



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Matrix Trilogy

"Free your mind."

The Matrix trilogy has been hailed as a triumph in filmmaking, breaking ground for both technical achievements and for weaving a rich tapestry of philosophy, religion, and pop culture with mass-market appeal. The films raise challenging moral and philosophical questions—all while captivating audiences with thrilling battles of good versus evil, man versus machine, and creator versus the created.

What do these films say about the nature of self-knowledge, faith, love, reality, free will, and destiny? This discussion guide will help you examine these issues and discuss the movie from a biblical perspective.

Based on:

The Matrix (Warner Brothers, 1999), *The Matrix Reloaded* (Warner Brothers, 2003), and *The Matrix Revolutions* (Warner Brothers, 2003), all written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski; rated R



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Movie Summary

These movies occur several hundred years in the future. Artificial intelligence is mankind's greatest technological creation—and its master. Machines grow humans, seal them in pods, and then liquefy and recycle them as batteries when they are no longer useful. But the humans are unaware of this; they are all slumbering in their pods and plugged into the machines, which create for them a false reality. The humans are unaware that the world where they go to work, go to church, and pay taxes is a lie.

Thomas A. Anderson (Keanu Reeves) is awakened to this reality by unplugged rebels Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) and Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne). They reveal to him that he has been living in the Matrix, a computer-generated fiction spiked directly into every sleeping human's brain. They tell him his real name is Neo.

Once Neo is safely purged from the Matrix, he has to master this new reality, confront his role as a possible messiah, evade and battle the unrelenting Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), embrace true love, and save the world.

The first *Matrix* shows Neo adapting quickly, discovering his potential, dying, finding love, coming back to life, and defeating Agent Smith. *Reloaded* shows Neo struggling with choice and destiny, still battling the new-and-improved—and multiplied—Agent Smith, growing in his powers, learning the truth about himself and the Matrix, and failing in his quest to destroy the source of the network. This time Neo raises Trinity from the dead, and we see Neo's power extend beyond the Matrix into the real world. The conclusion, *Revolutions*, is a battle epic with the machines nearly overrunning Zion and a plague of Agent Smiths choking the Matrix. All this occurs while the humans face diggers and squids at Zion, and Neo and Trinity face death at the Machine City. Meanwhile, Morpheus and his true love, Niobe (Jada Pinkett Smith), rush to save Zion. Neo's final gambit ends tragically but ultimately brings an uneasy peace between the machines and mankind.

—For more coverage of the Matrix trilogy, visit
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/matrix.html>

Rated R

These films are MPAA-rated R for “sci-fi violence and brief language” (*The Matrix*), “sci-fi violence and some sexuality,” (*Reloaded*), and “sci-fi violence and brief sexual content” (*Revolutions*).

Please note, this study is not an endorsement of the views and philosophies presented in The Matrix films but simply examines apparent themes in light of Scripture.

Discussing the Scenes

Select one or more of these themes to discuss:

1. *Temet Nosce*: “Know thyself”
2. Faith: “Free your mind” from fear, doubt, and disbelief
3. Love: “What matters is the connection the word implies”
4. Reality and Truth: “The Matrix has you”
5. Slavery: “You are a slave...born into bondage”
6. Fate: “We're all here to do what we're all here to do”



1. *Temet Nosce*: “Know thyself” (Psalm 139:23-24; Philippians 3:10; 1 Corinthians 2:7-14)

The theme of self-knowledge runs throughout the movies as we journey with Neo to understand his ultimate role in the Matrix. It begins with Trinity’s command to Neo (through his computer) to “wake up.” It continues with Morpheus’s revelations about the nature of the world and Neo’s place in it, and when Neo seeks confirmation from the Oracle (Mary Alice), she merely directs Neo’s attention to a plaque inscribed with “*temet nosce*,” Latin for “know thyself.”

At last, in the final film, Neo gains understanding: “I’m sorry that I took so long. But I wanted to be sure. ...I know what I have to do.”

- [Q] John Calvin’s *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* begins with these words: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” How important do you think the “know thyself” motto should be for the Christian? What happens to the believer who spends no time in reflection and lives without self-examination?
- [Q] Is self-understanding required in any way for salvation? Is it required for repentance? Why or why not?
- [Q] Neo never seems to have time for contemplation, and everything he knows about himself comes from others. Is that good or bad? What role do fellow believers, the Bible, prayer, spiritual disciplines, and the Holy Spirit play in the process of self-discovery?
- [Q] Is it possible to ever fully and completely know oneself? What might prevent complete self-knowledge, and how should we deal with these barriers?
- [Q] What dangers are part of this process? Is it possible to be deceived or mistaken? What happens if our self-knowledge is misguided to faulty conclusions? Is it possible for believers to practice self-examination in excess?
- [Q] Assuming self-knowledge is a beneficial end in itself, what then? What does one do with the results of self-discovery? Is it enough to merely understand our own nature, or should we then do something about it?
- [Q] Is it possible to know yourself without knowing God? What happens if we don’t seek to know God first? What happens if we *do* place knowing God ahead of knowing self?

Arriving at a sense of accurate self-knowledge, Neo finally is able to make his own choices. This is clear in the final confrontation with Agent Smith in *Revolutions*, when Smith demands an answer to his questions:

Why, Mr. Anderson, why? Why? Why do you do it? Why? Why get up? Why keep fighting? Do you believe you’re fighting for something—for more than your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom, or truth, perhaps peace? Could it be for love? ...Why, Mr. Anderson, why? Why do you persist?

Neo’s answer: “Because I choose to.”



Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychologist and Nazi concentration camps survivor, says the need for a meaningful existence is the most powerful of all. He quotes Nietzsche, saying, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”

[Q] How should believers go about discovering a sense of purpose and meaning? Do you know any recent converts? How has salvation transformed their sense of purpose? How has this sense of purpose impacted their life? What do you think about most believers’ sense of purpose?

[Q] Neo chooses self-sacrifice because of his sense of purpose. What about Jesus? Was his sacrifice willingly chosen, according to a purpose he understood and embraced, or was it merely inevitable? Why?

2. Faith: “Free your mind” from fear, doubt, and disbelief (Luke 12:29-32; Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 4:4-9; Hebrews 11; James 2:14-26)

Faith is never mentioned in the movies, but the characters tell us clearly where their faith is by telling us their beliefs and disbeliefs. While there are a variety of beliefs expressed in the films, the most important is faith in Neo as a powerful savior. Morpheus believes Neo is “The One” who was prophesied to save Zion. Trinity declares belief, in the end: “You have to save Zion. ...I believe it. I always have.” In *Revolutions*, Kid (Clayton Watson) prays to Neo, “Neo, I believe.”

[Q] In the beginning of the trilogy, everyone but Morpheus doubts Neo’s ability to be a savior. But by the end everyone is convinced. What events changed characters’ minds?

[Q] In the Bible, miracles surrounded Jesus’ ministry before his death, leading many to believe. And after his crucifixion, the Book of Acts shows that miracles often preceded or accompanied the dramatic growth of the church. What role do miracles play in changing people’s minds today?

[Q] Read Hebrews chapter 11, especially verses 1-4. In what way is faith the “evidence of things not seen” (KJV)? How can we be certain of what we do not see?

[Q] Miracles are certainly instrumental in changing people’s minds, but what if you can’t perform a miracle on cue? How do you go about bringing others to faith, or even grow in your own faith?

[Q] When training Neo, Morpheus describes the ultimate goal of his instruction: “You have to let it all go, Neo—fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind.” But later even Morpheus has doubts. How is it possible to be a believer, to be a Christian, and still doubt? Is there a degree of doubt that is healthy and OK? What should we do about to our failures of belief?

Read James 2:14-26.



[Q] Throughout the films, Morpheus makes and defends several critical decisions because of his profound faith in Neo. These decisions repeatedly prove his faith, despite occasional doubts. What evidence demonstrates a believer has faith in God?

[Q] What strengthens *your* faith?

3. Love: “What matters is the connection the word implies” (Luke 10:27; John 14:20-24; 1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 4:11-16)

The Wachowskis don’t feed us the usual Hollywood fare with characters simply falling in or out of love, or responding to physical attraction and thinking it’s love. Love, Matrix-style, is much deeper.

In *Revolutions*, Rama-Kandra (Bernard White) tutors Neo on love as a source of beauty and as the substance of a connection. He says, “I love my daughter very much—I find her to be the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. ...[Love] is a word. What matters is the connection the word implies.” This comment echoes the Architect’s (Helmut Bakaitis) comment that Neo’s love is “a profound attachment” to the rest of mankind in general, and that it binds Neo to Trinity in particular.

[Q] What do you think about Rama-Kandra’s description of love? Love certainly connects us to others, but how would *you* define love? How is this connection formed? How is the connection wrought by love different than other kinds of connections? Can this kind of connective love be severed? Why or why not?

[Q] Rama-Kandra explains his love for his daughter, Sati (Tanveer K. Atwal), by saying that she is the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen. What is the proper order of those two concepts? Should we love only those who are beautiful? Or should we look for beauty only in those we love? What kind of beauty do you think he’s speaking of?

[Q] Jesus commands us to love God with *all* of our heart, mind, strength, and soul, and to love others as we love ourselves. What is the role of self-knowledge in this kind of love? Is it possible to be connected by Rama-Kandra’s kind of love without being aware of it? Is it possible to love one another as Jesus commands us without being aware of it?

On the negative side of things, Cypher (Joe Pantoliano) confuses *lust* with love: “I thought I was in love with you. I used to dream about you. You’re a beautiful woman, Trinity.” The Merovingian (Lambert Wilson) compares love to *dementia*: “It is remarkable how similar the pattern of love is to the pattern of insanity.” And Agent Smith says love is an *illusion*, a feeble human attempt to give meaning to life, adding, “Only a human mind can invent something as *insipid* as love.”

[Q] We could dismiss the negative portrayals of love as silly or irrelevant, but these views are not uncommon today. Why are lust and attraction so easily confused for love?

[Q] Why do strong feelings of love make some people do irrational and crazy things?



- [Q] What kinds of experiences lead people to disillusionment and a dismissal of love as an illusion?
- [Q] Read 1 Corinthians 13. How does the Bible's portrayal of love compare with that in the Matrix trilogy?

4. Reality and Truth: "The Matrix has you" (John 12:40; Romans 8:19-21; Galatians 4:1-9)

We are shocked, along with Neo, when we first realize the enormous extent of the pseudo-reality he is trapped in. As Mark Twain wrote, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything," and the computers running the Matrix have to remember a *lot*. The illusion runs deep, and it's sold to billions of humans at every level of detail. Every aspect of Neo's world constantly upholds the lie: from night to day, from birth to death, from atoms to stars. Morpheus tells Neo, "It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." But for the Matrix slaves, it is more than just a trick of perception: the lie *is* the reality. The prison is real, not merely a dream.

But even within a prison of lies, truth can still be found. Before giving him a choice to unplug, Morpheus confirms Neo's sleep-disturbing suspicions, his nagging certainty that something is wrong with the world. And, sitting in our soft theater chairs, we realize the chilling truth: *he's right*. Something, indeed, is not right with the world. As we share Neo's "whoa" moment, we leave the theaters, excitedly talking about the nature of reality, the nature of the world, and just exactly what's wrong with it.

Executive producer Andrew Mason revealed that this was intentional: "I think Larry and Andy would like an audience to wander away wondering if what they have just experienced is itself part of the Matrix, and if the cup of coffee they are now having is something that their body is actually experiencing, or is it just another manifestation of somebody else's programming. So *The Matrix* is really just a set of questions, a mechanism for prodding an ignorant or dulled mind into questioning as many things as possible."

- [Q] What advantages does reality—rejecting the lies—offer? Cypher found none. He longed to return to his plugged-in mindscape, to remember nothing, and to become a famous actor—playing make-believe from within a dream. So what advantages does a false reality offer someone like Cypher? What kind of a mindset would lead someone to embrace a meaningless life and deny reality?
- [Q] What are some of the ways people make Cypher's choice and reject reality today? Have you ever found yourself turning your back on the truth and immersing yourself in a false reality? What happened? How did you come out of it?
- [Q] When the creators of the *Matrix* trilogy were asked if they had to make Neo's choice, would they take the red pill (reality) or the blue pill (the Matrix), their answer was immediate and unqualified: "the blue pill." Perhaps they were joking, but how would *you* have made the choice? Why?
- [Q] Trinity commands Neo to wake up at the beginning of the first movie. In what way is salvation like waking up from a dream? How were you blinded to the reality of the



kingdom of God when you were a nonbeliever? What blinded you? When did you begin rising from your slumber? Was it before or after you became a believer?

- [Q]** Neo is awakened to reality by Morpheus, physically unplugged from the Matrix, washed out of the system, and undergoes a time of training and recuperation before reentering the Matrix on a mission. In what way is salvation liked being unplugged from a false reality? In what other ways is Neo's introduction to this higher reality like—or unlike—the experiences of a new believer?

5. Slavery: "You are a slave...born into bondage" (Joshua 24:15; Matthew 6:23-25; John 12:40; Romans 6:16; Romans 7; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 6:12)

The three *Matrix* films portray a continuum of masters dealing out rules, controls, and slavery. At first, Neo appears to be a slave just to his boss, MetaCortex's Mr. Rhineheart (David Aston): "You believe that you are special, that somehow the rules do not apply to you. Obviously, you are mistaken."

- [Q]** Doesn't this question sound like the question God put to the Israelites? See Joshua 24:15. How is God's challenge to the Israelites *not* like Mr. Rhineheart's ultimatum to Neo? How is Neo's, and our, service to an employer not like slavery but is voluntary?

- [Q]** What other institutions, people, or things in this world limit the actions we can freely take? Whether we're taking orders from a boss or living in a prison cell, where does true freedom reside? (See Romans 12:1-2.) What does Neo do immediately after being given this ultimatum from his boss?

Morpheus later reveals to Neo a higher master, the Machine that generated the world of lies Neo lives in: "You are a slave...born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell, or taste, or touch—a prison for your mind."

Read Matthew 6:23-25, John 12:40, and Ephesians 6:12.

- [Q]** How would you compare the false reality of the Matrix with what we know and see today in this world? How does the reality of the kingdom of God compare with the reality of this world?
- [Q]** If the world we are born into does not easily reveal the whole truth, how do we stop being slaves to it? How does Jesus' concept of not serving two masters apply to the idea of a higher reality found in Christ?
- [Q]** How does Neo's violent rebellion against the Matrix compare with Paul's description of spiritual warfare? What is our battle as Christians?

Being unplugged from the Matrix doesn't guarantee freedom. The unplugged mind is in bondage to faulty belief systems as well, and we learn that Neo's mind has to be transformed when Morpheus instructs Neo in the training program to "let it all go, Neo—fear, doubt, and disbelief. Free your mind."

Read Romans 7 and Romans 12:1-2



- [Q] What is real? How does your sense of truth and reality define your way of thinking and your ability to choose? In what way are we slaves to our assumptions?
- [Q] How does sin limit our decisions? What is the way out?
- [Q] How does coming to Christ limit our decisions (see Matthew 6:23-25, and Romans 6:16)?
- [Q] What kinds of mental changes must the believer undergo after coming to Christ? When a slave is freed, what happens to the old patterns of thought and habits of reaction? How does one retrain one's mind and actions to a new way of thinking?
- [Q] How are spiritual disciplines like the training Neo undergoes on the Nebuchadnezzar with Morpheus? What are some spiritual disciplines that help transform the mind of the believer?
- [Q] When does the process of unlearning the old ways of a slave to sin stop? What does this process of mental transformation look like for the long-time believer, compared to the new believer?

6. Fate: "We're all here to do what we're all here to do" **(John 3:16; John 12:32-33; Romans 8:29-30; 1 John 2:2)**

Thoughtful Christians have debated for 2,000 years whether God's foreknowledge and omnipotence negate our ability to choose, especially when it counts eternally, or whether our freedom of will negates God's sovereignty. On the one hand, some Christians are fate-driven, like Morpheus, believing that no choice can ever be made except the one God already made for us. On the other hand, some Christians are freedom- and choice-oriented, like Neo (at times), believing that God never interferes with our freedom to choose. And, of course, there are varying positions in the middle ground.

Read John 3:16; John 12:32-33; Romans 8:29-30; and 1 John 2:2.

- [Q] What does your church teach about predestination and free will?
- [Q] Various Scriptures seem to support either view—some were just referred to above. Does this mean that the Bible contradicts itself? Or, is there a way to harmonize the different passages that makes sense?
- [Q] In either case, if you were preordained to make all the choices you have made, or if you were not, where does that place the burden of responsibility on consequences? How do concepts like justice, responsibility, and consequences impact a doctrine of predestination or free will?
- [Q] If God has given us a free will and made us responsible for our choices, what implications does that hold for choosing to obey and follow Jesus?



As the Credits Roll

- [Q] One of the most violent scenes in the entire trilogy occurs in the first film, *The Matrix*, when Trinity and Neo walk into the lobby where Morpheus is being tortured and begin coldly slaughtering the guards. The film was released in April 1999, and before the month was over, on April 20, two high-school seniors walked into their Littleton, Colorado, school armed to the teeth to play out their own Matrix-style massacre. Critics were quick to lay blame on the movie's over-the-top violence. Others have pointed out that teen violence, per capita, is actually on a downturn. What do you think? Does surrogate violence in movies engender real-world violence? If it does, should the consequences for the violence be shared? Should directors of violent movies be called to court? What about romantic movies? Are people fully responsible for their protestations of love and proposals for marriage because they were inspired by *Sleepless in Seattle*?
- [Q] The Christian themes in the Matrix trilogies do not seem to be deeply theological or even orthodox. They seem to work as mere plot or storytelling devices, and often sit side-by-side with Buddhist, Gnostic, Hindu, postmodern, and other philosophies. What is the danger of reading too much into the Wachowskis' works of art and entertainment? What is the danger of this disorganized, cafeteria-style pluralism, where *this* idea and *that* belief are picked at random from multiple faiths and philosophies?
- [Q] What other truths do you find in the movies? What other philosophies and themes in the movies do you find troublesome, disagreeable, or wrong? What do you think about other religious groups—such as student Buddhist groups on university campuses—using the Matrix movies to explain their faith to seekers?

—Study by Rich Tatum