

Introduction to Test of Faith

(Taken from the course Leaders Guide)

The aim of the *Test of Faith* materials is to help meet the enormous need in churches and parachurch groups for accessible materials on science and Christianity. The issues this course addresses have an impact on our faith and are relevant to life in the world today.

Why 'Test of Faith'? The challenge that has been put forward so many times recently is that God is a delusion and science has removed the need for faith in anything. How do believing scientists respond to this? They have all been trained to think and test ideas to the limit. If their faith and their science are both genuine searches for truth, we need to hear from them.

The main message that you should take away from the *Test of Faith* documentary is that there are many practising scientists who have a sincere Christian faith, even at the highest levels of academia. All of us can share their experience of awe when they find out more about God's creation through science. These scientists also help us to explore a number of issues that affect our own lives.

This course is designed to help you make the most of the documentary: to take any new concepts on board and then discuss them. The material is very much an introduction to science and Christianity. It may well provoke some questions that people didn't know that they had and open up some new areas of interest. There are many good books, articles and mp3s available to take things further, some of which are recommended in the Taking it Further lists for each session. There are also extra resources tailored specifically for the course on www.testoffaith.com.

The scientists interviewed on *Test of Faith* are all Christians. We have also interviewed some theologians, most of whom also have a scientific background. The book *Test of Faith: Spiritual Journeys with Scientists* tells the stories of ten of the scientists – their personal discovery of faith and how that has affected their work. It's a short book and an easy read. For many people this will be the most useful background reading for the course, so try to make a number of copies available for your group.

Christians hold different views on some of these issues. We're not expecting everyone to agree with all that the scientists and theologians say in the documentary. These are complex issues, and in the course material we have often laid out several different views that Christians take on a particular topic so that you can discuss them openly.

Most of all, *you do not have to be an expert* to run this course. In fact, being new to the subject can be an advantage, because you will be learning along with the group and are less likely to try to cover the material too quickly. We have provided all the scientific information that you need in the glossary and Briefing Sheets. For most of the questions we have given helps for the leader so that you can guide the discussion in a helpful direction and drop in hints if needed. If you don't have a science background yourself, and want to save time in preparation, you could invite a science graduate along to answer your questions.

Who is it for?

This course is designed primarily for small groups in an informal setting. It will also work well for larger groups that can break into smaller groups for discussion. Each session includes options for introduction and epilogue activities that will work for large groups.

We aim to bring the latest issues to churches and other groups in a number of settings – maybe at school, on campus, or at work. We've chosen a format that is flexible and user-friendly and have tried not to use scientific or theological jargon. These materials should be suitable for an audience of different ages, educational levels, learning types and faith backgrounds.

You do not have to be a scientist to be interested in science, and you definitely don't need any scientific knowledge to have Christian faith, but we hope that if people have the opportunity to think about science and faith together they will be able to engage with the scientific issues that have an impact on our faith, culture and practical aspects of our lives in a new way.

The main requirement for anyone taking part in the course is to be interested and open-minded. We have worked within a theological framework that is based on a high view of Scripture and in line with the major creeds of the

Christian church. Where issues are secondary we have made that clear and laid out a range of views that Christians hold. Pastors from a number of different denominations have reviewed the materials.

Although the materials have been written for Christians, we have kept a second audience in mind: people who are interested in Christianity for a number of reasons and have questions about science and faith. Scientific issues often come up as Christians talk about their faith with their friends, so as well as being an excellent training tool for church members, the course has been designed to be used with mixed groups of Christians and others. So although the focus is on Christian faith, we have deliberately avoided Christian jargon and Scripture references in the documentary so that you can explore the biblical material at a suitable pace in the course.

Our approach

The aim of each session's introduction is to help people see how the subject they will be tackling is relevant to them personally. This will be especially important for a group that is new to science-faith issues, and these activities will lead to livelier discussion later on in the session.

The documentary begins with questions that come from the world around us and proceeds to unpack them from a perspective of faith. Some people will relate to that initial feeling of conflict and want to work through that tension in the parts of the course that address it. Others may want to look at some of the specific issues raised at a deeper level, and they can use the bonus and/or in-depth sessions and the accompanying bonus DVD clips to do that.

After watching each episode of the documentary, general discussion or the optional Short Questions will allow people to digest the main points. Each discussion topic then brings out a key question from the documentary and allows the group to ask, 'What do you think?', 'Do you think these people are justified in what they are saying?' and 'What does the Bible have to say?'

These are issues that affect everyone at a deep level, and there are rarely easy 'black and white' answers. The Bible was written in a pre-scientific time and doesn't speak directly to all of the issues that new technologies and scientific ideas raise. There are always broader biblical principles that Christians can apply to any given situation, and so the course material brings those out where possible. These are subjects that have theologians and biblical scholars hard at work, so it's difficult to have a really in-depth discussion without a good deal more background knowledge. Having said that, everyone has to start somewhere and you do not need a degree in science or theology to understand the basics. This course will help people to find the answers where they do exist and to equip them for an informed discussion.

It's important to recognize that it is possible for Christians to hold different views on some issues. For example, where creation is concerned, the fact that God created the universe is vital, and the 'why' of that is important to all of us. The 'how' – the mechanism by which that happened – is a secondary issue, and as such it is open to discussion. The questions in every Discussion Topic will guide people in developing a broad understanding of the issue, but – especially towards the end of the topic – there are always some questions that will stimulate an open discussion and allow people to air their views.

The purpose of the epilogue activities is to help people process the things they have learned or discussed during the session – personally and spiritually, as well as intellectually. For some, this will be the most important part of the session and will help them to unwind and absorb what they have heard and remember it. Some sessions touch on issues that are personally challenging or sensitive, and here there are activities that deal with these issues on a more pastoral level using Bible passages, quotes from theologians and suggestions for prayer and reflection.

Taking it Further

The 'Taking it Further' sections will help people to keep on learning, but course leaders may want to do other things to address the questions that have been raised. Some members of the group may want to read one of the recommended books and come together again to discuss it. You may want to invite a speaker or arrange a series of talks with several churches in your area.

Finally, Christians in Science (UK) and the American Scientific Affiliation (USA) have regular conferences, and local groups are active in many different locations. There are similar groups in other parts of the world (see www.testoffaith.com for details).