

FOUR MODELS OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

Don't get hung up on these four arbitrary labels. No one can authoritatively or even objectively categorize all beliefs. I offer these positions and principles merely to facilitate discussion.

Individuals who generally refer to themselves and their beliefs by any of these labels may certainly affirm points in other columns. Still, I'd expect most differences to move only one column in either direction. For example, I'm sure some "conservatives" would affirm certain positions I've placed under "fundamentalist" and maybe even some under "liberal," but I doubt any self-described conservative would voice support for any belief in the "progressive" column.

	FUNDAMENTALIST	CONSERVATIVE	LIBERAL	PROGRESSIVE
<i>Bible and Inspiration</i>	<p>"God breathed" every word in the original oral traditions and all written transmission across languages, cultures, and centuries. The Bible consists of <i>literal and infallible truth</i> in all respects (including history, biology, anthropology, astronomy, geography, chemistry, physics, etc.). The Bible contains no contradictions; any perceived discrepancies reflect our human misunderstanding, or they involve only irrelevant details. Writers recorded all teachings accurately. They remain absolutely binding forever in all places, all cultures.</p>	<p>"God breathed" the ideas and themes into chosen writers, establishing the definitive guidelines for all theological history and belief. Scriptures may be literally true. Each writer's personality and interests shaped his writing. Transmission across languages, cultures, and centuries yield a few apparent discrepancies, most of which reflect our human misunderstanding, or they involve only irrelevant details. Writers recorded all teachings accurately. The core truths remain universally authoritative.</p>	<p>Devout people felt "God breathing" the basic ideas. Writers recognized and recorded some larger "divine" truths and core values, most of which still rightly elicit respect in most cultures. Limitations: transmission across languages, cultures, and centuries erodes original meanings and can leave some principles unrecoverable for modern readers. And ancient writers' cultural and personal influences—and prejudices—yield numerous discrepancies and errors of history, science, etc.</p>	<p>The Bible includes tales of a few actual historic figures, plus some composite or purely literary characters. A few historic events have grown into legends; some myths and fables embellish the narratives. Many books have undergone extensive editing and revision. Many simple flaws could be evident to bright third-graders. Authors' biases and social morés plague the texts with blatant contradictions and errors. Scientific errors abound. Transmission across languages, cultures, and centuries muddies original meanings. Regardless, the major themes continue to inspire and provoke potentially useful spiritual insight.</p>

<p><i>Nature of God</i></p>	<p>Male anthropomorphic deity: personal, holy and perfect, omniscient, omnipresent, just. He shows himself loving and faithful to all who do accept and obey Jesus, but equally vengeful and damning toward those who do not.</p>	<p>Male anthropomorphic deity: personal, holy, perfect, omniscient, omnipresent, just, loving and faithful. These positive attributes attract seekers; those who reject God incur his wrath.</p>	<p>Usually anthropomorphic deity: personal, holy, perfect, omniscient, omnipresent; loving and faithful. Some also honor or at least recognize the equally valid "Mother" essence of God. Emphasize the positive and higher attributes; the bloody and vengeful elements distract from God's true nature.</p>	<p>"God" represents ultimate reality as a transcendent, guiding force of the cosmos. Beyond human concepts of gender, God <i>may</i> exist as a conscious, personal entity, but we have no reason to assume this. Any truly holy God in whatever form would never authorize violence or war (e.g., invading Canaan, medieval Crusades), nor subject creation to vengeful torture (e.g., Hell).</p>
<p><i>Jesus</i></p>	<p>Jesus' followers believe in his virgin birth, holy and miraculous life, sacrificial death, bodily resurrection, and eventual return. Salvation requires consciously accepting Jesus as Lord and following him personally. Failing to accept him—even if one has never heard of him—invokes God's damnation, even if only by default.</p>	<p>Jesus' followers believe in his virgin birth, holy and miraculous life, sacrificial death, bodily resurrection, and eventual return. Salvation requires consciously accepting Jesus as Lord and following him personally. God knows the hearts of all who <i>would</i> accept Jesus upon hearing of him, and he <i>may</i> accept them if he chooses.</p>	<p>Jesus, a devout and charismatic Jew, epitomized most ideals of Judaism (though not all orthodox doctrines and practices). Though he may not have said and done everything the New Testament attributes to him, the story of his life and teachings duly inspires many to revere him and follow his example. God knows the hearts of all who seek him and their faith may or may not entail knowledge of Jesus.</p>	<p>Jesus, a devout and charismatic Jew, passionately sought a deeper spirituality. Some of his followers amplified and exaggerated early tales of Jesus to include many things that Jesus probably never said nor did; they promoted an agenda Jesus would have thrown out of the temple. Regardless, the good in the story of Jesus' life and teachings can inspire respect and reverence for him as a path to enlightenment.</p>
<p><i>Spirit</i></p>	<p>The Spirit of God indwells each believer. Some believe in the Spirit as an active, uniquely personal spirit; some hold that it may function only "through the written word" (viz., scripture).</p>	<p>The Spirit, a personal yet divine entity, indwells each believer. It encourages, supports, refreshes, comforts, and may somehow guide or enlighten conscious decision-making. Any such influence will have its basis in, and always act consistently with, the scriptures.</p>	<p>The Spirit, the sublime "breath of God," vitalizes the believer. It encourages, supports, refreshes, comforts, promotes genuine inner change, creates new realms of holiness and moves us to act. It may influence conscious decision-making with unique insights as believers aim to apply ancient scriptures to modern circumstances.</p>	<p>Spirit symbolizes the divine influence vitalized in each individual. It marshalls the human capacity for love and peace, manifesting divine will through meaningful and decisive action in the world.</p>

Fundamentalist / Conservative / Liberal / Progressive (chart) as of September 14, 2004

<i>Doctrine</i>	All New Testament doctrinal stances, scriptural examples, rituals, and traditions rooted in those truths apply to all cultures, all places, always.	Essential teachings are plain and indisputable. Customs and traditions rooted in eternal, spiritual truths apply forever, in all cultures, while less binding elements may shift.	We should sustain enough core traditions and teachings to meet human needs for stability, but stay flexible enough to let them reflect dominant cultural and situational concerns.	We may respect the core spiritual essence of valid scriptural examples and teachings. We should also regularly revisit them to reflect ever-growing knowledge and cultural changes.
<i>Morality</i>	All Biblical morals stand as absolutes, binding in all cultures, all places, always. Church communities should hold believers firmly to strict standards, disfellowship offenders who reject loving correction, and teach God's judgment of unbelievers.	Biblical morality undergirds any good society. "Hate the sin but love the sinner"; judge good and evil firmly; stand for what's right; don't condone evil. No compromise, no apology.	Promote moral good such as honesty, mercy, tolerance, benevolence, self-discipline. Respect individual circumstances and support others in their moral struggles; emphasize ideals for personal moral growth.	Uphold the Bible's many noble points; reject its xenophobia, superstition, dogmatism, male chauvinism, homophobia, malicious vengeance, and warmongering nationalism. Never use scripture as a weapon to condemn others whom you despise or whose values differ.
<i>Creation</i>	Literally fashioned by God in six 24-hour days as recorded plainly in Genesis 1. All apparent knowledge of geology, biology, astronomy, anthropology, physics, paleontology, and all other science remains subordinate to the scriptures.	Fashioned by God, perhaps in 24-hour days, maybe in longer stages. Valid science always harmonizes with Genesis and other biblical accounts. Scientific discoveries or theories that do not support Biblical records are in some way false, incomplete, or misrepresented.	God created the cosmos and all life as an expression of infinite, eternal divine consciousness, presumably over eons. It operates according to purely natural processes and principles. Legitimate scientific discoveries supersede the Biblical authors' culture-locked views.	The cosmos and life emerged billions of years ago through time and chance. It evolves and operates according to natural processes and basic principles of biology, chemistry, physics, meteorology, geology, etc. Biblical authors' naïve prescientific assertions reflect their superstitions and many other cultural limitations.
<i>Prayer</i>	Literal talking to God through Jesus, the only mediator. God listens only to believers and answers all their prayers. Although the Bible includes rare examples of God hearing unbelievers, this probably happens only rarely today, if at all.	Literal talking to God through Jesus, the only mediator. God hears believers and answers their prayers. God may hear unbelievers if it suits his will.	Speaking with God and staying open to his guidance in return. God draws near to all who seek him as they know best and as their circumstances allow. God answers prayer, perhaps via subtleties, perhaps in unexpected times and means.	Individual or corporate prayerful introspection evokes the divine nature and focuses human energies toward manifesting that essence in meaningful action. It may also draw our attention to synchronicities and deeper levels of experience.

<p><i>Miracles</i></p>	<p>Literal suspensions of the laws of nature occurred exactly as the Bible records them. The Bible contains no contradictions between accounts. Disputes persist over whether such miracles continued after the early church leaders died.</p>	<p>Literal suspensions of the laws of nature, most of which happened just as the Bible says. Different accounts report superficial contradictions, but these minor details are explainable or irrelevant. Disputes persist over whether such miracles continued after the early church leaders died.</p>	<p>Maybe they happened, maybe they didn't—their <i>lessons</i> matter. A little dose of careful thinking and simple comparison of contradictory accounts indicate some obvious problems with the whole concept. These things may happen today, but probably not.</p>	<p>Ancient cultures craved explanations for rainbows, disease, weather, natural disasters, failed crops, and sparkly things in the sky. Miracle tales serve as symbols, metaphors, literary devices that assuage primitive human needs.</p>
<p><i>Salvation</i></p>	<p>Salvation, though a present reality, becomes fully manifest only after physical death. The individual soul has full consciousness of its eternal literal home: glorious reward in Heaven, or fiery punishment in Hell.</p>	<p>Believers manifest their salvation in right living. Some emphasize compassion and benevolence; some stress firm adherence to doctrinal and moral absolutes. After death each of us will spend eternity in Heaven or Hell.</p>	<p>Salvation lies more in living morally and compassionately here and now. If Heaven and Hell exist, everyone probably ultimately reaches Heaven, whatever form it takes, literal or otherwise. Or perhaps God will simply annihilate unbelievers upon their death, and thus they will not suffer any conscious punishment.</p>	<p>“Salvation” comes here and now as we help and respect each other, work for peace and justice, and oppose all cruelty, ignorance, fear, and oppression in this world. If any “eternal soul” continues after death, it probably entails a transcendent bliss, not western ego-based cognizance in any literal “heavenly city.”</p>
<p><i>Evangelism</i></p>	<p>Every believer has an urgent duty to evangelize because “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” (Jn. 3:18) “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in... of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom. 10:14)</p>	<p>Every believer needs to reach out to unbelievers. Some have a gift for explicit teaching; others evangelize more through their moral example. Some conservatives follow up citing Jn. 3:18 and Rom. 10:14 by emphasizing that God alone can judge each person, and he will judge fairly and justly.</p>	<p>Some believers gladly seek out or respond to opportunities to share their faith with others who request or seem to need spiritual support and guidance. That may entail teaching or action. God’s grace will deal fairly and compassionately with everyone based on circumstances, understanding, and personal opportunity.</p>	<p>Believers may offer to share their faith, or to act compassionately and lovingly, to help others who request or seem to need spiritual support and guidance. As Jesus represents one path to spiritual insight, no one needs to push for “conversion” to any one “savior” or theology as if it superseded any another.</p>