl named Ellie. Ellie never knew her mother, so naturally, she and her father were inseparable.

Her dad taught her everything he knew—one of those things was to be a HAM Radio operator. She also learned amateur astronomy from him and determined by the age of nine that she would be an astronomer. She is fascinated by the idea of communicating across thousands of miles, even millions of miles.

One night, when little Ellie was only nine years old, her beloved father died suddenly of a heart attack. Naturally, this event rocked her world. Now both of her parents had been taken and she is left alone in this world. From that moment she determined to be an astronomer and she poured her life into science.

Her brief brush with religion came at her father's funeral when back at the house the priest had some choice words for Ellie that shaped her life forever. Take a look at this scene:

### [Show Contact, 30:22 to 32:19.]

It is quite easy to see that after that profound explanation from the priest, religion was not going to be young Ellie's life pursuit. But the big questions remain: Why did my mom die before I could get to know her? Why then, did my Dad die? Why am I left all alone? Am I really alone? If it's God's will that my parents die then clearly there is no hope in God.

With questions like this on her mind it is not surprising at all that Ellie focuses her scientific inquiry in a area known as SETI—Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence. Throughout her career she is mocked by her colleagues and beleaguered by lack of funding. Very few believe in her pursuit. To most her passion for SETI seems more like science fiction than real science.

Then there is a character named Palmer. He is a very eclectic, spiritual sort of guy. Palmer meets Ellie in South America where he is writing a book about the effects of technology on developing countries and Ellie is using one of the best radio telescopes in the world. While there is a romantic interest between them, Ellie can't get over the fact that Palmer was formerly a priest and believes in God and, worst of all, religion. For her, the only religion is science.

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Ellie finally hits pay dirt when she receives a radio transmission from outer space. After several altercations with various government officials and lots of decoding they discover that the initial transmission has encoded within it plans to construct a strange looking machine. Everyone agrees that it is apparently some sort of transportation device. When the first machine is destroyed by terrorists (interestingly they are fundamentalist religious types) a second machine is built under a cloak of secrecy and Ellie gets her chance to enter the pod and see where it takes her.

At the precise moment, the pod is released and it drops from its anchored position inside the spinning concentric rings and falls into the water below. To all the onlookers the experiment is a dismal failure. Nothing happened. However, inside the pod something different is taking place. Ellie is taken on a wild and bizarre ride, while, through a wormhole, 26 light years away to the Vega system.

The problem comes after several days when it becomes clear that what the dozens of scientists saw and recorded and measured was that the pod fell through the air and landed in the water. They observed nothing abnormal. Ellie's story is drastically different. There is absolutely no scientific proof to substantiate Ellie's story. Yet, she **knows** what happened to her.

### **Materialism and Naturalism as Science's Answers to Ultimate Questions**

Is there a scientific explanation for everything that is real and true? Does all reality submit itself to the scientific process? Can everything be explained empirically? Or is there an alternative?

With the introduction of the scientific worldview, it has provided all the answers to questions humanity has posed. If it can't be proven in a laboratory it isn't true.

Even the liberal arts began to be measured by this scientific rule until ultimately even the Bible was interpreted using scientific rules. But has it always been like this? Listen to what Huston Smith says in his best-selling book, *The World's Religions*.

"Traditionally, when people wanted answers to life's ultimate questions—Where are we? Why are we here? What does it all mean? What, if anything, are we supposed to do?—they looked to their revealed texts; or to their ancestral myths if they were oral peoples.... Since the rise of modern science, however, they have turned increasingly to it for answers. This is understandable, for controlled experiments enable science to prove its theses; and with those theses it has remade the world. It is a signal feature of our century's close that we recognize that this turn to science was mistaken. Not entirely mistaken, for science (and its spin-off, technology) have their place. What was mistaken was to expect science to answer ultimate questions, for its method doesn't connect with them. Recognizing this clears the way for looking seriously again at the enterprise that does connect with them: religion." (Smith, 10)

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Traditionally, there are three main problems humanity faces: (1) How to win food and shelter from the their natural environment, the problem **nature** poses. (2) How to get along with one another, the **social** problem. (3) How to relate themselves to the total scheme of things, the **religious** problem.

We do pretty well understanding the need for the first two questions. (1) Materialism is second nature to us. We must work to make a living and provide at least the basics for our family. The American tendency to live in order to work speaks to our obsession with conquering our natural environment.

(2) While we may not mediate upon it frequently, we intuitively know that we must get along with each other. At the very least we must get along with our families. And while the divorce rate does not speak well of our efforts in this regard, we at least know that we ought to do better. The mental health industry has built itself up around our need and lack of ability in relating to one another.

(3) But what about the third basic human problem—how to relate ourselves to the total scheme of things? Our ancestors in what we might call “pre-modern times,” that is, before the scientific worldview held the power it does today, had the best handle on this. But there is no respect in the scientific community for the pre-modern world. You would get the impression from some quarters that those people were ignorant Neanderthals. You see, the modern, scientific worldview has not just built upon the traditional worldview, it has rather attempted to obliterate it! The best efforts of science today have attempted to explain reality apart from a God.

In fact, I hold this to be one of the primary motives of modern science, especially as it relates to evolutionary theory. The glaring problem, however, is that the scientific worldview has not been able to improve upon the pre-modern answers to the third big question of how to relate ourselves to the total scheme of things.

What is the consequence of this? The modern world has lost track of its soul! Listen, again, to what Huston Smith says, this time in his recent book, *Why Religion Matters*:

“When, with the inauguration of the scientific worldview, human beings started considering themselves the bearers of the highest meaning in the world and the measure of everything, meaning began to ebb and the stature of humanity to diminish. **The world lost its human dimension**, and we began to lose control of it [the world].” (Smith, 1, emphasis supplied)

It is a testimony to our strength that we work hard to provide the basics of life for ourselves and our loved ones; the problem of **nature**. The psychological professions have helped us to realize our need to get along and have equipped us to do that; the **social** problem. But we are still trying to live without God; hiding, as it were, from him! **Therefore the “successful modern person” is wealthy, socially well adjusted, and hollow inside.**



## Jesus on What is Real

So, what does Jesus have to say about all of this? The testimony of Jesus and the other writers of the Bible is that there are ultimate questions that lie outside the realm of experimentation and science. And this isn't just Jesus and the Bible. All the world's major religions insist that science is not the end of the discussion. There is a reality that lies outside the realm of science. The answers to ultimate questions are found in religion.

**Kingdom**—The good news Jesus announced was that the kingdom of God had come. What that means is that in Jesus, a whole new understanding and relationship to reality was inaugurated. Jesus saw things differently.

**A God-Saturated World**—When the Bible speaks of relating ourselves to the whole of reality it speaks of it in terms **completely opposite to the scientific worldview**. In other words, the universe is a profoundly **spiritual** place, not just a material place. The Bible speaks of a world where there are angels and spirits (both good and evil). The Bible speaks of miracles of healing and transformation of the physical world.

What we find, in fact, is that in Jesus' understanding of the world, the physical world is actually a servant of the spiritual world. John 4—Jesus turns water to wine; **Mark 4:35-41—Jesus calms the storm**; John 6:16-21—Jesus walks on water; Mark 2:1-12—Jesus heals a lame man; Matthew 9:18-26—Jesus raises a dead girl to life. Even death does not limit Jesus.

In short, Jesus' world is a God-saturated world. To Jesus' way of understanding, the world is full of the presence of God. To Jesus, the spiritual world is MORE REAL than the physical/material world.

Writing years after Jesus had returned to heaven, Paul comments about the same truth of God's kingdom. Notice his words in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

For Jesus and for Paul, what is **most important**, what is **most real**, are the things that are **unseen**.

## Back to Contact

Well, we left Ellie in a quandary. The heat is really on. She is being accused of fabricating the entire story. She has no scientific proof of her experience and a tribunal is set up to conduct an official inquiry into this matter. They are putting the pressure on Ellie to say that it never happened! I want you to watch how this unfolds.

### [Show tribunal scene, 2:16:35 – 2:22:57]

She experienced something she can't prove but **knows** to be **true**. This presents a major problem for Ellie. She comes to the end of science's ability to answer questions. She finds herself as that little girl, still struggling to know whether she is alone in the universe. And

she finds the answer to be **no, she is not alone!**

**Truth, she finds out, really is stranger than fiction.** What we're used to viewing as truth is scientific truth. Jesus says that view of truth is too small. All truth won't fit in that box. Scientific truth, or empirical truth, is one part of the larger totality of truth. To try to make all truth fit empirical standards is like trying to fit your house in your living room. It just won't fit. God's world is much bigger than what meets the eye. When we try to escape that reality, our lives are necessarily diminished and, as Huston Smith said, **the world loses its human dimension.**

Jesus came teaching **a new way to be human.** What may sound like science fiction to some, others know to be real. What sounds like science fiction to the tribunal, Ellie knows (and Palmer knows) is real!

So, when you come to the edge of your world, as Truman did ... When you come to the end of your answers, as Ellie did ... You may find that you are living in too small a world. Jesus invites us into a bigger world.

**But you have to believe it!** You can't expect all truth to submit itself to materialistic measurements. What we find in Jesus is that **faith** is a legitimate way of knowing. Faith is not the negative word that the man in the tribunal made it out to be. Faith is a real way to know truth. Some truth is can be known scientifically. Some truth must be known spiritually ... by faith.

One closing quote from Huston Smith's book, *Why Religion Matters*: "What is obvious to me? First, that the finitude of mundane existence cannot satisfy the human heart completely. Built into the human makeup is a longing for a "more" that the world of everyday experience cannot requite. The outreach strongly suggests the existence of the **something** that life reaches for in the way that the wings of birds point to the reality of air. Sunflowers bend in the direction of light because light exists, and people seek food because food exists. Individuals may starve, but bodies would not experience hunger if food did not exist to assuage it."

## Conclusion

Perhaps the most difficult step you will ever take in your spiritual journey is to believe that this "something" is real! In fact, perhaps more real than what you can see and touch and taste.

**So I dare you to believe!** Believe that the Kingdom Jesus taught about is real! Believe that the gospel—the good news about God's reign over the entire world—is true! Believe that there is reality beyond your senses! Believe that miracles still happen! **I dare you to believe!**

## Handout 3

### Out of the Matrix

**Theme:** What Jesus Taught about Reality, Part 3

#### Introduction

So, what's next? We've seen that there is another reality that we sometimes don't see. We've sensed the longing in our hearts to experience that reality. We're reaching for it as best we can. But how can we experience it? How can we get a taste of the hope, love, and joy we long for? How can our dreams be fulfilled?

Another look at Matthew will help us. Matthew 4:17: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

What's next? We're intrigued about this kingdom Jesus is talking about. What do we do about it? And Jesus' answer to them was, "Follow Me!"

#### Old Testament Expectation of Messiah

However, this teaching about God's kingdom reign on earth did not come to these fishermen in a vacuum. It wasn't as much of a surprise to them as it seems to us today. There were predictions all through the centuries that such a man would come and He would inaugurate a new world, God's reign on earth. The first two thirds of the Bible, which we call the Old Testament, (the Jewish scriptures) is made up of this forward-looking vision.

Certain parts of the Old Testament that we call the Prophets, especially predicted the day when God's anointed one, the Messiah, would come and make everything right; establish a totally just and peaceful regime. Let's look at just a couple of these prophecies. We can even start in the New Testament and see that this is true. If you look at Matthew chapter three you can see that Jesus' cousin, John, who we call John the Baptist, preached the same message.

**Look at Matthew 3:1-3:** So, John the Baptist said, "The kingdom of heaven is near." But he didn't just make that up. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah. Look, then, at Isaiah 40:3-5.

**Isaiah 9:7**—The prediction was that David's kingdom and the reach of his throne would increase forever. Problem is, when the OT ends, none of this has happened. If you draw the line on history right there, it looks as if the prophecy has failed. In fact, when Jesus comes on the scene most all of Israel had lost any hope that a liberator would come.

So, when Jesus came along and said, “The kingdom of heaven is near,” He was speaking as one in a long line of prophets who have said a similar thing. But when Jesus said it, He was also saying something revolutionary. It was into an atmosphere of gloom and despair that Jesus spoke hope. And He had more than just the message of the kingdom. When He said the kingdom of heaven is near, He also meant, the King is near.

When these fishermen met Jesus and He challenged them to follow Him into the unknown adventure of the kingdom, they didn’t hesitate. Why? Because they saw that what Jesus was offering was what they had been hungering for. He could offer them some answers to their questions. But more than answers, He could offer them life—real life.

### The Matrix

A similar thing happened to Neo. Neo was just a normal guy with a normal life and normal job. He worked for a respectable software company earning a respectable income. But in his spare time he pursued the truth. One question plagued his mind, “What is the Matrix?”

How Neo first learned about the Matrix is uncertain, but he is obsessed with discovering what it is. He has an intuitive sense about it, but the details are so unclear.

One day a person bearing a message from the mysterious Morpheus contacts him. He is in danger, they tell him. Then he receives a phone call from Morpheus; he wants to meet with him to try to explain what the Matrix is.

But before I show you that segment, let me first try to show you what the Matrix is, by showing you a clip a little later in the film. In this clip, Morpheus explains a little of the history to Neo.

#### [Show clip of white room up through, “It was we who scorched the sky.” 41:43 – 44:11]

So, you see, all of life as humanity is experiencing it is a fiction. It’s all virtual reality. Every human being alive, except the very few that have been able to escape the Matrix, are living in a computer generated dream world. Nothing they see or do is real.

Artificial Intelligence rules the world—Machines! The Matrix is what these machines use to keep all humans under control ... thinking that their life is normal, as it has always been.

A few people have been able to escape the Matrix—get unplugged from it. Their mission is to free more and more people from the Matrix and eventually destroy the machines and take the planet back. Real life is their pursuit. The problem is, the machines are so much stronger and more powerful than the humans that all hope of overcoming them seems futile.

But there is an oracle or prophet, who tells Morpheus, the leader of this small group of resistance fighters, to expect **The One**, who will destroy the machines and the Matrix, and

set all humans free to remake their world anew. This person is the sole pursuit of Morpheus and his rag tag band.

**Neo is that one!** Many of Morpheus' followers struggle with their own doubts about Neo while others are staunch believers. There is a Judas character in the film who follows Morpheus but ends up betraying the group into the hands of the machine. He would rather live in the Matrix than in the real world. His mantra is, "Ignorance is bliss!" Even Neo doesn't believe he can possibly be The One.

Are the analogies beginning to jump out at anyone? Can you see that Morpheus and his followers are pursuing the Messiah and at the same time trying to save people from the evil power of the machines? The Matrix is, according to Morpheus, "a world that is pulled over our eyes to blind us from the truth. What looks very real to all of us is only a virtual reality.

Now, let me show this clip, earlier in the film, before Neo decides to follow Morpheus out of the Matrix. Here, Morpheus shares the most startling insights about the nature of the Matrix and the nature of reality. These insights are vitally important for us as we pursue a new way to be human.

**[Show clip of Morpheus trying to explain the Matrix to Neo offering him the blue pill or the red pill. 28:02 – 32:11] ... Ends with words, "Follow me."**

Do you see how Morpheus approaches this with Neo? He tells him he knows something. He can feel it. He knows something is wrong with the world but he doesn't know what. So do you! So do I! So did Truman! We know something is wrong!

And so Morpheus asks, "Do you want me to tell you what it is? And how does Morpheus describe the Matrix? It's all around us. It's everywhere. And in the best line in the entire movie, Morpheus says the Matrix is "**a world that is pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.**" What truth? **(Here's comes the punch line!)** That you are a slave, Neo! You were born in bondage. A prison for your mind!

The Bible says the exact same thing about our situation. (Psalm 51:5, John 8:31-36) Jesus says that we are born slaves, in bondage to sin. We are born in that condition. **Just like Neo was born in bondage to the Matrix.** And, just like the machines would like to keep humanity ignorant of the slavery by making everyone think their life is normal. So Satan, the archenemy of God, would like each of us to think that normal life is life without God. But then Jesus comes along and says, "Come out of the Matrix into the real world!" Come out of your prison and into freedom.

Well, is that good enough? Can Neo be satisfied with that explanation and now go on with his life? **Can Neo fit this new information into his life?** The answer is a profound, "No!" In fact, Morpheus says to Neo, "You can't be told what the Matrix is. You have to see it for yourself."

So it is when Jesus come to the disciples and tells them that the kingdom of God has

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come near. It is not enough for them to hear the information and nod their heads in agreement. Jesus says to them, “Follow me!” They **must** do something with this new information. Information alone is not enough. Knowing **about** the Matrix is not going to set Neo free.

So, Morpheus offers Neo two options: (1) **Blue pill**—story ends, he goes back to his so-called “normal life” and never remembers any of this. (2) **Red pill**—he follows Morpheus out of the Matrix and into reality. Courageously, but without much hesitation, Neo takes the red pill.

### Time to Decide

The truth about God and his mission through Jesus comes to us much as the truth about the Matrix came to Neo. It is a shock and a surprise. We can’t really believe it; it seems too strange to believe (angels and spirits and miracles).

But once you know the truth you can’t go back. You begin to realize that living in the Matrix is no way to be human. Morpheus offers Neo a **new way to be human**. As it turns out, life outside the Matrix is the **only** way to be truly human.

But Neo has to decide. The decision is his. Is he going to take the red pill or the blue pill? It’s crucial to notice that Neo cannot fit this new information into his current life. Freedom from the Matrix is not something he can do on the weekends or in his spare time. It’s a whole new way to be human.

So it is with the kingdom of God. It’s not a pastime. It’s not a hobby; something to do on the weekends. The kingdom of God is a life—a new way to be human—the **only** way to truly be human.

The mistake that is often made when Christianity is taught is to teach it as something that will easily fit in your life and actually make your current life better. This is not what Jesus says. The metaphor of the Matrix clearly shows this. Morpheus says at the end of that last clip, “Remember, all I’m offering is the truth!” It’s not going to be easy. And in the case of the Matrix, the truth turns out to be harder, in many ways, than the lie.

The real world turns out to be uglier. But it’s the truth, and that’s what matters. **Life in God’s kingdom doesn’t promise to be easy, just real!**

### Conclusion

So, the choice is yours! Do you want to take the blue pill or the red pill? Do you want to go back to your life as it was before you learned these things? Or do you want to pursue the truth, wherever that may take you?

I began this presentation by telling you that after Jesus announced the nearness of the kingdom of heaven, he asked people to **follow Him**. That's the next step. That's the same thing Morpheus says to Neo after he swallows the red pill. **Follow me!**

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