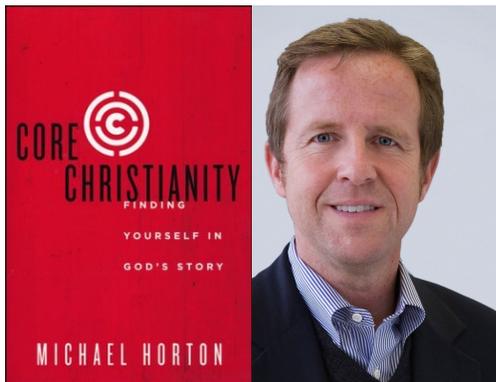


BLOG / CORE CHRISTIANITY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL HORTON

Core Christianity: An Interview with Michael Horton

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For many people, words like Christian doctrine and theology cause their eyes to glaze over, or they find them difficult to understand and struggle to see how they're relevant to daily life. But theology is far from boring; it's the study of God and should lead to awe and wonder as we better understand who God is and what he's done for us.

Bible Gateway interviewed Michael Horton (@MichaelHorton_) about his book, *Core Christianity: Finding Yourself in God's Story* (Zondervan, 2016)

What's your reaction to **Scot McKnight's** comparison of your book to John Stott's *Basic Christianity*?

Michael Horton: Scot is a very gracious brother! While my book isn't in the same class, it is in the same genre with the same audience that John Stott had in mind. The word 'Christianity' is broadly defined by people. What's your definition of its essence? And does that essence transcend East and West understandings?
Michael Horton: Absolutely. I take "Christianity" to be defined in the broadest sense by the **Nicene Creed**. I don't wade into the Filioque controversy (i.e., the West's addition "...and from the Son" for the Spirit's procession from the Father). This book is really basic and all along I kept picturing friends from other Christian traditions, asking myself, "Would they say this is 'core Christianity'?" I hope it accomplished that goal.

Explain how you've brought the idea of 'story' into the discussion of Christian doctrine.

Michael Horton: Sometimes people say doctrine is boring because it's isolated from the unfolding biblical drama that gives rise to it and also isolated from doxology (praise) and discipleship. Actually, it's the doctrine that shows the story's relevance for us: It's not only that Jesus lived and died and rose again. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised for our justification" (**Romans 4:25**). In Scripture, we constantly see this integral connection between what happened, why it happened, and why it matters.

What's the importance of the stories we tell about our lives?

Michael Horton: Everyone is living out of a story, even if they might not be able to articulate it. Many of us are writing our own story, inventing our own character, using other people—and God—as supporting actors in our life movie. But God has given us the greatest story ever told and the Holy Spirit is the casting director, sweeping us into the drama that centers on being "in Christ" rather than "in Adam."

In today's culture of relativism, how is it possible to persuade a person that there are absolutes (or doctrines, to use another word)?

Michael Horton: I start with the resurrection of Christ. The Bible makes a lot of truth-claims, but if this one isn't true, none of the rest matters and we can all go back to writing our autobiography about "the nowhere man, living in his nowhere land, making all his nowhere plans for nobody." (That's a very loose paraphrase of Paul's alternative to the resurrection in **1 Corinthians 15**.) So **Core Christianity** begins there. There's nothing more "core" than that, right?

What are the four Ds you write about and how do they influence a person's worldview?

Michael Horton: Drama: the grand narrative from **Genesis** to **Revelation** centering on the Triune God and his redemption of a people in Jesus Christ.

Doctrine: the great truths arising from the drama. For example, a narrative text tells us how God delivered his people in the **exodus** and then from these throbbing verbs and adverbs it gives us stable nouns: God is loving, compassionate, sovereign, omniscient, faithful, just, holy, and so forth.

Doxology: if the doctrine tells us how God's mighty acts affect us, the goal is to provoke us to respond in repentance and faith, with the fruit of faith: love and thanksgiving. It's at this stage that we step into the story and become a character in God's unfolding drama together with the great cloud of witnesses in all times and places.

Discipleship: "In view of God's mercies, present your body as a living sacrifice," Paul says in **Romans 12**, after teaching the drama and the doctrine, interjected with exclamations of praise. In **Romans 1**, Paul says that after the fall humanity was "no longer thankful." The gospel of free grace in Christ restores our gratitude, which fuels our lives. Faith bears the fruit of love and good works. As we learn our role, we join a local community theater—church—where there are

“live” performances of this amazing story. And then we fan out into the world as part of the new creation, loving and serving others in our witness and callings. You write that God still speaks to us today. How so?

Michael Horton: We have the enormous privilege to speak to our Father through prayer, because of the **mediation of Christ** and the work of the Spirit in our hearts. God speaks to us through Scripture, as it's read but especially as it's proclaimed in the assembly where the Triune God gathers a people for his name. Through the lips of another sinner he's sent to us, the Father speaks, hears, absolves, directs, comforts, corrects, and unites us to his Son and to each other by his Spirit. As Paul says in **Romans 10**, we don't have to try to climb up to heaven to pull Christ down or descend into the abyss as if to make him alive in our midst, but he is as near as the word of the gospel that's preached—and prayed, read, sung, and confessed.

Defend the Faith - "Can the Bible Be Trusted?"

How do you respond to people who claim the Bible is a book of contradictions and can't be trusted?

Michael Horton: I find it helpful to ask people, “What do you mean? Could you be specific?” Usually, they've heard these claims but can't recall any examples. It's pretty vague.

But you meet some who've wrestled with particular examples. In those cases I try to get the person to take a step back and consider the case for Christ, centering on his resurrection. From there, you have the testimony of the risen Christ to the Old Testament (he identifies Scripture as God's word) and to the New Testament (he commissions his apostles and tells them that **the Spirit will cause them to remember** and to accurately communicate all that has transpired and what it means).

Next, it helps to point out that apparent discrepancies, for example, in the Gospels, are exactly what you have in legitimate testimony to historical events. Each sees the scene from a particular vantage point and at different times during the events in question. These differences in testimony aren't contradictions, but the sign that you're actually dealing with eye-witnesses of real events. You also have to ask: What's the level of worry here? Are we talking about contradictions over whether Jesus rose from the dead or other matters of salvation?

Finally, we should point out that accuracy doesn't equal exactitude in reporting. For example, Jesus wasn't making a botanical point about **the mustard seed** being the smallest; he was drawing on the familiar experience of his hearers for an analogy of how the kingdom spreads into a great worldwide tree from a tiny seed.

Only now, after putting the remaining questions in their place, can we tackle specific alleged contradictions one-by-one. They turn out to be a pretty small set. Scientists are always discovering anomalies that seem to contradict their

theories, but they don't easily give up a theory that has such enormous explanatory power over so much data. Their first hunch is that they don't have all the answers and just because they haven't figured it out doesn't mean the theory is wrong. Don't give up the gospel because you don't know how to reconcile some census numbers or can't make sense of the sun standing still in **Joshua**.

Recovering Scripture: How can we best understand the Bible today?

What does a person look like who believes in the essence of Christianity?

Michael Horton: A new creature in Christ who nevertheless needs to be forgiven every day. Yes, there are hypocrites. In fact, all Christians are hypocrites to some degree. We don't always live in the light of the character we've been given in God's story. But hypocrisy assumes some standard: "the glory of God" from which **we fall short** each day. Even to see us on our knees in **confession of sin** and grateful praise is astonishing to a culture that has pushed God out of its daily consciousness.

The Spirit creates faith through the gospel and that faith bears **the fruit** of love, which gives birth to good works. The gospel not only changes our status before God; it changes our loves, longings, and lives before our neighbors. So we need to know what we believe and why believe it—to be transformed by **the renewing of our mind** by the Word. We have to be intentional about it. There are no accidental Christians.

Why should people read **Core Christianity**?

Michael Horton: I hope people read it to investigate the basic claims of Christianity: how it all fits together and why it matters. I've already heard stories of people coming to know Christ who had little previous contact with the gospel and of others who were raised in the church but didn't know much about the basics or why it's true.

What are your thoughts about Bible Gateway and the Bible Gateway App?

Michael Horton: It's a go-to resource, no doubt about it. I'm a big fan and hope that both continue to expand the reach of God's Word around the world.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

Michael Horton: Thanks for the opportunity to let folks know about **Core Christianity** and introducing it to a wider circle.

Bio: Michael Horton is the author of over 20 books—such as **Ordinary: Sustainable Faith in a Radical, Restless World**, **Putting Amazing Back into Grace**, and **The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way**—and host of **White Horse Inn**, a nationally syndicated radio program. He is professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California and the editor-in-chief of **Modern Reformation** magazine. A popular blogger and sought-after lecturer, he resides in Escondido, California with his wife and children.

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