

Thirty-Five Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God

A collection of articles about the doctrines mentioned
in *Statement of Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God*

2007



WORLDWIDE
CHURCH OF GOD

Living and Sharing the Gospel

Thirty-Five Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God

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Contents

The indented material that begins each chapter is quoted from the *Statement of Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God* published in 2001. At the end of each chapter we give the author and date the article was written. Additional edits were made for the publication of this book.

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Thirty-Five Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God

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Summary of Our Christian Faith

We believe:

- In one holy, loving, all-powerful, and gracious Creator God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- That the Bible is the inspired and infallible Word of God, fully authoritative for all matters of faith and practice.
- That Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, is both Lord and Savior.
- That Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross for human sin, that he was raised bodily on the third day, and that he ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father.
- That Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and to reign over all things.
- In the Holy Spirit, who brings sinners to repentance, who gives eternal life to believers, and who lives in them to conform them to the image of Jesus Christ.
- That Christians should gather in regular fellowship and live lives of faith that make evident the good news that humans enter the kingdom of God by putting their trust in Jesus Christ.
- In the spiritual unity of all believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- That salvation comes not by works, but only by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
- In the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

1. The Triune God

God, by the testimony of Scripture, is one divine Being in three eternal, co-essential, yet distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the one true God, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He is Creator of heaven and earth, Sustainer of the universe, and Source of human salvation. Though transcendent, God is directly and personally involved with human beings. God is love and infinite goodness.

(Mark 12:29; 1 Timothy 1:17; Ephesians 4:6; Matthew 28:19; 1 John 4:8; 5:20; Titus 2:11; John 16:27; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Corinthians 8:4-6) (*Statement of Beliefs of the Worldwide Church of God* [2001], page 2).

Why study theology?

“Don’t talk to me about theology. Just teach me the Bible.”

To the average Christian, theology might sound like something hopelessly complicated, frustratingly confusing and thoroughly irrelevant. Anybody can read the Bible. So why do we need head-in-the-clouds theologians with their long sentences and fancy terms?

Faith seeking understanding

Theology has been called “faith seeking understanding.” In other words, as Christians we trust God, but God has made us to want to understand who we are trusting and why we trust him. That’s where theology comes in. The word *theology* comes from a combination of two Greek words, *theos*, meaning God, and *logia*, meaning knowledge or study—study of God.

When properly used, theology can serve the church by combating heresies, or false teachings. That is because most heresies come from wrong understandings of who God is, understandings that don’t square with the way God has revealed himself in the Bible. The church’s proclamation of the

gospel, of course, needs to rest on the firm foundation of God’s own revelation of himself.

Revelation

Knowledge about God is not something that we humans can just come up with on our own by thinking it out. The only way we can know anything true about God is to listen to what God tells us about himself. The main way God has chosen to reveal himself to us is through the Bible, a collection of inspired writings compiled over many centuries under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. But even diligent study of the Bible cannot convey to us right understanding of who God is.

We need more than mere study—we need the Holy Spirit to enable our minds to understand what God reveals in the Bible about himself. The bottom line is that true knowledge of God comes only from God, not merely by human study, reasoning or experience.

The church has an ongoing responsibility to critically examine its beliefs and practices in the light of God’s revelation. Theology is the Christian community’s

continuous quest for truth as it humbly seeks God's wisdom and follows the Holy Spirit's lead into all truth. Until Christ returns in glory, the church cannot assume that it has reached its goal.

That is why theology should never become a mere restatement of the church's creeds and doctrines, but should rather be a never-ending process of critical self-examination. It is only as we stand in the divine Light of God's mystery that we find true knowledge of God.

Paul called that divine mystery "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), the mystery that through Christ it pleased God "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (verse 20).

The Christian church's proclamation and practice are always in need of examination and fine-tuning, sometimes even major reform, as it continues to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dynamic theology

The word *dynamic* is a good word to describe this constant effort of the Christian church to look at itself and the world in the light of God's self-revelation and then to let the Holy Spirit conform it accordingly to be a people who reflect and proclaim God as God truly is. We see this *dynamic* quality in theology throughout church history. The apostles reinterpreted the Scriptures when they proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

God's new act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ brought new light to the Bible, light that the Holy Spirit opened the eyes of the apostles to see. In the fourth century, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, used descriptive words in the creeds that were not in the Bible in order to help Gentiles understand the meaning of the biblical revelation of God. In the 16th century, John Calvin and Martin Luther contended for the

renewal of the church in light of the demand of the biblical truth that salvation comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

In the 1800s, John McLeod Campbell attempted to broaden the Church of Scotland's narrow view on the nature of Jesus' atonement for humanity and was thrown out for his efforts.

In modern times, no one has been more effective in calling the church to a dynamic theology rooted in active faith than Karl *Barth*, who "gave the Bible back to Europe" after liberal Protestant theology had nearly swallowed up the church by embracing Enlightenment humanism and the "natural theology" of the German church.

Listening to God

Whenever the church fails to hear the voice of God and instead gives in to its own assumptions and presuppositions, it becomes weak and ineffective. It loses relevance in the eyes of those it is trying to reach with the gospel message. The same is true of any part of the Body of Christ when it wraps itself up in its own preconceived ideas and traditions. It becomes bogged down, stuck or *static*, the opposite of *dynamic*, and loses its effectiveness in spreading the gospel.

When that happens, the church begins to fragment or break up, Christians become alienated from one another, and Jesus' command that we love one another fades into the background. Then, gospel proclamation becomes merely a set of words, a proposition that people unthinkingly agree with. The power behind it to offer healing to sinful minds loses its force. Relationships become external, only surface contacts that miss the deep union and communion with Jesus and one another where genuine healing, peace and joy become real possibilities. Static religion is a barrier that can prevent believers from becoming the real people God intends them to be in Jesus Christ.

'Double predestination'

The doctrine of election or double predestination has long been a distinctive, or identifying doctrine, in the Reformed theological tradition (the tradition that stands in the shadow of John Calvin). This doctrine has frequently been misunderstood, distorted and the cause of endless controversy and distress. Calvin himself struggled with this issue, and his teaching on it has been interpreted by many as saying, "From eternity God has decreed some to salvation and others to damnation."

This latter interpretation of the doctrine of election is usually described as hyper-Calvinistic. It fosters a fatalistic view of God as an arbitrary tyrant and an enemy of human freedom. Such an approach to the doctrine makes it anything but good news as proclaimed in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The biblical witness describes the electing grace of God as astonishing, but not dreadful! God, who loves in freedom, offers his grace freely to all who will receive it.

Karl Barth

In correcting this hyper-Calvinism, the preeminent Reformed theologian of the modern church, Karl Barth, recast the Reformed doctrine of election by centering rejection and election in Jesus Christ. He carefully laid out the full biblical doctrine of election in Volume II of his *Church Dogmatics* in a way that is consistent with the whole of God's revelation.

Barth forcefully demonstrated that within a Trinitarian context, the doctrine of election has one central purpose: it declares that God's works in creation, reconciliation and redemption are fully realized in the free grace of God made known in Jesus Christ.

It affirms that the triune God who lives eternally in loving communion graciously wills to include others in that communion. The Creator Redeemer deeply desires a

relationship with his creation. And relationships by nature are dynamic, not frozen and unchanging.

In the *Dogmatics*, where Barth rethought the doctrine of election in a Trinitarian, Creator-Redeemer context, he called it "the sum of the gospel." In Christ God elected *all* of humanity in covenant partnership to share in his life of communion by freely and graciously choosing to be the God who is for humanity.

Jesus Christ is both the Elected and the Rejected for our sakes, and individual election and rejection can be understood as real only in him. In other words, the Son of God is the Elect on our behalf. As the universal elected human, his vicarious or substitutionary election, in our place and on our behalf, both condemns death (on the cross) and makes eternal life for us possible (by his resurrection). This atoning and reconciling work of Jesus Christ in the incarnation was complete for the redeeming of fallen humanity.

We must therefore say yes to God's yes for us in Christ Jesus and embrace and begin to live in the joy and light of what he has already secured for us—union, communion and participation with him in a new creation.

New creation

In his important contribution to the doctrine of election, Barth writes:

For in God's union with this one man, Jesus Christ, he has shown his love to all and his solidarity with all. In this One he has taken upon himself the sin and guilt of all, and therefore rescued them all by higher right from the judgment which they had rightly incurred, so that he is really the true consolation of all.

Everything changed at the cross. The entire creation, whether it knows it or not, has been, is being and will be redeemed,

transformed and made new in Jesus Christ. We are becoming a new creation in him.

Thomas F. Torrance, premier student and interpreter of Karl Barth, served as editor when Barth's *Church Dogmatics* was translated into English. Torrance believed that Volume II included some of the finest theology ever written. He agreed with Barth that all of humanity has been redeemed and elected in Christ. Professor Torrance, in his book *The Mediation of Christ*, lays out the biblical revelation that Jesus is not only our atoning reconciler through his vicarious life, death and resurrection, but serves as our perfect response to God's grace.

Jesus took our fallenness and judgment on himself, assuming sin, death and evil in order to redeem the creation at all levels and transform everything that stood against us into a new creation. We have been freed from our depraved and rebellious natures for an internal relationship with the One who both justifies and sanctifies us.

Torrance goes on to explain that "the unassumed is the unhealed." What Christ has not taken upon himself has not been saved. Jesus took our alienated mind on himself, becoming what we are in order to reconcile us to God. He thereby cleansed, healed and sanctified sinful humanity in the depths of its being in his vicarious loving act of incarnation for us.

Instead of sinning like all other human beings, he condemned sin in our flesh by living a life of perfect holiness within our flesh, and through his obedient Sonship he transformed our hostile and disobedient humanity into a true, loving relationship with the Father.

In the Son, the triune God took up our human nature into his Being, and he thereby transformed our nature. He redeemed us and reconciled us. By making our sinful nature his own and healing it, Jesus Christ became the Mediator between God and a fallen humanity.

Our election in the one man Jesus Christ fulfills God's purpose for the creation and

defines God as the God who loves in freedom. Torrance explains that "all of grace" does not mean "nothing of humanity," but *all of grace means all of humanity*. That is, we cannot hold onto even one percent of ourselves.

By grace through faith, we participate in God's love for the creation in a relational way that was not possible before. That means that we love others as God loves us because by grace Jesus Christ is in us and we are in him. This can happen only within the miracle of a new creation. God's revelation to humanity comes from the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and a redeemed humanity now responds by faith in the Spirit through the Son to the Father.

We have been called to holiness in Christ. We enjoy freedom in him from the sin, death, evil, misery and judgment that stood against us. We reciprocate, or return, God's love for us through thanksgiving, worship and service in the community of faith. In all his healing and saving relations with us, Jesus Christ is engaged in personalizing and humanizing us—that is, in making us real people in him. In all our relations with him, he makes us more truly and fully human in our personal response of faith. This takes place in us through the creative power of the Holy Spirit as he unites us to the perfect humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All of grace really does mean all of humanity. The grace of Jesus Christ who was crucified and resurrected for us does not depreciate the humanity he came to save. God's unconditional grace brings into the light all that we are and do. *Even in our repenting and believing we cannot rely on our own response, but in faith we rely only on the response that Christ has offered to the Father in our place and on our behalf!* In his humanity, Jesus, the new Adam, became our vicarious response to God in all things, including faith, conversion, worship, celebration of the sacraments and evangelism.

Ignored

Unfortunately, Karl Barth has generally been ignored or misinterpreted by American evangelicalism, and Thomas Torrance is often presented as too hard to understand. But to fail to appreciate the dynamic nature of theology displayed in Barth's reworking of the doctrine of election causes many evangelicals and Reformed Christians alike to remain caught in the behavioralism trap, struggling to understand where God draws the line between human behavior and salvation.

The great Reformation principle of ongoing reformation should free us from old worldviews and behavior-based theologies that inhibit growth, promote stagnation and prevent ecumenical cooperation within the Body of Christ. Yet today doesn't the church often find itself robbed of the joy of grace as it shadowboxes with all its various forms of legalism? For this reason the church is not uncommonly characterized as a bastion of judgmentalism and exclusivism rather than as a testament to grace.

We all have a theology—a way that we think about and understand God—whether we know it or not. And our theology affects how we think about and understand God's grace and salvation.

If our theology is dynamic and relational, we will be open to hear God's ever-present word of salvation, which he freely gives us by his grace though Jesus Christ alone. On the other hand, if our theology is static, we will shrivel into a religion of legalism, judgmentalism and spiritual stagnation.

Instead of knowing Jesus as he is in a way that seasons all our relationships with mercy, patience, kindness and peace, we will know judgment, exclusivity and condemnation of those who fail to meet our carefully defined standards of godliness.

New creation in freedom

Theology does make a difference. How

we understand God affects the way we understand salvation and how we live the Christian life. God is not the prisoner of some static, humanly reasoned idea about what he must and should be.

Humans are not capable of reasoning out who God is and what he must be like. God tells us who he is and what he is like, and he is free to be exactly how he chooses to be, and he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ as being the God who loves us, is for us and who chooses to make humanity's cause—including your cause and my cause—his own.

In Jesus Christ, we are freed from our sinful minds, from our boasting and despair, and graciously renewed to experience God's *shalom* peace in his loving faith community.

Terry Akers and Mike Feazell, 2005

Recommended reading:

Michael Jenkins, *Invitation to Theology*

Thomas Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*

Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*

James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*

Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*

Thomas Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*

Ray Anderson, *Theology, Death and Dying*

C. Baxter Kruger, *The Great Dance*

Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of Judgment*

Donald Bloesch, *The Christian Foundations* series (seven books)

2. God the Father

God the Father is the first Person of the Godhead, the Unoriginate, of whom the Son is eternally begotten and from whom the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds through the Son. The Father, who made all things seen and unseen through the Son, sends the Son for our salvation and gives the Holy Spirit for our regeneration and adoption as children of God.

(John 1:1, 14, 18; Romans 15:6; Colossians 1:15-16; John 3:16; 14:26; 15:26; Romans 8:14-17; Acts 17:28) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 2)

An introduction to God

As Christians, our most basic religious belief is that God exists. By the capitalized word “God,” we mean the God described in the Bible: a good and powerful spirit being who created all things, who cares about us, who cares about what we do, who is involved in our lives, and who offers us an eternity with his goodness.

Humans cannot understand God in totality, but we can have a solid beginning point for understanding who God is and what God is doing in our lives. Let’s focus on the qualities of God that a new believer, for example, might find most helpful.

His existence

Many people, even long-time believers, want proof of God’s existence. But there is no way to “prove” God’s existence so that everyone is convinced. It is probably better to talk in terms of evidence, rather than proof. The evidence gives us confidence that God exists and is the sort of being the Bible describes.

God “has not left himself without testimony,” Paul told the pagans in Lystra (Acts 14:17). Well then, what is the evidence?

Creation. Psalm 19:1 tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” Romans 1:20 tells us, “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen,

being understood from what has been made.” Creation itself tells us something about God.

It is reasonable for us to believe that something caused the earth, sun and stars to be the way they are. Scientists say the universe began with a big bang, and it is reasonable for us to believe that something caused the bang. That something, we believe, was God.

Design. Creation shows signs of order, of laws of physics. If various properties of matter were different, then earth would not exist, or humans could not exist. If the size or orbit of earth were different, then conditions on this planet would not permit human life. Some people believe that this is a cosmic accident; others believe that the more reasonable explanation is that the solar system was designed by an intelligent Creator.

Life. Life is based on incredibly complex chemicals and reactions. Some people believe that life had an intelligent cause; others believe that it happened by chance. Some have faith that scientists will eventually demonstrate a non-god origin for life. But for many people, the existence of life is evidence of a Creator God.

Humans. Humans are self-conscious creatures who explore the universe, who ponder the meaning of life, who seek significance. Physical hunger suggests the

existence of food; thirst suggests that there is something that can quench our thirst. Does our intellectual yearning for purpose suggest that there is in fact a meaning to be found? Many people claim to have found meaning in relationship with God.

Morality. Is right and wrong a matter of opinion, of majority rule, or is there some supra-human authority that defines good and evil? If there is no God, then humans have no basis for proclaiming anything evil, no reason to condemn racism, genocide, torture or any atrocity. The existence of evil is therefore evidence that God exists. If there is no God, then there is no basis for authority except power. It is reasonable to believe in God.

Greatness

What sort of being is God? Bigger than we can imagine! If he created the universe, then he is bigger than the universe—and not limited by time, space or energy, for he existed before time, space, matter and energy did.

2 Timothy 1:9 mentions something God did “before the beginning of time.” Time had a beginning, and God existed before that. He has a timeless existence that cannot be measured by years. He is eternal, of infinite age—and infinity plus several billion is still infinity. Mathematics is too limited to describe God’s existence.

Since God created matter, he existed before matter, and he is not made of matter. He is spirit—but he is not “made of spirit.” God is not made at all; he simply *is*, and he exists as spirit. He defines existence—he defines spirit and he defines matter.

God existed before matter did, and the dimensions and properties of matter do not apply to him. He cannot be measured in miles or kilowatts. Solomon acknowledged that even the highest heavens could not

contain God (1 Kings 8:27). He fills heaven and earth (Jeremiah 23:23); he is everywhere, or omnipresent. There is no place in the universe where he does not exist.

How powerful is God? If God can cause a big bang, design solar systems, create the codes in DNA and manage all these levels of power, then he must be unlimited in power, or omnipotent. “With God all things are possible,” Luke 1:37 tells us. God can do whatever he wants to do.

God’s creativity demonstrates an intelligence greater than we can understand. He controls the universe, constantly causing its continued existence (Hebrews 1:3). That means he must know what is happening throughout the universe; he is unlimited in intelligence—he is omniscient. He knows whatever he wants to know.

God defines right and wrong, and is by definition right, and he has the power to always do right. “God cannot be tempted with evil” (James 1:13). He is consistently and perfectly righteous (Psalm 11:7). His standards are right, his decisions are right, and he judges the world in righteousness, for he is, in his very nature, good and right.

In all these ways, God is so different from us that we have special words that we use only for God. Only God is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal. We are matter; he is spirit. We are mortal; he is eternal. This great difference between us and God, this otherness, is called his *transcendence*. It means that he transcends us, is beyond us, is not like us.

Other ancient cultures believed in gods and goddesses who fought with one another, who acted selfishly, who could not be trusted. But the Bible reveals a God who is in complete control, who needs nothing from anyone, who therefore acts only to help others. He is perfectly consistent, his behavior is perfectly righteous and completely

trustworthy. This is what the Bible means when it says that God is holy: morally perfect.

This makes life much simpler. People do not have to try to please 10 or 20 different gods; there is only one. The Creator of all is still the Ruler of all, and he will be the Judge of all. Our past, our present and our future are all determined by the one God, the All-knowing, All-powerful, Eternal One.

Goodness

If all we knew about God is that he had incredible power over us, we might obey him out of fear, with bent knee and resentful heart. But God has revealed to us another aspect of his nature: The incredibly great God is also incredibly gentle and good.

One of Jesus' disciples asked him, "Show us the Father" (John 14:8). He wanted to know what God was like. He knew the stories of the burning bush, the pillar of cloud and fire at Mt. Sinai, the science-fiction throne that Ezekiel saw, and the whisper that Elijah heard (Exodus 3:4; 13:21; 1 Kings 19:12; Ezekiel 1). God can appear in all these ways, but what is he really like? Where should we look?

Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). If we want to know what God is like, we need to look at Jesus. We can learn a bit about God from nature; we can learn more from the way he revealed himself in the Old Testament, but we learn the most from the way that God has revealed himself in Jesus.

Jesus shows us what God is like. Jesus is called Immanuel, which means God with us (Matthew 1:23). He lived without sin, without selfishness. He is a person of compassion. He has feelings of love and joy, disappointment and anger. He cares about individuals. He calls for righteousness, and he forgives sin. He served others, even in his

suffering and death.

God is like that. He described himself to Moses in this way: "The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6-7).

The God who is above all creation is also free to work within creation. This is his *immanence*, his being with us. Although God is larger than the universe and everywhere within the universe, he is with believers in a way that he is not with unbelievers. The enormous God is always close to us. He is near and far at the same time (Jeremiah 23:23).

In Jesus, he entered human history, space and time. He worked in human flesh, showing us what life ought to be like in the flesh, and showing us that God wants more for our lives than merely flesh. We are offered eternal life, life beyond the physical limits we know now. We are offered spirit life, as the Spirit of God himself comes into us to live in us and make us children of God (Romans 8:11; 1 John 3:2). God continues to be with us, working in space and time to help us.

The great and powerful God is also the gentle and gracious God; the perfectly righteous Judge is also the merciful and patient Savior. The God who is angry at sin also provides salvation from sin. He is mighty in mercy, great in gentleness. This is what we should expect from a Being who can create the codes in DNA, the colors in a rainbow and the delicate wisps on dandelion seeds. We would not exist at all, except for the fact that God is kind and gentle.

God describes his relationship to us in several ways. In one analogy, he is a father and we are his children. In another, he is the

husband and all believers together are his wife. Or he is a king and we are his subjects. He is a shepherd and we are the sheep. In all these analogies, God puts himself in a situation of responsibility to protect and provide for the needs of his people.

God knows how tiny we are. He knows he could obliterate us in the snap of a finger, in the slightest miscalculation of cosmic forces. But in Jesus, God shows us how much he loves us, how much he cares for us. Jesus was humble, willing even to suffer, if it would help us. He knows the kind of pain we go through, because he has felt it. He knows the pain that evil causes, and he accepted it, showing us that we can trust God.

God has plans for us, for he has made us to be like himself (Genesis 1:27). He invites us to become more like himself—in goodness, not in power. In Jesus, God gives us an example to follow: an example of humility, selfless service, love and compassion, faith and hope.

“God is love,” John wrote (1 John 4:8). God demonstrated his love by sending Jesus to die for our sins, so barriers between us and God might be removed, so we might live with him in eternal joy. God’s love is not wishful thinking—it is action that helps us in our deepest need.

We learn more about God from the crucifixion of Jesus than from his resurrection. Jesus shows us that God is willing to suffer pain, even pain caused by the people who are being helped. His love invites us, encourages us. He does not force us to do his will.

God’s love for us, shown most clearly in Jesus Christ, is our example: “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” (1 John 4:10-11). If we live in love, then eternal life

will be a joy not only for us but also for those who live with us.

If we follow Jesus in life, we will also follow him in death, and then in resurrection. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us and give us life eternal (Romans 8:11). But if we do not learn to love, then we will not enjoy everlasting life. So God is teaching us to love, at a pace we can follow, giving us a perfect example, changing our hearts by the Holy Spirit working in us. The Power who controls the nuclear furnaces of the sun is working gently in our hearts, wooing us, winning our affection, winning our allegiance.

God gives us meaning in life, direction for life, hope for life eternal. We can trust him, even when we suffer for doing good. God’s goodness is backed up by his power; his love is guided by his wisdom. He has all the forces of the universe at his control, and he is using them for our benefit. “In all things God works for the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28).

Response

How do we respond to a God so great and gentle, so terrible and tender? We respond with worship: awe at his glory, praise for his works, reverence for his holiness, respect for his power, repentance in the presence of his perfection, obedience in the authority found in his truth and wisdom.

To his mercy, we respond with thankfulness; to his grace, with our allegiance; to his goodness, with our love. We admire him, we adore him, we give ourselves to him even as we wish we had more to give. Just as he has shown his love for us, we let him change us so that we love the people around us. We use all that we have, all that we are, all that he gives us, to serve others, just as Jesus did.

This is the God we pray to, knowing that

he hears every word, that he knows every thought, that he knows what we need, that he cares about our feelings, that he wants to live with us forever, that he has the power to fulfill every request, and that he has the wisdom not to.

God has proven himself faithful in Jesus Christ. God exists to serve, not to be selfish. His power is always used in love. Our God is supreme in power, and supreme in love. We can trust him in absolutely everything.

Michael Morrison, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/God for more articles about God.

We do not endorse every idea in the books below, but you may find these helpful:

- Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty*. Christian Foundations. InterVarsity, 1995.
- Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1987.
- Ray S. Anderson, ed. *Theological Foundations for Ministry*. T&T Clark, 1979.
- T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*. T&T Clark, 1996, 2002.
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The Trinity

1+1+1

It Just Doesn't Add Up

The Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but there is only one God. “Wait a minute,” some people say. “One plus one plus one equals one? This can’t be right. It just doesn’t add up.”

True, it doesn’t add up—and it’s not supposed to. God isn’t a thing that can be added. There can be only one all-powerful, all-wise, everywhere-present being, so there can be only one God. In the world of spirit, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God, unified in a way that material objects cannot be. Our math is based on material things; it does not always work in the infinite, spiritual realm.

The Father is God and the Son is God, but there is only one God being. This is not a family or committee of divine beings—a group cannot say, “There is none like me” (Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5). God is only one divine being—more than one Person, but only one God. The early Christians did not get this idea from paganism or philosophy—they were forced into it by Scripture.

Just as Scripture teaches that Jesus Christ is divine, it also teaches that the Holy Spirit is divine and personal. Whatever the Holy Spirit does, God does. The Holy Spirit, like the Son and the Father, is God—three Persons perfectly united in one God: the Trinity.

3. God the Son

God the Son is the second Person of the Godhead, eternally begotten of the Father. He is the Word and the express image of the Father, by whom and for whom all things were created. He was sent by the Father as Jesus Christ to be God revealed in the flesh for our salvation. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, two natures in one Person. He is the Son of God and Lord of all, worthy of worship, honor and reverence. As the prophesied Savior of humanity, he died for our sins, was raised bodily from the dead, and ascended to heaven, from where he mediates between humanity and God. He will come again in glory to reign as King of kings over all nations in the kingdom of God.

(John 1:1, 10, 14; Colossians 1:15-16; Hebrews 1:3; John 3:16; Titus 2:13; Matthew 1:20; Acts 10:36; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Hebrews 1:8; Revelation 19:16)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 2-3)

Who is this man?

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” The question confronts us, too: Who is this man? What authority does he have? Why should we trust him?

The Christian faith centers on Jesus Christ. We need to understand what kind of person he is.

Fully human—and then some

Jesus was born in the normal way, grew in the normal way, got hungry and thirsty and tired, ate and drank and slept. He looked normal, talked in ordinary language, and walked in the normal way. He had emotions such as compassion, surprise, sorrow and apprehension (Matthew 9:36; Luke 7:9; John 11:38; Matthew 26:37). He prayed to God, as humans need to. He called himself a man and other people called him a man. He was a human being.

But Jesus was such an extraordinary human that after he ascended to heaven, some people claimed he was not human after

all (2 John 7). They thought that Jesus was so holy that surely he would have nothing to do with flesh, with its dirt, sweat, digestive functions and imperfections. Perhaps he merely *appeared* to be human, in the way that angels sometimes appeared as humans, without actually becoming human.

So the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus was really a human. John tells us, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). He didn’t just appear as flesh, or clothe himself in flesh. He *became* flesh. “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 John 4:2). We know, says John, because we saw him and touched him (1 John 1:1-2).

Paul said that Jesus was “made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7), “born under the law” (Galatians 4:4), “in the likeness of sinful man” (Romans 8:3). Since he came to save humans, the author of Hebrews reasons, it was necessary that he “shared in their humanity” (Hebrews 2:14-17).

Our salvation depends on the reality of

Jesus' humanity. His role as our intercessor, our high priest, depends on his experience as a human (Hebrews 4:15). Even after his resurrection, Jesus had flesh and bones (John 20:27; Luke 24:39). Even in heavenly glory, he continues to be a human (1 Timothy 2:5).

Acting like God

"Who is this fellow?" asked the Pharisees when they heard Jesus forgive sins. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21). Sin is an offense against God, so how could a human speak for God and say the offense is removed from the record? It was blasphemy, they said.

Jesus knew what they thought about it, but he forgave sins anyway. He even implied that he had no sins of his own (John 8:46). He made some astonishing claims:

- He said he would sit at God's right hand in heaven—another claim the Jewish leaders thought blasphemous (Matthew 26:63-65).
- He claimed to be the Son of God—another blasphemy, they said, since in that culture it implied equality with God (John 5:18; 19:7).
- Jesus claimed to be in such perfect communication with God that he did only what God wanted (John 5:19).
- He claimed to be one with the Father (John 10:30), which the Jewish leaders again said was blasphemous (v. 33).
- He claimed to be so much like God that people should look at him to see the Father (John 14:9; 1:18).
- He claimed to be able to send God's Spirit (John 16:7).
- He claimed that he had angels he could send (Matthew 13:41).
- He knew that God was the judge of the world, but he also claimed to be the judge (John 5:22).
- He said he could raise the dead, even

himself (John 5:21; 6:40; 10:18).

- He said that everyone's eternal life depends on their relationship with him (Matthew 7:23).
- He said that the words of Moses were not enough (Matthew 5:21-48).
- He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath—the Lord of a God-given law! (Matthew 12:8).

If he were merely a human, his teaching was arrogant and sinful. But Jesus backed up his words with some amazing actions. "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles" (John 14:11). Miracles can't force anyone to believe, but they can provide powerful supporting evidence.

To show that he had the authority to forgive sins, Jesus healed a paralyzed man (Luke 5:23-25). His miracles give evidence that what he said about himself is true. He has more-than-human power, because he is more than a human. The claims that would have been blasphemous in anyone else were true for Jesus. He could speak like God and act like God because he was God in the flesh.

Who did he think he was?

Jesus had a clear sense of self-identity. Even at age 12, he had a special relationship with his Father in heaven (Luke 2:49). At his baptism, he heard a voice from heaven say that he was God's Son (Luke 3:22). He knew he had a mission to perform (Luke 4:43; 9:22; 13:33; 22:37).

When Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus answered, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:16-17). Jesus was the Son of God. He was the Christ, the Messiah—the person uniquely anointed by God for a special mission.

When Jesus called 12 disciples, one for each tribe of Israel, he did not count himself among the 12. He was above them, for he was above all Israel. He was the maker and builder of the new Israel. At the last Supper, he proclaimed himself to be the basis of the new covenant, a new relationship with God. He saw himself as the focal point of what God was doing in the world.

Jesus spoke boldly against traditions, against laws, against the temple, against religious leaders. He demanded that his followers abandon everything to follow him, to put him first in their lives, to give him complete allegiance. He spoke with the authority of God—but he spoke on his own authority. He had authority equal to God.

Jesus believed that he was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. He was the suffering servant who would die to ransom the people from their sins (Isaiah 53:4-5, 12; Matthew 26:24; Mark 9:12; Luke 22:37; 24:46). He was the king of peace who would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9-10; Matthew 21:1-9). He was the son of man who would be given all power and authority (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 26:64).

Previous life

Jesus claimed to be alive before Abraham was born: “I tell you the truth,” he said, “before Abraham was born, I am!” (John 8:58). The Jewish leaders thought that Jesus was claiming something divine, and they wanted to kill him (v. 59). The phrase “I AM” is an echo of Exodus 3:14, where God revealed his name to Moses: “This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Jesus used this name for himself.

Jesus said he shared glory with God before the world began (John 17:5). John tells us that he existed even in the beginning of time, as the Word (John 1:1). John tells us

that the universe was made through the Word (John 1:3). The Father was the Designer, and the Word was the Creator who carried out the design. “All things were created by him and for him” (Colossians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 8:6). Hebrews 1:2 says that God made the universe through the Son.

Both Hebrews and Colossians tell us that the Son sustains the universe (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17). Both tell us that he is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), “the exact representation of his being” (Hebrews 1:3).

Who is Jesus? He is a divine being who became flesh. He was in the beginning with God; he was the Creator of all, the Author of life (Acts 3:15). He is exactly like God, has glory like God, and has powers that only God has. Little wonder that the disciples concluded that he *was* God, even in the flesh.

Worthy of worship

Jesus was conceived in a supernatural way (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35). He lived without ever sinning (Hebrews 4:15). He was blameless, without impurity (Hebrews 7:26; 9:14). He committed no sin (1 Peter 2:22); in him there was no sin (1 John 3:5); he knew no sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). No matter how tempting the sin was, Jesus always had a greater desire to obey God. His mission was to do God’s will (Hebrews 10:7).

On several occasions, people worshiped Jesus (Matthew 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38). Angels refuse worship (Revelation 19:10), but Jesus did not. Indeed, the angels worship Jesus, the Son of God (Hebrews 1:6). Some prayers are addressed to Jesus (Acts 7:59-60; 2 Corinthians 12:8; Revelation 22:20). He is worthy of worship.

The New Testament gives elaborate praises to Jesus Christ, with doxologies that are normally reserved for God: “To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy

4:18; 2 Pet 3:18; Revelation 1:6). He has the highest title that can ever be given (Ephesians 1:20-21). Even if we call him God, that title is not too high.

In Revelation, equal praise is given to God and to the Lamb, implying equality: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!” (Revelation 5:13). The Son must be given equal honor with the Father (John 5:23). Both God and Jesus are called the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end of everything (Revelation 1:8, 17; 21:6; 22:13).

The New Testament often uses Old Testament passages about God and applies them to Jesus Christ. One of the most striking is this passage about worship: “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11, quoting Isaiah 45:23). Jesus will get the honor and respect that Isaiah said would be given to God.

Isaiah says there is only one Savior—God (Isaiah 43:11; 45:21). Paul just as clearly says that God is Savior and Jesus is Savior (Titus 1:3-4; 2:10, 13). So, is there one Savior, or two? Early Christians concluded that the Father is God and Jesus is God, even though there is only one God, only one Savior. The Father and Son are the same in essence (God), but different in person.

Several other New Testament verses also call Jesus God. John 1:1 says, “the Word was God.” Verse 18 says, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Jesus is the God who made the Father known. After the resurrection, Thomas recognized Jesus as God: “Thomas said to

him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:28).

Paul says that the patriarchs are great because “from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen” (Romans 9:5). In Hebrews, God himself is said to call Jesus God: “About the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever’” (Hebrews 1:8).

“In Christ,” Paul said, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). Jesus Christ is fully divine, and even now has bodily form. He is the exact representation of God—God made flesh. If Jesus were only a human, it would be wrong to put our trust in him. But because he is divine, we are *commanded* to trust in him. He is utterly trustworthy, because he is God.

The divinity of Jesus is crucial for us, for he could reveal God to us accurately only if he is divine (John 1:18; 14:9). Only a divine person could forgive our sins, redeem us, and reconcile us to God. Only a divine person could be the object of our faith, the Lord to whom we give complete allegiance, the Savior we worship in song and prayer.

Truly human, truly God

As you can see from the scripture references above, the biblical information about Jesus is scattered throughout the New Testament. The picture is consistent, but it is not all drawn together in one place. The early church had to put the facts together. They drew these conclusions from the biblical revelation:

- Jesus, the Son of God, is divine.
- The Son of God became genuinely human, but the Father did not.
- The Son of God and the Father are distinct, not the same.
- There is only one God.
- The Son and the Father are persons in that one God.

The council of Nicea (A.D. 325) declared that Jesus, the Son of God, was divine, of the same essence as the Father. The council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) explained that he was also human:

Our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son; the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man... begotten of the Father before all ages as regards his Godhead and... begotten of the Virgin Mary the Theotokos [the "God-Bearer"] as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures... the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one person.

The last part was included because some people said that the divine nature so overpowered Jesus' human nature that he wasn't really human. Others said that the two natures combined to form a third nature, so that Jesus was neither human nor divine. No, the biblical data says that he was truly human, and truly divine, and this is what the church must say, too.

How can this be?

Our salvation depends on Jesus being both human and divine. But how can this be? How can someone infinite become finite? How can the holy Son of God become a human, in the likeness of sinful flesh?

Our question comes mainly because the only humanity that we can see now is woefully corrupt. But this is not the way God made it. Jesus shows us what true humanity is. For one thing, he shows us a person who is completely dependent on the Father. This is the way humanity ought to be.

Jesus also shows us what God is capable of doing. He is able to become part of his creation. He can bridge the gap between the uncreated and the created, between the holy and the sinful. What we might think is impossible, is possible with God. Jesus also shows us what humanity will be in the new creation. When he returns and we are resurrected, we will look like him (1 John 3:2). We will have bodies like his glorious body (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

Jesus is our trailblazer, showing us that the way to God is through Jesus. Because he is human, he sympathizes with our weaknesses, and because he is divine, he effectively intercedes for us at God's right hand (Hebrews 4:15). With Jesus as our Savior, we can be confident that our salvation is secure.

Michael Morrison, 2001

There are many more articles at www.wcg.org/lit/jesus

Numerous theology books give orthodox views on Jesus. You may find the following helpful:

- Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord*. InterVarsity, 1997.
- Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.
- Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker, 1992.

4. God the Holy Spirit

God the Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Godhead, eternally proceeding from the Father through the Son. He is the Comforter promised by Jesus Christ, given by the Father to all believers. The Holy Spirit lives in us, unites us with the Father and the Son, and transforms us into the image of Christ through regeneration, repentance, sanctification, and continual renewal. The Holy Spirit is the Source of inspiration and prophecy throughout the Scriptures, and the Source of unity and communion in the church. He provides spiritual gifts for the work of the gospel, and is the Christian's constant Guide into all truth.

(John 14:16; 15:26; Acts 2:4, 17-19, 38; Matthew 28:19; John 14:17-26, 23; 1 Peter 1:2; Titus 3:5; 2 Peter 1:21; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 2 Corinthians 13:14; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Acts 20:28; John 16:13) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 3)

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God at work—creating, speaking, transforming us, living within us, working in us. Although the Holy Spirit can do this work without our knowledge, it is helpful for us to know more.

The Holy Spirit is God

The Holy Spirit has the attributes of God, is equated with God and does work that only God does. Like God, the Spirit is holy—so holy that insulting the Spirit is just as sinful as trampling the Son of God under foot (Hebrews 10:29). Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable sin (Matthew 12:32). This indicates that the Spirit is holy by nature rather than having an assigned holiness such as the temple had.

Like God, the Holy Spirit is eternal (Hebrews 9:14). Like God, the Holy Spirit is everywhere present (Psalm 139:7-9). Like God, the Holy Spirit knows everything (1 Corinthians 2:10-11; John 14:26). The Holy Spirit creates (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30) and empowers miracles (Matthew 12:28; Romans 15:18-19), doing the work or ministry of God.

Several passages discuss the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as equally divine. In a discussion of spiritual gifts, Paul puts the Spirit, the Lord, and God in parallel constructions (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). He closes a letter with a three-part prayer (2 Corinthians 13:14). Peter begins a letter with a different three-part formula (1 Peter 1:2). These are not proof of unity, but they support it.

The baptismal formula has a stronger indication of unity—"in the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The three have one name, indicating one essence and being.

When the Holy Spirit does something, God is doing it. When the Holy Spirit speaks, God is speaking. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he lied to God (Acts 5:3-4). As Peter said, Ananias did not lie to God's representative, but to God himself. People do not "lie" to an impersonal power.

In one passage, Paul says that Christians are a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19); in another he says that we are God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:16). A temple is for

the worship of a divine being, not an impersonal power. When Paul writes “temple of the Holy Spirit,” he implies that the Holy Spirit is God.

The Holy Spirit and God are also equated in Acts 13:2: “The Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for *me* Barnabas and Saul for the work to which *I* have called them.’” In this verse, the Holy Spirit speaks with personal pronouns, speaking as God. Similarly, the Holy Spirit says that the Israelites “tested and tried me”; the Holy Spirit says that “I was angry.... They shall never enter my rest” (Hebrews 3:7-11).

But the Holy Spirit is not just another name for God. The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son, as shown in Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). The three are distinct, but one.

The Holy Spirit does the work of God in our lives. We are born of God (John 1:12), which is the same as being born of the Spirit (John 3:5). The Holy Spirit is the means by which God lives in us (Ephesians 2:22; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). The Holy Spirit lives in us (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16)—and because the Spirit lives in us, we can say that *God* lives in us.

The Spirit is personal

Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as having personal characteristics.

- The Spirit lives (Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 3:16).
- The Spirit speaks (Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 21:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:7; etc.).
- The Spirit sometimes uses the personal pronoun “I” (Acts 10:20; 13:2).
- The Spirit may be spoken to, tested, grieved, insulted or blasphemed (Acts 5:3, 9; Ephesians 4:30; Hebrews 10:29; Matthew 12:31).
- The Spirit guides, intercedes, calls

and commissions (Romans 8:14, 26; Acts 13:2; 20:28).

Romans 8:27 refers to the “mind” of the Spirit. He makes judgments—a decision “seemed good” to the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). The Spirit “knows” and “determines” (1 Corinthians 2:11; 12:11). This is not an impersonal power.

Jesus called the Holy Spirit the *parakletos*—translated as the Comforter, the Advocate or the Counselor. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another Counselor* to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16-17). Like Jesus, the disciples’ first Counselor, the Holy Spirit teaches, testifies, convicts, guides and reveals truth (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13-14). These are personal roles.

John uses the masculine form of the Greek word *parakletos*; it was not necessary to use a neuter word. In John 16:14, masculine pronouns (he) are used even after the neuter word “Spirit” is mentioned. It would have been easy to switch to neuter pronouns (it), but John does not. The Spirit may be called *he*. However, grammar is relatively unimportant; what is important is that the Holy Spirit has personal characteristics. He is not an impersonal power, but the intelligent and divine Helper who lives within us.

The Spirit in the Old Testament

The Bible does not have a section titled “The Holy Spirit.” We learn about the Spirit a little here and a little there, as Scripture happens to mention what the Spirit does. The Old Testament gives us only a few glimpses.

The Spirit was involved in creating and sustaining all life (Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4; 34:14). The Spirit of God filled Bezalel with skill to build the tabernacle (Exodus 31:3-5). He filled Moses and came upon the 70 elders (Numbers 11:25). He filled Joshua with wisdom and filled leaders such as Samson

with strength or ability to fight (Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 6:34; 14:6).

God's Spirit was given to Saul and later taken away (1 Samuel 10:6; 16:14). The Spirit gave David plans for the temple (1 Chronicles 28:12). The Spirit inspired prophets to speak (Numbers 24:2; 2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Chronicles 12:18; 2 Chronicles 15:1; 20:14; Ezekiel 11:9; Zechariah 7:12; 2 Peter 1:21).

In the New Testament, too, the Spirit caused people to speak, including Elizabeth, Zechariah and Simeon (Luke 1:41, 67; 2:25-32). John the Baptist was filled with the Spirit even from birth (Luke 1:15). His most important work was announcing the arrival of Jesus, who would baptize people not only with water, but with "the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

The Spirit and Jesus

The Holy Spirit was involved throughout Jesus' life. The Spirit caused his conception (Matthew 1:20), descended on him at his baptism (Matthew 3:16), led him into the desert (Luke 4:1) and anointed him to preach the gospel (Luke 4:18). Jesus drove out demons by the Spirit of God (Matthew 12:28). It was through the Spirit that he offered himself as a sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 9:14) and by that same Spirit was raised from the dead (Romans 8:11).

Jesus taught that the Spirit would speak through his disciples in times of persecution (Matthew 10:19-20). He told them to baptize followers in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). He said that God was certain to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13).

Jesus' most important teachings about the Holy Spirit come in the Gospel of John. First, people must be "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). People need a spiritual renewal, and this does not come from inside

themselves: it is a gift of God. Although spirit can't be seen, the Holy Spirit does make a difference in our lives (verse 8).

Jesus also taught, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:37-38). John adds this explanation: "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive" (verse 39). The Holy Spirit satisfies an internal thirst. He gives us the relationship with God that we were created for. We receive the Spirit by coming to Jesus, and the Spirit can fill our lives.

John also tells us, "Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified" (verse 39). The Spirit had already filled various men and women before Jesus, but the Spirit would soon come in a new and more powerful way—on Pentecost. The Spirit is now given on a far larger scale: to all who call on the name of the Lord (Acts 2:38-39).

Jesus promised that his disciples would be given the Spirit of truth, who would live in them (John 14:16-18). This is equivalent to Jesus himself coming to his disciples (verse 18), because he is the Spirit of Christ as well as the Spirit of the Father—sent by Jesus as well as the Father (John 15:26). The Spirit makes Jesus available to everyone and continues his work.

Jesus promised that the Spirit would teach the disciples and remind them of what Jesus had taught (John 14:26). The Spirit taught them things that they could not understand before Jesus' resurrection (John 16:12-13).

The Spirit testifies about Jesus (John 15:26; 16:14). He does not promote himself, but leads people to Jesus Christ and the Father. He does not speak on his own, but only as the Father wants (John 16:13). And

because the Spirit can live in millions of people, it is for our good that Jesus left and sent the Spirit to us (John 16:7).

The Spirit works in evangelism, convicting the world of their sin, their guilt, their need for righteousness, and the certainty of judgment (verses 8-10). The Holy Spirit points people to Jesus as the solution to guilt and the source of righteousness.

The Spirit and the church

John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize people in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). This happened on the day of Pentecost after his resurrection, when the Spirit dramatically gave new power to the disciples (Acts 2). This included speaking that was understood by people from other nations (verse 6). Similar miracles happened on a few other occasions as the church grew (Acts 10:44-46; 19:1-6). As a historian, Luke reports the unusual as well as the more typical events. There is no indication that these miracles happened to all new believers.

Paul says that all believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit into one body—the church (1 Corinthians 12:13). Everyone who has faith is given the Holy Spirit (Romans 10:13; Galatians 3:14). Whether miracles happen to them or not, all believers have been baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is not necessary to seek any particular miracle as proof of this.

The Bible does not command any believer to seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Instead, every believer is encouraged to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)—to be fully responsive to the Spirit's lead. This is a continuing duty, not a one-time event.

Rather than seeking a miracle, we are to seek God, and leave it to God's decision as to whether miracles happen. Paul often describes the power of God not in terms of miracles, but in inner strength—hope, love,

patience, serving, understanding, suffering and preaching boldly (Romans 15:13; 2 Corinthians 12:9; Ephesians 3:7, 16-18; Colossians 1:11, 28-29; 2 Timothy 1:7-8). That is the power of God at work in human lives.

The book of Acts shows that the Spirit is the power behind the church's growth. The Spirit gave the disciples power to testify about Jesus (verse 8). He gave the disciples great boldness in preaching Christ (Acts 4:8, 31; 6:10). He gave instructions to Philip and later transported him (Acts 8:29, 39).

The Spirit encouraged the church and set leaders in it (Acts 9:31; 20:28). He spoke to Peter and to the church at Antioch (10:19; 11:12; 13:2). He inspired Agabus to predict a famine and Paul to pronounce a curse (11:28; 13:9). He led Paul and Barnabas on their journeys (13:4; 16:6-7) and helped the Jerusalem council come to a decision (15:28). He sent Paul to Jerusalem and warned him what would happen (20:22-23; 21:11). The church existed and grew only through the Spirit working in the believers.

The Spirit and believers today

God the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the life of believers today.

- He leads us to repentance and gives us new life (John 16:8; 3:5-6).
- He lives in us, teaches us and leads us (1 Corinthians 2:10-13; John 14:16-17, 26; Romans 8:14). He leads us through Scripture, prayer and other Christians.
- He is the Spirit of wisdom, helping us look at choices with confidence, love and self-control (Ephesians 1:17; 2 Timothy 1:7).
- The Spirit circumcises our hearts, seals us and sanctifies us, setting us apart for God's purpose (Romans 2:29; Ephesians 1:14).
- He produces in us love and the fruit of righteousness (Romans 5:5; Ephesians 5:9; Galatians 5:22-23).

- He puts us into the church and helps us know that we are God's children (1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:14-16).

We are to worship God "by the Spirit," with our minds set on what the Spirit wants (Philippians 3:3; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Romans 7:6; 8:4-5). We strive to please him (Galatians 6:8). If we are controlled by the Spirit, he gives us life and peace (Romans 8:6). He gives us access to the Father (Ephesians 2:18). He helps us in our weakness, interceding for us (Romans 8:26-27).

The Holy Spirit also gives spiritual gifts, including leaders for the church (Ephesians 4:11), basic functions within the church (Romans 12:6-8), and some abilities for extraordinary purposes (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). No one has every gift, nor is any gift given to everyone (verses 28-30). All gifts, whether spiritual or "natural," are to be used for the common good, to help the entire church (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:12). Every gift is important (12:22-26).

Now, we have only the firstfruits of the Spirit, only a deposit that guarantees much more in our future (Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14).

In summary, the Holy Spirit is God at work in our lives. Everything God does is done through his Spirit. Paul therefore encourages us: "Let us keep in step with the Spirit.... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.... Do not put out the Spirit's fire" (Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Be attentive to what the Spirit says. When he speaks, God is speaking.

Michael Morrison, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/God for more articles about the Trinity.

You may also find these books helpful:

- Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1992.
- Donald G. Bloesch, *The Holy Spirit: Works and Gifts*. InterVarsity, 2000.
- Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons*. Baker, 1995.

5. The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God in the broadest sense is God's supreme sovereignty. God's reign is now manifest in the church and in the life of each believer who is submissive to his will. The kingdom of God will be fully manifest over the whole world after the return of Jesus Christ when all things will become subject to it.

(Psalms 2:6-9; 93:1-2; Luke 17:20-21; Daniel 2:44; Mark 1:14-15; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Revelation 11:15; 21:3, 22-27; 22:1-5) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 3)

The present and future kingdom of God

“**R**epent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed the nearness of God's kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). A literal translation is “has come near.” The long-awaited rule of God was near. This message was called the gospel, the *good* news. Thousands were eager to hear and respond to this message of John and Jesus.

But consider for a moment what the response would have been like if they had preached, “The kingdom of God is 2,000 years away.” The message would have been disappointing, and public response would also have been disappointing. Jesus may not have been popular, Jewish religious leaders might not have been jealous, and Jesus might not have been crucified. “The kingdom of God is far away” would have been neither *news* nor *good*.

John and Jesus preached a soon-coming kingdom, something that was near in time to their audiences. The message said something about what people should do *now*; it had immediate relevance and urgency. It aroused interest—and jealousy. By proclaiming that changes were needed in government and in religious teachings, the message challenged the *status quo*.

First-century Jewish expectations

Many first-century Jews knew the phrase “kingdom of God.” They eagerly wanted God to send them a leader who would throw off Roman rule and make Judea an independent nation again—a nation of righteousness, glory and blessings, a nation everyone would be attracted to.

Into this climate—eager but vague expectations of God-ordained intervention—John and Jesus preached the nearness of God's kingdom. “The kingdom of God has come near you,” Jesus told his disciples to say after they healed the sick (Matthew 10:7; cf. Luke 10:9, 11).

But the hoped-for kingdom did not happen. The Jewish nation was not restored. Even worse, the temple was destroyed and the Jews were scattered. The Jewish hopes are *still* unfulfilled. Was Jesus wrong in his prediction, or was he *not* predicting a national kingdom?

Jesus' kingdom was *not* like the popular expectation—as we might guess from the fact that many Jews wanted him dead. His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). When he talked about the “kingdom of God,” he used a phrase the people knew well, but he gave it new meaning. He told Nicodemus

that God's kingdom was invisible to most people (John 3:3)—to understand it or experience it, a person must be renewed by God's Spirit (verse 6). The kingdom of God was a spiritual kingdom, not a physical organization.

Present condition of the kingdom

In the Olivet prophecy, Jesus announced that the kingdom would come after certain signs and apocalyptic events. But some of Jesus' teachings and parables explain that the kingdom does *not* come in a dramatic way. The seed grows quietly (Mark 4:26-29); the kingdom starts as small as a mustard seed (verses 30-32) and is hidden like yeast (Matthew 13:33). These parables suggest that the kingdom is a reality *before* it comes in a powerful and dramatic way. In addition to being a future reality, it has reality right now.

Let's look at some verses that indicate the kingdom is already functioning. In Mark 1:15, John announced, "The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near." Both these verbs are in the past perfect tense, which indicates that something has happened and its results continue. The time had come not just for the announcement but also *for the kingdom*.

Jesus said, after casting out demons, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:28, Luke 11:20). The kingdom is here, he said, and the proof is in the exorcisms. This proof continues in the church today, because the church is doing even greater works than Jesus did (John 14:12). We can also say, "If we cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is working here." The kingdom of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is continuing to demonstrate its authoritative power over the kingdom of Satan.

Satan still exerts some influence, but he has been defeated and condemned (John 16:11). He has been partially restrained (Mark 3:27). Jesus overcame Satan's world (John 16:33), and with God's help we are overcoming it, too (1 John 5:4). But not everyone does. In this age, the kingdom contains both good and bad (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 24:45-51; 25:1-12, 14-30). Satan is still influential; we still look forward to the glorious future of the kingdom.

The kingdom active in the teachings

"The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing," Jesus said in Matthew 11:12. And forceful people are laying hold of it. These verbs are in the present tense—the kingdom existed in Jesus' day. A parallel verse, Luke 16:16, also uses present-tense verbs: "everyone is forcing his way into it." We don't need to decide who the forceful people are or why they use force—what is important here is that these verses talk about the kingdom as a present reality.

Luke 16:16 replaces the first part of the verse with "the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached." This variation suggests that the kingdom's advance in this age is, for practical purposes, roughly equivalent to its proclamation. The kingdom *is*—it already exists—and it is advancing by being preached.

In Mark 10:15, Jesus indicates that the kingdom is something we must *receive* in some way, apparently in this life. How is the kingdom present? The details are not yet clear, but the verses we have looked at say it *is* present.

The kingdom is among us

Some Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom would come (Luke 17:20). You can't see it, replied Jesus. But Jesus also said, "The kingdom of God is within [NIV

footnote: among] you” (verse 21). Jesus was the King, and because he was teaching and performing miracles among them, the kingdom was among the Pharisees. Jesus Christ is in us today, too, and just as the kingdom was present in the ministry of Jesus, it is present in the ministry of his church. The King is among us; his spiritual power is in us, even though the kingdom is not yet operating in its full power.

We have already been brought into God’s kingdom (Colossians 1:13). We are already receiving a kingdom, and our proper response is reverence and awe (Hebrews 12:28). Christ “has made us [past tense] to be a kingdom” (Revelation 1:6). We *are* a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9)—already and currently a holy kingdom—but it does not yet appear what we shall be. God has rescued us from the dominion of sin and transferred us into his kingdom, under his ruling authority.

The kingdom of God is *here*, Jesus said. His audience did not need to wait for a conquering Messiah—God is already ruling, and we should be living his way now. We don’t yet possess a territory, but we do come under the *reign* of God.

The kingdom of God is yet future

Understanding that the kingdom already exists helps us give greater attention to serving others around us. But we do not forget that the completion of the kingdom is still future. If our only hope is in this age, we don’t have much hope (1 Corinthians 15:19). We do not harbor illusions about bringing the kingdom with human efforts. When we suffer setbacks and persecutions, when we see that most people reject the gospel, we gain strength from the knowledge that the fullness of the kingdom is in a future age.

No matter how much we try to live in a way that reflects God and his kingdom, we cannot transform this world into God’s

kingdom. It must come through dramatic intervention. Apocalyptic events are needed to usher in the new age. Satan must be completely restrained.

Numerous verses tell us that the kingdom of God will be a glorious *future* reality. We know that Christ is a King, and we yearn for the day he will exercise his power in a great and dramatic way to stop human suffering. The book of Daniel predicts a kingdom of God that will rule the earth (Daniel 2:44, 7:13-14, 22); the New Testament Apocalypse describes its arrival (Revelation 11:15, 19:11-16).

We pray for the kingdom to come (Luke 11:2). The poor in spirit and the persecuted await their future “reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:3, 10, 12). People “enter the kingdom” on a future “day” of judgment (Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 13:22-30). Jesus gave one parable because some people thought the kingdom would become powerful right away (Luke 19:11).

In the Olivet prophecy, Jesus described dramatic events that would come before his return in power. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus looked forward to a kingdom in the future (Matthew 26:29).

Paul speaks several times of “inheriting the kingdom of God” as a future experience (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; cf. Ephesians 5:5), and otherwise indicates by his language that he thinks of it as realized only at the end of the age (1 Thessalonians 2:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:5; Colossians 4:11; cf. 2 Timothy 4:1, 18). When Paul wants to focus on the present manifestation of the kingdom, he tends either to introduce the term “justice” or “righteousness” along with “kingdom” (Romans 14:17) or in place of it (Romans 1:17; for the close association of the kingdom and

the justice of God, see Matthew 6:33), or (alternatively) to connect the kingdom with Jesus Christ rather than God the Father (Colossians 1:13). (J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Kingdom of God and the Historical Jesus,” chapter 8 of *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation*, edited by Wendell Willis [Hendrickson, 1987], page 112)

Many “kingdom” scriptures could apply equally to the present kingdom or to the future fulfillment. Lawbreakers will be called least in the kingdom (Matthew 5:19-20). We leave families for the sake of the kingdom (Luke 18:29). We enter the kingdom through tribulations (Acts 14:22). The important thing for this article is that some verses are clearly present tense, and some are clearly future tense.

After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). How was Jesus to answer such a question? What the disciples meant by *kingdom* was not what Jesus had been teaching. The disciples were still thinking in terms of a nationalistic kingdom rather than a slowly growing nation of all ethnic groups. It would take them years to realize that Gentiles were welcome in the new kingdom. Christ’s kingdom was still not of this world, but it was to be active in this age. So Christ did not say *yes* or *no*—he simply told them there was work to do and power to do it (verses 7-8).

The kingdom of God in the past

Matthew 25:34 tells us that the kingdom has been in preparation since the foundation of the world. It has been in existence all along, albeit in different forms. God was a King to Adam and Eve; he gave them dominion or authority to rule; they were his vice-regents in the Garden of Eden. Although

the word “kingdom” is not used, Adam and Eve were in a kingdom of God, under his rule and ownership.

When God promised Abraham that his descendants would become great nations and that kings would come from him (Genesis 17:5-6), he was promising a kingdom of God. But it started small, like yeast hidden in a batch of dough, and it took hundreds of years to be seen for what it was.

When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and made a covenant with them, they became a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), a kingdom that belonged to God and could be called a kingdom of God. The covenant he made with them was similar to treaties powerful kings made with smaller nations. He had saved them, and the Israelites responded—they agreed to be his people. God was their king (1 Samuel 12:12; 8:7). David and Solomon sat on the throne of God, ruling on his behalf (1 Chronicles 29:23). Israel was a kingdom of God.

But the people wouldn’t obey their King. God sent them away, but he promised to restore the nation with a new heart (Jeremiah 31:31-33), a prophecy that has been fulfilled in the church today, which participates in the new covenant. We who have been given the Holy Spirit are the royal priesthood and holy nation that ancient Israel was unable to be (1 Peter 2:9, Exodus 19:6). We are in the kingdom, but there are now weeds growing among the grain. At the end of the age, the Messiah will return in power and glory, and the kingdom of God will again be transformed in appearance. The postmillennial kingdom, in which *everyone* is perfect and spiritual, will be dramatically different from the millennial one.

Since the kingdom has historical continuity, it is proper to speak of it in past, present and future tenses. In its historical development, it has had and will continue to

have major milestones as new phases are established. The kingdom was established at Mt. Sinai; it was established in Jesus' ministry; it will be established at his return, after the judgment. In each phase, God's people rejoice in what they have and look forward to more yet to come. As we now experience some limited aspects of the kingdom, we gain confidence that the future kingdom will also be a reality. The Holy Spirit is our guarantee of greater blessings (2 Corinthians 5:5, Ephesians 1:14).

The kingdom and the gospel

When we hear the word *kingdom*, we are reminded of the kingdoms of this world. *Kingdom* in this world is associated with authority and power, but not harmony and love. *Kingdom* can describe the authority God has in his family, but it does not describe all the blessings God has in store for us. That's why other metaphors are used, too, such as the family term *children*, which emphasizes God's love and authority.

Each term is accurate, but incomplete. If any one term could describe salvation perfectly, the Bible would use that term consistently. But all are metaphors, each describing some aspect of salvation—but none of the terms describes the complete picture. When God commissioned the church to preach the gospel, he did not restrict us to using only the term “kingdom of God.” The apostles translated Jesus' sayings from Aramaic to Greek, and they translated them into other metaphors, especially metaphors that were more meaningful to a non-Jewish audience. Matthew, Mark and Luke use “the kingdom” often. John and the epistles also describe our future, but they prefer other metaphors to do it.

Salvation is a more general term. Paul said we *have been* saved (Ephesians 2:8), *are being* saved (2 Corinthians 2:15) and *shall be*

saved (Romans 5:9). God has given us salvation, and he expects us to respond to him with faith. John wrote of salvation and eternal life as a present reality and possession (1 John 5:11-12) and a future blessing.

Metaphors such as *salvation* and *family of God*—just as much as *kingdom*—are legitimate although partial descriptions of God's plan for us. Christ's gospel can be called the gospel of the kingdom, gospel of salvation, gospel of grace, gospel of God, gospel of eternal life, etc. The gospel is an announcement that we can live with God forever, and it includes information about this is possible—through Jesus Christ our Savior.

When Jesus talked about the kingdom, he didn't emphasize its physical blessings or clarify its chronology. He focused instead on what people should do to be part of it. Tax collectors and prostitutes enter the kingdom of God, Jesus said (Matthew 21:31), and they do it by believing the gospel (verse 32) and by doing what the Father wants (verses 28-31). We enter the kingdom functionally when we respond to God with faith and allegiance.

In Mark 10, a man wanted to inherit eternal life, and Jesus said he should keep the commandments (Mark 10:17-19). Jesus added another command: He told him to give up all his possessions for the heavenly treasure (verse 21). Jesus commented to the disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (verse 23). The disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” (verse 26). In this passage, and in its parallel in Luke 18:18-30, we see several phrases used to indicate the same thing: receive the kingdom, inherit eternal life, have treasure in heaven, enter the kingdom, be saved. When Jesus said, “follow me” (verse 21), he was using another phrase to indicate the same thing: We enter the kingdom by orienting our life to Jesus.

In Luke 12:31-34, Jesus indicates that several phrases are similar: seeking the kingdom, being given the kingdom, having a heavenly treasure, giving up trust in physical possessions. We seek God's kingdom by responding to what Jesus taught. In Luke 21:28, 30, the kingdom is parallel to redemption. In Acts 20:21, 24-25, 32, we learn that Paul preached the gospel of the kingdom, and he preached the gospel of God's grace, repentance and faith. The kingdom is closely connected with salvation—the kingdom would not be worth preaching if we couldn't be part of it, and we can enter it only through faith, repentance and grace, so those are part of any message about God's kingdom. Salvation is a present-tense reality as well as a promise of future blessings.

In Corinth, Paul preached nothing but

Christ and his crucifixion (1 Corinthians 2:2). In Acts 28:23, 29, 31, Luke tells us that Paul in Rome preached both the kingdom and about Jesus and salvation. These are different aspects of the same Christian message.

The kingdom is relevant not merely because it is our future reward, but also because it affects how we live and think in this age. We prepare for the future kingdom by living *in* it now, in accordance with our King's teachings. As we live in faith, we recognize God's rule as a present reality in our own experience, and we continue to hope in faith for a future time when the kingdom will be filled to the full, when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Michael Morrison, 1993

6. Humanity

God created humanity male and female in the image and likeness of God. God blessed them, telling them to multiply and fill the earth. In love, the Lord gave humans power as stewards to subdue the earth and rule its creatures. In Genesis, humanity is the crown of creation; Adam is the first human. Typified by Adam who sinned, humanity lives in rebellion against its Creator, thus spreading sin and death in the world. Despite human sinfulness, humanity continues in and is defined by God's image. Thus all humans, collectively and individually, deserve love, honor, and respect. The eternally perfect image of God is the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the last Adam. God creates through Jesus Christ the new humanity over which sin and death have no power. In Christ, humanity will bear perfectly the image of God.

(Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:3-8; Romans 5:12-21; Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 15:47-49; 1 John 3:2) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 3-4)

What are human beings?

When we look at the heavens, when we consider the moon and stars, when we consider the enormity of the universe and the stupendous powers involved in each star, we might well wonder why God bothers with us at all. We are so small, so limited—like ants scurrying to and fro inside a terrarium. Why should we think that he even looks at this anthill called earth, and why would he even care about each individual ant?

Modern science is expanding our awareness of just how large the universe is, and how powerful each star is. In astronomical terms, humans are no more significant than a few randomly moving molecules—but yet it is humans who are asking the questions of significance. It is humans who develop the science of astronomy, who explore the universe without ever leaving home. It is humans who turn the universe into a springboard for spiritual questions. It hearkens back to Psalm 8:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet (Psalm 8:3-6, NRSV in this article).

Like animals

So, what are human beings? Why does God care about them? They are in some ways like God himself, yet inferior, yet crowned by God himself with honor and glory. Humans are a paradox, a mystery—tainted with evil, and yet believing that they should behave morally. So corrupt in power, but yet having power over other living things. So far below God, and yet called honorable by God himself.

What are human beings? Scientists call us *Homo sapiens*, a member of the animal kingdom. Scripture calls us *nephesh*, a word that is also used for animals. We have spirit in us, just as animals have spirit in them. We are dust, and when we die, we return to the dust, just as animals do. Our anatomy and our physiology is like that of an animal.

But Scripture says that we are much more than animals. There is a *spiritual* aspect to human beings—and science cannot tell us about this spiritual part of life. Nor can philosophy; we cannot come up with reliable answers just by thinking about it. No, this part of our existence must be explained by revelation. Our Creator needs to tell us who we are, what we are supposed to do, and why he cares. We find answers in Scripture.

Genesis 1 tells us that God created all things: light and darkness, land and sea, sun and moon and stars. Pagans worshipped these things as gods, but the true God is so powerful that he can call them into existence just by speaking a word. They are totally under his control. Whether he did it in one day, six days, or six billion years is not nearly as important as the fact *that* he did it. He said it, it was done, and it was good.

As part of all creation, God also created humans, and Genesis tells us that we were created on the same day as the animals. The symbolism of this seems to say that we are in some respects like the animals. That much we can see for ourselves.

The image of God

But the creation of humans is not described in the same way as everything else. There is no, “And God said...and it was so.” Instead, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion’” (Genesis 1:26). Who is this “us”? The text does not explain, but it is clear that humans

are a special creation, made in the “image of God.” What is this “image”? Again, the text does not explain, but it is clear that humans are special.

Many theories have been suggested for what “the image of God” is. Some say it is intelligence, the power of rational thought or speech. Some say it is our social nature, our ability to have a relationship with God, and male and female reflecting relationships within the Godhead. Others suggest it is morality, the ability to make decisions that are good or evil. Some say the image is our dominion over the earth and its creatures, that we are like God’s agents to them. But dominion itself is godly only if done in a moral way.

Exactly what the first readers understood from this phrase is open to question, but it seems to say that humans are in some way like God himself. There is a supernatural significance to who we are, and our importance lies not in being like animals, but in being like God. Genesis does not tell us much more. We learn in Genesis 9:6 that each human is in God’s image even after humanity sinned, and for that reason murder must not be tolerated.

The Old Testament does not mention “the image of God” again, but the New Testament gives more meaning to the phrase. There we learn that Jesus Christ, the perfect image of God, reveals God to us in terms of his self-sacrificial love. We are to conform to the image of Christ, and by doing so we achieve the full potential that God intended for us when he made us in his image. The more we let Jesus Christ live in us, the closer we are to God’s purpose for our lives.

Let’s go back to Genesis, for it tells us more about *why* God cares so much about people. After saying, “Let’s do it,” he did it: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and

female he created them” (Genesis 1:27).

Note here that women and men are both made in the image of God; they have equal spiritual potential. Similarly, social roles do not change a person’s spiritual value—a person of high intelligence does not have more value than one with a low intelligence, nor does a ruler have more value than a servant. We are *all* made in the image and likeness of God, and all humans deserve love, honor and respect.

Genesis then tells us that God blessed the humans, telling them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (v. 28). God’s command is a blessing, which is what we would expect from a gracious God. In love, he gave humans the responsibility to rule the earth and its living things. The humans were his stewards, taking care of his property.

Modern environmentalists sometimes accuse Christianity of being anti-environmental. Does this mandate to “subdue” the earth and to “rule” the animals give humans permission to destroy the ecosystem? Of course not. Humans are to use their God-given power to serve, not to destroy. They are to exercise dominion in the way that God does.

The fact that some humans misuse this power, and misuse this scripture, does not change the fact that God wants us to use it well. If we skip ahead in the story, we will learn that God told Adam to till and *keep* the garden. He could eat the plants, but he was not to use up or destroy the garden.

Life in the garden

Genesis 1 concludes by noting that everything was “very good.” Humanity was the crown, the capstone of creation. This was just the way God wanted it to be—but

anyone who lives in the real world realizes that something is now terribly wrong with humanity. What went wrong? Genesis 2 and 3 explain how an originally perfect creation became marred. Some Christians take the account pretty much at face value; others view it more as a parable. Either way, the theological message is the same.

Genesis tells us that the first humans were named *Adam* (Genesis 5:2), the common Hebrew word for “human.” The name *Eve* is similar to the Hebrew word for *living*—“The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living” (3:20). The names Adam and Eve, to use modern terms, mean Human and Everyone’s Mother. What they did in Genesis 3—sin—is what humanity as a whole has done; the story illustrates why humanity is in a less-than-perfect situation. Humanity is typified by Adam and Eve—humanity lives in rebellion against its Creator, and that is why sin and death characterize all human societies.

Note the way that Genesis 2 sets the scene: an ideal garden, somewhere that no longer exists, watered by a stream. The picture of God shifts from a cosmic commander, to a nearly physical being who walks in a garden, who plants trees, who shapes a person out of the ground, who breathes into his nostrils to give him life. Adam was given something more than animals had, and he became a living soul, a *nephesh*. Yahweh, the personal God, “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (v. 15). He gave Adam instructions about the garden, asked him to name all the animals, and then created a woman to be a human companion for Adam. Again, God became personally involved, physically active in creating the woman.

Eve was a “helper” for Adam, but that word does not imply inferiority. The Hebrew word is most often used for God himself,

who is a helper to humans in our needs. Eve was not invented to do the work Adam didn't want to do—Eve was created to do something that Adam was unable to do on his own. And when Adam saw her, he recognized that she was basically the same as he was, a God-given companion (v. 23).

The narrator concludes chapter 2 on a note of equality: “A man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (vv. 24-25). This is the way that God meant it to be, the way it was before sin entered the picture. Sex was a divine gift, nothing to be ashamed of.

Something went wrong

But now the serpent enters the story. Eve was tempted to do something that God had forbidden. She was invited to follow her emotions, to please herself, instead of trusting the instruction of God. “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate” (3:6).

What went through the mind of Adam? Genesis does not say. The point of the story in Genesis is that *all* humans do what Adam and Eve did—we ignore the word of God and do what we please, making up excuses as we go. We can blame it on the devil if we want to, but the sin is still within us. We want to be wise, but we are foolish. We want to be like God, but we are not willing to be the way he *tells* us to be.

What did the tree stand for? The text does not tell us anything more than “the knowledge of good and evil.” Is it experience? Is it wisdom? It is moral authority? Whatever it represents, the main point seems

to be that it was forbidden, and that it was nevertheless eaten. The people had sinned, had rebelled against their Creator, had chosen to go their own way. They were no longer fit for the garden, no longer fit for “the tree of life.”

The first result of their sin was a changed way of viewing themselves—they saw something wrong with their nakedness (v. 7). Even after making loincloths, they were afraid of being seen by God (v. 10). And they made their lame excuses.

And God explained the consequences: Eve would bear children, which was part of the original plan, but now it would be with great pain. Adam would till the ground, which was part of the original plan, but now it would be with great toil. And they would die. In fact, they were already dead. “In the day that you eat of it you shall die” (2:17). Their true life in union with God was over. All that was left was mere physical existence, far less than the true life God intended. And yet there was potential, for God still had his plans.

There would be struggle between the woman and the man: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16). People who take matters into their own hands (like Adam and Eve did) instead of following instructions are likely to have conflict, and brute strength usually prevails. This is the way society is, once sin has entered the picture.

So the scene has been set: The problem that humans find themselves in is their own fault, not God's. He gave them a perfect start, but they blew it, and everyone ever since has been infected with sin. But despite human sinfulness, humanity continues to be in God's image—tarnished and dented, we might say, but still the same basic image.

This divine potentiality still defines who human beings are, and this brings us to the

words of Psalm 8. The cosmic commander still cares about human beings because he made them a little bit like himself, and he gave them authority over his creation—an authority they still have. There is still honor there, there is still glory, even though we are temporarily lower than we were designed to be. If our vision is good enough to see this picture, it should lead us to praise: “O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, 9). God is to be praised because he has a plan for us.

Christ, the perfect image

Jesus Christ, God made flesh, is the perfect image of God (Colossians 1:15). He was fully human, showing us exactly what a human being ought to be: perfectly obedient, perfectly trusting. Adam was a type of Jesus Christ (Romans 5:14), and Jesus is called “the last Adam” (1 Corinthians 15:45). “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). Jesus restored the life that was lost through sin. He is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25).

What Adam did for physical humanity, Jesus Christ does for the spiritual revision. He is the starting point of the new humanity, the new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). In him, everyone will be made alive again (1 Corinthians 15:22). We are born again. We are starting over, this time on the right foot. Through Jesus Christ, God is creating the new humanity, and sin and death have no power over this re-creation (Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 15:24-26). The victory has been won; the temptation has been rejected.

Jesus is the one we are to trust and the model we are to follow (Romans 8:29-35); we are being transformed into his image (2 Corinthians 3:18), the image of God. Through faith in Christ, through his work in our lives, our imperfections are being stripped away, and we are being brought

closer to what God wants us to be (Ephesians 4:13, 24). We are going from one degree of glory to another—to a much higher glory!

Of course, we do not yet see the image in all its glory, but we are assured that we will. “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust [Adam], we will also bear the image of the man of heaven [Christ]” (1 Corinthians 15:49). Our resurrected bodies will be like Jesus Christ’s: glorious, powerful, spiritual, heavenly, imperishable, immortal (vv. 42-44).

John put it this way: “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2-3). We don’t yet see it, but we know it will happen, for we are God’s children, and he will *make* it happen. We will see Christ in his glory, and that means that we will also have a similar glory, able to see spiritual glory.

And then John adds this pastoral comment: “And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (v. 3). Since we will be like him then, we try to be like him now.

So humanity is a multilevel being: physical and spiritual. Even the natural human is made in God’s image. No matter how much a person sins, the image is still there and the person is of tremendous value. God has a purpose and plan that includes every sinner.

Through faith in Christ, a sinner becomes a new creation, modeled after the second Adam, Jesus Christ. In this age, we are just as physical as Jesus was during his earthly ministry, but we are being re-fashioned into the spiritual image of God. This spiritual change means a change of attitude and behavior, brought about because Christ lives in us and we live by faith in him (Galatians 2:20).

If we are in Christ, we will bear the image of God perfectly in the resurrection. Our minds cannot now fully grasp what that will be like, and we do not know exactly what the “spiritual body” will be, but we know that it will be wonderful. Our gracious and loving God will bless us with as much as we can enjoy, and we will praise him forever!

When you look at others, what do you see? Do you see the image of God, the potential for greatness, the image of Christ being formed? Do you see the beauty of God’s plan at work in giving grace to sinners? Do you rejoice that he redeems a humanity who went astray? Do you rejoice at the majesty of the wonderful plan of God? Do you have the eyes to see?

This is far more wonderful than the stars. It is a far more glorious creation. He has given his word, and it is so, and it is *very* good.

Joseph Tkach, 2000

7. The Holy Scriptures

The Holy Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, the faithful witness to the gospel, and the true and accurate record of God's revelation to humanity. As such, the Holy Scriptures are infallible and are foundational to the church in all matters of doctrine and godly living.

(2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21; John 17:17) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 4)

The written word of God

How do we know who Jesus is, or what he taught? How do we know when a gospel is false? Where is the authority for sound teaching and right living? The Bible is the inspired and infallible record of what God wants us to know and do.

A witness to Jesus

Perhaps you've seen newspaper reports about the "Jesus Seminar," a group of scholars who claim that Jesus didn't say most of the things the Bible says he did. Or perhaps you've heard of other scholars who say that the Bible is a collection of contradictions and myths.

Many well-educated people dismiss the Bible. Many other equally educated people believe it is a trustworthy record of what God has done and said. If we cannot trust what the Bible says about Jesus, for example, then we will know almost nothing about him.

The Jesus Seminar began with a preconceived idea of what Jesus would have taught. They accepted the sayings that fit this idea, and rejected the sayings that didn't, thereby, in effect, creating a Jesus in their own image. This is not good scholarship, and even many liberal scholars disagree with the Seminar.

Do we have good reason to trust the

biblical reports about Jesus? Certainly—they were written within a few decades of Jesus' death, when eyewitnesses were still alive. Jewish disciples often memorized the words of their teachers, so it is quite possible that Jesus' disciples preserved his teachings accurately. We have no evidence that they invented sayings to deal with early church concerns, such as circumcision. This suggests that they are reliable reports of what Jesus taught.

We can also be confident that the manuscripts were well preserved. We have some copies from the fourth century, and smaller sections from the second. This is better than all other historical books. (The oldest copy of Virgil was copied 350 years after Virgil died; of Plato, 1,300 years.) The manuscripts show that the Bible was copied carefully, and we have a highly reliable text.

Jesus' witness to Scripture

Jesus was willing to argue with the Pharisees on many issues, but he did not seem to argue with their view of the Scriptures. Although Jesus disagreed on interpretations and traditions, he apparently agreed with other Jewish leaders that the Scriptures were authoritative for faith and practice.

Jesus expected every word in Scripture to be fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-18; Mark 14:49). He quoted Scripture to prove his points (Matthew 9:13; 22:31; 26:24; 26:31; John 10:34); he rebuked people for not reading Scripture carefully enough (Matthew 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 5:39). He referred to Old Testament people and events without any hint that they were not real.

Scripture had the authority of God behind it. When Jesus answered Satan's temptations, he said, "It is written" (Matthew 4:4-10). The fact that something was written in Scripture meant, for Jesus, that it was an indisputable authority. The words of David were inspired by the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:36); a prophecy was given "through" Daniel (Matthew 24:15) because its real origin was God.

Jesus said in Matthew 19:4-5 that the Creator said in Genesis 2:24: "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife." However, Genesis does not describe this verse as the words of God. Jesus could say that God said it simply because it was in Scripture. The assumption is that God is the ultimate author of all of Scripture.

The evidence throughout the Gospels is that Jesus viewed Scripture as reliable and trustworthy. As he reminded the Jewish leaders, "the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Jesus expected it to be valid; he even upheld the validity of old covenant commands while the old covenant was still in force (Matthew 8:4; 23:23).

Witness of the apostles

The apostles, like their teacher, considered Scripture authoritative. They quoted it repeatedly, often as proof of an argument. The sayings of Scripture are treated as words of God. Scripture is even personalized as the God who spoke to Abraham and Pharaoh

(Romans 9:17; Galatians 3:8). What David or Isaiah or Jeremiah wrote was actually spoken by God, and therefore certain (Acts 1:16; 4:25; 13:35; 28:25; Hebrews 1:6-10; 10:15). The law of Moses is assumed to reflect the mind of God (1 Corinthians 9:9). The real author of Scripture is God (1 Corinthians 6:16; Romans 9:25).

Paul called the Scriptures "the very words of God" (Romans 3:2). Peter says that the prophets "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20). The prophets didn't make it up—God inspired them, and he is the real origin of their words. They often wrote, "the word of the Lord came..." or "Thus says the Lord..."

Paul also told Timothy that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). It is as if God breathed his message through the biblical writers.

However, we must not read into this our modern ideas of what "God-breathed" has to mean. We must remember that Paul said this about the Greek Septuagint *translation* (the Scriptures that Timothy had known since childhood—v. 15), and this translation is in some places considerably different than the Hebrew original. Paul used this translation as the word of God without meaning that it was a perfect text.

Despite its translation discrepancies, it is God-breathed and able to make people "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and it is still able to equip believers "for every good work" (v. 17).

Imperfect communication

The original word of God is perfect, and God is certainly able to cause people to state it accurately, to preserve it accurately and (to complete the communication) make us understand it accurately. But God has not

done all this. Our copies have grammatical errors, copyist errors, and (far more significantly) humans always make errors in receiving the message. There is “noise” that prevents us from hearing perfectly the word God inspired to be written in Scripture. Nevertheless, God uses Scripture to speak to us today.

Despite the “noise” that puts human mistakes between God and us, the purpose of Scripture is accomplished: to tell us about salvation and about right behavior. God accomplishes his purpose in Scripture: he communicates his word to us with enough clarity that we can be saved and we can learn what he wants us to do.

Scripture, even in a translation, is accurate for its purpose. But we would be wrong to expect more from it than God intended. He is not teaching us astronomy or science. The numbers in Scripture are not always mathematically precise by today’s standards. We must look at Scripture for its purpose, not for minor details.

For example, in Acts 21:11, Agabus was inspired to say that the Jews would bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles. Some people might assume that Agabus was specifying who would tie Paul up, and what they would do with him. But as it turns out, Paul was actually rescued by the Gentiles and bound by the Gentiles (21:30-33).

Is this a contradiction? Technically, yes. The prediction was true in principle, but not in the details. Of course, when Luke wrote this, he could have easily doctored the prediction to fit the result, but he was willing to let the differences be seen. He did not expect people to expect precision in such details. This should warn us about expecting precision in all the details of Scripture.

We need to focus on the main point of the message. Similarly, Paul made a mistake when he wrote 1 Corinthians 1:14 — a

mistake he corrected in verse 16. The inspired Scriptures contain both the mistake and the correction.

Some people compare Scripture to Jesus. One is the word of God in human language; the other is the Word made human. Jesus was perfect in the sense that he was sinless, but that does not mean that he never made any mistakes. As a child or even as an adult, he could have made mistakes in grammar and mistakes in carpentry, but such mistakes were not sins. They did not prevent Jesus from his purpose—being the sinless sacrifice for our sins. In the same way, mistakes in grammar and trivial details cannot prevent the Bible from accomplishing its purpose: to teach us about salvation through Christ.

Proof of the Bible

No one can prove that all of the Bible is true. They may show that a particular prophecy came true, but they cannot show that the entire Bible has the same validity. This is based more on faith. We see the historical evidence that Jesus and the apostles accepted the Old Testament as the word of God. The biblical Jesus is the only one we have; other ideas are based on guesswork, not new evidence. We accept the teaching of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would guide the disciples into more truth. We accept the claim of Paul that he wrote with divine authority. We accept that the Bible reveals to us who God is and how we may have fellowship with him.

We accept the testimony of church history, that Christians through the centuries have found the Bible useful for faith and practice. This book tells us who God is, what he did for us, and how we should respond. Tradition also tells us which books are in the biblical canon. We trust that God guided the process so that the end result accomplishes his purpose.

Our experience also testifies to the accuracy of Scripture. This is the book that has the honesty to tell us about our own sinfulness, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience. It gives us moral strength not through rules and commands, but in an unexpected way—through grace and the ignominious death of our Lord.

The Bible testifies to the love, joy and peace we may have through faith—feelings that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption. These aspects of biblical authority cannot be proven to skeptics, but they help verify the Scriptures that tell us these things that we experience.

The Bible does not sugar-coat its heroes, and this also helps us accept it as honest. It tells us about the failings of Abraham, Moses, David, the nation of Israel, and the disciples. The Bible is a word that bears witness to a more authoritative Word, the Word made flesh, and the good news of God's grace.

The Bible is not simplistic; it does not take the easy way out. The New Testament claims both continuity and discontinuity with the old covenant. It would be simpler to eliminate one or the other, but it is more challenging to have both. Likewise, Jesus is presented as both human and divine, a combination that does not fit well into Hebrew, Greek or modern thought. This complexity was not created through ignorance of the philosophical problems, but in spite of them.

The Bible is a challenging book, not likely to be the result of fishermen attempting a fraud or trying to make sense of hallucinations. Jesus' resurrection gives additional weight to the book that announces such an phenomenal event. It gives

additional weight to the testimony of the disciples as to who Jesus was and to the unexpected logic of conquering death through the death of the Son of God.

Repeatedly, the Bible challenges our thinking about God, ourselves, life, right and wrong. It commands respect by conveying truths to us we do not obtain elsewhere. Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the Bible is in its application to our lives.

The testimony of Scripture, of tradition, of personal experience and reason all support the authority of the Bible. The fact that it is able to speak across cultures, to address situations that never existed when it was written, is also a testimony to its abiding authority. The proof of the Bible is conveyed to believers as the Holy Spirit uses it to change their hearts and lives.

Michael Morrison, 2001

The WCG website has numerous articles about the Bible and more than a hundred articles about specific passages of Scripture. See www.wcg.org/lit/bible

You may also find the following helpful:

- Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture*. Inter-Varsity, 1994.
- Paul Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority*. Hendrickson, 1999.
- I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration*. Eerdmans, 1982.
- Robertson McQuilken, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*. Moody, 1992.
- A.B. and A.M. Mickelsen, *Understanding Scripture*. Hendrickson, 1992.
- Stott, John. *Understanding the Bible*. Zondervan, 1999.
- Thompson, Alden. *Inspiration*. Review & Herald, 1991.
- Thompson, David. *Bible Study That Works*. Evangel, 1994.

8. The Church

The church, the Body of Christ, consists of all who have faith in Jesus Christ and in whom the Holy Spirit abides. The church is commissioned to preach the gospel, to teach all that Christ commanded, to baptize, and to nurture the flock. In fulfilling its mission, the church is directed by the Holy Scriptures, led by the Holy Spirit, and looks continually to Jesus Christ, its living Head.

(1 Corinthians 12:13; Romans 8:9; Matthew 28:19-20; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 4)

What is the church?

The Bible says that people who have faith in Christ become part of the “church.” What is the church? How is it organized? What is its purpose?

Jesus is building his church

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The church is important to him—he loved it so much that he gave his life for it (Ephesians 5:25). If we have the mind of Christ, we will love the church, too, and give ourselves to it.

The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, which means an assembly. In Acts 19:39, 41, it is used for a large group of townspeople. But among Christians, the word *ekklesia* came to have a special meaning: all who believe in Jesus Christ.

For example, the first time that Luke uses the word, he writes, “great fear seized the whole church” (Acts 5:11). He does not have to explain what the word meant, for his readers were already familiar with it. It meant all Christians, not just those who happened to be there on that particular occasion. “The church” means all disciples of Christ. It refers to people, not to a building.

Each local group of believers is a church. Paul wrote to “the church of God in

Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2); he referred to “all the churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16) and the “church of the Laodiceans” (Colossians 4:16). But he could also use the word *church* to refer to all believers everywhere: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

The church exists in several levels. At one level is the universal church, which includes everyone worldwide who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Local churches are a different level, including people who regularly meet together. Denominations are an intermediate level, containing groups of congregations that work more closely together because of shared history and beliefs.

Local congregations sometimes include unbelievers—family members who have not accepted Jesus as Savior, yet nevertheless meet regularly with believers. Local congregations may also include people who consider themselves to be Christians, but may not be. Experience shows that some of these will later admit that they were not really Christians.

Why we need the church

Many people claim to believe in Jesus

Christ but do not want to attend any of his churches. The New Testament shows that the normal pattern is for believers to meet together (Hebrews 10:25).

Paul repeatedly exhorts Christians to do different things to “one another” (Romans 12:10; 15:7; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:32; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:13). It is difficult for people to obey these commands if they do not meet with other believers.

A local congregation can give us a sense of belonging, of being involved with other believers. It can give us some spiritual safety, so that we are not blown around by strange ideas. A congregation can give us friendship, fellowship and encouragement. It can teach us things we would never learn on our own. A congregation can help train our children, help us work together for more effective ministry and give us opportunities to serve that help us grow in ways we did not expect. In general, the value that we get out of a local congregation is in proportion to the amount of involvement we give to it.

But perhaps the most important reason for each believer to participate in a local congregation is that members need each other. God has given different abilities to different believers, and he wants us to work together “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). If only part of the work force shows up, it is no surprise that the congregation is not able to do as much as we would like, or to be as healthy as we would like. Unfortunately, some people find it easier to criticize than to help.

Our time, our abilities, our resources are needed to fulfill the work and mission of the church. The commitment of mission-focused people is essential in order for the church to effectively reflect Jesus and his love to the world. Jesus said to pray for laborers (Matthew 9:38). He wants each of us to be

working, not sitting on the sidelines.

Individuals who try to be Christian without the church fail to use their strengths to help the people the Bible says we should be helping. The church is a mutual-aid society, and we help each other, knowing that the day may come (and in fact is already here) that we will need to be helped.

Descriptions of the church

The church is described in several ways: the people of God, the family of God, the bride of Christ. We are a building, a temple and a body. Jesus described us as sheep, a field of grain and a vineyard. Each analogy describes a different aspect of the church.

Many of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom describe the church, too. Like a mustard seed, the church started small and yet has grown quite large (Matthew 13:31-32). The church is like a field in which weeds are scattered among the wheat (vv. 24-30). It is like a fishnet that catches bad fish as well as good (vv. 47-50). The church is like a vineyard in which some people work a long time and others only a short time (Matthew 20:1-16). The church is like servants who were given money to invest for the master, and some produce more fruit than others (Matthew 25:14-30).

Jesus described himself as a shepherd, and his disciples as sheep (Matthew 26:31); his mission was to seek lost sheep (Matthew 18:11-14). He described his people as sheep that must be fed and cared for (John 21:15-17). Paul and Peter used the same analogy, saying that church leaders should be shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

“You are...God’s building,” Paul says (1 Corinthians 3:9). The foundation is Jesus Christ (v. 11), and people are the building built on it. Peter said that we are all “living stones...being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). As we are built together, we

“become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). We are the temple of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19). Although God may be worshiped in any place, the church has worship as one of its purposes.

We are “the people of God,” 1 Peter 2:10 tells us. We are what the people of Israel were supposed to be: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (v. 9; see Exodus 19:6). We belong to God, because Christ purchased us with his blood (Revelation 5:9). We are his children, and his family (Ephesians 3:15). As his people, we are given a great inheritance, and in response we are to try to please him and bring praise to his name.

Scripture also calls us the bride of Christ—a phrase that suggests his love for us, and a tremendous change within ourselves, that we might have such a close relationship with the Son of God. In some of his parables, people are invited to attend the wedding banquet, but in this analogy, we are invited to be the bride.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). How do we become ready for this? It is a gift: “Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear” (v. 8). Christ cleanses us “by the washing with water through the word” (Ephesians 5:26). He presents the church to himself, having made her radiant, spotless, holy and righteous (v. 27). He is working in us.

Working together

The picture of the church that best illustrates the way that members relate to one another is that of the body. “You are the body of Christ,” Paul says, “and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus Christ “is the head of the body, the

church” (Colossians 1:18), and we are all members of the body. If we are united to Christ, we are united to one another, too, and we have responsibilities to one another.

No one can say, “I don’t need you” (1 Corinthians 12:21), and no one can say, “I don’t belong in the church” (v. 18). God distributes our abilities so that we work together for the common good, helping one another and being *helped* by working together. “There should be no division in the body” (v. 25). Paul frequently warned against the sin of divisiveness, even saying that a person who causes division should be put out of the church (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10). Christ causes the church to grow “as each part does its work”—as the various members cooperate (Ephesians 4:16).

Unfortunately, the Christian world is divided into denominations that sometimes squabble with one another. The church is not yet perfect, since none of its members is perfect. Nevertheless, Christ wants the church to be united (John 17:21). This does not require a merger of organizations, but it does suggest a common purpose.

True unity can be found only as we draw closer to Christ, preach his gospel, and live as he would. The goal is to promote him, not ourselves. The existence of different denominations has a side benefit, however: Through diverse approaches, more people are reached with the message of Christ in a way they understand.

Organization

The Christian world has three basic approaches to church organization and leadership: hierarchy, democracy and representative. These are called episcopal, congregational and presbyterian.

Variations exist within each type, but in general, the episcopal model means that a denominational officer has the power to set

policy and ordain pastors. In the congregational model, church members choose their policies and their pastors. In a presbyterian system, power is divided between the denomination and the congregations. Elders are elected and given power to govern.

The New Testament does not require any particular church structure. It talks about overseers (bishops), elders and shepherds (pastors) as if these were different words for the same type of church leader. Peter told the elders to be shepherds and overseers (1 Peter 5:1-2). Similarly, Paul told a group of elders that they were overseers and shepherds (Acts 20:17, 28).

The Jerusalem church was led by a group of elders; the church in Philippi was led by several overseers (Acts 15:2-6; Philippians 1:1). Paul told Titus to ordain elders, wrote one verse about elders and then several about overseers, as if these were synonymous terms for church leaders (Titus 1:5-9). In the book of Hebrews, the leaders are simply called “leaders” (Hebrews 13:7).

Some church leaders were also called “teachers” (1 Corinthians 12:29; James 3:1). The grammar of Ephesians 4:11 implies that pastors and teachers were in the same category. One of the primary functions of a church leader is teaching—one of the qualifications for leadership is that the person must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

One thing is consistent in this: Certain people were designated as leaders. The local churches had some organization, though the exact title didn’t seem to matter much.

Members were exhorted to respect and obey these leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17). If the leader commands something wrong, members should not obey, but for the most part, members are to support their leaders.

What do leaders do? They “direct the

affairs of the church” (1 Timothy 5:17). They shepherd the flock, leading by example and by teaching. They watch over the church (Acts 20:28). They should not lord it over others, but serve them (1 Peter 5:2-3). They are to “prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

How are leaders chosen? We are told in only a few cases: Paul appointed elders (Acts 14:23), implied that Timothy would choose overseers (1 Timothy 3:1-7), and authorized Titus to appoint elders (Titus 1:5). At least in these cases, there was a hierarchy. We do not find any examples of church members choosing their own elders.

Deacons

However, in Acts 6:1-6 we see members choosing some leaders to help distribute food to the needy, and the apostles then appointed them for this work. In that way the apostles could concentrate on spiritual matters, and the physical needs could also be taken care of (v. 2). This distinction between spiritual leadership and physical leadership is also seen in 1 Peter 4:11-12.

Leaders who serve in manual work are often called deacons, from the Greek word *diakoneo*, which means to serve. Although all members and leaders are to serve, some are specifically appointed for service roles. At least one woman is called a deacon (Romans 16:1). Paul gave Timothy a list of traits needed in a deacon (1 Timothy 3:8-12), but he did not specify what they did. Consequently different denominations assign them different roles, ranging from custodial work to financial management.

The important thing in leadership is not what people are called, how they are structured or how they are appointed. The important thing is the purpose of leadership:

to help God's people grow in maturity we become more like Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Purposes of the church

Christ has built his church, given his people gifts and leadership, and he has given us work to do. What are the purposes of the church?

A major purpose of the church is worship. God has called us that we “may declare the praises of him” who called us “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). God seeks people who will worship him (John 4:23), who will love him above everything else (Matthew 4:10). Everything we do, whether as individuals or as a congregation, should be for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). We are called to “continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise” (Hebrews 13:15).

We are commanded, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). When we gather, we sing praises to God, we pray to him and we listen to his word. These are forms of worship. So is the Lord's Supper, so is baptism and so is obedience.

Teaching is another purpose of the church. It is at the heart of the Great Commission: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Church leaders should teach, and members should teach one another (Colossians 3:16). We should encourage one another (1 Corinthians 14:31; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:25). Small groups provide an excellent setting for this mutual ministry.

If we want to be spiritual, Paul says, we should want to “build up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). The goal is to edify, strengthen, encourage and comfort (v. 3). The entire meeting should “be done for the strengthening of the church” (v. 26). We are to be disciples, people who learn and apply

the word of God. The early church was praised because they “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Ministry is a third major purpose of the church. Paul writes, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). Our first duty is to our family, and then to the church and then to the world around us. The second-greatest commandment is to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39).

This world has many physical needs, and we should not ignore them. But the greatest need is the gospel, and we should not ignore that, either. As part of our ministry to the world, the church is to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. No other organization will do this work—it is the mission of the church. Every worker is needed—some on the front lines, and some in support. Some will plant, some will nurture and some will harvest, and as we work together, Christ will cause the church to grow (Ephesians 4:16).

Michael Morrison, 2001

There are numerous articles about the church and its ministries at www.wcg.org/lit/church

You may also find helpful:

- Donald Bloesch, *The Church*. InterVarsity, 2002.
- Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*. Eerdmans, 2000.

9. The Christian

The Christian is any person who trusts in Jesus Christ. The Christian experiences a new birth through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit and is placed through adoption into a right relationship with God and fellow humans by God's grace. The Christian's life is characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

(Romans 10:9-13; Galatians 2:20; John 3:5-7; Mark 8:34; John 1:12-13; 3:16-17; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:9, 14-15; John 13:35; Galatians 5:22-23) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 4)

On being a child of God

Jesus' disciples sometimes had delusions of self-importance. They once asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (Matthew 18:1). In other words, what personal characteristics are the best examples of what God wants in his people?

It is a good question, and Jesus used it to make an important point: "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 3).

The disciples must have been surprised, even puzzled. Perhaps they had been thinking of people such as Elijah, who called down fire from heaven to consume some enemies, or a zealous person like Phinehas, who killed compromisers (Numbers 25:7-8). Were they the greatest in the history of God's people?

But their idea of greatness was misguided. Jesus said that what God wants most in his people is not bravado, not spectacular works, but childlikeness. In fact, if we do not become like little children, we will not be in the kingdom at all!

In what way are we to be like children? Are we to be immature, childish, un-informed? No. We are to put childish ways behind us (1 Corinthians 13:11). We are to discard some characteristics of children,

while keeping others.

One characteristic we need is humility, as Jesus says in verse 4: "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The humble person is, in God's way of thinking, the greatest—the best example of what God wants in his people.

This is because humility is characteristic of God himself. God is willing to give up his privileges for our salvation. What Jesus did in becoming flesh was not some strange aberration in God's nature—it was a revelation of what God is like all the time. God wants us to be like Christ, willing to give up privileges to serve others.

Some children are humble, but others are not. Jesus used one particular child to make a point: We are to see ourselves in certain respects as like children—particularly in our relationship to God.

Jesus also pointed out that as children, we ought to *welcome* children (verse 5), and he probably meant this both literally and figuratively. Adults should be attentive to and respectful of young people. We should also welcome and respect people who are young in the faith, immature in their relationship to God and in their understanding.

Humility involves not only our relationship with God, but also with other people.

Abba, Father

Jesus knew that he had a unique relationship with God. Only he knew the Father well enough to reveal him to others (Matthew 11:27). Jesus called God by the Aramaic word *Abba*, an affectionate word that children and adults used for their fathers. Perhaps the best modern equivalent is “Dad.”

In prayer, Jesus talked to his Dad, asking him for help and giving him thanks for whatever he had. Jesus says that we do not have to flatter our way into an audience with the King. He’s our Dad, and we can talk to him because he is our Dad. He has given us that right, so we can be confident that he hears us.

Although we are not children of God in exactly the same way that Jesus is the Son, Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God as their Abba. Many years later, Paul could assume that the Roman church, more than a thousand miles from Aramaic-speaking lands, called God by the Aramaic word Abba (Romans 8:15).

Using the word Abba isn’t required in prayers today, but the widespread use of the word in the early church shows that it made an impression on the disciples. They had been given an especially close relationship with God, a relationship that gave them guaranteed access to God through Jesus Christ.

The word Abba was distinctive. Other Jews didn’t pray like that, but the disciples of Jesus did. They knew that God was their Dad. They were children of the King, not just members of a chosen nation.

Rebirth and adoption

The apostles used several metaphors to help communicate the new fellowship that

believers have with God. A term like *redemption* conveyed the idea that we belong to God. We were redeemed from the slave-market of sin through an enormous price—the death of Jesus Christ. The “price” wasn’t paid to anyone in particular, but it did convey the idea that there was a cost involved in our salvation.

A term such as *reconciliation* emphasized the fact that we were once enemies of God, and are now restored to friendship through Jesus Christ. His death allowed our sins, which separated us from God, to be wiped off the record. God did this for us, because we were completely unable to do it ourselves.

The analogies that Scripture gives us are analogies, and the fact that several are used indicates that none of them gives us the complete picture. This is especially true when it comes to two analogies that would otherwise be mutually contradictory: first, that we are born from above as children of God, and then, that we are adopted.

Both these analogies tell us something important about our salvation. Being born again tells us that there is a radical change in who we are as human beings, a change that begins small and grows in our lives. We are new creations, new people, living in a new age.

Adoption tells us that we were once strangers to the kingdom, but now, by God’s decision, attested by the Holy Spirit, we are declared God’s children, with full rights of inheritance and identity. We who were once far off have been brought near through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In him we die, yet because of him we do not have to die. In him we live, yet it is not we who live, but we are new people, being created by the Spirit of God.

Each metaphor has its value, and each has its weakness. Nothing in the physical or

social world can fully convey what God is doing in our lives. But these are the analogies he has given us, and one of the most consistent images that Scripture uses is that we are children of God.

Become as children

God is Creator, Sustainer and King, but far more importantly for us, he is Dad. It's an intimate bond, expressed in the most important relationship of first-century culture.

In that society, you were known by your dad. Your name was, for example, Joseph son of Eli. Your place in society was determined by your dad. Your economic status, your occupation, your future spouse, were determined by your dad. If you inherited anything, it was from your dad.

In modern society, mothers play a more prominent role, and many people today have a better relationship with mom than with dad. If the Bible were being written today, maternal metaphors might be more common. But in Bible times, father metaphors were more important.

God sometimes reveals himself with maternal characteristics, but he always calls himself a Father. If our relationship with our dad is good, then the analogy works well. But if our relationship with our dad is bad, then we will have to think harder to see what God is trying to communicate to us.

We are not to judge God as no better than the father we know, but to think more creatively, to the idealized parental relationship that no human being ever matches up to. God is better than the best.

As children of God, in what way do we look to God as our Dad?

- God loves us deeply, and sacrifices to prepare us for success. He made us to be like himself, and he wants us to succeed. Often, it is only when we are parents ourselves that we can appreciate how much our own parents

did for us. In our relationship with God, we can only dimly perceive all that he goes through for our good.

- We look to God in faith, as totally dependent on him. We are not self-sufficient. We trust him to provide our needs and guide us in life.

- We have day-to-day security, knowing that an all-powerful God is looking out for us. He knows our needs, whether for daily bread or for emergency assistance. We do not need to worry, because Dad will take care of us.

- As children we are guaranteed a future in God's kingdom. To use another analogy, we'll be fabulously wealthy—living in a city in which gold is as plentiful as dirt, where we will have spiritual wealth of far greater value than anything we know now.

- We have confidence and courage. We can preach with boldness, without fear of persecution. Even though we may be killed, we do not fear, for we have a Dad no one can take away from us.

- We can face our trials with optimism. We know that our Dad allows difficulties to discipline us so we will be better in the long run (Hebrews 12:5-11). We are confident that he is working in our lives, that he will not disown us.

These are enormous benefits. Perhaps you can think of more. But I am sure that there is nothing better in all the universe than being a child of God. That is the greatest blessing of the kingdom of God. When we become like little children, we become heirs to all the joy and blessings of the eternal kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Joseph Tkach, 2001

10. The Angelic Realm

Angels are created ministering spirits, endowed with free will. The holy angels serve God as messengers and agents, are appointed to attend to those who will obtain salvation, and will accompany Christ at his return. The disobedient angels are called demons, evil spirits, and unclean spirits.

(Hebrews 1:14; Revelation 1:1; 22:6; Matthew 25:31; 2 Peter 2:4; Mark 1:23; Matthew 10:1) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 4-5)

What the Gospels teach us about angels

Angels are spirit beings, messengers and servants of God. They have a special role in four major events of Jesus' life, and Jesus referred to them on occasion as he taught about other subjects.

The Gospels are not designed to answer all our questions about angels. They give us only incidental information as angels enter the story.

Angels appear before Jesus does. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah to announce that he would have a son, John the Baptist (Luke 1:11-19). Gabriel also told Mary that she would have a son, Jesus (vv. 26-38). Joseph was told about it by an angel in a dream (Matthew 1:20-24).

An angel announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds, and a host of angels sang praises (Luke 2:9-15). An angel again appeared to Joseph in a dream to tell him to flee to Egypt, and when it was safe to return (Matthew 2:13, 19).

Angels are mentioned again in Jesus' temptation. Satan quoted a verse about angelic protection, and angels ministered to Jesus after the temptation (Matthew 4:6, 11). An angel helped Jesus in Gethsemane during a later temptation (Luke 22:43).

Angels had an important role in the resurrection, too, as mentioned in all four

Gospels. An angel rolled back the stone and told the women that Jesus was risen (Matthew 28:2-5). The women saw one or two angels inside the tomb (Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4, 23; John 20:11). Divine messengers showed the importance of the resurrection.

Jesus said that angels will again play a major role when he returns. Angels will come with him and will gather the elect for salvation and evildoers for destruction (Matthew 13:39-49; 24:31).

Jesus could have had legions of angels, but he did not ask for them (Matthew 26:53). He will have them when he returns. Angels will be involved in the judgment (Luke 12:8-9). Perhaps this is when people will see angels "ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (John 1:51).

Angels may appear as a person, or with unusual glory (Luke 2:9; 24:4). They do not die and do not marry, which apparently means that they have no sexuality and do not reproduce (Luke 20:35-36).

Jesus said that "little ones who believe in me" have angels in heaven who care for them (Matthew 18:6, 10). Angels rejoice when people turn to God, and they bring the righteous to paradise (Luke 15:10; 16:22).

Michael Morrison, 1999

11. Satan

Satan is a fallen angel who heads the evil forces in the spirit realm. The Bible refers to him with such terms as the devil, adversary, evil one, murderer, liar, thief, tempter, accuser of the brethren, prince of demons, and god of this world. He is in constant rebellion against God. Through his influence, Satan generates discord, deception, and disobedience among human beings. In Christ, Satan is already defeated, and his dominion and influence as god of this world will cease at Christ's return.

(Luke 10:18; Revelation 12:9; 1 Peter 5:8; John 8:44; Job 1:6-12; Zechariah 3:1-2; Revelation 12:10; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 20:1-3; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, page 5)

Satan: God's defeated adversary

There are two unfortunate trends in the Western world today regarding Satan the devil, who is mentioned in the New Testament as an unrelenting adversary and enemy of God and humanity. Most people are unaware or discount the devil's role in creating chaos, suffering and evil. For many people, the idea of a real devil is just a remnant of ancient superstition or, at best, a metaphor representing evil in the world.

On the other hand, some Christians have accepted superstitious beliefs about the devil under the guise of what is called "spiritual warfare." They are giving the devil undue recognition and are "warring" against him in ways not appropriate to the advice given in Scripture. In this article, we see what information the Bible gives us about Satan. Armed with this understanding, we can avoid the pitfalls of the extremes mentioned above.

Old Testament references

Isaiah 14:3-23 and Ezekiel 28:1-19 are sometimes said to contain descriptions of the devil's origin as an angel who sinned. Some of the details can be read as applying to the

devil. However, the context of these passages indicates that much of the material is referring to the vanity and pride of human kings—the kings of Babylon and Tyre. Perhaps the point in both passages is that the human kings are being manipulated by the devil, and they are mirror images of his evil intents and his hatred of God. To speak of the spiritual leader, Satan, is to speak of his human agents, the kings, all in one breath. It would be a way of saying that the devil rules the world.

In the book of Job, a reference to angels says they were present at the creation of the world and were filled with wonder and joy (Job 38:7). On the other hand, the Satan of Job 1-2 also appears as an angelic being, since he is said to be with the angelic "sons of God." But he is an adversary of God and his righteousness.

There are a few references to "fallen angels" in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6; Job 4:18), but nothing significant is mentioned as to how and why Satan became the enemy of God. Scripture doesn't give us any details about angel life, either about "good" angels

or fallen angels (also called demons). The Bible, particularly the New Testament, is much more interested in showing Satan as someone who attempts to overthrow God's purpose. He is pictured as the supreme enemy of God's people, the church of Jesus Christ.

Satan or the devil is not prominently mentioned by name in the Old Testament. However, the conviction that cosmic forces were at war with God is clearly seen in the motifs found in its pages. Two Old Testament motifs depicting Satan or the devil are cosmic waters and monsters. They are metaphors representing the satanic evil that holds sway over the earth and does battle against God. In Job 26:12-13, we see Job explaining that God has "churned up the sea" and "cut Rahab to pieces." Rahab is said to be "the gliding serpent" (verse 13).

In the few places that Satan as a personal being is mentioned in the Old Testament, Satan is shown to be an accuser who seeks to sow discord and condemn (Zechariah 3:1-2), incites people to sin against God (1 Chronicles 21:1), and uses human beings and the elements to cause great pain and suffering (Job 1:6-19; 2:1-8).

In Job, Satan is seen coming together with other angels to present himself to God, as though he had been called to a great heavenly council. There are a few other biblical references to a heavenly gathering of angelic beings that affect the affairs of humans. In one of these, a lying spirit entices a king to go to war (1 Kings 22:19-22).

God is pictured as one who "crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert" (Psalm 74:14). Who is Leviathan? He is the "monster of the sea"—the "gliding serpent" and "coiling serpent" whom the Lord will punish "in that day" when God banishes evil from the earth and brings in his kingdom (Isaiah 27:1).

The motif of Leviathan as a serpent harkens back to the Garden of Eden. Here the serpent—"more crafty than any of the wild animals"—deceives humans into sinning against God, which results in their fall (Genesis 3:1-7). This leads God to utter a prophecy of a future war between himself and the serpent, in which the devil appears to win a crucial battle (a strike at God's feet) only to lose the war (having his head crushed). In this prophecy, God says to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his feet" (Genesis 3:16).

New Testament references

The cosmic significance of this statement is understood in the light of the Incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1, 14). We see in the Gospels that Satan attempts to destroy Jesus in one way or another from the day of his birth until his death by crucifixion. While Satan succeeds in having his human proxies kill Jesus, the devil loses the war when Jesus destroys Satan's work through his death and resurrection.

After Jesus' Ascension, the cosmic battle continues between the bride of Christ—the people of God—and the devil and his minions. But God's purposes always prevail and stand. In the end, Jesus will return and crush the spiritual opposition against him (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

The book of Revelation most notably depicts this war between the forces of evil in the world driven by Satan and the forces of good in the church led by God. In this highly symbolic book written in the genre of apocalypse, two bigger-than-life cities, Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem, represent the two earthly groups at war.

When the war is over, the devil or Satan

is chained in the Abyss, and is thus prevented from “leading the whole world astray” as he had previously (Revelation 12:9).

In the end, we are shown the kingdom of God victorious over all evil. It is depicted by an ideal city—the Holy City, the Jerusalem of God—where God and the Lamb dwell together with their people in eternal peace and joy, made possible by the reciprocal love they share (21:15-27). Satan and all the forces of evil are destroyed (20:10).

Jesus and Satan

In the New Testament, Satan is clearly identified as the adversary of God and humanity. In one way or another, the devil is responsible for suffering and evil in our world. In his healing ministry, Jesus pointed to fallen spirits and Satan as a cause even of disease and infirmity. Of course, we should be careful to not label every problem or illness as a direct hit from the devil. Nevertheless, it is instructive to note that the New Testament doesn’t shy away from naming the devil and his evil cohorts as being responsible for many calamities, including illnesses. Sickness is an evil, rather than being ordained by God.

Jesus spoke of Satan and the fallen spirits as “the devil and his angels,” who are bound for “the eternal fire” (Matthew 25:41). In the Gospels, demons are said to be the cause of a wide variety of physical illnesses and infirmities. In some cases, demons possessed people’s minds and/or bodies, resulting in such infirmities as convulsion, muteness, blindness, partial paralysis and forms of insanity.

Luke speaks of a woman Jesus encountered in a synagogue “who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years” (Luke 13:10). Jesus set her free from her infirmity and was criticized because he had healed on the Sabbath. In response, Jesus said, “Should

not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (verse 16).

In other cases, Jesus exposed demons as the cause of infirmity, as in the case of a boy who had suffered terrible convulsions from childhood (Matthew 17:14-19; Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-45). Jesus could simply command demons to leave, and they did. In this, Jesus showed that he had complete authority over the world of Satan and the demons. Jesus gave the same authority over demons to his disciples (Matthew 10:1).

The apostle Peter spoke of Jesus’ healing ministry as one that delivered people from illnesses and infirmities in which Satan and his evil spirits were either the direct or indirect cause. “You know what has happened throughout Judea...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:37-38). This view of Jesus’ healing reflects the belief that Satan is the adversary of God and his creation, most especially the human race.

It places the ultimate blame for suffering and sin on the devil and characterizes him as the “first sinner.” “The devil has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). Jesus calls Satan “the prince of demons”—the ruler of fallen angels (Matthew 25:41). But Jesus has broken the devil’s hold on the world through his redemptive work. Satan is the “strong man” whose house (the world) Jesus has entered (Mark 3:27). Jesus has “tied up” the strong man and has “carried off his possessions” (his kingdom).

This is why Jesus came in the flesh. John tells us, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Colossians speaks of this

destroyed work in cosmic terms: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

Hebrews is more explicit as to how Jesus accomplished this: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15).

It’s not surprising, then, that Satan would seek to defeat God’s purpose in his Son, Jesus Christ. Satan’s goal was to kill the Incarnate Word, Jesus, when he was a baby (Revelation 12:13 with Matthew 2:1-18), tempt him to sin during his life (Luke 4:1-13) and have him arrested and killed (verse 13 with 22:3-6).

Satan “succeeded” in the final plot on Jesus’ life, but Jesus’ death and subsequent resurrection exposed and condemned the devil. Jesus had made a “public spectacle” of the world’s way and the evil propounded and practiced by the devil and his followers. It became plain to all who were willing to hear that only God’s way of love is right.

Through Jesus’ Person and his redemptive work, the devil’s plans were turned back, and he was vanquished. Thus, Christ has already defeated Satan through his life, death and resurrection, exposing the shame of evil. Jesus told his disciples on the night of his betrayal, “Because I am going to the Father...the prince of this world now stands condemned” (John 16:11).

After Christ’s return, the devil’s influence in the world will cease, and his complete defeat will be obvious. This victory will occur in a final and lasting change at the end of the age (Matthew 13:37-42).

Prince of power

During his earthly ministry, Jesus explained that “the prince of this world will be driven out” (John 12:31) and said that this prince has “no hold” on him (John 14:30). Jesus has defeated Satan in that the devil could not bring him under his control. No temptation that was hurled at Jesus by Satan was powerful enough to entice him away from his love for and faith in God (Matthew 4:1-11). He has vanquished the devil and taken “the strong man’s” possessions (Matthew 12:24-29), which was the world he held captive. As Christians, we can rest in faith in Jesus’ victory over all the enemies of God (and our enemies), including the devil.

However, the church exists in the tension of the “already-not yet” time, in which God continues to allow Satan to deceive the world and spread destruction and death. Christians live between the “It is finished” of Jesus’ death (John 19:30) and the “It is done” of the ultimate destruction of evil and the coming of God’s kingdom to earth in the future (Revelation 21:6). Satan is still allowed to strive against the power of the gospel. The devil is still the unseen Prince of Darkness, and he is allowed to have power by God to fulfill God’s purposes.

The New Testament tells us that Satan is the controlling power of the present evil world, and that people unknowingly follow him in his opposition to God. (In Greek, the word “prince” or “ruler” [as in John 12:31] is a translation of the Greek *archon*, which referred to the highest ranking official of a political area or city.)

The apostle Paul explains that Satan or the devil is “the god of this age” who has “blinded the minds of unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Paul understood that Satan can even hinder the work of the church (1 Thessalonians 2:17-19).

Today, much of the Western world pays scant attention to a reality that fundamentally affects their lives and future—the fact that the devil is a real spiritual being who attempts at every turn to harm them and thwart the loving purpose of God. Christians are admonished to be aware of Satan’s schemes so they can refute them through the guidance and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. (Unfortunately, a few Christians have gone to a misguided extreme in a “hunt” for Satan, and they have unwittingly created additional fodder for those who ridicule the idea that the devil is a real and evil being.)

The church is warned to be vigilant of Satan’s devices. Christian leaders, says Paul, must lead lives worthy of God’s calling so that they “will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (1 Timothy 3:7). Christians must be aware of the devil’s schemes and must put on the armor of God “against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:10-12). They are to do this “in order that Satan might not outwit us” (2 Corinthians 2:11).

The evil work of the devil

The devil creates spiritual blindness to the truth of God in Christ in various ways. False doctrines and ideas of various kinds “taught by demons” cause people to “follow deceiving spirits,” though they may be unaware of the ultimate source of the deception (1 Timothy 4:1-5). When blinded, people are unable to understand the light of the gospel, which is the good news that Christ saves us from sin and death (1 John 4:1-2; 2 John 7). Satan is the chief enemy of the gospel, “the evil one” who attempts to deceive people into rejecting its message (Matthew 13:18-23).

Satan need not *personally* attempt to deceive. He can work through humans who spread false philosophical and theological

ideas. Humans can also be enslaved by structural evil and deception embedded in human society. The devil can also use our own fallen nature against us, making people think that they have “the truth,” when they have really given up that which is of God for that which is of the world and the devil. Such people believe that their misguided belief system will save them (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10), but what they have really done is “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (Romans 1:25). “The lie” appears to be good and true because Satan presents himself and his belief system in such a way so as to make it appear that his teaching is truth from an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14).

In an overall sense, Satan is behind the temptation and desire of our fallen natures to sin, and for this reason he is called “the tempter” (1 Thessalonians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 6:5; Acts 5:3). Paul takes the Corinthian church back to Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden story to admonish them to not be led away from Christ, something the devil seeks to do. “I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning,” says Paul, “your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3).

This is not to say that Paul believed that Satan personally tempted and deceived every person directly. People who think “the devil made me do it” every time they sin do not realize that he uses the Satan-created system of evil in the world and our fallen nature against us. In the case of the Thessalonian Christians mentioned above, this deception could have been accomplished by teachers sowing seeds of hate against Paul, causing people to think he was trying to trick them or cover up greed or another impure motive (1 Thessalonians 2:3-12). Nevertheless, since the devil encourages discord and manipulates the world, ultimately behind any humans

sowing discord and hate would be the Tempter himself.

According to Paul, Christians who are separated from the fellowship of the church because of sinfulness are, in effect, “handed over to Satan” (1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20) or have “turned away to follow Satan” (1 Timothy 5:15). Peter admonishes his flock, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The way to defeat the devil, says Peter, is to “resist him” (verse 9).

How do people resist? James explains: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you” (4:7-8). We are near to God when our hearts have a prayerful attitude of joy, peace and gratitude toward him, which is nurtured by his indwelling Spirit of love and faith.

People who do not know Christ and are not led by his Spirit (Romans 8:5-17) “live according to the sinful nature” (verse 5). They are in tune with and follow “the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Ephesians 2:2). This spirit, elsewhere identified as the devil or Satan, manipulates human beings so that they find themselves intent on “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature” (verse 3). But through God’s grace we can see the light of the truth that is in Christ, and follow him by the Spirit of God rather than unwittingly coming under the influence of the devil, the fallen world and our spiritually weak and sinful human nature.

Satan’s warfare and ultimate defeat

“The whole world is under the control of the evil one,” the apostle John writes (1 John 5:19). But those who are the children of God and followers of Christ have been given understanding “so that we may know him who is true” (5:20).

On this point, Revelation 12:7-9 is most dramatic. In the warfare motif of Revelation, the book pictures a cosmic battle between Michael and his angels and the dragon (Satan) and his fallen angels. The devil and his minions were defeated and “lost their place in heaven” (verse 8). The result? “The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (verse 9). The idea is that Satan continues his warfare against God by going after God’s people on earth.

The battleground between evil (manipulated by Satan) and good (led by God) results in warfare between Babylon the Great (the world under the control of the devil) and the New Jerusalem (the people of God who follow God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ). It is a war that is destined to be won by God, because nothing can defeat his purposes.

In the end, all the enemies of God, Satan included, are defeated. The kingdom of God—a new world order—comes to earth, pictured by the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. The devil is destroyed from the presence of God, and his kingdom is obliterated with him (Revelation 20:10), replaced by God’s eternal reign of love.

We read these encouraging words about “the end” of all things: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’” (Revelation 21:3-5).

Paul Kroll, 2004

See also our booklet on the spirit world, at www.wcg.org/lit/booklets/spirit.

12. The Gospel

The gospel is the good news of salvation by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. It is the message that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, that he appeared to his disciples, and that he ascended to God's right hand. It is the good news that through the saving work of Jesus Christ we may enter the kingdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 15:1-5; Luke 24:46-48; John 3:16; Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 1:14-15; Acts 8:12; 28:30-31) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 5)

Why were you born?

You were born for a purpose! God created each of us for a reason—and we are happiest when we are living in harmony with the purpose he has given us. You need to know what it is.

Many people have no idea what life is all about. They live, and they die, searching for some kind of meaning, wondering whether their lives have purpose—where they fit, whether they really matter in the grand scheme of things. They may have put together the finest bottle collection in Ohio, or they may have been voted “most popular” in high school, but all too soon, youthful plans and dreams evaporate into anxiety and frustration over missed opportunities, failed relationships or countless other “if-onlys” and “might-have-beens.”

Many people lead empty, unfulfilled lives, lacking in solid purpose and meaning beyond the short-lived gratification of money, sex, power, respect or popularity, none of which means anything, especially when the darkness of death approaches. But life could be much more than this, because God offers each of us much more. He offers us true significance and purpose—the joy of being what he created us to be.

Part 1: Made in God's image

The first chapter of the Bible tells us that God created humans “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27). Men and women are created “in the image of God” (same verse).

Obviously, we are not in God's image in terms of height or weight or skin color. God is spirit, uncreated, and we are created of matter. Still, God has made humanity in his own image, which means that there are essential ways in which he has made us to be like him. We are self-aware, we can communicate, plan, think creatively, design and build, solve problems, and be a force for good in our world. And we can love.

We are to be “created like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24). Yet, often in those very ways, people are not much like God at all. In fact, people can often be rather ungodly. In spite of our ungodliness, however, there are certain things we can be sure of. For one thing, God will always be faithful in his love toward us.

A perfect example

The New Testament helps us understand what it means to be made in the image of

God. The apostle Paul tells us that God is remaking us into something that is perfect and good—the likeness of Jesus Christ. “He also predestined [us] to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Romans 8:29). In other words, God intended from the beginning for us to be like Jesus, the Son of God in the flesh.

Paul says that Jesus himself “is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). “He is the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15). He is the perfect example of what we were created to be. We are God’s children, in his family, and we look to Jesus, God’s Son, to see what that means.

One of Jesus’ disciples asked him, “Show us the Father” (John 14:8). And Jesus answered, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (verse 9). In other words, Jesus says, What you really need to know about God, you can see in me.

He is not talking about skin color, clothing styles, or carpentry skills—he is talking about spirit, attitude and actions. God is love, John wrote (1 John 4:8), and Jesus shows us what love is, and how we are to love as people being conformed to his image.

Since humans were made in the image of God, and Jesus is the image of God, it is no wonder that God is conforming us to the image of Jesus. He is to be “formed” in us (Galatians 4:19). Our goal is “attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). As we are changed into Jesus’ image, the image of God is restored in us, and we become what we were made to be.

Maybe you aren’t very Jesus-like right now. That’s OK. God already knows about it, and that is why he is working with you. If you let him, he will change you—transform you—to be more and more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). It takes patience—but the process fills life with meaning and purpose.

Why doesn’t God do it all in the blink of an eye? Because that wouldn’t take into account the real, thinking and loving person he made you to be. A change of mind and heart, the decision to turn to God and trust Christ, may take only a moment, like deciding to go down a certain road. But the actual journey down the road takes time and may be filled with obstacles and troubles. In the same way, it takes time to change habits, behaviors and ingrained attitudes.

Besides, God loves you and wants you to love him. But love is love only when it is freely given, not when it is demanded. Forced love is not love at all.

It gets better and better

God’s purpose for you is not only to be like Jesus was 2,000 years ago—but also to be like Jesus is now—resurrected, immortal, filled with glory and power! He “will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). If we have been united with Christ in this life, “we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (Romans 6:5). “We shall be like him,” John assures us (1 John 3:2).

If we are God’s children, Paul writes, then we can be sure that “we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17). We will be given a glory like Jesus Christ has—bodies that are immortal, bodies that never deteriorate, bodies that are spiritual. We will be raised in glory, and raised in power (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). “Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven”—we will be like Christ! (verse 49).

Would you like to have glory and immortality? God has made you for this very reason! It is a wonderful gift that he wants you to have. It is an exciting and wonderful future—and it gives life meaning and purpose.

When we see the end result, the process we are in now makes more sense. The troubles, trials and pains of life, as well as the joys, make more sense when we know what life is all about. When we know the glory that will be given to us, the sufferings of this life are easier to endure (Romans 8:18). God has given us exceedingly great and precious promises.

Is there a problem here?

But wait a minute, you might think. I'll never be good enough for that kind of glory and power. I'm just an ordinary person. If heaven is a perfect place, then I don't belong there. I make mistakes; my life is messed up.

That's OK—God already knows that, but he isn't going to let it stop him. He has plans for you, and he has already planned for problems like that to be overcome. That's because everybody has blown it; everybody's life is messed up, and nobody *deserves* to be given glory and power.

But God knows how to save people who are sinners—and no matter how many times they mess up, he knows how to rescue them.

God's plan centers on Jesus Christ—who was sinless in our place and who suffered for our sins in our place. He represents us before God and offers us the gift of eternal life, if we will accept it from him.

Part 2: The gift of God

We all fall short, Paul says, but we have been justified, or set right, through the grace of God. It's a gift! We can't earn it or deserve it—God just gives it to us out of his mercy and righteousness.

People who are doing fine on their own don't need to be saved—it is people who are in trouble who need to be saved. Lifeguards don't "save" people who are swimming on their own—they save people who are drowning. And spiritually speaking, we are

all drowning. None of us measures up to the perfection of Christ, and without that, we're as good as dead.

Many people seem to think that we have to be "good enough" for God. Suppose we ask them, What makes you think that you'll go to heaven, or that you'll have eternal life in the kingdom of God? Many people will respond, Because I've been good. I've done this, or I've done that.

The truth is, that no matter how much good we have done, we are never "good enough" to earn a place in a perfect world, because we are not perfect. We have fallen short, but we are set right by God's gift, because of what Jesus Christ has done for us.

Not by good works

God has saved us, the Bible says, "not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9). "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Even if our works are very good, they are not the reason God saves us. We need to be rescued because our good works are not enough to save us. We need mercy and grace, and God gives us exactly that in Jesus Christ.

If it were possible for us to earn eternal life through good behavior, then God would have told us how. If rule-keeping could give us eternal life, Paul says, then God would have done it that way.

"If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Galatians 3:21). But the law cannot give us life—even if we could keep it.

"If righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:21). If people could earn their way into salvation, then we wouldn't need a Savior to rescue us. There would be no need

for Jesus to come to earth, or to die and be raised again.

But Jesus came to earth for this very reason—to die for us. Jesus said that he came “to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). His life was like a ransom payment, given to rescue us, or redeem us. The Bible repeatedly says that “Christ died for us” and that he died “for our sins” (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 15:3; Galatians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:10).

“The wages of sin is death,” Paul says in Romans 6:23, “but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We deserve to die, but we are saved by grace through Jesus Christ. We don’t deserve to live with God, since we aren’t perfect, but God saves us through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Descriptions of salvation

The Bible explains our salvation in several ways—sometimes using financial terms, sometimes sacrificial words, sometimes family or friendship words.

In financial terms, he has paid the price to free us. He took the penalty (death) that we deserved, paying the debt that we owed. He takes our sin and death, and in return, he gives us his righteousness and life.

God accepts Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf (after all, he is the one who sent Jesus to give it), and he accepts Jesus’ righteousness on our behalf. Therefore, though once we were opposed to God, now we are friends (Romans 5:10).

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight” (Colossians 1:21-22).

Because of Christ’s death, we are holy in God’s sight. In God’s book, we have gone from a huge debt to a huge balance—not

because of what we have done, but because of what Jesus did for us.

God now calls us his children—he has adopted us (Ephesians 1:5). “We are God’s children” (Romans 8:16). And then Paul describes the wonderful results of our adoption: “If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (verse 17). Salvation is described as an inheritance. “He has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:12).

Because of God’s generosity, because of his grace, we will inherit a fortune—we will share the universe with Jesus Christ. Or rather, he will share it with us, not because of anything we have done, but because he loves us and wants to give it to us.

Received through faith

Jesus has qualified us; he has paid the penalty not only for our sins, but for the sins of all human beings (1 John 2:2). But many people do not yet understand this. Perhaps they have not yet heard the message of salvation, or they heard a garbled version that didn’t make sense to them. For some reason, they have not believed the message.

It’s like Jesus has paid their debts for them, and given them a huge bank account, but they haven’t yet heard about it, or don’t quite believe it, or don’t think they had any debts in the first place. Or it’s like Jesus is throwing a party, and he gives them a ticket to get in, and yet some people decide not to come.

Or they are slaves working in the mud, and Jesus comes along and says, “I have purchased your freedom.” Some people don’t hear the message, some don’t believe it, and some would rather stay in the mud than find out what freedom is. But others hear the message, believe it, and step out of the mud to see what a new life with Christ might be.

The message of salvation is received by faith—by trusting Jesus, by taking him at his word, by believing the good news. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). The gospel is effective for “the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). If we don’t believe the message, it won’t do us much good.

Of course, there is more to “faith” than just believing certain facts about Jesus. The facts have some dramatic implications for us—we have to turn away from the life we’ve created in our own image and turn instead to God who made us in his.

We should admit that we are sinners, that we haven’t earned the right to eternal life, and that we don’t deserve to share in an inheritance with Jesus Christ. We have to admit that we’ll never be “good enough” for heaven—and we have to trust that the ticket Jesus gives us is indeed good enough to get us into the party. We have to trust that he did enough, in his death and resurrection, to pay our spiritual debts. We have to trust in his mercy and grace, admitting that there is no other way to get in.

A free offer

Let’s bring the discussion back to our purpose in life. God says that he made us for a purpose, and that purpose is that we become like him. We are to be united with God’s family, brothers and sisters of Jesus, sharing in the family fortune! It’s a wonderful purpose and wonderful promise.

But we haven’t done our part. We haven’t been as good as Jesus—that is, we haven’t been perfect. Then what makes us think we’ll get the other end of the deal—the eternal glory? The answer is that we have to trust God to be as merciful and full of grace as he says he is. He has made us for this purpose, and he is going to see it through! We can be confident, Paul says, that “he who

began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

Jesus has paid the price and done the work, and his message—the message of the Bible—is that our salvation comes by what he has done for us. Experience (as well as Scripture) says that we can’t trust in ourselves. Our only hope of salvation, of life, of becoming who God made us to be, is to trust in Christ. We can become like Christ because he, knowing all about our failings and shortcomings, says that he will bring it about!

Without Christ, life is pointless—we are stuck in the mud. But Jesus tells us that he has purchased our freedom, he can make us clean, he offers us a free ticket to the party and full rights in the family fortune. We can accept his offer, or we can dismiss it and stay in the mud.

Part 3: You’re invited to a banquet!

Jesus looked like an insignificant carpenter in an insignificant village in an insignificant part of the Roman Empire. But now he is widely regarded as the most significant person who ever lived. Even nonbelievers recognize that he gave up his life to serve others, and this ideal of self-sacrificial love reaches into the depths of the human soul and touches the image of God within us.

He taught that people could find true and abundant life if they are willing to give up their own faltering hold on existence and follow him into the life of the kingdom of God. “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).

We have nothing to lose but a pointless life, a frustrating life, and Jesus offers us a fulfilling, joyful, exciting and abounding life—for eternity. He invites us to give up pride and worry, and we gain peace of mind and joy of heart.

The path of Jesus

Jesus invites us to join him in his glory—but the journey to glory requires humility, through putting other people before ourselves. We have to loosen our grip on the things of this life, and fasten our hold on Jesus. If we want a new life, we have to be willing to let go of the old one.

We were made to be like Jesus. But we are not just copying a respected hero. Christianity is not about religious rituals or even religious ideals. It is about God's love for humanity, his faithfulness to humanity, and his love and faithfulness made visible in human form in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, God demonstrates his grace; he knows that no matter how hard we try, we will never be good enough on our own. In Jesus, God gives us help; he sends the Holy Spirit in Jesus' name to live within us, to change us from the inside out. God is making us to be like himself; we are not trying to be Godlike on our own.

Jesus has for us an eternity of joy. Each individual, as a child in the family of God, has purpose and significance—an eternity of life. We were made for eternal glory, and the path to glory is Jesus, who himself is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6).

For Jesus, it meant a cross. He calls us to join him on that part of the journey, too. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). But the cross was followed by the resurrection to glory.

A celebration banquet

In some of his teaching stories, Jesus compared salvation to a banquet. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father threw a party for the rebellious son who finally came home. "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son

of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:23-24). Jesus told the story to illustrate the point that all of heaven rejoices whenever anyone turns toward God (verse 7).

Jesus told another story about a man (illustrating God) who "was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests" (Luke 14:16). But surprisingly, many people ignored the invitation. "They all alike began to make excuses" (verse 18). Some were worried about their money, or their work; others were distracted by family matters (verses 18-20). So the master invited poor people instead (verse 21).

So it is with salvation. Jesus invites everyone, but some people are too busy with the cares of this world to respond. But those who are "poor," who realize there are more important things than money, sex, power and respect, are eager to come celebrate true life at Jesus' banquet.

Jesus told another story comparing salvation to a man (illustrating Jesus) who went on a journey. He "called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability" (Matthew 25:14-15). The money could represent various things that Christ gives us; let's look at it here as representing the message of salvation.

After a long time, the master came back and asked for an accounting. Two of the servants showed that they had accomplished something with the master's money, and they were rewarded: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (verses 21, 23).

You are invited!

Yes, Jesus is inviting us to share in his

happiness, to share in the eternal joys God has for us (Psalm 16:11). He is calling us to be like him, to be immortal, incorruptible, glorious and sinless. We will have supernatural power. We will have a vitality, intelligence, creativity, power and love far beyond what we know now.

We can't do this on our own—we have to let God do it in us. We have to accept his invitation to get out of the mud, and come to his celebration banquet.

Have you thought about accepting his invitation? If you do, you may not see amazing results right away, but your life will

definitely take on new significance and meaning. You'll gain purpose, you'll understand where you're going and why, and you'll be given new strength, new courage and great peace.

Jesus is inviting you to a party that lasts forever. Will you accept the invitation?

Michael Morrison, 2003

Our website contains many articles on this topic—see www.wcg.org/lit/gospel for articles about the gospel and www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/evang for about evangelism.

13. Christian Conduct

Christian conduct is characterized by trust in and loving allegiance to our Savior, who loved us and gave himself for us. Trust in Jesus Christ is expressed by belief in the gospel and by works of love. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ transforms the hearts of believers, producing in them love, joy, peace, faithfulness, meekness, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, righteousness, and truth.

(1 John 3:23-24; 4:20-21; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 5:6, 22-23; Ephesians 5:9)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, page 13)

Behavioral standards in Christianity

Christians are not under the Law of Moses, and we cannot be saved by any law, even the commandments of the New Testament. But Christianity does have behavioral standards. It does involve changes in the way we live. It does make demands on our lives. We are to live for Christ, not for ourselves (2 Corinthians 5:15). God is our God, our priority in everything, and he has something to say about the way we live.

One of the last things that Jesus told his disciples to do was to teach people “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Jesus gave commands, and as his disciples we must also preach commands and teach people to obey them. These commands are not as a means of salvation, nor a standard of condemnation—they are instructions from the Son of God. People are to obey him not out of fear of punishment,

but simply because he is their Savior, and he wants them to.

Perfect obedience is not the goal of the Christian life; the goal of the Christian life is to belong to God. We belong to God when Christ lives in us, and Christ lives in us when we put our faith in him. Christ in us leads us by the Holy Spirit toward obedience.

God is transforming us into the image of Christ. By God's grace and power, we are becoming more like Christ. His commands involve not just outward behavior, but also the thoughts and motives of our hearts. These thoughts and motives of our hearts need the transforming power of the Holy Spirit; we cannot just change them ourselves by willpower. Part of faith, then, is trusting God to do his transforming work in us.

The greatest command—love for God—is also the greatest motive for obedience. We obey him because we love him, and we love him because he has graciously drawn us into his own household. It is God who works in us, both to will and to behave according to his good purpose (Philippians 2:13).

What do we do when we fall short? We repent and look to God's grace for forgiveness, in full confidence that it is available for us. We do not want to take it lightly, but we should always take it.

What do we do when others fall short? Condemn them, and insist that they do good works to prove their sincerity? That's the human tendency, it seems, and yet this is precisely what Christ said we should not do (Luke 17:3).

New Testament commands

What does the Christian life look like? There are hundreds of commands in the New Testament. We are not lacking in guidance for how a faith-based life works itself out in the real world. There are commands for how the rich should treat the poor, commands for

how husbands should treat their wives, commands for how we should work together as a church. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22 contains a simple list:

Live in peace with each other....
Warn those who are idle,
encourage the timid,
help the weak,
be patient with everyone.
Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong...
always try to be kind....
Be joyful always;
pray continually;
give thanks in all circumstances...
Do not put out the Spirit's fire;
do not treat prophecies with contempt.
Test everything.
Hold on to the good.
Avoid every kind of evil.

Paul knew that his readers had the Holy Spirit, who could guide and teach them. He also knew that they needed some basic exhortations or reminders about the Christian life. The Spirit chose to teach and guide them through Paul himself. Paul did not threaten to kick them out of the church if they failed to measure up—he simply gave commands that instructed them in the paths of faithfulness.

Warnings about disobedience

Although forgiveness is available, sin has penalties in this life, and this sometimes includes social penalties. Paul writes, "You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

Paul did not want the church to become a haven for blatant, defiant sinners. The church is a hospital for reform, not a "safe zone" for social parasites to practice. Paul

told the Corinthian Christians to discipline an incestuous man (1 Corinthians 5:1-5), and he also encouraged them to forgive someone after he had repented (2 Corinthians 2:5-8).

The New Testament has a lot to say about sin, and it gives us plenty of commands. Let's look at the book of Galatians. In this manifesto of Christian freedom from the law, Paul also has some bold commands. Christians are not under the law, but neither are they lawless. He warns, "Don't let yourself be circumcised, or else you will fall out of grace!" That is a pretty serious command (5:2-4). Do not let yourself be enslaved by an obsolete law!

Paul warns the Galatians about people who would try to prevent them "from obeying the truth" (v. 7). Paul is turning the tables on the Judaizers. They claimed to be obeying God, but Paul is saying they were not. We disobey God if we try to command something that is now obsolete.

Paul takes another twist in verse 9: "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." The sinful leaven in this case is a law-based approach to religion. This error can spread if the truth of grace is not preached. There are always people who are willing to look to laws as the measurement of how religious they are. Restrictive rules appeal to many well-meaning people (Colossians 2:23).

Christians are called to be free, but Paul cautions: "Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). With freedom comes obligations, or else one person's "freedom" would infringe on another's. No one should have the freedom to preach other people into bondage, or to gain a following for themselves, or to make merchandise of God's people. Such divisive and anti-Christian behaviors are not allowed.

Our responsibility

"The entire law is summed up in a single command," Paul says in verse 14: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This summarizes our responsibility toward one another. The opposite approach, fighting for self-advantage, is self-destructive (v. 15).

"Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (v. 16). The Spirit leads us to love, not to self-centeredness. Selfish thoughts come from the flesh, but God's Spirit produces better thoughts. "The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature" (v. 17). Because of this conflict between Spirit and flesh, we sometimes sin, even though we don't want to.

So what is the solution to the sins that so easily beset us? Bring back the law? No! "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (v. 18). Our approach to life is different. We look to the Spirit, and the Spirit will develop in us the desire and the power to walk according to the commands of Christ. We keep the horse before the cart.

We look to Jesus first, and we see his commands in the context of personal loyalty to him, not as rules "that have to be kept or else we'll be punished."

In Galatians 5, Paul lists a variety of sins: "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (v. 19-21). Some of these are behavioral, some are attitudinal, but all of them are self-centered and stem from the sinful heart.

Paul warns us sternly: "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 21). This is not God's way of life; this is not the way we want to be; this is not the

way we want the church to be.

Forgiveness is available for each of these (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Does that mean the church should close its eyes to sin? No, the church is not a cover, or safe sanctuary for such sins. The church is to be a place where grace and forgiveness is expressed and extended, not a place where sin is given permission to abound unchecked.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). This is the product of a heart devoted to God. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (v. 24). With the indwelling Spirit at work in us, we grow in our desire to reject the works of the flesh. We bear the fruit of God’s work in us.

Paul’s message is clear: We are not under the law—but we are not lawless. We are under the authority of Christ, under *his* law, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our lives are based on faith, motivated by love, characterized by joy and peace and growth. “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (v. 25).

Joseph Tkach, 1999

See www.wcg.org/lit/law for articles about the relationship of Christians to the law, and to obedience.

You may also find a book about Christian ethics to be helpful:

- Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. HarperCollins, 1996.
- John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*. 4th ed. Zondervan, 2006.
- D.J. Atkinson, ed. *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*. InterVarsity, 1995.

14. God's Grace

God's grace is the free, unmerited favor God has chosen to bestow on his entire creation. In its broadest sense, God's grace is expressed in every act of his self-disclosure. By grace, humanity and the entire cosmos have been redeemed from sin and death through Jesus Christ, and by grace, humans are empowered to know and love God and Jesus Christ and enter the joy of eternal salvation in the kingdom of God.

(Colossians 1:20; 1 John 2:1-2; Romans 8:19-21; 3:24; 5:2, 15-17, 21; John 1:12; Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:7) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 5-6)

Grace

“If righteousness could be gained through the law,” Paul wrote, “Christ died for nothing!” (Galatians 2:21). The only alternative, as he says in this same verse, is “the grace of God.” We are saved by grace, not by keeping the law.

These are alternatives that cannot be combined. We are not saved by grace plus works, but by grace alone. Paul makes it clear that we must choose either one or another. “Both” is not an option (Romans 11:6). “If the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise” (Galatians 3:18). Salvation does not depend on the law, but on God's grace.

“If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law” (verse 21). If there were any way that rule-keeping could lead to eternal life, then God would have saved us with the law. But it wasn't possible. The law cannot save anyone.

God wants us to have good behavior. He wants us to love others and thereby fulfill the law. But he does not want us to think that our works are ever a reason for our salvation. His provision of grace implies that he has always known that we would never be “good

enough” despite our best efforts. If our works contributed to our salvation, then we would have something to boast about. But God designed his plan of salvation in such a way that we cannot take any credit for saving ourselves (Ephesians 2:8-9). We can never claim to deserve anything; we can never claim that God owes us anything.

This goes to the heart of the Christian faith, and it makes Christianity unique. Other religions say that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. Christianity says that we simply cannot be good enough; we need grace.

On our own, we will never be good enough, and because of that, other religions will never be good enough. The only way we can be saved is through the grace of God. We can never deserve to live forever, so the only way we can be given eternal life is for God to give us something that we don't deserve. This is what Paul is driving at when he uses the word *grace*. Salvation is a gift of God, something that we could never earn with even a thousand years of the law.

Jesus and grace

“The law was given through Moses,” John writes. “Grace and truth came through

Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). John saw a contrast between the law and grace, between what we do and what we are given.

Nevertheless, Jesus didn’t use the word *grace*. But his entire life was an example of grace, and his parables illustrated grace. He sometimes used the word *mercy* to describe what God gives us. “Blessed are the merciful,” he said, “for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). In this, he implied that we all need mercy. And he noted here that we should be like God in this respect. If we value grace, we will give grace to others.

Later, when Jesus was asked why he associated with notorious sinners, he told people, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (Matthew 9:13, quoting Hosea 6:6). In other words, God wants us to show mercy more than he wants us to be perfectionists in law-keeping.

We do not want people to sin. But since transgressions are inevitable, mercy is essential. That is true of our relationships with one another, and true of our relationships with God, too. God wants us to know our need for mercy, and for us to have mercy toward others. Jesus was exemplifying this when he ate with tax collectors and talked with sinners—he was showing by his behavior that God wants fellowship with us all, and he has taken all our sins upon himself and forgiven us in order to have that fellowship.

Jesus told a parable of two debtors, one who owed an enormous sum, and the other who owed a much smaller amount. The master forgave the servant who owed much, but that servant failed to forgive the servant who owed less. The master was angry and said, “Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?” (Matthew 18:33).

The point of the parable is that each of us should see ourselves as the first servant, who was forgiven an enormous debt. We

have all fallen far short of what the law requires, so God shows us mercy—and he wants us to show mercy as well. Of course, in mercy as well as in law, we fall short of what we should do, so we must continue to rely on God’s mercy.

The parable of the good Samaritan concludes with a command for mercy (Luke 10:37). The tax collector who pleaded for mercy was the one who was set right with God (Luke 18:13-14). The wasteful son who came home was accepted without having to do anything to “deserve” it (Luke 15:20). Neither the widow of Nain nor her son did anything to deserve a resurrection; Jesus did it simply out of compassion (Luke 7:11-15).

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

The miracles of Jesus served temporary needs. The people who ate loaves and fishes became hungry again. The son who was raised eventually died again. But the grace of Jesus Christ continues to be extended to all of us through the supreme act of grace: his sacrificial death on the cross. This is how Jesus gave himself up for us, with eternal consequences rather than temporary ones.

As Peter said, “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved” (Acts 15:11). The gospel was a message about God’s grace (Acts 14:3; 20:24, 32). We are justified by grace “through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24). God’s grace is linked with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross (verse 25). Jesus died for us, for our sins, and we are saved because of what he did on the cross. We have redemption through his blood (Ephesians 1:7).

But God’s grace goes further than forgiveness. Luke tells us that God’s grace was on the disciples as they preached the gospel (Acts 4:33). God showed them favor, giving them help they did not deserve. But

don't human fathers do the same? We not only give our children life when they had done nothing to earn it, we also give them gifts that they could not earn. That's part of love, and that is the way that God is. Grace is generosity.

When church members in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out on missionary trips, they commended them to the grace of God (Acts 14:26; 15:40). In other words, they put them into God's care, trusting God to take care of the travelers, trusting him to give them what they might need. That is included in his grace.

Spiritual gifts are a work of grace, too. "We have different gifts," Paul says, "according to the grace given us" (Romans 12:6). "To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (Ephesians 4:7). "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).

Paul thanked God for the spiritual gifts God had graced the believers with (1 Corinthians 1:4-5). He was confident that God's grace would abound toward them as he enabled them to do even more work (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Every good thing is a gift of God, a result of grace rather than something we have earned. That is why we are to be thankful even for the simplest of blessings, for the singing of birds and the smells of flowers and the laughter of little children. Even life itself is a luxury, not a necessity.

Paul's own ministry was given to him through grace (Romans 1:5; 15:15; 1 Corinthians 3:10; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:7). Everything he did, he wanted to be according to God's grace (2 Corinthians 1:12). His strength and skills were a gift of grace (2 Corinthians 12:9). If God can save and use the biggest sinner of all (which is the way

Paul described himself), he can certainly forgive and use any of us. Nothing can separate us from his love, from his desire to give to us.

Response of grace

How should we respond to the grace of God? With grace, of course. We are to be merciful, even as God is full of mercy (Luke 6:36). We are to forgive others, just as we have been forgiven. We are to serve others, just as we have been served. We are to be gracious toward others, giving them favor and kindness.

Our words are to be full of grace (Colossians 4:6). We are to be gracious (forgiving and giving) in marriage, in business, in church, with friends and family and strangers. It's supposed to make a difference in our lives and in our priorities.

Paul spoke of financial generosity as a work of grace, too: "We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:1-3). They had been given much, and they in turn were willing to give much.

Giving is an act of grace (verse 6), and generosity—whether in finances, in time, in respect, or in other ways—is an appropriate way for us to respond to the grace of Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us so that we might be richly blessed (verse 9).

Joseph Tkach, 2002

See www.wcg.org/lit/gospel for more articles about grace.

Also helpful are the popular books about grace by Philip Yancey, Max Lucado, and Charles Swindoll.

15. Sin

Sin is lawlessness, that is, a state or condition of rebellion against God. From the time sin entered the human race through Adam and Eve, humanity has been under its yoke—a yoke that can only be removed by God’s grace through Jesus Christ. The sinful condition of humanity is manifested in the tendency to choose self and self-interests over God and God’s will. Sin causes alienation from God, and suffering and death. Because all humans are sinners, all humans need the salvation God offers through his Son.

(1 John 3:4; Romans 5:12; 7:24-25; Mark 7:21-23; Galatians 5:19-21; Romans 6:23; 3:23-24) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 15)

Trusting God with the problem of sin

“OK, I understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. And I understand that there is nothing I can add to the equation. But here’s my question: If God, for Christ’s sake, has completely forgiven me for all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn’t he want me to stop sinning?”

That’s already four questions. And they are important. Let’s go through them one at a time, and see if any more crop up along the way.

All sin forgiven

First, you said that you understand that the blood of Christ covers all sin. That’s a great beginning. A lot of Christians don’t understand that. They believe that the forgiveness of sins is a transaction, kind of a business deal, between a person and God. The idea is that you do the right thing for God, and God will give you forgiveness and salvation.

For example, you put your faith in Jesus,

and God rewards you by applying Jesus’ blood to your sins. Tit for tat. That would be good deal, to be sure, but still a deal, a transaction, and certainly not the pure grace proclaimed by the gospel. In this way of thinking, most people are damned because they didn’t ante up in time, and God divvies out the blood of Jesus to only a few; it never actually redeemed the whole world.

But many churches don’t even leave it there. Potential believers are lured in with the promise of being saved by grace alone, but once the believer enters the church, the list of rules comes out. If you don’t toe the line, you might well get kicked out, and under certain circumstances, not only out of the church, but out of the kingdom of God as well. So much for “saved by grace.”

There is definitely, according to the Bible, a place for removing a person from the fellowship of the church (which does not remove a person from the kingdom, of course), but that’s another subject. For now, suffice it to say that organized religion tends to have a love affair with keeping sinners out of the church, whereas the gospel trumpets them an invitation to enter.

According to the gospel, Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice not only for our sins, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). That, contrary to what many Christians have been told by their preachers, means absolutely everybody.

Jesus said, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Jesus is God the Son, by whom and through whom all things exist (Hebrews 1:2-3), and his blood redeems no less than everything he made (Colossians 1:20).

By grace alone

You also said that you understand that there is nothing you can bring to the table to sweeten the deal God has drawn up for you in Christ. There again, you are way ahead of the game. The world is full of sin-battling preachers who lay weekly guilt trips on their cowering flocks with a long list of specially selected commissions and omissions that reputedly ignite God’s ever-shortening fuse and threaten to land the whole pathetic lot of spiritual low achievers in the fiery torments of hell.

The gospel, on the other hand, declares that God loves people. He is not out to get them. He is not against them. He is not waiting for them to trip up so he can squash them. Quite the contrary, he is on their side. He loves them so much that he has set free from sin and death all people everywhere by the atoning sacrifice of his Son (John 3:16).

In Christ, the door is open to the kingdom of God. People can believe God’s word (faith), turn to him (repent) and claim their freely given inheritance—or they can continue to deny God as their Father and reject their part in the family of God. God honors our choice. If we disown him, he lets our decision stand. That is not the choice he *wants* us to make, but he does allow us the freedom to make it.

Response

God has done all that needed to be done for us. In Christ, he has said “Yes” to us. It is up to us to say “Yes” to his “Yes.” But the Bible indicates that there are, amazingly, those who say “No.” They are the wicked, the haters, the ones who oppose God and themselves.

When all is said and done, they have committed themselves to the proposition that they have a better way; they have no need of God. They regard not God or man. To them, God’s offer of complete amnesty and eternal blessing is a meaningless and worthless insult. God, who gave his Son for them, ratifies their appalling decision to remain the children of the devil they have chosen over him.

God is the Redeemer, not the destroyer. And he has done all this for no other reason than that he wants to, and he is free to do what he wants. He is bound by no outside rules, but he has freely chosen to be utterly faithful to his covenant love and promise. He is who he is, which is exactly who he wants to be, and he is our God, full of grace and truth and faithfulness. He forgives our sins because he loves us. That is how he wants it, so that is how it is.

No law could save

There is no law that could bring eternal life (Galatians 3:21). We humans simply don’t keep laws. We can argue all day over whether it is theoretically possible for humans to keep the law, but when all is said and done, the fact is, we don’t keep it, never did and never will, and nobody ever has but Jesus.

There is only one way salvation comes, and that is through God’s free gift apart from anything we do or don’t do (Ephesians 2:8-10). Like any gift, we can take it or leave it.

Either way, it is ours already by God's grace, but we can use it and enjoy it only if we actually take it. That is a simple matter of trust. We believe God and turn to him.

If, on the other hand, we are foolish enough to reject it, we will, tragically, continue to live in our self-imposed darkness and death as though we never had light and life handed to us in a golden goblet.

Hell a choice

Such a choice, such contempt for God's free gift—a gift paid for by the blood of his Son through whom all things exist and consist—is nothing less than hell. But it is a choice made by people whose invitation to pre-paid life is just as real and valid as the invitation of those who accept theirs. Jesus' blood covers all sin, remember, not just some sin (Colossians 1:20). His atonement is for all the creation, not just part of it.

Those who scorn such a gift are kicked out of the kingdom only because that is their own preference. They want no part of it, and God, though he never stops loving them, won't allow them to stick around and ruin the joy of the eternal celebration by stinking up the place with the pride and hate and unbelief they have made their gods.

So they go where they like it best—straight to hell where there is nobody having fun to spoil their miserable self-absorption.

Free grace is good news! Even though we didn't earn it or deserve it, God decided to give us eternal life in his Son. Believe or scoff, it's our choice. Whatever we decide to do about it, this much is forever true: Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has concretely demonstrated how much he loves us, and how far he has gone to forgive our sins and restore us to himself.

He has freely poured out his mercy everywhere in abounding love on absolutely everybody. It is pure grace—God's free gift

of salvation, and it is enjoyed by everybody who believes his word and accepts him on his terms.

What stops me?

That brings us to your questions. If God has already forgiven my sins even before I commit them, what is to stop me from just going out and sinning my brains out?

First, let's clear some ground. Sin is primarily a condition of the heart, not merely individual acts of wrongdoing. The acts of wrongdoing don't come from nowhere; they spring naturally from our corrupt hearts. The solution to our sin problem, consequently, requires a fixed heart, getting at the source of sin, rather than merely treating its effects.

God is not interested in finely behaved robots. He wants a love relationship with us. He loves us. That is why Christ came to save us. And relationships are built on forgiveness and mercy, not on forced compliance.

If I want my wife to love me, for example, do I force her to act as though she does? If I did, I might get compliance, but I certainly wouldn't get her to actually love me. You cannot force anybody to love. You can only force people to act.

Through self-sacrifice, God has shown us how much he loves us. Through forgiveness and mercy, he has proven his great love. By suffering for our sins in our place, he has demonstrated that there is nothing that can come between us and his love (Romans 8:38).

God wants children, not slaves. He wants a love relationship with us, not a world of cowering whipped dogs. He made us free beings, with real choices to make that matter to him very much. And the choice he wants us to make is him.

Real freedom

God gives us freedom to behave as we

wish, and he forgives our failures. He does it because he wants to. He set things up that way, and he makes no apologies for it. If we have any sense, we will see his love for what it is and latch onto him like there's no tomorrow.

So what is there to stop us from sinning all we want? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And there never has been. The law certainly didn't stop anybody from sinning all they wanted (Galatians 3:21-22). We have always sinned all we want, and God has always permitted it. He's never stopped us. He doesn't like it. He doesn't condone it. He doesn't endorse it. In fact, it grieves him. But he has always permitted it. That's called freedom, and he gives us that freedom.

In Christ

When the Bible says that we are righteous in Christ, that is what it means (1 Corinthians 1:30; Philippians 3:9).

We are not righteous in ourselves; we are righteous in Christ. In ourselves, because of sin, we are dead, but we are also, at the same time, alive in Christ—our lives are hid in Christ (Colossians 3:3).

Without Christ, we are in hopeless shape, sold under sin, with no future. But Christ saved us. That is the gospel—good news! His salvation, if we receive it, puts us on a new footing with God.

Because of what God has done in Christ for us, including his prompting, even urging, us to trust him, Christ is now in us. And for Christ's sake (he intercedes for us), we are, in spite of our sin, acceptable—righteous—before God. And the whole business, from start to finish, is done, not by us, but by God, who wins us not by force, but by the power of his self-sacrificial love.

The law meaningless?

Paul was very plain about the purpose of

the law. It shows us that we are sinners (Romans 7:7). It declares the fact of our slavery to sin so that we might be justified by faith when Christ came (Galatians 3:19-27).

Now, suppose for a moment that you enter the judgment actually believing you are righteous because you always tried really hard to obey God. And so, instead of taking the wedding garment provided at the door (the free, clean one that goes only to dirty people who know they need it), you go in by a side door wearing your striving-real-hard garment, reeking all the way, and sit down at your place at the table.

The lord of the house will say to you, "Hey buddy, where did you get the brass to come in here and insult me in front of all my guests with your sewage-soaked rags?" And then he will say to the staff, "Handcuff this filthy imposter and dump him in the swamp."

We simply cannot clean our own dirty faces ourselves with our own dirty water, our own dirty soap and our own dirty washcloths, and go happily on our way thinking our hopelessly filthy faces are clean. There is only one way to remedy sin, and it does not lie with us.

Remember, we are dead in sin (Romans 8:10), and dead people, by definition, can't remedy their deadness. Rather, the acute knowledge of our sinfulness should lead us to trust Jesus to clean us (1 Peter 5:10-11).

God wants you sin-free

God has given us such indescribably great mercy and salvation not so that we feel a license to sin, but to free us from sin. That freedom not only removes our guilt from sin, but it also empowers us to see sin stripped naked for what it really is instead of dressed up in the pretty costume it wears to fool us, and to reject its fraudulent and pretentious power over us. Even so, when we still sin, which we certainly do, Jesus remains no less

our atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:1-2).

God not only does not condone sin, he condemns sin. He does not like or endorse our glazed-eyed rationalizations, our comatose suspension of good sense or our hair-trigger, dive-in responses to temptations of every sort, from anger to lust to scorn to pride. And he rarely bails us out of the natural consequences of the things we choose to do.

However, because our faith and trust are in him (which means we are wearing the clean wedding clothes he provides), neither does he kick us out (as some preachers seem to think) of his wedding feast because of the poor choices we make.

Confession

Have you ever noticed that when you become aware of sinfulness in your life, your conscience plagues you until you confess your sins to God? (And chances are, there are some forms of sinfulness that you find yourself confessing rather frequently.)

Why do you do that? Because you have committed yourself to “go out and sin all you can”? Is it not, rather, because your heart rests in Christ, and you, in tune with the Spirit who dwells in you, are grieved until you re-establish a sense of right relationship with him?

The Spirit in us testifies with our spirit, we are told, to the truth that we are the children of God (Romans 8:15-17). Two things to remain keenly aware of here: 1) You, by the testimony of the Spirit of God himself, are, in Christ and with all the saints, a child of God, and 2) The Spirit, as the inner witness to your real identity, does not neglect to rumble your landscape when you choose to live as though you are still nothing but the dead meat you used to be before Jesus redeemed you.

Make no mistake. Sin is God’s enemy

and your enemy. We need to fight it tooth and nail. But we must never think that our salvation depends on the level of our success in overcoming sin. Salvation depends on Christ’s success in overcoming sin, and that’s already been done. Sin and the death that shadows it have already been defeated in Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the power of that victory resounds through all the creation from the beginning of time and forever. The only overcomers in the world are those who trust in Christ to be their resurrection and life.

Good works

God takes joy in the good works of his children (Psalm 147:11; Revelation 8:4). He delights in our acts of kindness, our sacrifices of love, our devotion to justice, honesty and peace (Hebrews 6:10).

These and every good work are the natural outgrowth of the Spirit’s work in us, leading us to trust, love and honor God. They are part and parcel with the love relationship that he has built with us through the sacrificial death and resurrection of the Lord of life, Jesus Christ. Such deeds and such work are God’s own work in us, his beloved children, and as such, they are never useless (1 Corinthians 15:53).

God’s work in us

Our faithful devotion to do what pleases God reflects our Savior’s love, but again, our works of righteousness in his name are not what saves us. The righteousness that finds expression in our words and deeds of obedience to God’s commands is righteousness that God himself is behind, joyfully working in us to his glory to bring forth good fruit.

For us to try to take credit for what he does in us would be silly. It would also be silly to think that the blood of Jesus, which covers all sin, leaves any of our sinfulness

uncovered. Because if we think that, then we still don't have a clue as to who this eternal and omnipotent triune God is—this Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who created all things, redeems us freely and magnificently with the Son's own blood, dwells in us through the Holy Spirit, and renews the whole creation, indeed, makes us into a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) along with the whole universe (Isaiah 65:17), because of his indescribable love.

True life

Though God commands us to do what is right and good, he simply does not determine salvation by record books. That is good for us, because if he did, we would all turn up in the reject pile.

God saves us by his grace, and we can walk in the joy of that salvation if we give up all our claims on life and turn to him and trust him and him alone to raise us from the dead (Ephesians 2:4-10; James 4:10).

Salvation is determined by the One who writes names in the book of life, and he has already written absolutely everyone's name in that book with the Lamb's blood (1 John 2:2). It is a colossal tragedy that some refuse to believe it, because if they would trust the Lord of life they would find that the life they have been scratching to save is not really life at all, but death, and that their true life, waiting to be revealed, is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3). God loves even his enemies and wants them, along with all people, to turn to him and enter the joy of his kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4, 6).

Summing up

So let's summarize. You asked: "If God, for Christ's sake, has completely forgiven all my sins, past, present and future, then what is to stop me from just going out and sinning all I want? I mean, is the law meaningless for

Christians? Does God now condone sin? Doesn't he want me to stop sinning?"

There is nothing to stop us from sinning all we want. There never has been. God has given us free will, and he values it. He loves us and desires a love relationship with us, and such a relationship comes only through free choice, rooted in trust and forgiveness, not through threats or forced compliance.

We are not robots or videotaped characters in a predetermined play. We are created as real, free beings, made so by God in his own creative freedom, and the personal relationship God has with us is real.

The law is far from meaningless; it serves to make it abundantly plain that we are sinners, falling far short of God's perfect will for us. God permits us to sin, but he definitely does not condone it. That is why he has gone to such astounding self-sacrificial lengths to save us from it.

Sin hurts and destroys us and everyone around us. It springs from a corrupt heart of unbelief and selfish rebellion against the very source of our life and being. It saps us of true life and true being and imprisons us in the darkness of death and nothingness.

Sin hurts

In case you haven't noticed, sin hurts like hell—literally, since that is in essence what it is. It makes as much sense to "go out and sin all I want to" as it does to stick my hand into the lawnmower. "Well, then," I heard one man say, "If we're already forgiven, we might as well just go out and commit adultery."

Sure, if you want to live in constant fear of being caught while you risk unwanted pregnancy and some nasty diseases, breaking your family's hearts, discrediting yourself, losing your friends and paying alimony out the nose, not to mention a plagued conscience and the likelihood of having to

deal with very angry husbands, boyfriends, brothers or fathers.

Sin has consequences, bad ones, which is precisely why God is at work in you to conform you to the image of Christ. You can work on listening and cooperating, or you can keep feeding appendages to the garbage disposal.

And we must not forget that the usual sins we think about when we say things like “go out and sin all I want” are only the tip of the iceberg. What about just being greedy, or selfish or rude? What about being unthankful, or saying mean things, or not helping out when you ought? What about holding a grudge, envying someone’s job, clothes, car or house, or harboring angry thoughts about someone? What about taking home your employer’s office supplies, sharing in gossip, or belittling your spouse and children? On and on we could go.

These are sins too, some big, some little, and guess what? We “go out” and do them all we want to. It’s a good thing God saves us by grace and not by works, isn’t it? Sin is not OK, but that does not stop us from sinning. God does not want us to sin, yet he knows better than we do that we are dead in sin, and that we will continue to be dogged by sin until our true life, redeemed and sinless, which is hidden in Christ, is revealed at his appearing (Colossians 3:4).

Sinners alive in Christ

Purely by the freely given grace and limitless power of our ever-living and ever-loving God, believers paradoxically have died to sin, yet are alive in Jesus Christ (Romans 5:12, 6:4-11). Despite our sins, we no longer walk in death because we have believed and accepted our resurrection in Christ (Romans 8:10-11; Ephesians 2:3-6), a resurrection that will find its consummation at the appearing of Christ when even our

mortal bodies put on immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52-53).

Nonbelievers continue to walk in death, unable to enjoy their life that is hid in Christ (Colossians 3:3) until they come to faith, not because the blood of Christ does not cover their sin, but because they cannot trust Christ to raise them from the dead until they believe the good news that he is their Savior and turn to him.

Nonbelievers are as redeemed as believers—Christ died for everybody (1 John 2:2)—only they don’t know it yet, and because they don’t believe what they don’t know, they continue to live in the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15) and the futile pursuit of life in all the wrong places (Ephesians 2:3).

The Holy Spirit transforms believers into the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). In Christ, the power of sin is broken, and we are no longer its prisoners. Even so, we are still weak and give place to sin (Romans 7:14-29; Hebrews 12:1).

Because he loves us, God cares very much about our sinful condition. He loves the world so much that he sent his eternal Son that whoever believes in him would not remain in the darkness of death that is the fruit of sin, but would have eternal life in him. There is nothing that can separate you from his love, not even your sins. Trust him. He helps you walk in obedience, and he forgives your every sin. He is your Savior because he wants to be, and he is very good at what he does.

J. Michael Feazell, 2000

16. Faith in God

Faith in God is a gift of God, rooted in his incarnate Son and enlightened by his eternal Word through the witness of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. Faith in God prepares and enables our minds and emotions to understand and receive God's gracious gift of salvation. It empowers us to participate in spiritual fellowship and committed allegiance to God our Father through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the author and perfecter of our faith, and it is through faith and not by works that we are saved by grace.

(Ephesians 2:8; Acts 15:9; 14:27; Romans 12:3; John 1:1, 4; Acts 3:16; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11:1; Romans 5:1-2; 1:17; 3:21-28; 11:6; Ephesians 3:12; 1 Corinthians 2:5; Hebrews 12:2) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 6)

Responding to God with faith

God is great and good. God always uses his enormous power to further his promise of love and grace toward his people. He is gentle, loving, slow to anger and full of mercy.

That's nice, but how is this relevant to us? What difference does it make in our lives? How do we respond to a God who is simultaneously powerful and gentle? We respond in at least two ways.

Trust

When we realize that God has all power to do anything he wants, and that he always uses it for the good of humanity, then we can have absolute confidence that we are in good hands. He has both the ability and the stated purpose of working all things, including even our rebellion, hatred and betrayal against him and one another, toward our salvation. He is completely trustworthy—worthy of our trust.

When we are in the midst of trials, sickness, suffering and even dying, we can be confident that God is still with us, that he cares for us, that he has everything under

control. It may not look like it, and we certainly do not feel in control, but we can be confident that God isn't caught off guard. He can and does redeem any situation, any misfortune, for our good.

We need never doubt God's love for us. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). The God who did not spare his own Son can be counted on to give us through his Son everything we need for eternal happiness.

God did not send somebody else: The Son of God, essential to the Godhead, became human so that he could die for us and rise again for us (Hebrews 2:14). We were redeemed not by the blood of animals, not by the blood of a very good man, but by the blood of the God who became human. Every time we take communion, we are reminded of the extent of his love for us. We can be confident that he loves us. He has earned our trust.

“God is faithful,” Paul tells us. “He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear” (1 Corinthians 10:13). “The Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:3). Even “if we are faithless, he will remain faithful” (2 Timothy 2:13).

He is not going to change his mind about wanting us, about calling us, about being merciful to us. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).

He has made a commitment to us, a covenant with us, to redeem us, to give us eternal life, to love us forever. He will not be without us. He is trustworthy, but how do we respond to him? Do we worry? Do we struggle to be worthy of his love? Or do we trust him?

We need never doubt God’s power. This is shown in the resurrection of Jesus from death. This is the God who has power over death itself, power over all the beings he created, power over all other powers (Colossians 2:15). He triumphed over all things through the cross, and this is demonstrated through his resurrection. Death could not hold him, for he is the author of life (Acts 3:15).

The same power that raised Jesus from death will also give immortal life to us (Romans 8:11). We can trust that he has the power, and the desire, to fulfill all his promises toward us. We can trust him with everything—and that’s a good thing, since it is foolish to trust in anything else.

Of ourselves, we will fail. Left to itself, even the sun will fail. Our only hope is in a God who has power greater than the sun, greater than the universe, more faithful than time and space, full of love and faithfulness toward us. We have that sure hope in Jesus our Savior.

Belief and trust

All who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved (Acts 16:31). But what does it mean to *believe* in Jesus Christ? Even the devil believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. He doesn’t like it, but he knows it’s true. Moreover, the devil knows that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

So what is the difference between our belief and the devil’s belief? James gives us an answer: True faith is shown by action (James 2:18-19). What we do shows what we really believe. Behavior *can* be evidence of faith, even though some people obey for wrong reasons. Even the devil operates within constraints imposed by God.

So what is faith, and how does it differ from belief?

The simplest explanation is that saving faith is *trust*. We trust God to take care of us, to do good for us rather than evil, to give us eternal life. Trust means knowing that God exists, knowing that he is good, knowing that he has the power to do what he wants, and trusting that he will use it to do whatever is best for us. Trust means a willingness to put ourselves under him, to be willing to obey not out of fear but out of love. When we trust God, we love him.

Trust is shown by what we do. But the action is not the trust, and it does not create the trust—it is only the result of trust. True faith is, at its core, trust in Jesus Christ.

A gift of God

Where does this kind of trust come from? It is not something we can work up for ourselves. We cannot talk ourselves into it or use human logic to build an airtight case. We will never have the time to cover all the philosophical arguments about God. But we are forced to make a choice each day: Will

we trust God, or not? Trying to delay the decision is a decision in itself: We do not yet trust him.

Each Christian has at some point or another made a decision to trust in Christ. For some, it was a well-thought-out decision. For others, it was an illogical decision, made for wrong reasons—but the right decision anyway. We could trust no one else, not even ourselves. On our own, we would mess our lives up. Nor could we trust other human authorities. For some of us, faith was a choice of desperation—we had nowhere else to go but to Christ (John 6:68).

It is normal that our first faith is an immature faith—a good start, but not a good place to stay. We need to *grow* in our faith. As one man said to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). The disciples themselves, even after worshipping the resurrected Jesus, had some doubts (Matthew 28:17).

So where does faith come from? It is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8 tells us that salvation is a gift of God, which means that the faith that leads to salvation must also be his gift.

In Acts 15:9 we are told that God purified the believers’ hearts by faith. God was working in their hearts. He is the one who “opened the door of faith” (Acts 14:27). God did it, because he is the one who enables whatever faith we have.

We would not trust God unless God himself gave us the ability to trust him. Humans have been too corrupted by sin to believe or trust in God on our own strength or wisdom. That is why faith is not a “work” that qualifies us for salvation. We get no credit for meeting the qualification—faith is merely receiving the gift, being thankful for the gift. God gives us the ability to receive his gift, to enjoy his gift.

Trustworthy

God has good reason to give us faith, for there is someone completely trustworthy for us to believe in and be saved by. The faith he gives us is rooted in his Son, who became flesh for our salvation. We have good reason to have faith, for we have a Savior who has purchased our salvation for us. He has done all that it takes, once for all, signed, sealed and being delivered. Our faith has a firm foundation: Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)—but he does not work alone. Jesus does only what the Father wants, and he works by the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit teaches us, convicts us, and gives us faith (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:10).

Through the word

How does God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) give us faith? It is usually through the preached word. “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The message is in the written word, the Bible, and it is in the spoken word, whether a sermon at church or a simple testimony of one person to another.

The word of the gospel tells us about Jesus, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit uses this word to enlighten us, and somehow allows us to trust ourselves to this word. This is sometimes called “the witness of the Holy Spirit,” but it is not like a courtroom witness we can ask questions of.

It is more like an internal switch inside us that is flipped, allowing us to accept the good news that is preached. It feels right. Though we may still have questions, we believe that we can live in this message. We can base our lives on it, we can make decisions based on it. It makes sense. It is the best possible choice.

God gives us the ability to trust him. He also gives us the ability to grow in faith. The down payment of faith is a seed that grows. It prepares and enables our minds and our emotions to understand more and more of the gospel. It helps us understand more about God as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ. To use an Old Testament metaphor, we begin to walk with God. We live in him, think in him, and believe in him.

Doubts

But most Christians struggle with faith at some time or another. Our growth is not always smooth and steady—it comes through trials and questions. For some, doubts come because of a tragedy or severe suffering. For others, it is prosperity or good times that subtly tempt us to rely on material things instead of God. Many of us will face both sorts of challenges to our faith.

Poor people often have stronger faith than rich people do. People beset by constant trials often know they have no hope except God, no choice but to trust him. Statistics show that poor people give a higher percentage of their income to the church than rich people do. It appears that their faith (even though not perfect) is more consistent.

The greatest enemy of faith, it seems, is when all goes well. People are tempted to think that it was by their strength or their intelligence that they achieved as much as they have. They lose their sense of child-like dependence on God. They rely on what they have, rather than on God.

Poor people are in a better position to learn that life on this planet is full of questions, and God is the least questionable thing they have. They trust in him because all else has proven itself to be untrustworthy. Money, health, and friends are all fickle. We cannot depend on them.

Only God is dependable, but even so, we

don't always have the evidence we would like. So we have to trust him. As Job said, even though he kills me, I will trust him (Job 13:15). Only he offers the hope of eternal life. Only he offers a hope that life makes any sense or has any purpose.

Part of growth

But still, we sometimes wrestle with doubts. That is simply part of the process of growing in faith, of learning to trust God with yet more of life. We face the choices set before us and once again choose God as the best choice.

As Blaise Pascal said centuries ago, if we believe for no other reason, then at least we ought to believe because God is the best bet. If we follow him and he does not exist, then we have lost nothing. But if we do not follow him and he does exist, we have lost everything. So we have nothing to lose and everything to gain by believing in God, by living and thinking that he is the surest reality in the universe.

This does not mean that we will understand everything. No, we will never understand everything. Faith means trusting in God even though we do not always understand. We can worship him even when we have doubts (Matthew 28:17). Salvation is not an intelligence contest. The faith that saves does not come from philosophical arguments that answer every doubt. Faith comes from God. If we rely on having answers to every question, we are not relying on God.

The only reason we can be in God's kingdom is by grace, through faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ. If we rely on our obedience, or anything else that we do, then we are relying on the wrong thing, an unreliable thing. We need to re-form our faith (allowing God to re-form our faith) into Christ, and him alone. Works, even good

works, cannot be the basis of our salvation. Obedience, even to the commands of Jesus, cannot be our source of assurance. Only Christ is trustworthy.

As we grow in spiritual maturity, we often become more aware of our own sins, and our own sinfulness. We realize how far we are from Christ, and this can lead us to doubts, too, that God would really send his Son to die for people as perverse as we are.

The doubt, no matter how real, should lead us back to greater faith in Christ, for only in him do we have any chance at all. There is no other place to go. In his words and his actions, we see that he knew quite well how perverse we were before he came to die for us. The better we see ourselves, the more we see the need to cast ourselves into the mercy of God. Only he is good enough to save us from ourselves, and only he will save us from our doubts.

Fellowship

It is by faith that we have a fruitful relationship with God. It is by faith that we pray, by faith that we worship, by faith that we hear his words in sermons and fellowship. Faith enables us to have fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is by faith that we are enabled to give our allegiance to God, through our Savior Jesus Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts.

It is by faith that we can love other people. Faith frees us from the fear of ridicule and rejection. We can love others without worrying about what they will do to us, because we trust in Christ to reward us generously. Through faith in God, we can be generous with others.

Through faith in God, we can put him first in our lives. When we believe God is as good as he says he is, then we will treasure him above all else, and be willing to make

the sacrifices that he asks of us. We will trust him, and it is by that trust that we will experience the joys of salvation. Christian life is, from first to last, a matter of trusting God.

Joseph Tkach, 2001

Articles about faith can be found at www.wcg.org/lit/gospel

Faith is also discussed in numerous books about evangelism and apologetics, including:

- Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. InterVarsity, 1994.
- William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*. Crossway, 1994.
- C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe?* InterVarsity, 1996.
- Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*. Zondervan, 1993.
- Alister McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith*. InterVarsity, 2007.

17. Salvation

Salvation is the restoration of human fellowship with God and the deliverance of the entire creation from the bondage of sin and death. God gives salvation, not only for the present life, but for eternity, to every person who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is the gift of God, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not earned by personal merit or good works.

(Ephesians 2:4-10; 1 Corinthians 1:9; Romans 8:21-23; 6:18, 22-23) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 6-7)

Salvation—a rescue!

Salvation is a rescue operation. To understand salvation, we need to know what the problem was, what God did about it, and how we respond to it.

What humans are

When God made humans, he made them “in his own image,” and he pronounced his creation “very good” (Genesis 1:26-27, 31). Humans were a wonderful creation: made from dust, but energized by the breath of God (Genesis 2:7).

“The image of God” probably includes intelligence, creativity and power over creation. It also includes the ability to have relationships and to make moral choices. We are in some way like God himself. That’s because God has something special in mind for us, his children.

Genesis tells us that the first humans did something God had warned them not to do (Genesis 3:1-13). Their disobedience showed that they did not trust God, and it was a violation of his trust in them. By being faithless, they had broken the relationship and fallen short of what God wanted for them. They were becoming less like God. The result, said God, was struggle, pain and death (vv. 16-19). If they were not going to

follow the Maker’s instructions, they were going to end up doing things the hard way.

Humans are noble and crude at the same time. We can have high ideals, and yet be barbaric. We are like God, and yet ungodly. We are not the way we are supposed to be. Even though we have messed ourselves up, God still considers us to be made in his image (Genesis 9:6). The potential is still there for us to be like God. This is why he wants to rescue us, to save us, to restore the relationship he had with us.

God wants to give us eternal life, free from pain, on good terms with God and with each other. He wants our intelligence, creativity and power to be used for good. He wants us to be like he is, to be even better than the first humans were. This is salvation.

The center of the plan

We need to be rescued. And God has done this—but he did it in a way that no human would have expected. The Son of God became a human, lived a perfect life, and we killed him. And that, says God, is the salvation we need. What irony! We are saved by a victim! Our Creator became flesh so he could absorb the penalty of sin for us. But God raised him back to life, and through

Jesus, he promises to resurrect us, too.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the death and salvation of humanity is represented and made possible. His death is what our failures deserve, and as our Creator, he paid for all our failures. Though he did not deserve death, he willingly died for our sins, on our behalf.

Jesus Christ died for us, and was raised for us (Romans 4:25). Our old self died with him, and a new person is brought back to life with him (Romans 6:3-4). In one sacrifice, Jesus paid the penalty “for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The payment has already been made; the question now is how we are to receive the benefits. We participate in the plan through repentance and faith.

Repentance

Jesus came to call people to repentance (Luke 5:32). Peter told people to repent and turn to God for forgiveness (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Paul said people “must turn to God in repentance” (Acts 20:21). Repentance means to turn away from sin and toward God. Paul told the Athenians that God overlooked idolatry done in ignorance, but “now commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). They should stop their idolatry.

Paul was concerned that some of the Corinthian Christians might not repent of their sexual sins (2 Corinthians 12:21). For these people, repentance would mean a willingness to stop their immorality. Paul preached that people should “prove their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20). We change our attitude and our behavior.

Part of our doctrinal foundation is “repentance from acts that lead to death” (Hebrews 6:1). But this does not mean perfect behavior—Christians are not perfect (1 John 1:8). Repentance means not that we arrive at our goal, but that we begin traveling in the right direction.

No longer do we please ourselves, but we live to please Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Corinthians 6:20). Paul tells us, “Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness” (Romans 6:19).

Faith

However, simply telling people to repent is not going to rescue them from their failures. Humans have been told to obey for thousands of years, but they still need to be rescued. Something more is needed, and that is Christ. But we do not experience the blessing of forgiveness if we don’t believe that Christ has done this for us. We need faith, or belief. The New Testament says much more about faith than it does repentance—the words for faith occur more than eight times as often.

Everyone who believes in Jesus is forgiven (Acts 10:43). “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). The gospel “is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Christians are known as believers, not as repenters. Belief is the defining characteristic.

Does this mean that we are to accept certain facts? The Greek word *can* mean that kind of belief, but more often it conveys the sense of trust. When Paul encourages us to believe in Jesus Christ, he is not emphasizing facts. (The devil knows the facts about Jesus, but he isn’t saved.)

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we trust him. We know he is faithful and trustworthy. We can count on him to take care of us, to give us what he promises. We can trust him to rescue us from humanity’s worst problems. When we turn to him for salvation, we admit that we need help, and that he can provide it.

Our faith does not save us—our faith must be in him, not something else. We commit ourselves to him, and he saves us. When we trust in Christ, we quit trying to save ourselves. Although we try to have good behavior, we do not think our efforts are saving us (diligent effort never made anyone perfect). Nor do we despair when our efforts fail. That's because we are trusting in Christ, not in ourselves, for our salvation. Our confidence is in him, not in our success or failure.

Faith is what motivates repentance. When we trust Jesus as our Savior, when we realize that God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us, when we know that he wants the best for us, then we become willing to live for him and please him. We make a choice—we give up the pointless and frustrating life we used to have, and accept his purpose and direction for what life is supposed to be.

Faith is the internal change that makes all the difference. Our faith doesn't earn anything or add anything to what Jesus has earned for us. Faith is simply the willingness to respond to what he has done. We are like slaves working in the clay pits, and Christ announces, "I have purchased your freedom." We are free to stay in the pits, or we can trust him and leave. The redemption has been done; our part is to accept it and act on it.

Grace

Salvation is God's gift to us, given by his grace, his generosity. We can't earn it, no matter what we do. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Even our faith is a gift of God. Even if we obey perfectly from now on, we do not deserve a reward (Luke 17:10).

We were created for good works (Eph-

esians 2:10), but good works cannot save us. They follow salvation, but they cannot earn it. As Paul says, if salvation could be achieved by law-keeping, then Christ died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). Grace does not give us permission to sin, but grace is given to us when we sin (Romans 6:15; 1 John 1:9). Whatever good works we do, we thank God for doing them in us (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:13).

God "has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9). "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:5).

Grace is the heart of the gospel: We are saved by God's gift, not by our works. The gospel is "the message of his grace" (Acts 14:3; 20:24). "It is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved" (Acts 15:11). "We are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). We would be hopelessly in sin and condemnation, except for grace.

Our salvation depends on what Christ has done. He is the Savior, the one who rescues us. We cannot brag about our obedience, or our faith, because they are always defective. The only thing we can be proud of is what Christ has done (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)—and he did it for everyone, not just us.

Justification

The Bible explains salvation in many ways: ransom, redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, adoption, justification, etc. That is because people understand their problem in different ways. For those who feel dirty, Christ offers cleansing. For those who feel enslaved, he offers redemption, or purchase. For those who feel guilt, he gives forgiveness.

For people who feel alienated and put at

a distance, he offers reconciliation and friendship. For those who feel worthless, he gives an assurance of value. For people who don't feel like they belong, he describes salvation as adoption and inheritance. For those who are aimless, he gives purpose and direction. For those who are tired, he offers rest. For the fearful, he gives hope. For the anxious, he offers peace. Salvation is all this, and more.

Let's look at justification. The Greek word is a courtroom term. People who are justified are declared "not guilty." They are exonerated, cleared, acquitted, declared OK. When God justifies us, he says that our sins will not be counted against us. They are removed from the record.

When we accept that Jesus died for us, when we acknowledge that we need a Savior, when we acknowledge that our sin deserves punishment and that Jesus bore the punishment of our sins for us, then we have faith, and God assures us that we are forgiven.

No one can be justified, or declared righteous, by observing the law (Romans 3:20), because the law does not save. It is only a standard that we fail to meet, and by that measurement, all of us fall short (v. 23). God "justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (v. 26). We are "justified by faith apart from observing the law" (v. 28).

To illustrate justification by faith, Paul uses the example of Abraham, who "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3, quoting Genesis 15:6). Because Abraham trusted God, God counted him as righteous. This was long before the law was given, showing that justification is a gift of God, received by faith, not earned by law-keeping.

Justification is more than forgiveness, more than removing our debts. Justification means counting us as righteous, as having

done something right. Our righteousness is not from our own works, but from Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30). It is through the obedience of Christ, Paul says, that believers are made righteous (Romans 5:19).

Paul even says that God "justifies the wicked" (Romans 4:5). God will consider a sinner righteous (and therefore accepted on the day of judgment) if the sinner trusts God. A person who trusts God will no longer want to be wicked, but this is a result and not a cause of salvation. People are "not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16).

A new start

Some people come to faith suddenly. Something clicks in their brain, a light goes on, and they accept Jesus as their Savior. Other people come to faith in a more gradual way, slowly realizing that they do trust in Christ and not in themselves for their salvation.

Either way, the Bible describes this as a new birth. When we have faith in Christ, we are born anew as children of God (John 1:12-13; Galatians 3:26; 1 John 5:1). The Holy Spirit begins to live within us (John 14:17), and God begins a new creation in us (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). The old self dies, and a new person is being created (Ephesians 4:22-24)—God is changing us.

In Jesus Christ, and as we have faith in him, God is undoing the results of humanity's sin. As the Holy Spirit works within us, a new humanity is being formed. The Bible doesn't say exactly how this happens; it just says that it is being done. The process begins in this life and is finished in the next.

The goal is to make us more like Jesus Christ. He is the image of God in perfection (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3), and we must be transformed into his

likeness (2 Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 4:19; Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 3:10). We are to be like him in spirit—in love, joy, peace, humility and other godly qualities. That’s what the Holy Spirit does in us. He is restoring the image of God.

Salvation is also described as reconciliation—the repair of our relationship with God (Romans 5:10-11; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20-22). No longer do we resist or ignore God—we love him. We are changed from enemies to friends. And even more than friends—God says that he adopts us as his own children (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5). We are in his family, with rights, responsibilities and a glorious inheritance (Romans 8:16-17; Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 1:18; Colossians 1:12).

Eventually there will be no more pain and sorrow (Revelation 21:4), which means that no one will be making mistakes. Sin will be no more, and death will be no more (1 Corinthians 15:26). That goal may seem a long way off when we look at ourselves now, but the journey (just like any other journey) begins with a single step—the step of accepting Christ as Savior. Christ will complete the work he begins in us (Philippians 1:6).

And in the future, we will be even more like Christ (1 Corinthians 15:49; 1 John 3:2). We will be immortal, incorruptible, glorious and sinless. Our spiritual bodies will have supernatural powers. We will have a vitality, intelligence, creativity, power and love far beyond what we know now. The image of God, once tarnished by sin, will be restored even better than it was before.

Michael Morrison, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/gospel for more articles about salvation.

18. Assurance of Salvation

The Bible affirms that all whose faith remains in Jesus Christ will be saved, and that nothing can snatch them out of his hand. The Bible emphasizes the infinite faithfulness of the Lord, the total sufficiency of Jesus Christ for our salvation, the dynamic love of God for all peoples, and the gospel as the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. Having such assurance of salvation, believers are urged to remain firm in the faith and to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(John 10:27-29; 2 Corinthians 1:20-22; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Corinthians 15:2; Hebrews 6:4-6; John 3:16; Romans 1:16; Hebrews 4:14; 2 Peter 3:18) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 7)

What about “eternal security”?

The doctrine of eternal security in theological language is referred to as the “perseverance of the saints.” In common expression it is referred to as “once saved, always saved” or “once a Christian, always a Christian.”

Many Scriptures give us an assurance that we have salvation now, even though we must await the resurrection to inherit, in finality, eternal life and the kingdom of God. Here are some of the phrases the New Testament uses:

He who believes has eternal life (John 6:47).... Every one who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).... I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish: no one can snatch them out of my hand (John 10:28).... There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1).... Those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son (Romans 8:29).... [Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of

God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).... [Christ] will keep you strong to the end (1 Corinthians 1:8).... God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13).... He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion (Philippians 1:6).... We have passed from death to life (1 John 3:14).

It is upon such assurances that the doctrine of eternal security is built. However, there is another side to the coin of salvation. There also appear to be warnings that Christians can fall from the grace of God.

Christians are warned, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Jesus said, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (Mark 14:38) and “the love of most will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). The apostle Paul said some in the church had “shipwrecked their faith” (1 Timothy 1:19). The church at Ephesus was warned that Christ might remove its lampstand and he would vomit the lukewarm Laodiceans from

his mouth. Most fearful is the admonition in Hebrews 10, verses 26-31:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay.”

There is also Hebrews 6:4-6 to think about:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

There is a duality, then, in the New Testament. Many verses are positive about the eternal salvation that we have in Christ. This salvation seems secure. But such verses are tempered by some warnings that appear to say Christians can lose their salvation through persistent unbelief.

Since the question of eternal security or whether Christians are safe—that is, when once saved, whether they are always saved—usually comes up because of such scriptures

as Hebrews 10:26-31, let’s look at this passage in more detail. The question is how to interpret these verses. To whom is the writer talking, and what is the nature of the people’s “belief” and what have they accepted?

Let’s first look at what Hebrews as a whole tells us. The point of this book is the need for *belief in Christ* as the *totally sufficient* sacrifice for sins. There are no competitors. Faith must rest in him alone. The solution to the question of the possible loss of salvation generated by verse 26 lies in the last verse of the chapter: “We are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed [or, lost], but of those who believe [or, have faith] and are saved.” Some shrink back and are lost, but those who remain in Christ cannot be lost.

This same assurance to the faithful is also found in the verses prior to Hebrews 10:26. Christians have confidence to be in God’s presence by the blood of Jesus (verse 19). We can draw near to God with full assurance of faith (verse 22). The writer exhorts Christians with these words: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (verse 23).

One way to understand the verses in Hebrews 6 and 10 about “falling away” is to see the writer as giving his readers *hypothetical* scenarios to encourage them to remain steadfast in the faith. Let’s look at Hebrews 10:19-39, for example. The people to whom he is talking “have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place” through Christ (verse 19). They are able to “draw near to God” (verse 22). The writer sees these people as holding “unswervingly to the hope we profess” (23). He wants to spur them on to even greater love and faith (verse 24).

As part of his encouragement, he paints a picture of what could happen—

hypothetically according to the above theory—to those who “deliberately keep on sinning” (verse 26). Nonetheless, the people he is addressing are people who “had received the light” and “stood their ground” during days of persecution (verses 32-33). They have their “confidence” in Christ, and the writer encourages them to persevere in the faith (verses 35-36). Finally, he says of the people to whom he is writing that “we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved” (verse 39).

Notice, also, how the writer closes his warning about “falling away” in Hebrews 6:1-8. He says: “Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of *better things* in your case—things that *accompany* salvation. God is not unjust; he will *not forget* your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and *continue* to help them” (verses 9-10). The writer then goes on to tell them he has said these things so that they will show the “same diligence to the very end.”

Hypothetically, then, it is possible to speak of a situation in which a person who truly had faith in Christ could lose it. But if it were not possible, would the warning be appropriate or effective?

In the real world, can Christians lose their faith? Christians can “fall” in the sense of committing sins (1 John 1:8-2:2). They can become spiritually lazy in certain situations. But does this sometimes result in a final “falling away” for those who are truly in Christ? This is not wholly clear from Scripture. In fact, we might ask how one can “truly” be in Christ and yet be capable of simultaneously “falling away”?

The church’s position, as expressed in its *Statement of Beliefs*, is that no one can snatch people of *continuing* faith whom God gives to Christ out of his hand. In other words, if a

person’s faith is in Christ, he or she cannot be lost. As long as Christians hold fast to this confession of their hope, their salvation is safe.

The question about the “once saved, always saved” doctrine has to do with whether we can lose our faith in Christ. As mentioned earlier, the book of Hebrews seems to describe people who have at least an initial “faith” but who can be in danger of losing it. Yet, that proves the point made in the previous paragraph. The only way to lose salvation is to discard the only Way to salvation: faith in Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews is primarily about the sin of unbelief in God’s saving work, which he accomplished in Jesus Christ. (See, for example, Hebrews 1:2; 2:1-4; 3:12, 14, 3:19-4:3; 4:14.) Hebrews chapter 10 gets into the question dramatically with verse 19, stating that we have confidence and full assurance through Jesus Christ.

Verse 23 exhorts us to hold fast to our confession. We know this for certain: As long as we hold fast the confession of our hope, we are fully secure and cannot lose our salvation. This confession includes our faith in Christ’s atonement for our sins, our hope of new life in him and our continuing allegiance to him in this life.

Often, those who use the slogan “once saved always saved” are not clear about what they mean. The phrase does *not* mean that a person has been saved merely because he or she said few words about Christ. Human beings are saved when they have the Holy Spirit, having been born again to a new life in Christ. Real faith is evidenced by allegiance to Christ, and that means we no longer live for self, but for the Savior.

The bottom line is, we are safe in Christ as long as we continue to live in Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-23). We have full assurance of faith in him, because it is he who saves us.

We don't have to worry, "Am I going to make it?" In Christ we have assurance—we are his and are saved, and nothing can snatch us out of his hand.

The only way we could be lost is to spurn his blood, deciding we really don't need him after all and that we are sufficient to ourselves. If we did that, we wouldn't really care about being saved anyway. As long as we remain faithful in Christ, we have assurance that he will complete the work he has begun in us.

The comforting thing is: We do not have to worry about our salvation, saying, "What if I fail? What if I fail?" We have already failed. Jesus is the one who saves us, and he doesn't fail. Can we fail to accept him? Yes, but if we are Spirit-led Christians we haven't failed to accept him. Once we accept Jesus, the Holy Spirit lives in us, conforming us to his image. We have joy, not fear. We have peace, not anxiety.

When we believe in Jesus Christ, we stop worrying about whether we'll "make it." He "made it" for us. We rest in him. We quit worrying. We have faith and trust in him, not in ourselves. So the question of whether we can lose our salvation no longer bothers us. Why? Because we believe Jesus' work on the cross and his resurrection is all we need.

God doesn't need our perfection. We need his, and he has given it to us as his free gift through faith in Christ. We won't fail, because our salvation doesn't depend on us.

To summarize, the church believes that those who *remain* in Christ cannot be lost. They are "eternally secure." But this depends on what people mean when they say "once saved, always saved."

As far as the related doctrine of predestination is concerned, we can summarize the church's position in a few words. We do not believe that God has decreed before all time who will and will not be lost. It is the

church's belief that God will make fair and just provision for people who did not receive the gospel in this life. Such people will be judged on the same basis as we are, that is, on whether they give their allegiance and faith to Jesus Christ.

Paul Kroll, 2000

You may find one of following books helpful:

- J. Matthew Pinson, ed., *Four Views on Eternal Security*. Zondervan, 2002.
- Chad Brand, *Perspectives on Election: Five Views*. Broadman & Holman, 2006.
- James K. Beilby, ed. *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. InterVarsity, 2001.

19. The Christian Sabbath

The Christian Sabbath is life in Jesus Christ, in whom every believer finds true rest. The weekly seventh-day Sabbath, which was enjoined upon Israel in the Ten Commandments, was a shadow that prefigured the true Reality to whom it pointed—our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

(Hebrews 4:3, 8-10; Matthew 11:28-30; Exodus 20:8-11; Colossians 2:16-17)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, page 19)

Celebrating salvation in Christ

Worship is our response to the gracious acts of God on our behalf. For ancient Israel, worship was centered in the Exodus experience—what God had done for them. For Christians, worship is centered in the gospel, what God has done for all believers. Christian worship celebrates and participates in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the salvation and redemption of all people.

The worship pattern given to Israel was designed especially for them. God gave the Israelites, through Moses, a worship pattern designed to enable them to respond in celebration to what God had done for them in delivering them from Egypt and bringing them into the Promised Land.

Christian worship does not require observances based on ancient Israel's experience with God, but responds instead to the gospel. We might say by analogy that the "new wine" of the gospel is to be poured into "new wineskins" (Matthew 9:17). The "old wineskin" of the old covenant was not made to hold the new wine of the gospel (Hebrews 12:18-24).

New forms

Israelite worship was for Israel. It lasted

until Christ came. Now God's people worship in new forms that reflect their response to new content—the transcendent new thing God has done in Jesus Christ. Christian worship is geared around the rehearsal of and participation in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Its key components include:

1. The Lord's Supper, also called Eucharist (or thanksgiving) and Communion, which was commanded by Christ.
2. Reading of Scripture, through which we rehearse and review the record of God's love and promises, especially his promise of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and through which we are nourished with the Word of God.
3. Prayer and song, through which we make our petitions to God in faith, repent of our sins in humility, and honor, praise and give him thanks in joyful and grateful adoration.

Focused on content

Christian worship is focused primarily on *content and meaning*, rather than primarily on form or time. Therefore, Christian worship is not limited to any day of the week or to any particular season of the year. Nor is any day or season commanded or required of Christians. However, Christians

are free to, and normally do, set aside special seasons to celebrate major aspects of the life and work of Jesus.

Christians also set aside one day a week for corporate worship, that is, for gathering together as the Body of Christ to worship God. Most Christians set aside Sunday for such worship. Some Christians set aside Saturday. A few choose to meet at other times, such as Wednesday evening.

Typical of seventh-day sabbatarian teaching is the belief that it is a sin for Christians to use Sunday as their regular day of gathering for worship. However, there is no biblical support for this idea.

Major events on Sunday

Surprising to many seventh-day sabbatarians, the Gospel accounts specifically pinpoint events of major importance as having taken place on Sunday. As we shall see, even though there is no command that Christians worship on Sunday, there is certainly no reason for Christians to feel uncomfortable with worshiping on Sunday.

John's Gospel tells us that disciples of Jesus came together on the first Sunday after Jesus was crucified, and that Jesus appeared among them (John 20:1). All four Gospels tell us that Jesus was first discovered to have been raised from the dead on early Sunday morning (Matthew 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1).

All four Gospel writers considered it significant enough to mention that these events occurred at a particular time—Sunday. They could have left that detail out, but they did not. *The Gospels declare that Jesus chose to reveal himself as the resurrected Messiah on Sunday, first in the morning, then in the afternoon, and finally in the evening.* Not only did these Sunday appearances of the risen Jesus cause the Gospel writers no concern or alarm, they

chose to make it plain that these things took place on that particular day of the week.

Road to Emmaus

If there is any question about which day the resurrection occurred on, consider the plain testimony of Luke's account of the two men on the road to Emmaus. Jesus had prophesied that he would be raised from the dead on "the third day" (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7).

Luke records plainly that Sunday, the day on which the women discovered that Jesus' tomb was empty, was in fact "the third day." He makes the point that the women discovered that Jesus was raised on Sunday morning (Luke 24:1), then makes the point that "the same day" (24:13), Sunday, was "the third day" (24:21), the day Jesus had said he would be raised (24:7).

Let's review certain key facts that the Gospel writers were inspired to record about the first Sunday after the crucifixion of Jesus:

1. Jesus was raised from the dead (Luke 24:1-8, 13, 21).
2. Jesus was recognized in the "breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:30-31, 34-35).
3. The disciples were meeting together, and Jesus came to be with them (Luke 24:15, 36; John 20:1, 19). John also records that on the second Sunday after the crucifixion, the disciples were again meeting, and that Jesus again came to be with them (John 20:26).

In the early church

Luke recorded in Acts 20:7 that Paul spoke to the church in Troas when it assembled on Sunday to "break bread." In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul told the church in Corinth, as he had told the churches in Galatia (v. 1), to use every Sunday for setting aside an offering for the famine-stricken Jerusalem church.

Paul does not say that the church must

meet on Sunday. His statement here does, however, seem to indicate that Sunday meetings were not extraordinary. The reason he gives for the weekly offering was so that “when I come no collections will have to be made” (v. 2). If the members had been setting aside the money each Sunday at home, rather than giving it each week at a meeting, then a collection would still need to have been taken when Paul came.

The natural reading of these passages shows us that it was not unusual for Christians to meet on Sunday, nor was it unusual for them to “break bread” together (a term Paul associates with the Lord’s Supper; see 1 Corinthians 10:16-17) during their Sunday meetings.

As we can see, the inspired writers of the New Testament *deliberately* inform us that Jesus was raised on Sunday. They also had no qualms about the fact that at least some believers gathered on Sunday to break bread. While Christians are not commanded to gather for worship on Sunday, these examples show that there is no reason to have any qualms about doing so.

Potential pitfalls

As we have seen, there are sound reasons for the Christian practice of gathering on Sunday as the body of Christ to commune with God. So then, *must* Christians meet on Sunday? No. Christian faith is not based on days, but on faith in God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

It would be a mistake to merely exchange one set of “commanded” days for another. Christian faith and worship is not about commanded days, but about knowing and loving God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

When we decide which day we will gather with fellow believers for worship, we should make our decision for right reasons.

Jesus’ command, “take, eat, this is my body” and “drink of this, all of you,” is not bound to any particular day. Yet, it has been a tradition of Gentile Christians to gather in communion with Christ on Sunday since the earliest years of the church, primarily because Sunday is the day on which Jesus revealed himself as raised from the dead.

The Sabbath commandment, along with all of the Mosaic law, *ended with Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection*. To embrace it, or to try to reapply it in the form of a Sunday Sabbath, is to diminish God’s revelation of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of his promises.

To believe that God commands Sabbath-keeping for Christians is to deprive ourselves of the full joy God wants us to have in Christ. God wants us to trust in him alone for salvation, and he wants us to find our rest and consolation in him alone. We are saved by grace, and we live by grace.

Confusion

We occasionally receive a letter in which the writer expresses his or her dissatisfaction that we would challenge the view that the weekly Sabbath is God’s holy day for Christians. They declare that they will “obey God rather than men,” regardless of what anyone tells them.

Certainly, such commitment to do what one believes God requires is good; the misunderstanding is in what it is that God requires. The strong sabbatarian conviction that we are obeying God by keeping the weekly Sabbath illustrates the confusion and error that sabbatarian teaching has given unwary Christians.

First, sabbatarian teaching sets up an unbiblical understanding of what it means to obey God, then it sets up that version of obedience as the defining content of Christian faithfulness. The result is an “us vs.

them” way of thinking, an approach to God that creates divisions in the body of Christ based on adherence to a command that the New Testament teaches is not in force.

Faithfulness to the weekly Sabbath is not a matter of obeying God, because God *does not command* the weekly Sabbath for Christians. God commands us to love him, and loving God is not defined by keeping the weekly Sabbath. It is defined by believing in Jesus Christ and by loving our neighbor (1 John 3:21-24; 4:19-21). There is, the Bible says, a new covenant and a new law (Hebrews 7:12; 8:13; 9:15).

It is a mistake for Christian teachers to set up the weekly Sabbath as a measuring rod for Christian faithfulness. The teaching that the Sabbath commandment is in force for Christians introduces destructive legalism into the Christian conscience, clouds the truth and power of the gospel and creates division in the body of Christ

Divine rest

The Bible says that God’s will for humans is that they believe the gospel and love him (John 6:40; 1 John 3:21-24; 4:21; 5:2). The greatest joy humans can have is knowing and loving their Lord (John 17:3), and such love is not defined by or enhanced by observance of a particular day of the week.

The Christian life is one of resting joyfully in the Savior, of entering the divine rest. It is a life in which every part of life is dedicated to God, and every activity is a sacrament of devotion. To set up Sabbath-keeping as a defining element of “true” Christianity causes a person to miss much of the joy and power of the truth that Christ has come, and that in him God has established a new covenant (Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:15) with all who believe the good news (Romans 1:16; 1 John 5:1).

The weekly Sabbath was a shadow, a hint, of the reality that was yet to come (Colossians 2:16-17). To hold up the hint as forever essential is to ignore the truth that the reality is indeed present and available. It robs one of being able to take full joy in what is *really* important.

It might be something like continuing to dwell on, treasure and meditate on one’s engagement announcement long after the wedding has taken place. It is high time to put one’s first attention on the spouse, and let the engagement announcement recede to its proper status as a pleasant memory, a step toward its own true goal.

Places and times are no longer central to the content of worship for the people of God. True worship, Jesus said, involves spirit and truth (John 4:21-26). The spirit involves the heart. Jesus is the truth.

When Jesus was asked, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” he answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent” (John 6:28-29). That is why Christian worship should revolve around Jesus Christ, around his identity as the eternal Son of God and his work as Lord, Savior and Teacher.

More pleasing?

To believe that obedience to the Sabbath command is the criterion by which we will be saved or damned in the final Judgment, as many sabbatarians have taught, is to misunderstand both sin and the grace of God. If Sabbath-keepers are the only ones who will be saved, then the Sabbath is the standard of judgment, not the Son of God who died and rose from the dead for our salvation.

Sabbath-keepers believe that it is more pleasing to God to keep the Sabbath than it is to ignore the Sabbath. But this reasoning does not come from the Bible. The Bible teaches that the Sabbath command, along

with the entire law of Moses, has been superseded and transcended in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, it is not “more pleasing” to God for us to keep the Sabbath than it is for us not to keep the Sabbath; the Sabbath was not given to Christians. The destructive element in sabbatarian theology is its insistence that Sabbath-keepers are the only *true and faithful* Christians, which means that the blood of Jesus is not enough to save you without your also keeping the Sabbath.

The Bible opposes such doctrinal confusion with powerful assertions that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ *without works* of any kind (Ephesians 2:8-10; Romans 3:21-22; 4:4-8; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:4-8). Such unvarnished declarations of the sufficiency of Christ alone to save us apart from the law plainly contradict the sabbatarian doctrine that salvation will not come to people who do not keep the Sabbath.

More godly?

The average Sabbath-keeper feels he or she is doing something more godly than non-Sabbath-keepers. Consider these statements from former WCG literature:

But only those who *continue to obey* God’s command to keep the Sabbath will finally enter the glorious “rest” of God’s Kingdom and receive the gift of eternal, spiritual life. (*Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course*, Lesson 27 of 58 [Ambassador College, 1964, 1967], 5)

Those not keeping the Sabbath will *not* be bearing God’s Sabbath “sign” which identifies His people, and therefore will NOT BE BORN OF GOD *at Christ’s coming!* (ibid., 12).

Not only was Sabbath-keeping considered more godly, it was believed that no one

would be saved without it. Consider this statement from a Seventh-day Adventist book:

Sunday observance, in the context of this eschatological struggle, will constitute in the end a distinguishing mark, here spoken of as the mark of the beast. Satan has exalted Sunday as the sign of his authority, while the Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty to God. This issue will divide Christendom into two classes, and will characterize the final time of trouble for the people of God. (Don Neufeld, ed., *Seventh Day Adventist Encyclopedia*, 2nd. rev. ed., vol. 3 [Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1966], 492)

This statement displays the concept that Sabbath-keeping is the deciding criterion of who is faithful to God and who is not, a concept that emerges from a fundamental misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, a concept that promotes an attitude of spiritual superiority.

Summary

Sabbatarian theology works against the grace of God in Jesus Christ and the plain teaching of the Bible. The law of Moses, including the Sabbath commandment, was given to Israel and not to the church. Although Christians should feel free to gather for worship on any day of the week, we must not make the mistake of thinking there is any biblical reason for choosing Saturday above any other day.

We can summarize it this way:

- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that the seventh-day Sabbath is binding on Christians.
- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that God is more pleased by Sabbath-keepers than by non-Sabbath-keepers, whether they are seventh-day sabbatarians or

Sunday sabbatarians.

- It is contrary to biblical teaching to say that one day is more holy or godly than another for the church to gather for worship.

- A central gospel event occurred on Sunday, and that is the basis for the Christian tradition of gathering on that day to worship.

- The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came as one of us to save us, forms the foundation of our faith. Therefore, gathering for worship on Sunday is a reflection of our belief in the gospel. Yet, gathering on Sunday is not *commanded*, nor does worship on Sunday make Christians more holy or loved by God than gathering on another day of the week.

- It is spiritually harmful to believe and teach that the Sabbath command is binding on Christians, because that teaching is contrary to Scripture and works against unity and love in the body of Christ.

- It is spiritually harmful to believe and teach that Christians are *required* to worship on either Saturday or Sunday, because such a teaching sets up the *day* of worship as a legalistic hoop that one must jump through to be saved.

A final thought

As followers of Jesus, we must learn not to condemn one another in the decisions we make in accord with our consciences before God. And we must be honest with ourselves about the reasons that lie behind our decisions. The Lord Jesus Christ has brought believers into his divine rest, into peace with him in full favor with God. May we, who love God, grow in love for one another as Jesus commanded.

J.M. Feazell, 2000, 2003

See www.wcg.org/lit/law/sabbath for more articles and a booklet about the Sabbath.

You may also find helpful:

- Michael Morrison, *Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing*. Writers Club, 2002.
- Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ*. Life Assurance Ministries, 2003.
- D.A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*. Wipf & Stock, 2000.

20. Repentance

Repentance toward a gracious God is a change of mind and attitude, prompted by the Holy Spirit and grounded in the Word of God. It includes an awareness of personal sinfulness and accompanies a new life sanctified through faith in Jesus Christ.

(Acts 2:38; Romans 2:4; 10:17; Romans 12:2) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 7)

Getting a grip on repentance

“**A** horrible dread.” That was how the young man described his deep fear that God had rejected him because of his repeated sins.

“I thought I had repented, but I did it again,” he explained. “I don’t even know if I really have faith, because I’m afraid God might not forgive me again. No matter how sincere I think my repentance is, it never seems to be enough.”

Let’s talk about what the gospel means by repentance toward God.

The first mistake in trying to understand what it means is to go to an English dictionary for a definition of the word *repent*. Contemporary dictionaries tell us how words have come to be understood at the time the dictionary was compiled. But a modern English dictionary does not tell us what was in the mind of a person who was writing 2,000 years ago in Greek about things that were first spoken in Aramaic, for example.

Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary says this of the word repent: 1) to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one’s life; 2a) to feel regret or contrition; 2b) to change one’s mind.

Webster’s first definition is exactly what most religious people believe Jesus was talking about when he said, “Repent and believe.” They believe that Jesus means that only people who repent, that is, stop sinning and change their ways, will be in the

kingdom of God. But the fact is, that is precisely what Jesus was *not* saying.

Common mistake

It is a common mistake for Christians to think of repentance as ceasing to sin. “If you had really repented, you wouldn’t have done it again” is a refrain many tormented souls have heard from well-meaning, law-upholding spiritual counselors. We are told that repentance is to “turn around and go the other way,” and it is explained in the context of turning away from sin and turning toward a life of obedience to God’s law.

With that idea firmly in mind, Christians set out with the best of intentions to change their ways. But along the way, some ways change, and some ways seem to stick like super-glue. And even the ways that change have a nasty way of cropping up again.

Is God satisfied with such mediocrity, such hit-and-miss obedience? “No, he is not!” the preacher exhorts, and the vicious, gospel-crippling cycle of commitment, failure and despair takes another spin around the going-nowhere rat-racetrack of futility.

And just when we are feeling frustrated and depressed about our failure to measure up to the high standards of God, we hear another sermon or read another article about “real repentance” and “deep repentance” and how such repentance results in a complete turning away from sin.

So, we crank up the commitment jalopy and go at it again, with the same, miserable, predictable results. And our frustration and despair deepens, because we realize that our turning away from sin is anything but “complete.”

We can only assume we have not “really repented.” Our repentance was not “deep” enough, or “heartfelt” enough or “true” enough. And if we have not really repented, then we must not really have faith. Which means we must not really have the Holy Spirit. Which means we must not really be saved.

Finally, we either get used to living like that, or, as many have done, we finally throw in the towel and walk away from the whole medicine show people call Christianity.

We won’t even talk about the disaster of people who actually believe they have cleaned up their lives and made themselves acceptable to God. Their state is far worse.

Repentance toward God is simply not about a new and improved you.

Repent and believe

“Repent and believe the gospel,” Jesus declares in Mark 1:15. Repentance and faith mark the beginning of our new life in the kingdom of God. They don’t mark it because we did the right thing. They mark it because that is when the scales fall off our darkened eyes and we at last see in Jesus Christ the glorious light of the liberty of the sons of God.

Everything that ever needed to be done for human forgiveness and salvation has already been done through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. There was a time when we were in the dark about that. We couldn’t enjoy it or rest in it because we were blind to it.

We thought we had to make our own way in this world, and we spent all our effort

and time plowing as straight a furrow in our little corner of life as we could manage.

We devoted all our attention to keeping our life and our future safe and secure. We worked hard to be respected and appreciated. We stood up for our rights and tried not to let anybody or anything take unfair advantage of us. We fought to protect and preserve our reputation, our family, our belongings. We did everything in our power to make something worthwhile of our lives, to be winners and not losers.

But like everybody who ever lived, it was a losing battle. Despite all our best efforts and plans and hard work, we simply cannot control our lives. We cannot keep disasters and tragedies and failures and pains from coming out of nowhere and shattering what little scraps of hope and joy we have managed to piece together.

Then one day, for no other reason than that he wanted to, God let us in on the way things actually are. The world is his, and we are his.

We are dead in sin, and there is no way out. We are lost blind losers in a world of lost blind losers, because we don’t have the sense to hold the hand of the only One who knows his way around. But that’s OK, because he became a loser for us through crucifixion and death, and we can be winners with him by joining him in his death so that we can also join him in his resurrection.

In other words, God gave us good news! The good news is that he has personally paid the heavy price for all our selfish, rebellious, destructive, evil lunacy. He has freely saved us, washed us, purified us, dressed us in righteousness and set a place for us at his eternal banquet table. And through the gospel, he invites us to trust him that it is so.

When, by the grace of God, you come to see that and believe it, you have repented. To repent, you see, is to say: “Yes! Yes! Yes! I

believe it! I trust your word! I'm leaving behind this rat-race life of mine, this pointless struggle to hold together with chewing gum and baling wire this death I thought was life. I'm ready for your rest. Help my unbelief!"

Repentance is a change of how you think. It is a change of perspective, from seeing yourself as the center of the universe to seeing God as the center of the universe, and trusting your life to his mercy. It is to surrender. It is to throw down your crown at the feet of the rightful ruler of the cosmos. It is the most important change you will ever make.

Not about morals

Repentance is not about morals. It is not about good behavior. It is not about "doing better."

Repentance is putting your trust in God instead of in yourself, your wits, your friends, your country, your government, your guns, your money, your authority, your prestige, your reputation, your car, your house, your job, your family heritage, your color, your sex, your success, your looks, your clothes, your titles, your degrees, your church, your spouse, your muscles, your leaders, your IQ, your accent, your accomplishments, your charity work, your donations, your kindness, your compassion, your self-control, your chastity, your honesty, your obedience, your devotion, your spiritual disciplines or anything else you can come up with of yours or associated with you that I left out of this long sentence.

Repentance is putting all your eggs in one basket—his basket. It's getting on his side, believing what he says, throwing in your lot with him, giving him your allegiance.

Repentance is not about promises to be good. It is not about teeth-clenched straining

to "put sin out of your life." It is trusting God to have mercy on you. It is trusting God to fix your evil heart. It is trusting God to be who he says he is—Creator, Savior, Redeemer, Teacher, Lord and Sanctifier. And it is dying, dying to your need to be thought of as right and good.

We are talking about a love relationship—not that you loved God, but that he loved you (1 John 4:10). This Person is the very fountainhead of all that is, including you, and it has dawned on you that this Person loves you for who you are—his beloved child in Christ—certainly not for what you have, or what you have done, or what your reputation is, or how you look, or any other characteristic you have, but purely and simply for you in Christ.

Suddenly nothing is the same. The whole world has suddenly become bright. All your failures no longer matter. They are all redeemed and made right in Christ's death and resurrection. Your eternal future is assured, and nothing in heaven or earth can take your joy away from you, because you belong to God for Christ's sake (Romans 8:1, 38). You believe him, you trust him, you put your life in his hands, come what may, whatever anyone says or does.

You can be lavish in forgiveness, in patience, in kindness, even in losses and defeats—you have nothing to lose, because you have gained absolutely everything in Christ (Ephesians 4:32-5:1). The only thing that matters to you is his new creation (Galatians 6:15).

Repentance is not just another worn out, hollow, moth-eaten commitment to be a good boy or girl. It is dying to all your big images of yourself and putting your weak, loser hand in the hand of the Man who calmed the sea (Galatians 6:3). It is coming to Christ for rest (Matthew 11:28-30). It is trusting his word of grace.

God's initiative, not ours

Repentance is about trusting God to be who he is and to do what he does, not about your good deeds versus your bad deeds. God, in his perfect freedom to be exactly who he wants to be in his love for us, decided to forgive our sins.

Let's be very clear about this: God forgives our sins—all of them—past, present and future; he does not tally them (John 3:17). Jesus died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8). He is the slain Lamb, and he was slain for us, for every one of us (1 John 2:2).

Repentance, you see, is not a way of getting God to do what he has already done. Rather, it is believing he *has done it*—saved your life forever and given you a priceless eternal inheritance—and such believing blossoms into loving him for it.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us," Jesus told us to pray. When it dawns on us that God has, for reasons entirely internal to himself, simply decided to write off our lifetime of selfish arrogance, all our lies, all our cruelty, all our pride, lust, betrayals and meanness—all of our evil thoughts, deeds and plans, we have a choice to make. We can praise him and thank him forever for his indescribable sacrifice of love, or we can go right on living the "I'm-a-good-person-don't-think-I'm-not" rat-race life we love so much.

We can believe God, we can ignore him, or we can run scared of him. If we believe him, we can walk in joyous friendship with him (and since he is a friend of sinners, all sinners, that makes everybody, even bad people, our friends too). If we don't trust him, if we think he won't or can't forgive us, we can't walk joyously with him (or with anybody else, for that matter, except for people who behave like we want them to).

Instead we will be afraid of him and eventually despise him (and everybody else who doesn't stay out of our way).

Two sides of the same coin

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. When you put your trust in God, two things happen at once. You realize you are a sinner who needs God's mercy, and you decide to trust God to save you and redeem your life. In other words, when you put your trust in God, you have also repented.

In Acts 2:38, for example, Peter told the crowd, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Belief, or faith, is part and parcel with repentance. By saying, "repent," he was also implying "believe," or "trust."

Later in the story, Peter puts it this way: "Repent and turn to God...." This turning to God is a turning away from yourself.

It does not mean you will now be morally perfect. It means you have turned away from your personal ambitions of making yourself worth something to Christ and instead put your trust and hopes in his word, his good news, his declaration in his own blood of your redemption, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal inheritance.

When you trust in God for forgiveness and salvation, you have repented. Repentance toward God is a change in the way you think, and it affects everything in your life. The new way of thinking is the way of trusting God to do what you could never do in a million lifetimes. Repentance is not a change from moral imperfection to moral perfection—you are incapable of that.

Corpses don't improve

You are incapable of moral perfection because, the fact is, you are dead. Sin has

made you dead, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:4-5. But even though you were dead in your sins (being dead is what *you* have contributed to this process of forgiveness and redemption), Christ made you alive (this is what *Christ* has contributed: the whole thing).

The only thing dead people can do is nothing. They cannot be alive to righteousness or to anything else, because they are dead, dead in sin. But it is precisely dead people, and only dead people, who get raised from the dead.

Raising the dead is what Christ does. He does not pour perfume on corpses. He does not prop them up and dress them in party clothes and wait for them to do something righteous.

They are dead. They can't do anything. Jesus isn't the least bit interested in new and improved corpses. What Jesus does is resurrect them. And again, corpses are the only kind of people he resurrects.

In other words, the only way to enter into Jesus' resurrection, his life, is to be dead. It doesn't take much effort to be dead. In fact, it doesn't take any effort at all. And dead is precisely what we are.

The lost sheep did not find itself before the shepherd went looking for it and found it (Luke 15:1-7). The lost coin did not find itself before the woman went looking for it and found it (verses 8-10).

The only thing they contributed to the whole process of their being sought, found and rejoiced over in a big party was being lost. Their utter, hopeless, lostness was the only thing they had that allowed them to be found.

Even the lost son in the next parable (verses 11-24) finds himself already having been forgiven, redeemed and fully accepted purely on the basis of his father's lavish grace, not on the basis of his "work-my-way-

back-into-his-good-graces" plan. His father had compassion on him without ever hearing the first word of his "I'm so sorry" speech (verse 20).

When the son finally accepted in the stench of the pigpen his deadness and lostness, he was on his way to discovering something amazing that had been true all along: his father, the one he had rejected and disgraced, had never stopped loving him passionately and unconditionally.

His father flatly ignored his little scheme for redeeming himself (verses 19-24), and without even a probationary waiting period, restored him to full rights as son.

Likewise, our utter, hopeless, deadness is the only thing that allows us to be resurrected. The initiative, the work and the success of the whole operation is entirely the Shepherd's, the Woman's, the Father's, God's.

The only thing we contribute to the process of our resurrection is being dead. That is as true for us spiritually as it is for us physically. If we cannot accept the fact that we are dead, we cannot accept the fact that we have, by the grace of God in Christ, been raised from the dead. Repentance is accepting the fact that you are dead and receiving from God your resurrection in Christ.

Repentance, you see, is not bringing forth some good and noble work or mouthing some emotion-laden speech designed to motivate God to forgive you.

We are dead, which means there is absolutely nothing we are capable of doing that could possibly add anything at all to our being made alive. It is a simple matter of believing God's good news of forgiveness and redemption in Christ through which he resurrects the dead.

Paul articulates the mystery, or paradox if you prefer, of our death and resurrection in Christ in Colossians 3:3: "For you died, and

your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”

The mystery, or paradox, is that we have died, yet we are, at the same time, alive, but that life, which is glorious, is not apparent: it is hidden with Christ in God, and it will not appear as it actually is until Christ himself appears, as verse 4 says: “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Our life is Christ. When he appears, we will appear with him, because he is, after all, our life. So let’s come at this again. Dead bodies can’t do anything for themselves. They can’t change. They can’t “do better.” They can’t improve. The only thing they can do is be dead.

God, however, who is the very Source of life itself, absolutely loves to raise the dead, and in Christ, does just that (Romans 6:4). The corpses bring nothing to the process except their deadness.

God does it all. It is his work, his alone, from beginning to end. Which means there are two kinds of raised corpses: those who receive their redemption with joy and those who, preferring their familiar deadness over life, despise it, close their eyes, clasp their hands over their ears and devote all their energies to pretending they are still dead.

So again, repentance is saying “Yes!” to the gift of forgiveness and redemption that God says you have in Christ. It is not doing penance, making promises or drowning in guilt.

That’s right. Repentance is not about a never-ending string of “I’m deeply sorry” or “I promise I won’t do it again.” Let’s be brutally honest. Chances are you *will* do it again, if not in actual deed, at least in thought, desire and emotion. Yes, you are sorry, maybe even deeply sometimes, and you truly don’t want to be the kind of person who will do it again, but that’s definitely not the heart and core of repentance.

Remember, you are dead, and dead people act like dead people. But even though you are dead in sin, you are also, at the same time, alive in Christ (Romans 6:11).

But your life in Christ is hidden with him in God, and it doesn’t show itself very consistently or very often—yet. It’s not going to be revealed for what it really is until Christ himself appears.

Meanwhile, even though you are now alive in Christ, you are also, for the time being, still dead in sin, and your deadness does show itself just about all the time. And it is precisely that dead you, that you that can’t seem to stop from acting stinkingly dead, which Christ has resurrected and made alive with him in God—to be revealed when he is revealed.

Now that’s where faith comes in. Repent and believe the gospel. The two go hand in glove. You can’t have one without the other. To believe the good news, that God has washed you clean in the blood of Christ, that he has healed your deadness and made you alive forevermore in his Son, is to repent.

Likewise, to turn to God in your utter helplessness, lostness and deadness, receiving his freely given redemption and salvation, is to have faith, to believe the gospel. They are two sides of the same coin, and it is a coin God gives you for no other reason, no other reason at all, than that he is righteous and gracious toward us.

Behavior not a measure

Now of course, someone will say, repentance toward God will result in good morals and good behavior. And I do not dispute that. The problem is, we love to measure repentance by the absence or presence of good behavior, and that is to tragically misunderstand repentance.

The honest truth is that we do not have perfect morals or perfect behavior, and

anything short of perfection is simply not good enough for the kingdom of God.

So let's dispense with any nonsense about how "if your repentance is sincere then you will not commit the sin again." That is precisely not the point of repentance.

The point of repentance is a change of heart, from being on the side of yourself, from being in your own corner, from being your own lobbyist, press agent, union rep and defense attorney, to trusting God, to being on his side, to being in his corner, to dying to yourself and being God's completely forgiven, redeemed and beloved child in Christ.

To repent means two things we don't naturally like. First, it means facing the fact that the lyrics "Baby, you're no good" are a perfect description of us. Two, it means facing the fact that we are no better than anybody else. We are standing in the same soup line with all the other losers for mercy we don't deserve.

In other words, repentance emerges from a humbled spirit. This humbled spirit is one that has no confidence left in what it can do; it has no hope left, it has given up the ghost, so to speak, it has died to itself and put itself in a basket on God's doorstep.

Say 'Yes!' to God's 'Yes!'

We must get rid of the hideous notion that repentance is a promise not ever to sin again. First of all, such a promise is pure hot air. Second, it is spiritually meaningless.

God has declared an almighty, thundering, eternal "Yes!" to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Repentance is your saying "Yes!" to God's "Yes!" It is turning to God to accept his blessed gift, his righteous declaration of your innocence and salvation in Christ.

To accept his gift is to acknowledge your deadness and your need of life in him. It

is to trust him, to believe him and to put yourself, your being, your existence, all that you are, in his hands. It is to rest in him and to give him your burdens. So why not rejoice in the rich and burgeoning grace of our Lord and Savior and take our rest in him? He redeems the lost. He saves the sinner. He raises the dead.

He is on our side, and because he is, nothing can come between him and us—no, not even your wretched sins, or your neighbor's. Trust him. It's his good news for all of us. He is the Word, and he knows what he is talking about.

J. Michael Feazell, 2000

21. Justification

Justification is God's gracious act in and through Jesus Christ to pronounce and establish a believer as righteous in his sight. Thus, humanity experiences through faith in Jesus Christ divine forgiveness and peace with its Savior and Lord.

(Romans 3:21-31; 4:1-8; 5:1, 9; Galatians 2:16) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 7)

Justification and righteousness by faith

God called Abraham out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his descendants the land of Canaan. After Abraham was in the land of Canaan,

The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?... You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 15:1-5)

This was a phenomenal promise. But, even more remarkable is what we read in verse 6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness." This is a landmark statement of justification by faith. Abraham was counted righteous on the basis of faith. The apostle Paul develops that thought further in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Christians inherit the promises of

Abraham *on the basis of faith*—and laws that were given to Moses simply cannot take away those promises. This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17. This is an especially important passage.

Faith, not law

In Galatians, Paul was arguing against a legalistic heresy. In Galatians 3:2 he asks, "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?" The answer, of course, is that they received the Holy Spirit by faith, not by the law.

He asks something similar in verse 5: "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?" The answer, of course, is that the Holy Spirit—and salvation—comes by faith, not by law.

"Consider Abraham," Paul says in verses 6-7. "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham." Paul is quoting Genesis 15. If we have faith, we are children of Abraham. We inherit the promises that God gave to him.

Notice verse 9: "So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." Faith brings blessings. But if we rely on keeping the law, we will be condemned.

We will fall short. But Christ saved us from that. He died for us. Notice verse 14: “He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that *by faith* we might receive the promise of the Spirit.”

Then, in verses 15-16, Paul uses a practical example to tell the Christians in Galatia that the law of Moses cannot do away with the promises given to Abraham. “Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed.”

That “seed” is Jesus Christ, but Jesus is not the only one who inherits the promises of Abraham. The point that Paul is making is that Christians also inherit these promises. If we have faith in Christ, we are Abraham’s children, and we inherit the promises through Jesus Christ.

A temporary law

Now we come to verse 17: “What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.”

The law given at Mt. Sinai cannot set aside the Abrahamic covenant, based on faith in God’s promise. That’s the point that Paul is making. Christians have a relationship with God based on faith, not on law. Obedience is good, but we obey according to the new covenant, not the old. Paul’s point here is that the law of Moses—the old covenant—was temporary. It was added only until Christ came. That’s what we see in verse 19: “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.”

Christ is the Seed, and the old covenant

is obsolete. In the new covenant, our relationship with God is on a different foundation, based on a different agreement.

Let’s read verses 24-26: “The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” We are not under the old covenant laws.

Let’s drop down to verse 29: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” So, the point is that Christians are given the Holy Spirit on the basis of faith. We are justified by faith, or declared right with God by faith. We are saved on the basis of faith, not on law-keeping, and certainly not on the basis of the old covenant. If we *believe God’s promise* through Jesus Christ, we have a right relationship with God.

In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise, just as Abraham’s was. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham, and those laws cannot change the promise given to all who are Abraham’s children by faith. That package of laws became obsolete when Christ died, and we are in the new covenant.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of *his* covenant, cannot change the original promise based on faith. In Romans 4, Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was **uncircumcised**. It was at least 14 years later that circumcision was commanded. Physical circumcision is not required for Christians today. Circumcision is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29).

The law cannot save

The law cannot give us salvation. All it

can do is condemn us, since we all are lawbreakers. And God knew in advance that no one could keep the law. The law points us to Christ. The law cannot give us salvation, but it can help us see our *need* for salvation, and it helps us see that righteousness must be a *gift*, not something we earn.

Suppose that Judgment Day comes and the Judge asks us why he should let us into his domain. How would we answer? Would we say that we have kept particular laws? I hope not, because the Judge could easily point out laws that we haven't kept, sins that we never knew we committed and never repented of. We can't say that we were good enough. No—all we can do is plead for mercy. We have faith that Christ died to redeem us from *all* sins. He died to rescue us from the penalty of the law. That's our *only* basis for salvation.

Of course, faith *leads* us to obedience. The new covenant has quite a few commands of its own. Jesus makes many demands on our time and our hearts and our money. Jesus did away with many laws, but he also *reaffirmed* some of those laws and taught that they should be kept in the spirit and not just superficially. We must look to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles to see the way that Christian faith is expected to *work* in our lives in the new covenant.

Christ died for us so that we might live for him. We are saved from the slavery of sin so that we might become slaves of righteousness. We are called to serve one another, not ourselves. Christ demands everything we have, and everything we *are*. We are told to obey—but we are *saved by faith*.

Justified by faith

We can see that in Romans 3. In one short section, Paul spells out the plan of salvation. Let's see how it confirms what we

have seen in Galatians: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, *apart from law*, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (verses 20-21).

Old Testament scriptures predicted salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and it comes not through the old covenant law, but by faith. That's the basis of the new covenant terms of our relationship with God through our Savior Jesus Christ.

Paul continues in verses 22-24: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely *by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Because Jesus died for us, we can be declared righteous. God justifies those who have faith in Christ—and therefore no one can brag about how well they keep the law. Paul continues in verse 28: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart from* observing the law."

These are profound words by the apostle Paul. James, like Paul, warns us about any so-called faith that ignores God's commands. Abraham's faith *led* him to obey God (Genesis 26:4-5). Paul is talking about real faith, the kind that includes allegiance to Christ, a wholehearted willingness to follow him. But even then, he says, it is the *faith* that saves us, and not the works.

In Romans 5:1-2, Paul writes: "Since we have been *justified through faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

Through faith, we have a right

relationship with God. We are his friends, not his enemies. That's how we will be able to stand before him on the day of judgment. We have faith in the promise given to us through Jesus Christ. Paul explains this further in Romans 8:1-4:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

So we see that our relationship with God is based on faith in Jesus Christ. That's the agreement or covenant that God has made with us. He promises to count us as righteous if we have faith in his Son. The law cannot change us, but Christ can. The law condemns us to death, but Christ promises us life. The law cannot rescue us from the slavery of sin, but Christ does. Christ gives us freedom, but it isn't freedom to please ourselves—it is freedom to serve him.

Faith causes us to be willing to follow our Lord and Savior in whatever he tells us to do. We see clear commands to love one another, to trust in Jesus Christ, to preach the gospel, to work for unity in the faith, to meet together as a church, to build one another up in the faith, to do good works of service, to lead pure and moral lives, to live peaceably and to forgive those who wrong us.

These new covenant commands are demanding. They absorb all our time. All our

days are dedicated to serving Jesus Christ. We need to be busy doing his work, and it's not the broad and easy path. It's a difficult task, a challenging task, a task that few are willing to do.

We should also point out that *our* faith cannot save us—God accepts us based not on the quality of our faith, but on the faith and faithfulness of his Son, Jesus Christ. Our faith will never measure up to what it “should” be—but we are saved not by how much faith we have, but simply by trusting that Christ has enough faith for all of us.

Joseph W. Tkach, 1994

22. Sanctification

Sanctification is God's gracious act of accounting and imparting the righteousness and holiness of Jesus Christ to the believer. It is experienced through faith in Jesus Christ and accomplished through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

(Romans 6:11; 1 John 1:8-9; Romans 6:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Galatians 5:22-23)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, page 8)

Sanctification

According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, to sanctify is “to set apart or observe [something] as holy” or “to purify or free from sin.”¹ These definitions reflect the fact that the Bible uses the word “holy” in two main ways: 1) a special status, that is, set apart for God's use, and 2) moral behavior—thoughts and actions appropriate to a holy status, thoughts and actions that are in keeping with the way God wants.²

God is the one who sanctifies his people. He is the one who sets them apart for his use, and he is the one who enables holy behavior. There is little controversy about the first point, that God sets people apart for his use. But there is controversy regarding the divine-human interaction involved in behavioral sanctification.

The questions include: How active a role should Christians take in sanctification? To what extent should Christians expect to succeed in conforming their thoughts and actions to the divine standard? How should the church exhort its members?

We will present the following points:

- 1) Sanctification is enabled by the grace of God.
- 2) Christians should try to bring their thoughts and actions into conformity with the will of God as revealed in the Bible.

- 3) Sanctification is a progressive growth in responsiveness to God's will.

Let us discuss how sanctification begins.

Initial sanctification

Humans are morally corrupt and cannot of themselves choose God. Reconciliation must be initiated by God. God's gracious intervention is needed before a person can have faith and turn toward God. Whether this grace is resistible is disputed, but orthodoxy agrees that God is the one who does the choosing. He selects people for his use and thereby sanctifies them or sets them apart from others. Anciently, God sanctified the people of Israel, and within that nation he further sanctified the Levites (e.g., Leviticus 20:26; 21:6; Deuteronomy 7:6). He set them apart for his use.³

Christians, however, are set apart in a different way: “sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:2). “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ” (Hebrews 10:10).⁴ Christians are made holy through the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:29; 12:12). They have been declared holy (1 Peter 2:5, 9) and throughout the NT are called “saints”—“holy ones.” That is their status. This initial sanctification is like justification (1 Corinthians 6:11). “God chose you to be saved through the

sanctifying work of the Spirit” (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

But God’s purpose for his people goes beyond a simple declaration of a new status—it is a setting apart for his *use*, and his use involves a moral transformation in his people. People are “chosen...for obedience to Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:2). They are to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). They are not only declared to be holy and righteous, they are also regenerated. A new life begins to develop, a life that is exhorted to behave in a holy and righteous way. So the initial sanctification leads into behavioral sanctification.

Behavioral sanctification

Even in the Old Testament, God told his people that their holy status implied a change in behavior. The Israelites were to avoid ceremonial uncleanness because God had chosen them (Deuteronomy 14:21). Their holy status depended on their obedience (Deuteronomy 28:9). The priests were to avoid certain sins because they were holy (Leviticus 21:6-7). Nazirites had to change their behavior while they were set apart (Numbers 6:5).

Our election in Christ has ethical implications. Since the holy One has called us, Christians are exhorted to “be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15-16). As God’s chosen and holy people, we are to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient (Colossians 3:12).

Sin and impurities “are improper for God’s holy people” (Ephesians 5:3; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:3). If people cleanse themselves from ignoble purposes, they will be “made holy” (2 Timothy 2:21). We should control our bodies in a way that is holy (1 Thessalonians 4:4). “Holy” is frequently linked to “blameless” (Ephesians 1:4; 5:27; 1 Thessalonians 2:10; 3:13; 5:23; cf. Titus 1:8).

Christians are “called to be holy” (1 Corinthians 1:2), “to live a holy life” (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; 2 Peter 3:11). We are told to “make every effort...to be holy” (Hebrews 12:14). We are urged to be holy (Romans 12:1), told that we “are being made holy” (Hebrews 2:11; 10:14), and encouraged to continue being holy (Revelation 22:11). We are made holy by the work of Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. He changes us from the inside out.

This brief word study shows that holiness and sanctification have something to do with behavior. God sets people apart as “holy” for the purpose that they live holy lives in following Jesus Christ. We are saved so that we might produce good works and good fruit (Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 5:22-23). The good works are not a cause of salvation, but a result of it. Good works are evidence that a person’s faith is genuine (James 2:18). Paul speaks of the “obedience of faith” and says that faith expresses itself in love (Romans 1:5; Galatians 5:6).

Lifelong growth

When people come to faith in Christ, they are not perfect in faith, love, good works, or behavior. Paul calls the Corinthians saints and brothers, but they have many sins in their lives. The numerous exhortations in the New Testament indicate that the readers need not only doctrinal instruction but also exhortations about behavior. The Holy Spirit changes us, but does not suppress the human will; holy living does not automatically flow from faith. Each Christian must make decisions whether to do right or wrong, even as Christ is working in us to change our desires.

The “old self” may be dead, but Christians must also put it off (Romans 6:6-7; Ephesians 4:22). We must continue to kill

the deeds of the flesh, the remnants of the old self (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). Though we have died to sin, sin continues to be in us, and we should not let it reign (Romans 6:11-13). Thoughts and emotions and decisions must be consciously shaped after the divine pattern. Holiness is something that must be striven for (Hebrews 12:14).

We are commanded to be perfect and to love God with all of our being (Matthew 5:48; 22:37). Due to the limitations of the flesh and the remnants of the old self, we are unable to do this perfectly. Even Wesley, who boldly talked about “perfection,” explained that he did not mean complete absence of imperfections.⁵ Growth is always possible and commanded. If a person has Christian love, he or she will strive to learn how to express it in better ways, with fewer mistakes.

The apostle Paul was bold enough to say that his behavior was “holy, righteous and blameless” (1 Thessalonians 2:10). But he did not claim to be perfect. Rather, he pressed on toward his goal, and he admonished others to not think that they had attained their goal (Philippians 3:12-15). All Christians need forgiveness (Matthew 6:12; 1 John 1:8-9) and grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). Sanctification should increase throughout life.

But our sanctification will not be completed in this life. Grudem explains: “When we appreciate that sanctification involves the whole person, including our bodies (see 2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:23), then we realize that sanctification will not be entirely completed until the Lord returns and we receive new resurrection bodies.”⁶ It is then that we will be freed from all sin and be given a glorified body like Christ’s (Philippians 3:21; 1 John 3:2). Because of this hope, we grow in sanctification by purifying ourselves (v. 3).

Biblical exhortation to holiness

Wesley saw a pastoral need to exhort believers to practical obedience resulting from love. The New Testament contains many such exhortations, and it is right to preach these exhortations. It is right to anchor behavior in the motive of love, and more ultimately, in our union with Christ and the Holy Spirit, which is the source of love.

Although we give all glory to God and recognize that grace must initiate all holy behavior, we also conclude that such grace is present in the heart of all believers, and we exhort them to respond to that grace.

McQuilken offers a practical rather than a dogmatic approach.⁷ He does not insist that all believers must have similar experiences in sanctification. He advocates high ideals, but without implying perfection. His exhortation to service as the end result of sanctification is good. He emphasizes the scriptural warnings about apostasy rather than get boxed in by theological conclusions about perseverance.

His emphasis on faith is helpful, since faith is the basis of all Christianity, and faith has practical consequences in our lives. The means of growth are practical: prayer, Scripture, fellowship, and a confident approach to trials. Robertson exhorts Christians to greater growth and witness without overstating the demands and expectations.

Christians are exhorted *to become what they have been declared to be*; the imperative follows the indicative. Christians are to live holy lives because God has declared them to be holy, designated for his use.

Endnotes

¹ R.E. Allen, ed. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 8th ed. (Oxford: Oxford, 1990), 1067.

² In the Old Testament, God is holy, his name is holy, and he is the Holy One (about 100 occurrences altogether). In the New Testament, “holy” is applied to Jesus more often than to the Father (about 14 times versus three times), but much more often to the Spirit (90 verses). The Old Testament refers to holy people (Nazirites, priests, and the nation) about 36 times, usually in reference to status; the New Testament refers to holy people about 50 times.

The Old Testament refers to holy places about 110 times; the New Testament only 17 times. The Old Testament refers to holy things about 70 times; the New Testament only three times, as metaphors for holy people. The Old Testament refers to holy times in 19 verses; the New Testament never calls time holy. In reference to places, things and time, holiness refers to a designated status, not a moral behavior.

In both Testaments, God is holy, and holiness comes from him, but the way his holiness affects people is different. The New Testament emphasis on holiness concerns people and their behavior, not a special status for things and places and times.

³ Especially in the Old Testament, sanctification does not imply salvation. This is obvious for the things and places and times that were sanctified, and applies to the nation of Israel, too. A non-salvific use of

“sanctification” may also be seen in 1 Corinthians 7:14—an unbeliever is in some way placed in a special category for God’s use. Hebrews 9:13 uses the term “sanctify” to refer to a ceremonial status under the old covenant.

⁴ Grudem notes that “sanctified” in several passages in Hebrews “is roughly equivalent to ‘justified’ in Paul’s vocabulary” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan, 1994], 748, note 3).

⁵ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in Millard J. Erickson, ed. *Readings in Christian Theology, Volume 3: The New Life* (Baker, 1979), 159.

⁶ Grudem, 749.

⁷ J. Robertson McQuilken, “The Keswick Perspective,” *Five Views of Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987), 149-183.

Michael Morrison, 1995

For more detailed studies of sanctification, you may want to consult:

- Melvin Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification*. Zondervan, 1987.
- Donald Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*. InterVarsity, 1988.

23. Worship

Worship is the divinely created response to the glory of God. It is motivated by divine love and springs from God's revelation of himself in communion with his creation. In worship, believers commune with God the Father through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. Worship involves humbly and joyfully giving God priority in all things and is expressed in such actions and attitudes as prayer, praise, celebration, generosity, acts of mercy, and repentance.

(John 4:23; 1 John 4:19; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 3:16-17; Romans 5:8-11; 12:1; Hebrews 12:28; 13:15-16) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 8)

Responding to God with worship

We respond to God with worship, because worship is simply giving God what is fitting. He is praiseworthy.

God is love, and all that he does is done in love. This is praiseworthy. We praise love even on a human level, don't we? We praise people who give their lives to help others. They did not have enough power to save their own lives, but what power they had, they used to help others—and that is praiseworthy. In contrast, we criticize people who had the power to help but refused to do it. Goodness is more praiseworthy than power is, and God is both good and powerful.

Praise deepens the bond of love between us and God. God's love for us is never diminished, but ours for him often grows weak. In praise, we rehearse his love for us and, in effect, fan the fire of love for him that the Spirit has started within us. It is good for us to remember and rehearse how wonderful God is, for that strengthens us in Christ and increases our motivation to be like him in his goodness, which increases our joy.

We were made for the purpose of praising God (1 Peter 2:9), of giving him glory and honor, and the better we are in harmony with God's purpose for life, the

greater joy will be ours. Life is simply more satisfying when we do what we were made to do: to honor God. We do that not only in worship, but also in the way we live.

A way of life

Worship is a way of life. We offer our bodies and minds as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1-2). We worship God when we share the gospel (Romans 15:16). We worship God when we give financial offerings (Philippians 4:18). We worship God when we help other people (Hebrews 13:16). We say that he is worthy, worth our time and attention and allegiance. We praise his glory, and his humility in becoming one of us for our sakes. We praise his righteousness and his mercy. We praise him for the way he really is.

This is what we were made for, to declare his praises. It is simply right that we praise the One who created us, the One who died and rose to save us and give us life eternal, the One who works even now to help us become more like him. We owe him our allegiance, and we owe him our love.

We were made to praise God, and this is what we will do eternally. John was given a vision of our future: "I heard every creature

in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!’” (Revelation 5:13). This is the right response: awe at the awesome, honor for the honorable, and allegiance to the trustworthy.

Five basic principles

Psalm 33:1-3 tells us, “Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.” Scripture tells us to sing, shout, to use harps, flutes, tambourines, trumpets, cymbals—even to worship with dancing (Psalms 149-150). The picture is of exuberance, unrestrained joy, and happiness expressed without inhibitions.

The Bible gives us examples of spontaneous worship. It also gives us examples of very formal approaches to worship, with stereotyped routines that stay the same for centuries. Both approaches to worship can be legitimate, and neither one can claim to be the only authentic way to praise God. Let me review some of the broader principles involved in worship.

1. We are called to worship

First, God does want us to worship him. This is a constant we see from one end of Scripture to another (Genesis 4:4; John 4:23; Revelation 22:9). Worship is one of the reasons we are called: to declare his praises (1 Peter 2:9). God’s people not only love and obey him, but they also do specific acts of worship. They make sacrifices, they sing praises, they pray.

In Scripture, we see a wide variety in the way that worship can be done. In the law of Moses, many details were specified. Specific people were assigned to do specific actions at

specific times in specific places. The who, what, when, where and how were spelled out. In contrast to that, we see in Genesis very few rules about how the patriarchs worshipped. They did not have a designated priesthood, were not restricted to a certain place, and were told little about what to offer or when to offer it.

In the New Testament, we again see very little about the how and the when of worship. Worship activities are not restricted to a certain group of people or a certain place. Christ did away with the Mosaic requirements. All believers are priests and continually offer themselves as living sacrifices.

2. Worship only God

Despite the great variety in worship styles, we see a simple constant throughout Scripture: Only God should be worshipped. Worship, to be acceptable, must be exclusive. God requires all our love—all our allegiance. We cannot serve two Gods. Although we may worship him in different styles, our unity is based on the fact that it is him we worship.

In ancient Israel, the rival God was often Baal, a Canaanite deity. In Jesus’ day, it was religious tradition, self-righteousness and hypocrisy. Actually, anything that comes between us and God—anything that might cause us to disobey him—is a false god, an idol. For some today, it is money. For others, it is sex. Some have a bigger problem with pride, or with concerns about what other people may think of us. John mentions some common false gods when he writes,

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the

world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

No matter what our weakness is, we need to crucify it, to kill it, to put all false gods away. If something distracts us from obeying God, we need to get rid of it. God wants people who worship only him, who have him as the center of all life.

3. Sincerity

The third constant about worship that we see in the Scriptures is that worship must be sincere. It does no good to go through the right motions, sing the right songs, meet on the right days and say the right words, if we don't really love God in our hearts. Jesus criticized those who honored God with their lips, but who worshipped in vain, because their hearts were not close to God. Their traditions (originally designed to express their love and worship) had become obstacles to real love and worship.

Jesus also stresses the need for sincerity when he says that worship must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). If we say that we love God when we actually resent his commands, we are hypocrites. If we value our freedom more than we do his authority, we cannot worship him in truth. We cannot take his covenant upon our lips and cast his words behind (Psalm 50:16-17). We cannot call him Lord and ignore what he says.

4. Obedience

Throughout Scripture, we see that true worship includes obedience. This includes God's words concerning the way we treat one another.

We cannot honor God when we dishonor his children. "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not

seen" (1 John 4:20-21). It is similar to Isaiah's scathing criticism of people who perform worship rituals while indulging in social injustices:

Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. (Isaiah 1:11-15)

As far as we can tell, there was nothing wrong with the days the people were keeping, or the kind of incense and animals they were bringing. The problem was the way they were living the rest of the time. "Your hands are full of blood," he said—and yet I am sure that the problem was not just with those who had actually committed murder.

He called for a comprehensive solution: "Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (verses 16-17). They needed to get their interpersonal relationships in order. They needed to eliminate racial prejudice, social class stereotypes, and unfair economic practices.

5. In all of life

Worship, if genuine, should make a difference in the way we treat one another seven days a week. This is another principle we see throughout Scripture.

How should we worship? Micah asks the question and gives the answer:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with

burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

Hosea also stressed that interpersonal relationships are more important than the mechanics of worship: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). We are called not only to praise, but also to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).

Our concept of worship must go far beyond music, days and rituals. Those details are not nearly as important as the way we treat our neighbors. It is hypocritical to call Jesus Lord if we do not also seek his sense of justice, mercy, and compassion.

Worship is much more than outward actions—it involves a change of behavior, rooted in a total change of heart, a change produced in us by the Holy Spirit. Instrumental in this change is our willingness to spend time with God in prayer, study and other spiritual disciplines. The transformation does not happen by magic—it happens through time spent in fellowship with God.

Paul’s expansive view of worship

Worship involves all of life. We see this especially in the words of Paul. He uses the terminology of sacrifice and worship in this way: “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1). All of life is to be worship, not just a few hours each week. Of course, if all of our lives are devoted to worship, this will most definitely include some time each week with

other Christians!

Paul uses more words for sacrifice and worship in Romans 15:16 when he speaks of the grace God had given him “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Here we see that preaching the gospel is a form of worship.

Since we are all priests, we all have the priestly duty of proclaiming the praises of the One who called us (1 Peter 2:9)—a worship any believer can do, or at least participate in by helping others preach the gospel.

When Paul thanked the Philippians for sending him financial support, he used words for worship: “I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18).

Financial help given to other Christians can be a form of worship. Hebrews 13 describes worship given both in words and in works: “Let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (verses 15-16).

We are called to worship, celebrate and glorify God. It is our joy to be able to declare his praises, to share the good news of what he has done for us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Joseph Tkach, 1998, 2006

See www.wcg.org/lit/spiritual/worship for more articles about worship.

You might also benefit from:

- Laurence Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time for the Church* (Abingdon, 1996).
- Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Zondervan, 1994)

24. Baptism

Water baptism, which signifies a believer's repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, is a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism of the Spirit and fire refers to the regenerating and purifying work of the Holy Spirit. The Worldwide Church of God baptizes by immersion.

(Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:4-5; Luke 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 1 Peter 1:3-9; Matthew 3:16) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 8)

How baptism pictures the gospel

Rituals were a prominent part of Old Testament worship—there were annual rituals, monthly rituals and daily rituals. There were rituals for birth and rituals for death, rituals of sacrifice, rituals of cleansing, rituals of ordination. Faith was involved, but rituals were prominent.

The New Testament, in contrast, has two basic rituals: baptism and the Lord's Supper—and there are no detailed regulations for either observance.

Why these two? In a religion in which faith is primary, why have any rituals at all?

The primary reason, I believe, is that both the Lord's Supper and baptism *picture the gospel of Jesus Christ*. They rehearse the fundamental elements of our faith.

Pictures the gospel

How does baptism picture the central truths of the gospel? The apostle Paul wrote:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been

united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Romans 6:3-5).

Paul is saying that baptism *pictures our union with Christ* in his death, burial and resurrection. These are the primary points of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Our salvation depends on his death and resurrection. Our forgiveness—being cleansed of sin—depends on him; our Christian life and future depend on him.

Baptism symbolizes the death of the old self—the old person was crucified with Christ—died with Christ—buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:8; Galatians 2:20; 6:14; Colossians 2:12, 20). It pictures our identification with Jesus Christ—we cast our lot in with him. We accept that his death was “for us,” “for our sins.” We acknowledge that we have sinned, that we have a propensity to sin, that we are sinners in need of a Savior. We acknowledge our need to be cleansed, and that this cleansing comes through Christ. Baptism is one of the ways in which we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

Raised with Christ

Baptism pictures even better news—in baptism we are *raised* with Christ so that we

might live with Christ (Ephesians 2:5-6; Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1). In him, we have a new life, and are called to live a new way of life, with him as Lord leading and guiding us out of sinful ways and into righteous and loving ways. In this way we symbolize a change in the way we live, and the fact that we cannot make this change in ourselves—it is done by the power of the risen Christ living in us. We identify with Christ in his resurrection not just for the future, but for life right now. This is part of the symbolism of baptism.

Jesus did not invent the ritual of baptism. It developed within Judaism, and was used by John the Baptist as a ritual of repentance in which the water symbolized cleansing. Jesus continued this practice, and after his death and resurrection his disciples continued to use it. It dramatizes the fact that we have a new basis for life, and a new basis for our relationship with God.

Paul saw further that since we are forgiven or cleansed through the death of Christ, baptism pictures his death and our participation in his death. Paul was also inspired to add the connection with Jesus' resurrection. As we rise from the baptismal waters, we picture rising to a new life—a life in Christ, with him in us.

Peter also wrote that baptism saves us “by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism itself does not save us. We are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Water cannot save us. Baptism saves us only in the sense that it is “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” It is a visible representation of turning toward God, of faith in Christ, forgiveness and new life.

Into one body

We are baptized not only into Christ Jesus, but also into his body, the church. “We

were all baptized by one Spirit into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). That means that people cannot baptize themselves—it must be done within the context of the Christian community. There are no secret Christians, people who believe in Christ but no one knows about it. The biblical pattern is to confess Christ before other people, to make a public acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord.

Baptism is one of the ways in which Christ may be confessed, in which a person's friends may see that a commitment has been made. It may be a joyous occasion in which the congregation sings hymns and welcomes the person to the family. Or it may be a smaller ceremony in which an elder (or another authorized representative of the congregation) welcomes the new believer, rehearses the significance of what is being done, and encourages the person in their new life in Christ.

Baptism recognizes that a person has already repented of sin, already accepted God's gift of salvation in Christ, already begun to grow spiritually—is in fact already a Christian. Baptism is generally done soon after a person has made a commitment, but occasionally it may be done much later.

Teens and children

After a person has come to faith in Christ, he or she is eligible for baptism. This may be when the person is old, or when quite young. A young person may explain faith differently than an older person does, but young people may have faith nonetheless.

Will some of them eventually change their minds and fall away? Perhaps, but that happens with adult professions of faith, too. Will some of those childhood conversions turn out to be mistaken? Perhaps, but that happens with adults, too. If the person is repentant and has faith in Christ, as best as the pastor can determine, then the person

may be baptized. However, we do not baptize minors without the consent of their parent or legal guardian. If the parent objects to the baptism, then the child who has faith in Jesus is no less a Christian for waiting until he or she becomes a legal adult to be baptized.

By immersion

In the Worldwide Church of God, we baptize by immersion. That was the most likely practice in first-century Judaism and in the early church. We believe that complete immersion pictures death and burial better than sprinkling does. However, we do not make the mode of baptism an issue to divide Christians.

The important thing is that the person forsakes the old life of self-reliance, and has faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. To develop the analogy further, we may say that the old person died with Christ, whether or not the body was properly buried. Cleansing was pictured, even if burial was not. The old life is dead, and the new life is here.

Salvation does not depend on the exact mode of baptism (the Bible doesn't give us many details on procedure, anyway) nor on the exact words, as if the words had some magical power of their own. Salvation depends on Christ, not on the depth of the baptismal waters. A believer baptized by sprinkling or pouring is still a Christian. We do not require another baptism, unless the person believes it appropriate. If the fruit of a Christian life has been present for 20 years, for example, there is no need to quibble about the validity of a ceremony of some 20 years ago. Christianity is based on faith, not on performance of a ritual.

Infant baptism

It is not our practice to baptize infants or children too young to express faith for

themselves, since we understand baptism to be an expression of faith, and no one can be saved by their parents' faith. We do not, however, condemn as unchristian those who do practice infant baptism. Let me briefly address two of the most common arguments for infant baptism.

First, scriptures such as Acts 10:44; 11:14; 16:15 tell us that entire households were baptized, and households in the first century normally included infants. It is possible that these particular households did not have any young children, but I think that a better explanation would be to observe in Acts 16:34 and 18:8 that entire households were said to believe in Christ. I do not think that the infants had genuine faith, nor that the infants were speaking in tongues (vv. 44-46). Perhaps the entire household was baptized in the same way that the entire household believed in Christ. This would mean that as many as were old enough to believe were also baptized.

A second argument sometimes used to support infant baptism uses the concept of covenants. In the Old Testament, children were included in the covenant, and the ritual of inclusion was circumcision, which was done on infants. The new covenant is a better covenant, with better promises, so surely children are included automatically and should therefore be marked with the initiatory rite of the new covenant, baptism, even in infancy. However, this argument fails to acknowledge the difference between the old and new covenants. A person entered the old covenant by genealogy, but a person enters the new covenant only by repentance and faith. We do not believe that all a Christian's descendants, even to the third and fourth generation, will automatically have faith in Christ! Each person must come to faith himself or herself.

Arguments about the proper mode and age of baptism have gone on for centuries, and the arguments can be considerably more complex than what I have sketched in the above few paragraphs. More could be said, but it is not necessary to do so right now.

Occasionally a person baptized in infancy wishes to become a member of the Worldwide Church of God. Is it necessary for us to baptize the person? I believe that this must be decided on a case-by-case basis, based on the person's preference and understanding of baptism. If the person has only recently come to a point of faith and commitment, it is probably appropriate to baptize the person. In such cases, baptism would emphasize to the person what a decisive step of faith has been taken.

If the person was baptized in infancy and has already been living as an adult Christian for many years, with good fruit, then we do not need to insist on baptizing them. Of course, if they request it then we would be happy to do so, but we do not need to quibble about ceremonies of decades ago when Christian fruit is already evident. We can simply praise the grace of God. The person is a Christian whether or not the ritual was done correctly.

Sharing the Lord's Supper

For similar reasons, it is permissible for us to share the Lord's Supper with people who have not been baptized in the manner we are accustomed to. The criterion is faith. If we both have faith in Jesus Christ, we are both united to him, we have both been baptized, one way or another, into his body, and we may share in the bread and wine. We may even share with them if they have erroneous ideas about what happens to the bread and wine. (Don't we all have erroneous ideas about some things?)

We should not get sidetracked by

arguments about detail. It is our belief and practice to baptize by immersion those who are old enough to have faith in Christ. We also wish to be charitable to those who have other beliefs. I hope that this is enough to make our approach reasonably clear.

Let us focus on the larger picture, provided by the apostle Paul: Baptism pictures our old self dying with Christ, our sins being washed away, our new life being lived in Christ and in his church. Baptism is an expression of repentance and faith, and a reminder that we are saved by the death and life of Jesus Christ. It is the gospel in miniature drama—the central truths of the faith being reenacted every time another person begins the Christian life.

Joseph Tkach, 1999

There are additional articles about baptism at www.wcg.org/lit/gospel

Some of the theological issues are discussed in:

- Thomas Nettles et al., *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*. Zondervan, 2007.

25. The Lord's Supper

The evening before Jesus was crucified, he took bread and the cup, saying, “This is my body, which is for you... This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Whenever we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we partake of bread and the cup in remembrance of our Savior, proclaiming his death until he comes. The Lord's Supper is a participation in the death and resurrection of our Lord, who gave his body and shed his blood so that we might be forgiven.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 1 Corinthians 10:16; Matthew 26:26-28) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 8-9)

The three-fold meaning of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is a reminder of what Jesus did in the past, a symbol of our present relationship with him, and a promise of what he will do in the future. Let's review these three aspects.

Memorials of Jesus' death on the cross

On the evening he was betrayed, while Jesus was eating a meal with his disciples, he took some bread and said, “This is my body given for you; do this in *remembrance* of me” (Luke 22:19). They each ate a piece of the bread. When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we each eat a piece of bread in remembrance of Jesus.

“In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you’” (v. 20). When we drink a small amount of wine (or grape juice) at the Lord's Supper, we remember that Jesus' blood was shed for us, and that his blood signified the new covenant. Just as the old covenant was sealed by the sprinkling of blood, the new covenant was established by Jesus' blood (Hebrews 9:18-28).

As Paul said, “For whenever you eat this

bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Lord's Supper looks *back* to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Is Jesus' death a good thing, or a bad thing? There are certainly some very sorrowful aspects to his death, but the bigger picture is that his death is *the best news possible*. It shows how much God loves us—so much that he sent his Son to die for us, so that our sins may be forgiven and we may live forever with him.

The death of Jesus is a tremendous gift to us. It is precious. When we are given a gift of great value, a gift that involved personal sacrifice for us, how should we receive it? With mourning and regret? No, that is not what the giver wants. Rather, we should receive it with great gratitude, as an expression of great love. If we have tears, they should be tears of joy.

So the Lord's Supper, although a memorial of a death, is not a funeral, as if Jesus were still dead. Quite the contrary—we observe this memorial knowing that death held Jesus only three days—knowing that death will not hold us forever, either. We

rejoice that Jesus has *conquered* death, and has set free all who were enslaved by a fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). We can remember Jesus' death with the happy knowledge that he has triumphed over sin and death! As Jesus said, our mourning will turn into joy (John 16:20). Coming to the Lord's table and having communion should be a celebration, not a funeral.

The ancient Israelites looked back to the Passover events as the defining moment in their history, when their identity as a nation began. It was when they escaped death and slavery through the powerful hand of God and were freed to serve the Lord. In the church, we look back to the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus as the defining moment in our history. That is how we escape death and the slavery of sin, and that is how we are freed to serve the Lord. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of this defining moment in our history.

Our present relationship with Jesus Christ

The crucifixion of Jesus has a continuing significance to all who have taken up a cross to follow him. We continue to participate in his death and in the new covenant because we participate in his *life*. Paul wrote, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). In the Lord's Supper, we show that we *share* in Jesus Christ. We commune with him. We are united in him.

The New Testament speaks of our sharing with Jesus in several ways. We share in his crucifixion (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 2:20), death (Romans 6:4), resurrection (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 2:13; 3:1) and life (Galatians 2:20). Our lives are in him, and he is in us. The Lord's Supper symbolizes this spiritual reality.

John 6 conveys a similar picture. After Jesus proclaimed himself to be the "bread of life," he said, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (v. 54). Our spiritual food is in Jesus Christ. The Lord's Supper pictures this ongoing truth. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him" (v. 56). We signify that we live in Christ, and he lives in us.

So the Lord's Supper helps us look *upward*, to Christ, and be mindful that true life can only be in him and with him.

But when we are aware that Jesus lives in us, we also pause to think what kind of home we are giving him. Before he came into our lives, we were habitations of sin. And Jesus knew it before he even knocked on the door of our lives. He wants to get in so he can start cleaning things up. But when Jesus knocks, many people try to do a quick tidy-up before they open the door. However, we are humanly unable to cleanse our sins—the most we can do is hide them in the closet.

So we hide our sins in the closet, and invite Jesus into the living room. Eventually we let him into the kitchen, and then the hallway, and then a bedroom. It is a gradual process. Eventually Jesus gets to the closet where our worst sins are hidden, and he cleans them, too. Year by year, as we grow in spiritual maturity, we surrender more of our lives to our Savior.

It is a process, and the Lord's Supper plays a role in this process. Paul wrote, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Every time we participate, we should be mindful of the great meaning involved in this ceremony.

When we examine ourselves, we often find sin. This is normal—it is not a reason to avoid the Lord's Supper. It is simply a reminder that we need Jesus in our lives.

Only he can take our sins away.

Paul criticized the Corinthian Christians for their manner of observing the Lord's Supper. The wealthy members were coming first, eating a great meal and even getting drunk. The poor members came last, still hungry. The wealthy were not sharing with the poor (vv. 20-22). They were not really sharing in the life of Christ, for they were not doing what he would do. They were not understanding what it means to be members of the body of Christ, and that members have responsibilities toward one another.

So as we examine ourselves, we need to look *around* to see whether we are treating one another in the way that Jesus commanded. If you are united with Christ and I am united to Christ, then we are united to each other. So the Lord's Supper, by picturing our participation in Christ, also pictures our participation (other translations may say communion or sharing or fellowship) with each other.

As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." By participating together in the Lord's Supper, we picture the fact that we are one body in Christ, one with each other, with responsibilities toward one another.

At Jesus' last meal with his disciples, Jesus pictured the life of God's kingdom by washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-15). When Peter protested, Jesus said it was necessary that he wash his feet. The Christian life involves both serving and being served.

Reminds us of Jesus' return

Jesus said he would not drink the fruit of the vine again until he came in the fullness of the kingdom (Matthew 26:29; Luke 22:18; Mark 14:25). Whenever we participate, we are reminded of Jesus' promise. There will

be a great messianic "banquet," a "wedding supper" of celebration. The bread and wine are miniature rehearsals of what will be the greatest victory celebration in all history. Paul wrote that "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

We always look *forward*, as well as backward and upward and inward and around. The Lord's Supper is rich in meaning. That is why it has been a prominent part of the Christian tradition throughout the centuries. Sometimes it has been allowed to become a lifeless ritual, done more out of habit than with meaning. When a ritual loses meaning, some people overreact by stopping the ritual entirely. The better response is to *restore the meaning*. That's why it is helpful for us to review what we are symbolizing.

Joseph Tkach, 1997

See www.wcg.org/lit/church/lordssup for more articles about the Lord's Supper.

26. Financial Stewardship

Christian financial stewardship is the management of personal resources in a manner that reflects the love and generosity of God. It includes the responsibility of offering a portion of one's financial resources to the work of the church. Donations fund the God-given mission of the church to preach the gospel and feed the flock. Such giving reflects the believer's worship, faith, obedience, and love for God, who is the Source of salvation and Giver of all good things.

(1 Peter 4:10; 1 Corinthians 9:1-14; 2 Corinthians 9:6-11) (*Statement of Beliefs*, 9)

Poverty and generosity

In Paul's second letter to the believers in Corinth, he gave an excellent illustration of how the wonderful gift of joy touches the lives of believers in practical ways. "And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches" (2 Corinthians 8:1).

Paul wasn't just giving a trivial news report—he wanted the Corinthian brethren to respond to God's grace in a similar way as the church in Macedonia had. He wanted to describe for them a right and fruitful response to God's generosity.

Paul notes that the Macedonians had a "severe trial" and "extreme poverty"—but they also had "overflowing joy" (v. 2). Their joy did not come from a health and wealth gospel. Their great joy was not in having enough money and goods, but in spite of the fact that they had very little!

Their response shows something "other-worldly," something supernatural, something quite beyond the natural world of selfish humanity, something that cannot be explained by the values of this world: "Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in *rich generosity*" (v. 2).

This is astonishing! Combine poverty

and joy, and what do you get? Rich generosity! This was not your ordinary percentage-based giving. "For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, *and even beyond their ability*" (v. 3). They gave more than what was "reasonable." They gave sacrificially.

Now, as if that were not enough, "entirely on their own, they *urgently pleaded with us* for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints" (vv. 3-4). They, in their poverty, were begging Paul for an opportunity to give more than what was reasonable!

This is how the grace of God worked in the Macedonian believers. It was a testimony to their great faith in Jesus Christ. It was a testimony to their Spirit-empowered love for other people—a testimony that Paul wanted the Corinthians to know about and to copy. And it is something for us today, too, if we can allow the Holy Spirit to work freely within us.

First to the Lord

Why did the Macedonians do something so "out of this world"? Paul says, "They gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will" (v. 5). They did it

in service to the Lord. Their sacrifice was to him first and foremost. It was a work of grace, of God working in their lives, and they found themselves *happy* to do it. Responding to the Holy Spirit in them, they knew and believed and *acted* as if life is not measured by the abundance of material things.

As we read further in this chapter, we see that Paul wanted the Corinthians to do the same: “We urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—*see that you also excel in this grace of giving*” (vv. 6-7).

The Corinthians had been boasting about their spiritual wealth. They had a lot to give, but they weren’t giving it! Paul wanted them to excel in generosity, because that is an expression of godly love, and love is what is most important.

And yet Paul knows that no matter how much a person may give, it doesn’t do that person any good if the attitude is resentful instead of generous (1 Corinthians 13:3). So he doesn’t want to bully the Corinthians into giving resentfully, but he does want to exert a little pressure, because the Corinthians were falling short in their behavior, and they needed to be *told* that they were falling short. “I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others” (2 Corinthians 8:8).

Jesus our pacesetter

True spirituality is not found in the things that the Corinthians boasted about—it is measured by the perfect standard of Jesus Christ, who gave his life for all. So Paul presents the attitude of Jesus Christ as theological proof of the generosity he wanted

to see in the Corinthian church: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (v. 9).

The riches Paul refers to are not physical riches. Our treasures are infinitely greater than physical riches. They are in heaven, reserved for us. Yet, even now, we can already begin to experience a small foretaste of those eternal riches as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us.

Right now, God’s faithful people have trials, even poverty—and yet, because Jesus lives in us, we can be rich in generosity. We can excel in giving. We can go beyond the minimum because our joy in Christ can even now overflow to help others.

Much could be said about the example of Jesus, who often spoke about the right use of riches. In this passage Paul summarizes it with “poverty.” Jesus was willing to be impoverished for us. Following him, we are *also* called to give up the things of this world, to live by different values, to serve him by serving others.

Joy and generosity

Paul continued his appeal to the Corinthians: “And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your *eager willingness* to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means” (vv. 10-11).

“For if the willingness is there”—if the attitude of generosity is present—“the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have” (v. 12). Paul was not asking the Corinthians to give as much as the Macedonians had. The Macedonians had already given beyond their

ability; Paul was only asking the Corinthians to give within their ability—but the main thing is that he wanted generosity to be voluntary.

Paul continues his exhortations in chapter 9: “I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action” (v. 2).

Just as Paul was using the Macedonian example to stir the Corinthians to generosity, he had earlier used the Corinthian example to stir the Macedonians, apparently with huge success. The Macedonians were so generous that Paul realized that the Corinthians could do a lot better than they already had. But he had bragged in Macedonia that the Corinthians were generous. Now he wanted the Corinthians to follow through. Again, he wants to exhort. He wants to exert some pressure, but he wants the offering to be given willingly:

“I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we—not to say anything about you—would be ashamed of having been so confident. So I thought it *necessary* to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, *not as one grudgingly given*” (vv. 3-5).

Then comes a verse we have often heard: “Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (v. 7). This cheerfulness does not mean hilarity or laughter—it means that because Christ is in us, we *enjoy* sharing what we have with others. It makes us feel

good to give. Love and grace work in our hearts in such a way that, little by little, a life of giving becomes a greater and greater pleasure for us.

The greater blessing

In this passage, Paul also speaks about rewards. If we give willingly and generously, then God will also give to us. Paul is not afraid to remind the Corinthians of this: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (v. 8).

Paul is promising that God will be generous to us. Sometimes God gives us material things, but that is *not* what Paul is talking about here. He is speaking of grace—not the grace of forgiveness (we receive that wonderful grace through faith in Christ, not through works of generosity)—Paul is speaking about the many other kinds of grace God can give.

When God gave extra grace to the Macedonian churches, they had less money than before—but more joy! Any sane person, if forced to choose, would rather have poverty with joy, than wealth without joy. Joy is the greater blessing, and God gives us the greater blessing. Some Christians even get both—but they are also given the responsibility to use both to serve others.

Paul then quotes from the Old Testament: “He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor” (v. 9). What kind of gifts is he talking about? “His righteousness endures forever.” The gift of righteousness outweighs them all. The gift of being counted righteous in God’s sight—this is the gift that lasts forever. God gives us the best possible gift.

God rewards a generous heart

“Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and

increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (v. 10). This last phrase, about the harvest of righteousness, tells us that Paul is speaking metaphorically. He is not promising literal seeds, but he is saying that God rewards generous people. He gives them more to give.

To the person who is using God’s gifts to serve, he will give more. Sometimes he gives in kind, grain for grain, money for money, but not always. Sometimes he blesses us with joy unmeasurable in return for sacrificial giving. He always gives the best.

Paul did say that the Corinthians would have all that they needed. For what purpose? So that they would “abound in every good work.” He says the same thing in verse 12: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.” God’s gifts come with strings attached, we might say. We need to use them, not hide them in a closet.

Those who are rich are to become rich in good works. “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, *to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share*” (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

Real living

What is the reward for such unusual behavior, for the people who do not cling to wealth as a thing to be grasped, but willingly give it away? “In this way they will lay up *treasure* for themselves as *a firm foundation for the coming age*, so that they may take hold of *the life that is truly life*” (v. 19). As we trust God, we are taking hold of the life that is truly life.

Friends, faith is not an easy life. The new covenant does not promise a comfortable life. It offers infinitely more than a million-to-one return on our investments—but it may involve, for this temporary life, some significant sacrifices.

And yet there are great rewards in this life, too. God gives abundant grace in the way he (in his infinite wisdom) knows what is best for us. In our trials and in our blessings, we can trust our lives to him. We can trust all things to him, and when we do it, our lives become a testimony of faith.

God loves us so much that he sent his Son to die for us even when we were sinners and enemies. Since God has already demonstrated such love for us, we can surely trust him to take care of us, for our long-range good, now that we are his children and friends! We do not need to have anxious thoughts about “our” money.

The harvest of praise

Let’s go back to 2 Corinthians 9 and notice what Paul tells the Corinthians about their financial and material generosity: “Your generosity will result in *thanksgiving* to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God’s people but is also *overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God*” (vv. 11-12).

Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their generosity is not just a humanitarian effort—it has theological results. People will thank God for it, because they understand that God works through people. God lays it on the hearts of those who have, to give. That is the way his work is done.

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and

with everyone else” (v. 13). There are several noteworthy points in this verse. First, the Corinthians were able to prove themselves by what they did. They showed in their actions that their faith was genuine. Second, generosity not only causes thanks but also praise to God. It is a form of worship. Third, accepting the gospel of grace also requires a certain obedience, and that obedience includes sharing physical resources.

Giving for the gospel

Paul was writing about generosity in connection with a famine-relief effort. But the same principles apply to the financial collections we have in the church today in support of the gospel and ministry. We are still supporting an important work. It allows workers who preach the gospel to make their living from the gospel, as best as we can distribute the resources.

God still rewards generosity. He still promises treasures in heaven and pleasures forevermore. The gospel still makes demands on our finances. Our attitude toward money still reflects our faith in what God does both now and forever. And people will still thank and praise God for the sacrifices we make today.

We receive benefits from the money we give to the church—the donations help pay for a place to meet, for pastoral support, for publications. But our contributions also help others, to provide literature for others, to provide a place for people to come to know a fellowship of people who love sinners, to pay for the expenses of a body of believers that creates and nourishes a climate in which newcomers can learn about salvation.

These people do not (yet) know you, but they will thank you—or at least thank God and praise him because of your living sacrifices. It is truly a significant work. The most significant thing we can do in this life

after accepting Christ as our own Savior is to help the kingdom grow, making a difference as we allow God to work in our lives.

Let me conclude with the words of Paul in verses 14-15: “And in their prayers *for you* their hearts will go out to *you*, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

Joseph Tkach, 1997

See www.wcg.org/lit/booklets/money for additional articles about money and stewardship.

27. Church Leadership

The Head of the church is Jesus Christ, who reveals the will of the Father to the church through the Holy Spirit. Through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit instructs and empowers the church to serve the needs of congregations. The Worldwide Church of God seeks to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in serving its congregations as it ordains elders...and appoints ministry leaders.

(Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:15-23; John 16:13-15; Ephesians 4:11-16)
(*Statement of Beliefs*, page 9)

Leadership in the church

Since every Christian has the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit teaches each of us, is there any need for leadership within the church? Wouldn't it be more Christian to view ourselves as a group of equals, as every person capable of every role?

Various verses in the Bible, such as 1 John 2:27, may seem to support this idea—but only if they are taken out of context. For example, when John wrote that Christians did not need anyone to teach them, did he mean they didn't need to be taught by him? Did he say, don't pay any attention to what I write, because you don't need me or anyone else to teach you? This is not what he meant.

John wrote the letter because those people *did* need to be taught. He was warning his readers against Gnosticism, against the idea that salvation is found in secret teachings. He was saying that the truths of Christianity were already known in the church. Believers did not need any secret "knowledge" beyond what the Holy Spirit had already given the community. John was not saying that Christians do not need leaders and teachers.

Each Christian has individual responsibilities. Each person must believe, make

decisions about how to live and decide what to believe. But the New Testament is clear that we are not merely individuals—we are part of a body. The church is optional in the same sense that responsibility is optional—God lets us choose what to do, but that does not mean that all choices are equally helpful for us, or that all are equally within God's desire.

Do Christians need teachers? The entire New Testament is evidence that we do. The church at Antioch had "teachers" as one of their leadership roles (Acts 13:1).

Teachers are one of the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to the church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). Paul called himself a teacher (1 Timothy 2:7; Titus 1:11). Even after many years in the faith, believers needed teachers (Hebrews 5:12). James warned against the idea that everybody is a teacher (James 3:1), but his comments still indicate that the church normally had people who taught.

Christians need sound teaching in the truths of the faith. God knows that we grow at different speeds and have strengths in different areas. He knows, because he is the one who gives us those strengths in the first

place, and he does not give the same gifts to everyone (1 Corinthians 12). Rather, he distributes them so that we will work together for the common good, helping each other, rather than each going off and doing our own thing (verse 7).

Some Christians are gifted with more ability for compassion, some for discernment, some for physical service, some for exhortation, some for coordination and some for teaching. All Christians are equal in value, but equality does not mean being identical. We are given different abilities, and although all are important, all are not the same. As children of God, as heirs of salvation, we are equal, but we do not all have the same role in the church. God puts people and distributes his gifts as he sees fit, not according to human expectations.

So God puts teachers into the church—people who are able to help others learn. Now, I admit that as a human organization we do not always select the most gifted people, and I admit that the teachers sometimes make mistakes. But this does not invalidate the clear witness of the New Testament that God’s church does have teachers, that this is a role that we should expect to see in communities of believers.

Although we do not have a specific office named “teacher,” we do expect teachers to exist within the church, and we expect our pastors to be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 2:2). In Ephesians 4:11, Paul groups pastors and teachers together, structuring them grammatically as if this role were a dual responsibility, to shepherd and to teach.

A hierarchy?

The New Testament does not prescribe any particular hierarchy for the church. The Jerusalem church had apostles and elders. The church in Antioch had prophets and

teachers (Acts 15:1; 13:1). Some New Testament passages call the leaders elders; others call them overseers or bishops; some just call them leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:6-7; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; Hebrews 13:17). These seem to be different words for the same role.

The New Testament does not describe an elaborate hierarchy of apostles over prophets over evangelists over pastors over elders over deacons over lay members. The word “over” may not be the best to use, anyway, for all of these are service roles, designed to help the church. But the New Testament does tell people to obey the leaders in the church, to cooperate with their leadership (Hebrews 13:17). Blind obedience is not appropriate, nor is consistent skepticism or resistance.

Paul describes a simple hierarchy when he tells Timothy to appoint elders in churches. As apostle, church planter and mentor, Paul had authority over Timothy, and Timothy had authority to decide who would be elders and deacons. But this is a description of Ephesus, not a prescription for all future organization of the church. We do not see any attempt to tie every church to Jerusalem, or to Antioch, or to Rome. That would not have been practical in the first century, anyway.

So what can we say for the church today? We can say that God does expect the church to have leaders, but he does not specify what those leaders are to be called or how they are to be structured. He has left those details to be worked out in the changing circumstances that the church will find itself in. We should have leaders in local churches, but it does not matter so much what they are called: Pastor Pierce, Elder Ed, Minister Matson or Servant Sam might be equally acceptable.

In the Worldwide Church of God, we use what might be called an episcopal model

(the word episcopal is based on the Greek word for overseer—*episkopos*, sometimes translated as bishop) because of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We believe this is the best way for our churches to have doctrinal soundness and stability. Our episcopal model has its problems, but so do other models, for they all involve fallible humans. We believe that in our historical and geographical circumstances, our style of organization can serve our members better than a congregational or a presbyterian model can.

(Keep in mind that all models of church government, whether congregational, presbyterian or episcopal, can take a variety of forms. Our form of the episcopal model is radically different from that of the Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Episcopal, Roman Catholic or Lutheran churches.)

The head of the church is Jesus Christ, and all leaders within the church should seek his will in all things, in their own lives as well as in the functioning of the congregations. The leaders are to be Christlike in their leadership, which means that they must seek to help others, not to benefit themselves. The local church is not a work crew to help the pastor get his work done. Rather, the pastor is a facilitator, to help the members get *their* work done—the work of the gospel, the work Jesus Christ wants them to do.

Elders and ministry leaders

Paul compares the church to a body with many different parts. Its unity is not in uniformity, but in working together for a common Lord and for a common purpose. Different members have different strengths, and we are to use these for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

The Worldwide Church of God appoints through *ordination* male and female elders to

serve as pastoral leaders. It also appoints through *commissioning* male and female ministry leaders (who may also be referred to as deacons/deaconesses).

What is the difference between “ordination” and “commissioning”? In general, ordination is more public and more permanent; whereas commissioning may be done privately as well as in public, and may be revoked easily. Commissionings are less formal, and are not automatically renewable or transferable. An ordination may be revoked also, but this is done only in exceptional circumstances.

In the Worldwide Church of God we do not have standard exhaustive descriptions of each church leadership role. Elders often serve in congregations as pastors (senior, associate or assistant pastors). Most preach and teach, though not all. Some specialize in administration. Each serves according to ability, under the supervision of the senior pastor (the overseer, or *episkopos* of the congregation).

Ministry leaders come in even greater diversity, each serving (we hope) according to ability, each according to the needs of the congregation. The senior pastor may commission these for temporary assignments, or for indefinite periods.

The roles of these leaders and the councils and committees that advise them are described in detail in our Church Administration Manual. The policies set forth in that manual allow for flexibility in organizing congregational leadership because our congregations exist in a variety of circumstances, having diverse gifts.

Senior pastors serve somewhat like orchestra conductors. They cannot force anyone to play on cue, but they can provide guidance and coordination, and the group as a whole will work much better when the

players take the cues they are given. In our denomination, members cannot fire their senior pastor. Instead, senior pastors are chosen and dismissed at the regional level, which in the United States includes Church Administration & Development, in coordination with local leaders.

What if a member believes a pastor is incompetent, or is leading the sheep astray? That's where our episcopal structure comes in. Problems of doctrine or leadership style should be discussed with the pastor first, and then with a pastoral leader (the overseer, or *episkopos*, of the pastors in the area).

Just as congregations need local leaders and teachers, pastors also need leaders and teachers. That is why we believe that our denominational headquarters has an important role in serving our congregations. We strive to be a source of training, of ideas, of encouragement, of supervision, of cooperation. We are not perfect, but that is the calling we see set before us, and that is what we will strive to do.

Our eyes need to be focused on Jesus. He has work for us to do, and much work is already being done. Praise him for his patience, for his gifts, and for the work that helps us grow.

Joseph Tkach, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/church/ministry for more articles about church leadership.

See www.wcg.org/lit/church/manual/ for the *U.S. Church Administration Manual*.

28. Bible Prophecy

Bible prophecy reveals God and his will and purpose for humanity. In Bible prophecy, God declares that human sinfulness is forgiven through repentance and faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Prophecy proclaims God as Sovereign Creator and Judge of all, assures humanity of his love, mercy, and faithfulness, and motivates the believer to live a godly life in Jesus Christ.

(Isaiah 46:9-11; Luke 24:44-48; Daniel 4:17; Jude 14-15; 2 Peter 3:14) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 9)

Our belief about Bible prophecy

Many Christians need an overview of prophecy like the one above, to put prophecy into perspective. That is because many Christians overemphasize prophecy and make claims about prophecy that cannot be substantiated. For some, prophecy is the most important doctrine. That is what occupies most of their Bible study, and that is the subject they want to hear about the most. Armageddon fiction sells well. Many Christians would do well to notice what our statement of belief on prophecy says.

Our statement has three sentences. The first one says that prophecy is part of God's revelation to us, and it tells us something about who he is, what he is like, what he wants and what he is doing.

The second sentence says that Bible prophecy announces salvation through Jesus Christ. It does not say that all prophecy is concerned with forgiveness and faith in Christ. Nor does it say that prophecy is the *only* place that God reveals these things about salvation. We could say that *some* Bible prophecy concerns salvation through Christ, or that prophecy is one of the *many* ways in which God reveals forgiveness through Christ.

Since God's plan centers on Jesus Christ, and prophecy is part of God's revelation of his will, it is inevitable that prophecy relates, either directly or indirectly, on what he is doing in and through Jesus Christ. But we are not trying to pinpoint every prophecy here—we are giving an introduction.

In our statement, we want to give a sound perspective on why prophecy exists. Our statement contrasts with the claim that most of prophecy concerns the future, or that it focuses on certain nations. The most important thing about prophecy is not about nations, and not about the future, but it is about repentance, and faith, salvation, and life right now.

If we took a survey in most denominations, I doubt that many people would say that prophecy is about forgiveness and faith. They think it is focused on other things. But prophecy is about salvation through Christ, as well as a number of other things. When millions are looking to Bible prophecy to discern the end of the world, when millions always associate prophecy with events still future, it is helpful to remind people that one purpose of prophecy is to reveal that human

sinfulness can be forgiven through the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness

Let me observe a few other things about our statement. First, it says that human sinfulness can be forgiven. It does not say human *sins*. We are talking about the fundamental condition of humanity, not only the individual results of our sinfulness. It is true that individual sins are forgiven through faith in Christ, but it is even more important that our flawed nature, which is the root of the problem, is also forgiven. We will never have the time nor the wisdom to repent of every sin. Forgiveness does not depend on our ability to itemize them all. Rather, what Christ makes possible for us is that all of them, and our sinful nature at its core, can all be forgiven in one fell swoop.

Next, we note that our sinfulness is forgiven through faith and repentance. We want to give a positive assurance that our sins are forgiven, and they are forgiven on the basis of repentance and faith in what Christ has done. And this is something that prophecy is about. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. They come practically at the same time, although faith comes first in logic. If we simply change our behavior without believing, this is not the kind of repentance that leads to salvation. Only a repentance that is accompanied by faith is effective in salvation. The faith has to come first.

We often say that we need faith in Christ. That is true, but this sentence says that we need faith *in his saving work*. We are not just trusting in him—we are also trusting in something he has done that enables us to be forgiven. It was not just him as a person who forgives our sinfulness—it was also something he did or something he does.

We do not specify in this statement what

his saving work is. Our statement on Jesus Christ says that “he died for our sins” and that he “mediates between humanity and God.” This is the “saving work” we are to believe in and thereby be forgiven.

Theologically, people can be forgiven simply through faith in Christ, without having any precise beliefs about how Christ is able to do that for us. There is no particular theory about Christ’s atoning death that is required. There are no special beliefs about his role as mediator that is required for salvation. However, it is clear in the New Testament that our salvation is made possible through the death of Christ on the cross, and that he is our High Priest interceding for us. When we believe that what Jesus does is effective for our salvation, then we experience forgiveness. We acknowledge and worship him as Savior and Lord. We realize that he accepts us in his love and grace and we accept his wonderful gift of salvation.

Our statement is saying that prophecy is concerned with the mechanics of salvation. We find evidence for that in the scriptures we cite at the end of our statement—in Luke 24. There, the resurrected Jesus is explaining things to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We cite verses 44 to 48, but we could also include verses 25 and 27: “Jesus said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with *Moses* and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

Jesus did not say that the Scriptures spoke *only* of him, or that every single prophecy was about him. He didn’t have time to cover the entire Old Testament. Some prophecies were about him, and some were about him only indirectly. Jesus explained the prophecies that were most directly about

him. The disciples believed some of what the prophets had written, but they were slow of heart to believe it *all*. They were missing part of the story, and Jesus filled them in and explained it to them. Even though some prophecies were about Edom, Moab, Assyria, or Egypt, and some about Israel, other prophecies were about the suffering and death of the Messiah, and his resurrection to glory. Jesus explained those.

Notice also that Jesus began with the books of Moses. They have some messianic prophecies in them, but most of the Pentateuch is about Jesus Christ in a different way—in terms of typology, in the rituals of sacrifice and priesthood that prefigured the work of the Messiah. Jesus explained these concepts, too.

Verses 44 to 48 tell us more: “He said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in *the Law of Moses*, the Prophets and the Psalms.’ Again, he did not say that every single detail was about him. What he said is that the parts that were about him had to be fulfilled. And I think we could add that not everything had to be fulfilled in his first coming. Some prophecies seem to point to the future, to his return, but like he said, they must be fulfilled. Not just prophecy pointed to him—the Law also pointed to him, and the Psalms pointed to him and the work he would do for our salvation.

Verses 45-48: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.’” Here Jesus explains some prophecies concerning

himself. Prophecy was pointing not only to the Messiah’s suffering, death, and resurrection—prophecy also pointed to the *message* of repentance and forgiveness, a message that would be preached to all nations.

Prophecy touches on many different things, but the main thing it is about, the most important thing it reveals, is that we can be forgiven through the death of the Messiah. Just as Jesus highlighted this purpose of prophecy on the road to Emmaus, so also we highlight this purpose of prophecy in our statement. If we are interested in prophecy, we should be sure not to miss this part of the message. If we don’t get this part of the message, it won’t do us any good to get anything else.

It is interesting to read Revelation 19:10 with that in mind: “The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” The message about Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. That is what it’s all about. The essence of prophecy is Jesus Christ.

Three more purposes

Our third sentence adds several more details about prophecy. It tells us, “Prophecy proclaims God as Sovereign Creator and Judge of all, assures humanity of his love, mercy, and faithfulness, and motivates the believer to live a godly life in Jesus Christ.” Here are three more purposes of prophecy. First, that it tells us that God is Sovereign Judge of all. Second, it tells us that God is loving, merciful and faithful. And third, prophecy motivates us to live right. Let’s look at each of these three purposes.

Bible prophecy tells us that God is sovereign, that he has authority and power over all things. We cite Isaiah 46:9-11, which supports this point: “Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and

there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, [I make known] what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. From the east I summon a bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose. What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do.”

In this passage, God is saying that he can tell us how everything ends up, even when it is only starting. It doesn’t take much to distinguish the end from the beginning after it has all transpired, but only God can make the end known even when he is in the beginning. Even in ancient times, he was able to make predictions about what would happen in the future.

Some people say that God can do this because he sees the future. It’s true that God can see the future, but that isn’t Isaiah’s point here. What Isaiah is bringing out is not so much that God sees or knows in advance, but that God will intervene in history to make *sure* that it happens. He will bring it about, even though he may call upon a man from the east, in this case, to do the work.

God makes his plan known in advance, and that revelation is what we call prophecy—something said in advance about what is going to happen. So prophecy is part of God’s revelation of his will and purpose. And then, because it is God’s will, his plan, his desire, he makes sure that it happens. He will do everything he pleases, everything he wants to do, because he has the power to do that. He is sovereign over all nations.

Daniel 4:17 tells us the same thing. This is just after Daniel announces that King Nebuchadnezzar will be insane for seven years, and then he gives this reason: “The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is

sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.”

So this prophecy was given and carried out so that people would know that God is sovereign of all nations. He has the power to set someone up as ruler, even the most unlikely of people. God can give it to whomever he wants, because he is sovereign. That is one message conveyed to us by Bible prophecy. It shows that he has all power.

Prophecy tells us that God is Judge. We can see that in many of the Old Testament prophecies, particular the prophecies of punishment. God is bringing unpleasant things because the people have done bad things. God is acting as a judge, with the power to reward and the power to punish, and the power to make sure that it is done.

We cite Jude 14-15 for this reason: “Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men: ‘See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him.’”

Here we find the New Testament quoting a prophecy that is not in the Old Testament. This prophecy is in the apocryphal book of *1 Enoch*, and it has been taken into the Bible, and it has become part of the inspired record as to what prophecy reveals. It reveals that the Lord is coming—that is still future—and that he is a judge of every nation.

Love, mercy, faithfulness

Where does prophecy tell us that God is loving, merciful and faithful? Where is this revealed *in prophecy*? We do not need predictions to learn about God’s character, because it always remains the same. Bible

prophecy reveals something about what God plans and what he does, and it is therefore inevitable that it reveals to us something about his character. His purposes and plans will inevitably reveal that he is loving, merciful, and faithful.

I think here of Jeremiah 26:13—“Reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you.” If the people change, then God will relent. He is not anxious to punish; he is willing to wipe the slate clean. He does not keep grudges—he is merciful and willing to forgive.

As an example of his faithfulness, we might look at the prophecy in Leviticus 26:44. The passage is a warning to Israel that if they broke the covenant, they would be conquered and taken into captivity. But then this assurance is added: “Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely.” This prophecy is highlighting God’s faithfulness, his mercy, and his love, even without using those specific words.

Hosea 11 is another example of God’s faithful love. Even after describing how unfaithful Israel has been, verses 8-9 say, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath.” This prophecy is showing God’s persistent love for his people.

New Testament prophecies also assure us that God is loving, merciful and faithful. He will resurrect us and reward us. We will live with him and enjoy his love forever. Bible prophecy assures us that God intends

to do this, and previous fulfillments of prophecy assure us that he has the power to carry it out, to do exactly as he has purposed to do.

Motivates godly life

Last, the statement says that Bible prophecy motivates believers to live a godly life in Jesus Christ. How does it do this? For one, it gives us a motive to turn to God, because we are assured that he wants the best for us, and we will receive good forever if we accept what he offers, and we will ultimately receive bad if we don’t.

In this connection, we cite 2 Peter 3:14. We can start in verses 10-12: “The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”

We are to look forward to the day of the Lord, rather than fearing it, and we are to live godly lives. Presumably something good will happen to us if we do, and something less desirable will happen to us if we don’t. Prophecy encourages us to live godly lives, because it reveals to us that God will reward those who faithfully seek him.

Verses 12-15: “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear

brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him.”

This scripture is telling us that Bible prophecy encourages us to make every effort, to have right behavior and right thoughts, to live godly lives and be at peace with God. The only way to do this, of course, is through Jesus Christ. But in this particular scripture passage, prophecy is telling us that God is patient, faithful and merciful.

Jesus’ ongoing role is essential here. Peace with God is possible only because Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us as our High Priest. The Law of Moses foreshadowed and prophesied this aspect of Jesus’ saving work; it is through him that we are strengthened to live godly lives, to make every effort, and to be cleansed of the spots that we incur. It is through faith in him as our High Priest that we can be confident that our sins are forgiven and that we are assured of salvation and eternal life. Prophecy assures us of God’s mercy and the way that we can be saved through Jesus Christ.

Prophecy is not the only thing that motivates us to live godly lives. Our future reward or punishment is not the only reason to live right. We can find motivations for good behavior in the past, the present, and the future. In the past, because God has been good to us, and in gratitude for what he has already done, we are willing to do what he says. Our present motivation for living right is our love for God; the Holy Spirit in us causes us to want to please him in what we do. And the future helps motivate our behavior, too—God warns us about punishment presumably because he wants that warning to motivate us to change our behavior. He promises rewards, too, knowing that they also help motivate us. We want to receive the rewards he will give.

Behavior has always been a reason for

prophecy. Prophecy is not just foretelling, it is also forthtelling: setting *forth* God’s instructions. That is the reason many prophecies were conditional—God warned of punishment, and he *hoped* for repentance so that the punishment would not have to come. Prophecies were not given as idle trivia about the future—they had a purpose for the present.

Zechariah summarized the message of the prophets as a call to change: “The earlier prophets proclaimed: This is what the Lord Almighty says, Turn from your evil ways.... Return to me, and I will return to you” (Zechariah 1:3-4). Prophecy tells us that God is a merciful judge, and because of what Jesus Christ does for us, we can be saved if we trust him.

Some prophecies were longer-range, and did not depend on whether people did either good or bad. Not all prophecies were designed for that purpose. In fact, prophecies come in such a wide variety that it is difficult to say, except in a general sense, what all prophecies are for. Some are for this, some are for that, and there are some we aren’t sure what they are for.

When we try to make a statement of belief about something as diverse as prophecy, we will make a general statement, because that is accurate: Bible prophecy is one of the ways God tells us what he is doing, and the overall message of prophecy therefore tells us about the most important thing that God is doing: leading us to salvation through Jesus Christ. Prophecy warns us of judgment to come, assures us of mercy, and therefore encourages us to repent and get with the program of what God is doing.

Michael Morrison, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/prophecy for more articles about prophecy.

29. The Second Coming

Jesus Christ, as he promised, will return to earth to judge and reign over all nations in the kingdom of God. His second coming will be visible, and in power and glory. This event inaugurates the resurrection and reward of the saints.

(John 14:3; Revelation 1:7; Matthew 24:30; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Revelation 22:12) (*Statement of Beliefs*, pages 9-10)

Will Christ return?

What do you think would be the biggest event that could occur on the world scene? Another world war? The discovery of a cure for some dread disease? World peace, once and for all? Contact with some extra-terrestrial intelligence?

For millions of Christians, the answer to this question is simple: The biggest event that could ever occur is the second coming of Jesus Christ.

The Bible's central message

The whole story of the Bible centers on the coming of Jesus Christ as Savior and King.

In the Garden of Eden, our first parents, by sinning, fractured their relationship with God. But God foretold the coming of a Redeemer who would repair that spiritual break. To the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve to sin, God said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

This is the Bible's earliest prophecy of a Savior who would smash the power that sin and death hold over humans ("he will crush your head"). How? By the sacrificial death of the Savior ("you will strike his heel"). Jesus accomplished this at his first coming. John

the Baptist recognized him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

The Bible reveals the central importance of God becoming flesh at the first coming of Jesus Christ. The Bible also reveals that Jesus is coming now, in the lives of believers. And the Bible most surely states that he will come again, visibly and in power. Jesus Christ actually comes in three ways:

Jesus has already come

We humans need God's redemption—his rescue—because Adam and Eve sinned, bringing death on the world. Jesus accomplished that redemption by dying in our place. "God was pleased," wrote Paul in Colossians 1:19-20, "to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Jesus healed the breach that first occurred in Eden. Through his sacrifice, the human family is reconciled to God.

Old Testament prophecy pointed to the kingdom of God in the future. But the New Testament opens with Jesus "proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come.... The kingdom of God is near,'" he said (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus, the King of the kingdom,

was walking among humans! Jesus offered “for all time one sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:12). We should never underestimate the import of Jesus’ incarnation, life and work two millennia ago.

Jesus came. Also —

Jesus is coming now

There is good news for those who believe in Christ: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions” (Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-5).

God has raised us with Christ, spiritually, now! Through his grace, “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (verses 6-7). This passage describes our present condition as followers of Jesus Christ!

God “has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Peter 1:3-4). Jesus lives in us now (Galatians 2:20). We have been born again, spiritually, and can see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Asked when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied: “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus was in the midst of Pharisees, but he lives within Christians. Jesus Christ brought the kingdom in his person.

In the same way, as he now lives in us, he inaugurates the kingdom of God. Jesus’

coming to live in us also anticipates the ultimate revelation of the kingdom on earth at Jesus’ second coming.

But why does Jesus live in us now? Notice: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:8-10). God has saved us by grace, through no effort of our own. But though works cannot earn us salvation, Jesus lives in us so that we may now do good works and thereby glorify God.

Jesus came. He is coming. And —

Jesus will come again

After Jesus’ resurrection, as his disciples watched him ascend to heaven, two angels asked: “Why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Yes, Jesus is coming again.

At his first coming, Jesus left some messianic predictions unfulfilled. This was one reason his own people, the Jews, rejected him. They saw the Messiah as a national hero who would free them from Roman domination.

But the Messiah was to come, first, to die for all humanity. Only later would Jesus Christ return as a conquering king, and then not just to exalt Israel, but to claim all earth’s kingdoms as his own. “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

“I am going...to prepare a place for you,” Jesus told his disciples. “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be

where I am” (John 14:23).

Jesus’ Olivet prophecy (Matthew 24:1-25, 46) addressed Christ’s disciples’ questions and concerns about his return and the end of this age.

Later, the apostle Paul told the church how “the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). At Christ’s return, he will raise to immortality the righteous dead and change to immortality the faithful who are still alive, and they will all meet him in the air (verses 16-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

But when?

Throughout the centuries, speculation about the second coming has caused uncounted arguments—and untold disappointment when prognosticators’ various scenarios failed. Overemphasizing the when of Jesus’ return can divert our minds from the central focus of the gospel—Jesus’ saving work for all humans, accomplished in his life, death, resurrection and continuing redemptive work as our heavenly High Priest.

We can become so engrossed in prophetic speculation that we fail to fulfill the rightful role of Christians as lights to the world, exemplifying the loving, merciful, Christlike way of life and glorifying God by serving our fellow humans.

“When anyone’s interest in the Scriptural announcements of the Last Things and the second advent degenerates into a subtle drawing up of precisely worked-out future events, then he has strayed a long way from the content and spirit of Jesus’ prophetic utterances,” says *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* on Luke, page 544.

Our focus?

If knowing when Christ will return is not possible (and therefore, by comparison to what the Bible *does* tell us, unimportant), then where should we focus our energies as Christians? Our focus should be on being ready for Jesus’ second coming *whenever it occurs!*

“You also must be ready,” Jesus said, “because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him” (Matthew 24:44). “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22). We need to be ready for him to come into our life right now, and to direct our life right now.

The Bible’s focal point

The whole Bible revolves around the coming of Jesus Christ. As Christians, our lives should revolve around his coming, too.

Jesus came. He is coming through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit now. Jesus Christ will come again. Jesus will return in all glory to “transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Philippians 3:21). Then, “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

Yes, I am coming soon, says our Savior. And as Christians, believers in and disciples of Jesus Christ, we all can reply in unison: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).

Norman Shoaf, 1994

- Richard Kyle, *The Last Days Are Here Again* (Baker, 1998).
- Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Belknap, 1998)

30. The Inheritance of Believers

The inheritance of believers is salvation and eternal life in Christ as children of God in communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father conveys believers even now into the kingdom of his Son, and their inheritance is reserved in heaven to be bestowed fully at the second coming of Christ. The resurrected saints reign with Christ in the kingdom of God.

(1 John 3:1-2; 1 John 2:25; Romans 8:16-21; Colossians 1:13; Daniel 7:27; 1 Peter 1:3-5; Revelation 5:10) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 10)

The rewards of following Christ

Peter once asked Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?” (Matthew 19:27). We might paraphrase it like this: “We’ve given up a lot to be here. *Is it really worth it?*”

Some of us may well ask the same thing. We have given up a lot—careers, families, jobs, status, pride—in our spiritual journey. Is it really worth it? Is there some sort of reward in store for us?

We used to talk often of rewards in the kingdom of God. Many members found these speculations very encouraging and motivating. It put eternal life into terms we could relate to. We could envision ourselves with physical rewards that made our sacrifices seem worthwhile.

The good news is that our labors and sacrifices are not in vain. Our efforts will be rewarded—even sacrifices we made because of doctrinal misunderstandings. Jesus says that whenever our *motive* is right—when our labor and sacrifice are for his name’s sake—we will be rewarded.

I think it will be helpful to discuss the kind of rewards God promises for us. Scripture has quite a bit to say about it. God knows that we do ask the question. We do need an answer. He inspired Scripture writers

to talk about rewards, and I am confident that when God promises a reward, we will find it extremely rewarding—far above what we could even think to ask (Ephesians 3:20).

Rewards both now and forever

Let’s begin by noting the way that Jesus answered Peter’s question: “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (vv. 28-29).

The Gospel of Mark makes it clear that Jesus is talking about two different time periods: “No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much *in this present age* (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in *the age to come*, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

Jesus is stating in emphatic terms that God will reward us generously—but he also

warns us that this life is not a life of physical luxury. We will have persecutions, trials and sufferings in this life. But the blessings outweigh the difficulties by a hundred-to-one margin! Whatever sacrifices we make will be richly compensated. The Christian life is certainly “worth it.”

Of course, Jesus is not promising to give 100 fields to everyone who gave up a farm to follow him. He is not promising to make everyone wealthy. He is not promising to give 100 mothers. He is not talking in strictly literal terms. What he means is that the things we receive in this life will be 100 times as valuable as the things we give up—as measured by real value, eternal value, not by temporary fads about physical things.

Even our trials have spiritual value to our benefit (Romans 5:3-4; Jas. 1:2-4), and this is of greater value than gold (1 Peter 1:7). God sometimes gives us gold and other temporary rewards (perhaps as an indication of better things to come), but *the rewards that count most are those that last forever*.

Frankly, I doubt that the disciples understood what Jesus was saying. They were still thinking in terms of a physical kingdom that would soon bring earthly freedom and power to the Israelites (Acts 1:6). The martyrdom of Stephen and James (Acts 7:57-60; 12:2) may have come as quite a surprise. Where were the hundredfold rewards for them?

Parables of reward

In several parables, Jesus indicated that faithful disciples would receive great rewards. Sometimes the reward is described as rulership, but Jesus also used other ways to describe our reward.

In the parable of the vineyard workers, the gift of salvation is symbolized by one day’s wage (Matthew 20:9-16). In the

parable of the virgins, the reward is a marriage banquet (Matthew 25:10). In the parable of talents, the reward is described in general terms: being put “in charge of many things” and being able to “share your master’s happiness” (vv. 20-23).

In the parable of sheep and goats, the blessed disciples are allowed to inherit a kingdom (v. 34). In the parable of the servants, the faithful servant is rewarded by being put in charge of all the master’s possessions (Luke 12:42-44).

In the parables of the pounds, the trustworthy servants were given rulership over cities (Luke 19:16-19). Jesus promised the 12 disciples rulership over the tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). Members of the church in Thyatira were promised authority over the nations (Revelation 2:26-27).

Jesus advised his disciples to “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19-21). By this, he implied that what we do in this life will be rewarded in the future—but what sort of reward is it? What good is a treasure when there is nothing to buy? When streets are made of gold, what will be the value of gold?

When we have spiritual bodies, we will not need physical things. I think that this fact suggests that when we think of eternal rewards, we should think primarily about spiritual rewards, not physical things that will pass away. But the problem is that we do not have the vocabulary to describe details of an existence we have never experienced. So we need to use words based on the physical when we even attempt to describe what the spiritual is like.

Our eternal reward will be like a treasure. In some respects, it will be like inheriting a kingdom. In some way, it will be like being given all our master’s possessions.

It will be similar to having a vineyard to take care of on behalf of the master. It will be like having responsibility over cities. It will be like a wedding banquet when we share in our master's happiness. It is like all of these things, and much more.

Our spiritual blessings will be far better than the physical things we know in this life. Our eternity in God's presence will be much more glorious and joyful than physical rewards. All physical things, no matter how beautiful, enjoyable or valuable, are only weak shadows of infinitely better heavenly rewards.

Eternal joy with God

David put it this way: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). John described it as a time when "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 20:4). Everyone will be fully happy. There will be no dissatisfaction of any kind. No one will be able to think of even a tiny way in which things could be better. We will have reached the purpose for which God has made us.

Isaiah described some of this joy when he predicted a nation returning to its land: "The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (Isaiah 35:10). We will be in the presence of God, and we will be happier than we have ever been. This is what Christianity has traditionally tried to convey by the concept of "going to heaven."

Is it wrong to want a reward?

Some critics of Christianity have ridiculed the concept of heaven as "pie in the sky in the bye and bye"—but ridicule is not a good form of argument. The real question is,

Is there a reward, or not? If there really is a reward in heaven, then it is not ridiculous to hope to enjoy it. If we really will be rewarded, it is ridiculous *not* to want it.

The simple fact is that God has promised to reward us. "Anyone who comes to him [God] must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Belief in rewards is part of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, some people think that it is somehow demeaning or less than honorable for Christians to want to be rewarded for their labors. They think that Christians should serve with a motive of love, expecting no reward for their labors. But that is not the complete message of the Bible. In addition to the free gift of salvation by grace through faith, the Bible does promise rewards for God's people, and it is not wrong to desire the promises of God.

Certainly, we are to serve God from the motivation of love and not as hirelings who work only to be paid. However, Scripture does speak of rewards, and assures us that we will be rewarded. It is honorable for us to believe in God's promises and to find them motivating. Rewards are not the only motive of the redeemed children of God, but it is part of the package God has given us.

When life becomes difficult, it is helpful for us to remember that there is another life, in which we will be rewarded. "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Corinthians 15:19). Paul knew that the future life would make his sacrifices worthwhile. He gave up temporary pleasures to seek better, longer-lasting pleasures in Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Paul was not afraid of using the language of "gain" (Philippians 1:21; 1 Timothy 3:13; 6:6; cf. Hebrews 11:35). He knew that his future life would be much better than the persecutions of this life. Jesus was also mindful of the benefits of his own

sacrifice, and he was willing to endure the cross because he saw great joy on the other side (Hebrews 12:2).

When Jesus counseled us to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20), he was not against investing—he was against bad investments. Do not invest in temporary rewards, but invest in heavenly rewards that will last forever. “Great is your reward in heaven” (Matthew 5:12). “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field” (Matthew 13:44).

God has prepared something wonderfully good for us, and we will find it to be extremely enjoyable. It is right for us to eagerly look forward to these great blessings, and when we count the cost of following Jesus, it is also right for us to count the blessings and rewards promised for us.

“The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does” (Ephesians 6:8). “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward” (Colossians 3:23-24). “Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully” (2 John 8).

Exceedingly great rewards

What God has in store for us is truly beyond our ability to imagine. Even in this life, the love of God is beyond our ability to understand (Ephesians 3:19). The peace of God is beyond our comprehension (Philippians 4:7), and his joy is beyond our ability to put into words (1 Peter 1:8). How much more, then, is it impossible to describe how good it will be to live with God forever?

The biblical writers didn’t give us many details. But one thing we know for certain—it is going to be the most wonderful experience we have ever had. It is better than the most beautiful paintings, better than the

most delicious food, better than the most exciting sport, better than the best feelings and experiences we have ever had. It is better than anything on earth. It is going to be a tremendous reward!

God is truly generous! We have been given exceedingly great and precious promises—and the privilege of sharing this wonderful news with others. What joy should fill our hearts!

In the words of 1 Peter 1:3-9:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

We have much to be thankful for, much to rejoice about, much to celebrate!

Joseph Tkach, 1997

31. Eternal Judgment

At the end of the age, God will gather all the living and the dead before the heavenly throne of Christ for judgment. The righteous will receive eternal glory, and the wicked will be condemned to the lake of fire. It is the belief of the Worldwide Church of God that in Christ the Lord makes gracious and just provision for all, even for those who at death appear not to have believed the gospel.

(Matthew 25:31-32; Acts 24:15; John 5:28-29; Revelation 20:11-15; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; 2 Peter 3:9; Acts 10:43; John 12:32; 1 Corinthians 15:22-28) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 31)

The Last Judgment

“**T**he Judgment is coming! The Judgment is coming! Repent now or you will go to hell.”

You may have heard some itinerant street “evangelist” shouting these words, trying to scare people into making a commitment to Christ. Or, you may have seen such a wild-eyed person satirized in movies.

Perhaps that is not so far from the picture of “eternal judgment” believed by many Christians down through the ages, especially in Medieval times. You can see sculptures and paintings depicting the righteous being wafted up into the sky to meet Christ and the evil and unrighteous being dragged into hell by ferocious demons.

These images of the Last Judgment, the judgment on eternal destiny, are derived from statements about the Judgment made in the New Testament. The Last Judgment is part of the doctrine of “last things”—the future return of Jesus Christ, the resurrection of the just and wicked, the end of the present evil world, which will be replaced by the glorious kingdom of God.

The Bible explains that the Judgment is a serious event for all human beings who have lived, as Jesus’ words declare: “I tell

you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:36-37).

The Greek word for “judgment” used in such New Testament passages is *krisis*, from which we get our English word “crisis.” *Krisis* refers to a time or situation when a decision is executed for or against someone. In that sense, it is a crisis point in the life of an individual or of the world. Most specifically, *krisis* refers to the activity of God or the Messiah as judge of the world on what is called the Last Day or Day of Judgment, or we might say the beginning of “eternal judgment.”

Jesus summarized the Judgment to come in terms of the fate of the righteous and the wicked: “Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:28-29).

Jesus also described the essence of the last Judgment in symbolic form—as sheep being separated from goats:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:31-33).

The sheep on his right hand are told of their blessedness and told to "take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (verse 34). The goats on the left are informed of their fate as well: "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (verse 41).

This two-group scenario gives confidence to the righteous and thrusts the wicked into a time of singular crisis: "The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:9).

Paul also speaks of this two-fold day of Judgment, referring to it as "the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). He says, "God will give to each person according to what he has done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger" (verses 6-8).

Such biblical passages define in stark terms the doctrine of eternal or last Judgment. It's an either-or situation; there are the saved in Christ and the unregenerate wicked who are lost. A number of other passages in the New Testament speak of the "last Judgment" as a time and situation that no person can escape. Perhaps the best way to get the flavor of this future time is to quote some of the passages that mention it.

Hebrews speaks of the Judgment as a crisis situation that every human will face. Those who are in Christ, saved by his redemptive work, will find their reward: "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (Hebrews 9:27).

The saved people, made righteous by his redemptive work, do not need to fear the Last Judgment. John assures his readers: "Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment" (1 John 4:17). Those who belong to Christ will receive their eternal reward. The ungodly will go to their fearful fate: "The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:7).

Our statement says that "in Christ the Lord makes gracious and just provision for all, even for those who at death appear not to have believed the gospel." We do not say *how* God makes such provision, except that whatever it is, such provision is made possible through Christ's redemptive work, as it is for those now in a saved condition.

Jesus himself indicated in several places during his earthly ministry that provision is made for the unevangelized dead to receive the opportunity to be saved. He did this by explaining that the people of a number of ancient cities would find favor in the Judgment, especially in relationship to cities of Judea, where he preached:

Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!... it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you (Luke 10:13-14).

The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it... The Queen of the South [who came to listen to Solomon] will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it (Matthew 12:41-42).

Here are people of ancient cities—Tyre, Sidon, Nineveh—who obviously did not have opportunity to hear the gospel or know of Christ’s redemptive work. But they find the Judgment bearable, and simply by standing in front of their Savior, they send a condemnatory message to those who rejected him in this life.

Jesus also makes the shocking statement that the ancient towns of Sodom and Gomorrah—bywords for every gross immorality—would find the Judgment more bearable than certain towns of Judea in which Jesus taught.

To put into context just how startling Jesus’ statement is, let’s see how Jude pictures the sin of these two towns and the consequences they received in this life for their actions:

“And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 6).

But Jesus says of the towns in the future Judgment: “It will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town [that is, the town that didn’t welcome the disciples]” (Matthew 10:15).

Perhaps, then, this suggests that the events of the last or eternal Judgment are not quite what many Christians have assumed

them to be. The late Reformed theologian, Shirley C. Guthrie, suggested we perhaps would do well to reorient our thinking about this crisis event:

The first thought that comes to Christians when they think about the end of history ought not be anxious or vindictive speculation about who will be “in” and go “up,” and who will be “out” and go “down.” It ought to be the thankful and joyful thought that we may confidently look forward to the time when the will of the world’s Creator, Reconciler, Savior, and Renewer will prevail once and for all—when justice will triumph over injustice, love over hatred and greed, peace over hostility, humanity over inhumanity, the kingdom of God over the powers of darkness. The last judgment will come not against but for the good of the world... That is good news not just for Christians but for everyone!¹

Indeed, that is what the last things—including the last or eternal Judgment—are all about: the triumph of the God of love over all that stands in the way of his eternal grace. So the apostle Paul says: “Then the end will come, when he [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15:24-26).

The One who is to be the Judge in the last Judgment of those made righteous by Christ and those who are yet sinners is none other than Jesus Christ, who gave his life as a ransom for everyone. “The Father judges no

¹ Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, Revised Edition (Westminster/John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1994), p. 387.

one,” said Jesus, “but has entrusted all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22).

The One who judges the righteous, the unevangelized and even the wicked is he who gave his life so that others might live eternally. Jesus Christ has already taken the judgment of sin and sinfulness upon himself. That is not to say that those who reject Christ avoid suffering the fate that their own decision brings on them. What the picture of the merciful Judge, Jesus Christ, does tell us is that he wishes that all would receive eternal life—and he will provide it for those who put their faith in him.

Those who are the called-in-Christ—made the “elect” through Christ’s election—can look to the Judgment with confidence and joy, knowing that their salvation is sure in him. The unevangelized—those who have not had opportunity to hear the gospel and put their faith in Christ—will also find that the Lord has made provision for them. The Judgment should be a time of joy for everyone as it will usher in the glory of the everlasting kingdom of God where nothing but goodness will exist throughout eternity.

Paul Kroll, 2007

Universalism says that all souls, whether human, angelic or demonic, will eventually be saved by God’s grace. Some universalists argue that repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ are not necessary. Many universalists deny the doctrine of the Trinity, and many are Unitarians.

Contrary to universalism, the Bible speaks both of “sheep,” who enter the kingdom of God, and of “goats,” who enter eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46). God’s grace does not force compliance. In Jesus Christ, who is God’s elect for our sakes, all humanity is elect, but that does not mean that all humans will ultimately accept God’s gift. God desires that all come to repentance, but he has created and redeemed humanity for true fellowship with him, and true fellowship can never constitute a forced relationship. The Bible indicates that some will persist in their rejection of God’s mercy.

Possible resources:

- Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. Zondervan, 1996.
- John Sanders, ed., *What About Those Who Have Never Heard?* InterVarsity, 1995.
- William Crockett and James Sigountos, *Through No Fault of Their Own?* Baker, 1991.

32. Hell

Hell is the separation and alienation from God chosen by incorrigible sinners. In the New Testament, hell is referred to by the terms “lake of fire,” “darkness,” and *Gehenna* (a gorge outside Jerusalem where garbage was burned). Hell is characterized by punishment, torment, anguish, weeping and gnashing of teeth, and eternal destruction. The biblical terms *Sheol* and *Hades*, often translated “hell” or “the grave,” refer to the realm of the dead. The Bible teaches that unrepentant sinners will suffer the second death in the lake of fire, but it does not make absolutely clear whether this means annihilation or conscious spiritual alienation from God.

(2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; Matthew 10:28; 25:41, 46; Revelation 20:14-15; 21:8; Matthew 13:42; Psalm 49:14-15) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 10)

Hell

“If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away,” said Jesus. “It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matthew 5:30). Hell is serious. We need to take Jesus’ warning seriously.

Our approach

Our statement above defines hell as “the separation and alienation from God chosen by incorrigible sinners.” We do not say whether this separation and alienation means eternal suffering, or a complete end of consciousness. Indeed, we say that the Bible does not make this absolutely clear.

On this subject, as with many others, we must listen to Jesus. If we take him seriously when he teaches about mercy, we should also take him seriously when he teaches about punishment. After all, mercy doesn’t mean much unless we are escaping something.

Warnings about fire

In one parable, Jesus warned that wicked people will be thrown into a fiery furnace (Matthew 13:50). In this parable, he did not

talk about incineration, but about “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In another parable, Jesus describes the punishment of a forgiven slave who would not forgive a fellow slave as “torture” (Matthew 18:34). Another parable describes the wicked person as tied up and thrown “into the darkness” (Matthew 22:13). This darkness is described as a place of weeping and grinding of teeth.

Jesus does not explain whether those in the darkness weep from pain or from sorrow, and he does not explain whether they grind their teeth in remorse or in anger. That is not his purpose. In fact, he never explains in detail the fate of the wicked.

Jesus does, however, warn people in vivid terms not to hang on to anything that would cause them to be thrown into eternal fire: “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin,” Jesus warned, “cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire” (Matthew 18:7-8). It is better to deny yourself in this life than to be “thrown into the fire of hell” (verse 9).

Does the punishing of the wicked last forever? The Bible can be interpreted in different ways on that. Some verses suggest eternal suffering, while others suggest a limited duration. But either way, hell is to be avoided at all costs.

This reminds me of a book on this subject: *Two Views of Hell*. Edward Fudge argues for annihilation; Robert Peterson argues for eternal suffering. On the cover of this book are two men, both with hand over face in an expression of dread or horror. The point being made with the graphic is that even though there are two views of hell, no matter how you look at hell, it is ghastly. God is merciful, but the person who opposes God refuses his mercy and therefore suffers.

Epistles

Jesus used a variety of word-pictures for the punishment of those who refuse the mercy of God: fire, darkness, torture and destruction.

The apostles also talked about judgment and punishment, but they described it in different ways. Paul wrote, “For those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil” (Romans 2:9).

Regarding those who were persecuting the church at Thessalonica, Paul wrote, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). So we define hell as “separation and alienation from God.”

The Old Testament penalty for rejecting Moses was death, but anyone who deliberately rejects Jesus deserves a greater punishment, says Hebrews 10:28-29. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (verse 31). God is merciful

beyond imagination, but if a person refuses his mercy, only judgment is left.

God does not want anyone to suffer the horrors of hell—he wants everyone to come to repentance and salvation (2 Peter 2:9). But those who refuse such wonderful grace will suffer. That is their choice, not God’s. Thus we say that hell is “chosen by incorrigible sinners.” That is an important part of the picture.

The final victory of God is also an important part of the picture. Everything will be brought under the control of Christ, for he has redeemed all creation (1 Corinthians 15:20-24; Colossians 1:20). Everything will be set right. Even death and Hades will be destroyed in the end (Revelation 20:14). The Bible does not tell us how hell fits into that picture, nor do we claim to know. We simply trust that God, full of righteousness and mercy, will conclude it all in the best possible way.

Of all that Jesus taught about hell, the most important thing is that Jesus is the solution to the problem. In him, there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). He is the way, the truth and the life eternal.

Joseph Tkach, 2001

- William Crockett, ed. *Four Views on Hell*. Zondervan, 1992.
- Edward Fudge and Robert Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*. InterVarsity, 2000.

The justice and mercy of God

A God of love would not torture people forever and ever, say some people. The Bible reveals God to be compassionate. He would rather put people out of their misery than see them suffer eternally. The traditional doctrine of an ever-punishing hell, many believe, portrays God as a vengeful sadist who sets a terrible example. Moreover, it would not be right to punish people forever for a life that lasted only a few years or decades, say some.

But rebellion against God is infinitely terrible, say some theologians. We cannot measure evil by the time it takes to commit it, they explain. A murder may take only a few minutes, yet the consequences may extend over decades or centuries. Rebelling against God is the most serious crime in the universe, they contend, so it demands the worst punishment.

Unfortunately, humans don't have a very good handle on either justice or mercy. Humans are not qualified to judge, but Jesus Christ is. He will judge the world righteously (Psalm 9:8; John 5:22; Romans 2:6-11). We can trust his judgment, knowing he will be both righteous and merciful.

When it comes to hell, some parts of the Bible stress anguish and punishment and others use images of destruction and cessation. Rather than trying to make one description conform to the other, we let them both speak. When it comes to hell, we must trust God, not our imagination.

33. Heaven

Heaven is a biblical term applied to the chosen dwelling place of God and the eternal destiny of all God's redeemed children. To be in *heaven* is to remain in Christ in the presence of God, where death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more. Heaven is characterized by everlasting joy, blessed peace, and the righteousness of God.

(1 Kings 8:27-30; Deuteronomy 26:15; Matthew 6:9; Acts 7:55-56; John 14:2-3; Revelation 21:3-4; 22:1-5; 2 Peter 3:13) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 11)

Heaven when we die?

Some people ridicule the idea of “going to heaven.” However, Paul says that we are *already* seated in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6)—and he wanted to go to be with Christ, who is in heaven (Philippians 1:23). Going to heaven isn't much different than what Paul has already said. We might prefer other ways of saying it, but it is not a point on which we should criticize or ridicule other Christians.

When most Christians talk about heaven, they are simply using the term as a synonym for salvation. For example, some Christian evangelists ask, “Are you sure that you will go to heaven if you die tonight?” Their real point in most cases is not when or where we go—they are simply asking if we are sure of our salvation.

A few people may envision heaven as a place of clouds, harps and gold-paved streets. But such physical things are not really part of heaven—they are figures of speech, suggesting peace, beauty, glory and other good things. They are an attempt to use limited physical terms to describe spiritual realities.

Heaven is spiritual, not physical. It is the “place” God lives. Science fiction fans might say, God lives in a different dimension. He is everywhere present in all dimensions, yet “heaven” is the realm in which he actually

dwells. (I apologize for the lack of precision in my words. Theologians may have more precise words for these concepts, but I hope I can get the general idea across with simple words.) The point is that to be in “heaven” is to be in the presence of God in an immediate and special way.

Scripture makes it clear that we will be where God is (John 14:3; Philippians 1:23). Another way to describe our close relationship with God at that time is that we will see him “face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12; Revelation 22:4; 1 John 3:2). This is a metaphor for being with him in the closest possible way. So, when we understand the term “heaven” to refer to the dwelling-place of God, it is not wrong to say that Christians will be in heaven in the age to come. We will be with God, and being with God is rightly called being in “heaven.”

In a vision, John saw God's presence eventually coming to earth—not the present earth, but a “new earth” (Revelation 21:3). Whether we “go” to heaven, or it “comes” to us, is of no consequence. Either way, we will be in heaven, in the presence of God forever, and it will be wonderfully good. How we describe the life of the age to come, as long as our description is biblical, does not change

the fact that we have faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

What God has in store for us is beyond our ability to imagine. Even in this life, the love of God is beyond our ability to understand (Ephesians 3:19). The peace of God is beyond our comprehension (Phil 4:7), and his joy is beyond our ability to put into words (1 Peter 1:8). How much more, then, is it impossible to describe how good it will be to live with God forever?

The biblical writers didn't give us many details. But one thing we know for certain—it is going to be the most wonderful experience we have ever had. It is better than the most beautiful paintings, better than the most delicious food, better than the most exciting sport, better than the best feelings and experiences we have ever had. It is better than anything on earth. It is going to be a tremendous reward!

Joseph Tkach, 1997

34. The Intermediate State

The intermediate state is the condition of the dead until the resurrection of the body. Christians hold various viewpoints on the nature of the intermediate state based on their interpretation of relevant biblical passages. Some passages suggest a conscious intermediate state, and others an unconscious state. The Worldwide Church of God believes both views should be respected.

(Isaiah 14:9-10; Ezekiel 32:21; Luke 16:19-31; 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8; Philippians 1:21-24; Revelation 6:9-11; Psalms 6:5; 88:10-12; 115:17; Ecclesiastes 3:19-21; 9:5, 10; Isaiah 38:18; John 11:11-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14)

What about the “intermediate state”?

We used to take a dogmatic stand on the question of the “intermediate state,” that is, whether a person is unconscious or conscious between death and resurrection. But we do not now.

Throughout Christian history, the majority view has been that after death, people are consciously present with God or consciously experiencing punishment. The minority view is called psychopannychy, also known as “soul sleep.”

In examining Scripture, we see that the New Testament offers no sustained reflection

on the intermediate state. There are a few verses that seem to indicate that humans are unconscious after death as well as a few verses that seem to indicate that humans are conscious after death.

Most of us are familiar with the verses that describe death in terms of sleep, such as those in Ecclesiastes and Psalms. These verses are written from a phenomenological perspective. In other words, when you look at the physical phenomenon of a dead body, it appears that the body is asleep. In such passages, sleep is a metaphor for death,

referring to the appearance of the body. When we read verses such as Matthew 27:52, John 11:11, and Acts 13:36, however, it appears that death is literally equated with “sleep”—even though the writers were well aware that there was a significant difference between death and sleep.

However, we should also take serious note of the verses that seem to indicate consciousness after death. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 Paul seems to refer to the intermediate state as being “unclothed” in verse 4, and as being “at home with the Lord” in verse 8. In Philippians 1:21-23 Paul says that to die is “gain” because believers depart “to be with Christ.” This does not sound like unconsciousness. This is also seen in Luke 23:43 when Jesus tells the thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” The Greek is clear and translated correctly.

Ultimately, the doctrine of the intermediate state is something God has not chosen to describe explicitly and dogmatically in the Bible. Perhaps it is beyond human capacity to grasp even if it could be clearly explained. This doctrine is certainly not an issue over which Christians should fight and divide.

As the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* states, “Speculation on the intermediate state should never diminish the certainty that flows from the cross or the hope in the new creation.”

If we are conscious with God after death, who will complain about this to God, saying, “I’m supposed to sleep like Rip Van Winkle until Jesus returns—why am I conscious?” And, of course, if we are unconscious, we won’t be able to complain. Either way, at death, our next conscious moment is with God.

Paul Kroll, 2001

See www.wcg.org/lit/prophecy for a much longer article about the intermediate state.

35. The Millennium

The Millennium is the time span described in the book of Revelation during which Christian martyrs reign with Jesus Christ. After the Millennium, when all enemies have been put under his feet, and all things made subject to him, Christ will deliver the kingdom to God the Father, and heaven and earth will be made new. Some Christian traditions interpret the Millennium as a literal 1000 years to precede or follow the return of Jesus, while others believe that the scriptural evidence points to a figurative interpretation: an indeterminate time span commencing with Jesus' resurrection and concluding with his return.

(Revelation 20:1-15; 21:1, 5; Acts 3:19-21; Revelation 11:15; 1 Corinthians 15:24-25) (*Statement of Beliefs*, page 11)

Two views of the millennium

For many Christians, the millennium is a very important doctrine, a wonderful message of good news. But we do not stress the millennium. Why? Because we base our teachings on the Bible, and the Bible is not as clear on this topic as some people think it is.

For example, how long will the millennium last? Some say it will be exactly 1,000 years. Revelation 20 calls it a thousand years. The word "millennium" *means* one thousand years. So why would anybody doubt it?

For one thing, the book of Revelation is filled with symbols: beasts, horns, colors and numbers that are meant figuratively, not literally. In Scripture, the number 1,000 is often used as a round number, not an exact count. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, it says, without meaning an exact number. He keeps his covenant for a thousand generations, without meaning exactly 40,000 years. In scriptures like this, a thousand means an unlimited number.

So, in Revelation 20, is the "thousand years" meant literally, or is it figurative? In this book of symbols that often aren't meant literally, is the thousand meant to be exact?

From Scripture, we cannot prove that the thousand years are meant exactly. Therefore, we cannot say that the millennium is exactly 1,000 years. However, we can say that "the millennium is the time span described in the book of Revelation..."

More questions

We can also say that the millennium is "the time span during which Christian martyrs reign with Jesus Christ." Revelation tells us that those who are beheaded for Christ reign with him, and it tells us that they will reign with Christ for a thousand years.

But when do these saints begin to reign? With this question, we get into some hotly disputed questions about the millennium. There are two, three, or four views about the millennium.

Some of these views are more literal in their approach to Scripture, and some are more figurative. But none are rejecting what the Bible says—they are just interpreting it in different ways. All of them claim to base their view on Scripture. It is largely a matter of interpretation.

Here we will describe the two most common views of the millennium, along with their strengths and weaknesses, and we will then return to what we can say with greatest confidence.

- In the premillennial view, Christ comes *before* the millennium.

- In the amillennial view, Christ comes after the millennium, but it is called amillennial or nonmillennial because it says that there *is no special millennium* different from what we are already in. This view says that we are *already* in the time span Revelation 20 is describing.

That might seem preposterous if you believe the millennial reign is a time of peace that is possible only after Christ returns. It may seem like “those people don’t believe the Bible”—but yet they *claim* to believe the Bible. In the interest of Christian charity, we ought to try to understand *why* they think the Bible says this.

The premillennial view

Let’s start with a presentation of the premillennial position.

Old Testament: First, many prophecies in the Old Testament predict a golden age in which people are right with God. “The lion and the lamb will live together, and a little child will lead them. They will not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord.”

Sometimes it seems as if this future world will be drastically different from the present world; other times it seems similar. Sometimes it seems perfect, and sometimes it is mixed with sin. In a passage like Isaiah 2, for example, many people will say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord. He will teach us his ways.... The word of the Lord will go out from Jerusalem.”

Nevertheless, there will be nations that

need to be rebuked. People will need plowshares, because they need to eat, because they are mortal. There are ideal elements, and there are normal elements. There will be young children, there will be marriage, and there will be death.

Daniel tells us that the Messiah will establish a kingdom that will fill the entire earth, replacing all previous empires. There are dozens of these prophecies in the Old Testament, but they are not decisive for our particular question.

Jesus: The Jews understood these prophecies to refer to a future age on earth. They expected the Messiah to come and reign and bring these blessings. Jewish literature before and after Jesus expects a kingdom of God on earth. Jesus’ own disciples seem to have expected the same thing. So when Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom of God, we cannot pretend that the Old Testament prophecies did not exist. He was preaching to a people who expected a golden age ruled by a Messiah. When he said “kingdom of God,” this is what they would have been thinking.

The disciples: Jesus announced that the kingdom was near. Then he left and said he’d be back. It would not be difficult for his followers to conclude that Jesus would bring the golden age when he came back. The disciples asked Jesus when he would restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). They used a similar Greek word to talk about the time of the restoration of all things when Christ returns—Acts 3:21: “Jesus must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

The disciples expected Old Testament prophecies to be fulfilled in a future age after Christ returned. The disciples didn’t preach much about this future golden age, because

their Jewish audiences were already familiar with the concept. They needed to know who the Messiah is, so that was the focus of the apostolic message.

According to premillennialists, the apostolic message focused on the *new* thing God had done in the Messiah. Since it focused on how salvation is possible through Jesus the Messiah, it did not need to say much about the future kingdom of God, and it is difficult for us to know exactly what they believed about it or how much they knew about it. However, we do see a glimpse of what the apostles believed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

Paul: In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is detailing his belief in the resurrection, and in that context he says something about the kingdom of God that some believe refers to a millennial kingdom after Christ returns.

"For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him" (vs. 22-23). Paul is explaining that the resurrection comes in a sequence: First Christ, then later, the believers. Paul uses the word "then" in verse 23 to refer to a time delay of 2,000 or so years. He uses that same word "then" in verse 24 to indicate another step in the sequence:

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father *after* he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (vs. 24-26).

So Christ must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. This is not a one-time event: it is a span of time. Christ reigns for a period of time in which he destroys all enemies, even the enemy of death. And after all that, then comes the end.

So, even though Paul is not sketching these steps in a particular chronology, his use of the word "then" shows various steps in the plan. First, the resurrection of Christ. The second step is the resurrection of believers and then Christ will reign. And according to this view, the third step will be to hand everything over to God the Father.

Revelation 20: The Old Testament predicts a golden age of peace and prosperity under God's rule, and Paul says that God's plan proceeds in steps. But the real foundation of the premillennial view is the book of Revelation. This is the book that many believe *reveals* how all this comes together. We have to spend some time in chapter 20 to see what it says.

We can begin by noting that Christ's return is described in Revelation 19. It talks about the marriage supper of the Lamb. There was a white horse, and the rider is the Word of God, the King of kings and Lord of lords. He leads armies from heaven, and he rules the nations. He gets rid of the beast, the false prophet and all his enemies. This chapter is describing the return of Christ.

Then we come to Revelation 20:1: "I saw an angel coming down out of heaven..." In the literary flow of the book of Revelation, this is something that happens after the return of Christ.

What did this angel do? "...having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years." The chain is not literal—it represents something that can restrain a spirit being. But the devil is restrained.

Would the original readers of Revelation, who were being persecuted by Jews and Romans, think that Satan had already been bound? Probably not. We were told in chapter 12 that the devil deceives the whole

world and wars against the church. This does not sound like he is restrained. He is not restrained until *after* the beast and false prophet are defeated.

Verse 3: “The angel threw Satan into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.” John sees the devil restrained for a time. In chapter 12, the devil deceived the whole world. Here, he is prevented from deceiving the world for a thousand years. He is not just chained—he is locked up and sealed. The picture given to us is one of total restraint, total inability, of no influence.

Resurrection and reign: What happens during that thousand years? John explains this in verse 4: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge.” This is a judgment that takes place after the return of Christ. Verse 4 then says:

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

Here John sees some martyrs who reign with Christ. The verse says it is those who were beheaded, but it probably isn’t intended to single out this particular form of martyrdom, as if Christians who were killed by lions didn’t get the same reward. Rather, “those who were beheaded” seems to be a figure of speech to stand for all who gave their lives for Christ. That could mean all Christians. Elsewhere in Revelation we are told that all who believe in Christ will reign with him. So, some people reign with Christ

for a thousand years, when Satan is bound and is not deceiving the nations anymore.

Verse 5 then inserts a parenthetical thought: “(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.)” So there will be a resurrection at the end of the thousand years. Jews before the time of Christ believed in only one resurrection. They believed in only one appearance of the Messiah. The New Testament tells us that things are more complex than that. The Messiah comes at different times for different purposes. The plan proceeds in steps.

Most of the New Testament describes only one resurrection at the end of the age. But the book of Revelation reveals that this comes in steps, too. Just as there is more than one “Day of the Lord,” there is also more than one resurrection. The scroll is being unrolled to reveal more details of how God’s plan will come to its conclusion.

At the end of this parenthetical comment about the rest of the dead, verses 5-6 return to the millennial period: “This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.”

The vision indicates that there will be more than one resurrection—one at the beginning of the millennium, and another at the end. The people will be priests and rulers in Christ’s kingdom, when the nations are no longer being deceived by Satan.

Verses 7-10 describe something at the end of the millennium: Satan will be released, he will deceive the nations again, they will attack God’s people, and the enemies will again be defeated and thrown in the lake of fire.

That is a sketch of the premillennial view. Satan is now deceiving the nations and

persecuting the church. But the good news is that the church's persecutors will be defeated, Satan's influence will be terminated, and the saints will resurrected and will rule with Christ for a thousand years. After that, Satan will be released a short while, and then thrown into the lake of fire. Then there will be a resurrection of the non-Christians.

This seems to be what most of the early Church believed, especially in Asia Minor. If the book of Revelation was intended to convey any other view, it apparently failed to make much of an impression on the earliest readers. They apparently believed that a thousand-year rule of Christ would come after his return.

The case for amillennialism

If premillennialism is so obvious, why do many Bible-believing Christians believe in something else? They are not facing persecution or ridicule on this issue. They have no obvious external pressures to believe in anything else, and yet they do. They claim to believe the Bible, but they claim that the biblical millennium ends, rather than begins, at Christ's return.

The one who speaks first sounds right, until the second one speaks (Proverbs 18:17). We can't answer the question before we hear both sides.

The time of Revelation 20

For the amillennial view, let's start with this question: What if Revelation 20 isn't fulfilled chronologically after chapter 19? John *saw* the vision of chapter 20 after he saw the vision of chapter 19, but what if the visions did not come in the sequence that they will actually be fulfilled in? What if Revelation 20 takes us to a different point in time than when chapter 19 ends?

Here is an example of this freedom to move forward or backward in time: Chapter

11 ends with the seventh trumpet; chapter 12 then takes us back to a woman giving birth to a male child, and the woman being protected for 1,260 days. This is usually understood to be the birth of Jesus Christ and the persecution of the church. And yet in the literary flow, this comes *after* the seventh trumpet. John's vision has taken him back in time to sketch another part of the story.

So the question is, Is this what's happening in Revelation 20? Is it taking us back in time? And more specifically, is there evidence in the Bible that this is a *better* interpretation of what God is revealing?

Yes, says the amillennial view. There is evidence in Scripture that the kingdom of God has begun, that Satan has been bound, that there will be only one resurrection, that Christ's return will bring the new heavens and new earth, without any phase in between. It is a hermeneutical mistake to make the book of Revelation, with all its symbolism and interpretive difficulties, *contradict* what the rest of Scripture says. We need to use the plain scriptures to interpret the obscure ones, rather than the other way around. In this case, the book of Revelation is the obscure and the controversial material, and the other New Testament verses are clear on the matter.

Prophecies are figurative

For example, Luke 3:3-6 tell us how we are to understand Old Testament prophecies:

John the Baptist went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall

become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation.”

In other words, when Isaiah wrote about mountains and valleys, roads and deserts, he was speaking in highly figurative language. Old Testament prophecies were given in figurative language to depict the events of salvation through Christ.

As Jesus said on the road to Emmaus, the Old Testament prophets were pointing to him. If we see their major focus as some *future* time span, we are not seeing these prophecies in the light of Jesus Christ. *He* changes the way we read all the prophecies. He is the focus. He is the true temple, he is the true David, he is the true Israel, his kingdom is the true kingdom.

We see the same thing in Acts. Peter said a prophecy of Joel was being fulfilled in his own day. Notice what Acts 2:16-21 says:

This [the speaking in tongues] is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

So many of the Old Testament prophecies about the last days are actually about the age of the church, the age we are

now in. And if there is a thousand-year age yet to come, then *now* is not the last days. There cannot be *two* sets of last days. When the prophets spoke of wonders in heaven above and strange signs in the sun and moon, such prophecies can be fulfilled in figurative ways, unexpected ways—as unexpected as the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on God's people and speaking in tongues.

We should not automatically reject figurative interpretations of Old Testament prophecies, because the New Testament shows us that we can understand the Old Testament prophecies figuratively.

Old Testament prophecies can be fulfilled either in the church age, through figurative fulfillments, or fulfilled in an even better way in the new heavens and new earth after Christ returns. Everything that the prophets promised, we have better in Jesus Christ, either now or in the new heavens and new earth. The Old Testament prophets described a kingdom that would never end, an everlasting kingdom, an everlasting age. They were not talking about a limited “golden age” after which the earth would be destroyed and rebuilt.

The New Testament does not explain every Old Testament prophecy. It just gives a sample of fulfillment that shows the original writings were in figurative language. That does not prove the amillennial view, but it removes one obstacle. In the New Testament we will find more evidence that causes many Christians to believe the amillennial view.

Daniel

First, we might look briefly at Daniel 2. It does *not* support premillennialism, despite the assumptions that some bring to it.

In the time of those kings [the kings represented by the toes of iron and clay], the God of heaven will set

up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. (Daniel 2:44)

Daniel is saying that the kingdom of God will eliminate human kingdoms and last forever. There is no hint in this verse that God's kingdom will come in phases of a church age that is almost destroyed by a great tribulation, and then a millennial age that is almost destroyed by the release of Satan, then finally a new Jerusalem. No, it simply says that the kingdom will defeat all enemies and last forever. There is no need for defeating all enemies twice, or establishing the kingdom three times.

Jesus

The Olivet prophecy is the most detailed prophecy that Jesus gave. If the millennium is important to him, we should find some hint of it here. But we do not. Instead, we find Jesus describing his own return immediately followed by a judgment of reward and punishment. Matthew 25 describes not just the righteous who are raised to judgment—it is also the wicked who are interacting with the judge and being sent to anguish and outer darkness. There is no evidence here for a thousand-year interval between the sheep and the goats.

Jesus gave another indication of his understanding of prophecy in Matthew 19:28: "I tell you the truth, *at the renewal of all things*, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

Jesus is not talking about a thousand-year span in which sin still exists, and in which Satan is only temporarily bound. When he says the renewal *of all things*, he means the renewal of all things—the new

heavens and new earth. He means the complete elimination of sin. He says nothing about a 1000-year period in the middle. This concept, to say the *least*, was not important to Jesus, for he said nothing about it.

Peter

The same thing happens in the early church. In Acts 3:21, Peter said that Christ "must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore *everything*, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." Christ will restore everything when he returns, and Peter is saying that this is the proper interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies. Christ is not leaving sin around to cause an enormous crisis a thousand years later. He is getting everything settled at once—restored heavens and restored earth, all at once, all at the return of Christ.

Notice what he wrote in 2 Peter 3:10: "The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare." The lake of fire purifies the whole earth at the return of Christ. He says nothing about a thousand-year period. Verses 12-14 say:

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

We are looking forward not to a millennium, but to new heavens and new earth. If we are going to talk about the good news of the wonderful world tomorrow, then *this* is what we ought to be focusing on, not a

temporary period in which sin and death still exists. We have better news than that to focus on: we should look forward to the restoration of *all* things in the new heavens and new earth. All this will happen on the day of the Lord, when Christ returns.

Paul

Paul presents the same view in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen *when* the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.” God will punish the first-century persecutors when Jesus comes back. This means a resurrection of unbelievers, not just Christians, at Christ’s return. That means one resurrection, without any time span in between. He says it again in verses 8-10:

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.

This describes one resurrection, everyone at the same time, on the *day* when Christ returns. If Revelation is talking about *two* resurrections, then it contradicts what Paul wrote. Paul says that both the good and the bad are to be resurrected on the *same* day.

Paul is simply repeating what Jesus said in John 5:28-29: “A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good

will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” Jesus is talking about a resurrection of the good and the evil at the same time—and if anyone knew the best way to describe the future, it was Jesus. If we read Revelation in such a way as to contradict what Jesus said, then we are misreading it.

Let’s look at Romans, Paul’s longest sketch of doctrinal matters. He describes our future glory in Romans 8:18-23:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Why is creation waiting for the children of God to be given their glory? Because the creation will also be liberated from its bondage—presumably at the same time. When the children of God are revealed in glory, the creation will no longer be waiting. Creation will be renewed—a new heavens and a new earth when Christ returns.

Paul gives the same view in 1 Corinthians 15. He says in verse 23 that those who belong to Christ will be resurrected when Christ comes. Verse 24 then tells us, “Then the end will come...” That is when the end will come. When Christ comes to resurrect his people, he will also destroy all his enemies, restore everything and hand the kingdom over to the Father.

There is no need to postulate a 1,000-year period in between verses 23 and 24. At

the least, we could say that if there is a time period involved here, it is not very important to Paul. He doesn't even mention it. In fact, it seems that such a time period would contradict what he wrote in other places, and contradict what Jesus himself said.

Romans 11 says nothing about a kingdom after Christ's return. What it says *could* fit into such a time span, but there is nothing in Romans 11 itself that would cause us to think of such a time period.

Revelation

Now we must look at the strange and symbol-filled vision of John, which causes all the controversy. In his sometimes bizarre beasts and heavenly symbols, is John revealing things other apostles did not, or is he simply restating in several ways the same prophetic framework?

Let's start in Revelation 20:1—a messenger comes from heaven to bind Satan. Someone who knew the teachings of Jesus would likely think, This has already happened. In Matthew 12, Jesus was accused of casting out demons by the prince of demons. And Jesus said, "If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." We are convinced that Jesus drove out demons by the Spirit of God, so we are convinced that the kingdom of God has already come upon this age.

Then Jesus adds, in verse 29, "Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house." Jesus is able to order demons around because he has already entered Satan's world and *tied him up*. It's the same Greek word as in Revelation 20. Satan has been defeated and bound. Here is more evidence:

- In John 12:31, Jesus said, "Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the

prince of this world will be driven out." Satan was being expelled during Jesus' ministry.

- Colossians 2:15 tells us that Jesus has already disarmed his enemies, "triumphing over them by the cross."

- Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Jesus destroyed—that's a very strong word—the devil by his death on the cross: "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil."

- 1 John 3:8 tells us, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work."

- Last, Jude 6 tells us, "And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day."

Satan has already been bound. His power has already been curtailed. So when Revelation 20 says that John saw Satan being bound, we can conclude that this is a vision of the past, something that has already happened. We are being taken back in time to see a part of the picture that other visions had not shown us. We see that Satan, despite his lingering influence, is a defeated enemy. He can no longer keep the nations under complete deception. The veil is being lifted, and people of all nations are already hearing the gospel and coming to Christ.

Then we are taken behind the scenes to see that the martyrs are already with Christ. Although they were beheaded, or killed in other ways, they came to life and lived with Christ. They are now in heaven, says the amillennial view, and this is the first resurrection, their first coming to life again. The second resurrection will be a resurrection of the body; the first is simply coming to live with Christ in the meantime. All who

participate in this resurrection are blessed and holy.

The first death is not like the second. Because of that, it is unrealistic to *assume* that the first resurrection is like the second. They are different in kind. Just like the enemies of God die twice, so also the saved people are said to live twice. In this vision the martyrs are already with Christ, reigning with him, and this lasts a very long time, symbolized by the phrase “thousand years.”

When this long time is over, Satan will be released, there will be a great tribulation, and Satan and his forces will be defeated for all time. There will be a judgment, a lake of fire and then a new heavens and new earth.

An interesting support of this is seen in the Greek of verse 8: Satan gathers the nations not just for battle, but for *the* battle. John has already talked about *the* battle—in Revelation 16:14 and in 19:19. All three verses are describing the same great climactic battle at the return of Christ.

If we had nothing but the book of Revelation, we would probably accept the literal view—that Satan will be bound for one thousand years, there will be more than one resurrection, there will be at least three phases in God’s kingdom, and there will be at least two climactic battles and more than one set of “last days.”

But Revelation is *not* all that we have. We have many other scriptures that clearly teach *one* resurrection, and teach that the end comes *when* Christ returns. So in this apocalyptic book, when we come across something that seems to contradict the rest of the New Testament, we do not have to accept the strange just because it comes last. Rather, we consider its context in a book of visions and symbols, and we can see how its symbols can be interpreted in such a way that it does not contradict the rest of the Bible.

We cannot base a complicated system of

theology on the most obscure book of the Bible. That would invite trouble and focus attention away from what the New Testament really is. The biblical message is not centered on a temporary kingdom after Christ returns. It is centered on what Christ did when he came the first time, what he is doing right now in the church, and as a grand climax, the way it all ends in eternity after his return.

Responses to amillennialism

The amillennial view is not lacking in biblical support. It cannot just be dismissed without some study. Here are some books that can help people get started in a study about the millennium.

- *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, edited by Robert Clouse, published by InterVarsity in 1977.

- *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, by Steve Gregg, published by Nelson in 1997.

- *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options*, by Stanley Grenz, published by InterVarsity in 1992.

- *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, edited by Darrell Bock, published by Zondervan in 1999.

Millard Erickson has a book about the millennium, and a good chapter on it in his *Christian Theology*. He surveys the options before explaining why he chooses the one he does.

All these books attempt to sketch the strengths and weaknesses of each concept of the millennium. In some, authors critique each others’ views. All the books show that the issues are complex, and the analysis of particular verses can get quite detailed. That is one reason that the debate continues.

Premillennial response

How might a premillennialist respond to the amillennial view? The response could

include the following four points:

First, the book of Revelation is part of the Bible, and we can't ignore its teachings just because it is difficult to interpret or because it is apocalyptic literature. We have to accept it as Scripture even if it changes the way we view other passages. We have to allow it to reveal something new, not just repeat things we've already been told. We cannot assume in advance that it reveals nothing new or different.

Second, further revelation is not a contradiction of earlier revelation. Jesus spoke of one resurrection, true, but it is not a contradiction to realize that *he* could be resurrected ahead of everyone else. So we already have *two* resurrections, without contradicting Christ, and it is therefore not a contradiction to suggest that the one resurrection is divided into three or more periods. The point is that each person is resurrected only once.

Third, the matter of extra phases of God's kingdom. The Jews expected the Messiah to bring the golden age right away, but he did not. There was a huge time lag in the fulfillment of the prophecies. This is explained by later revelation. In other words, inserting never-before-revealed time spans is not a contradiction—it is a clarification. Fulfillment can be, and has already been, in stages, with unannounced gaps. 1 Corinthians 15 shows such stages, and Revelation in its most natural meaning also does. We have to allow the possibility that things *develop* after Christ returns.

Fourth, the amillennial view does not seem to deal adequately with the language of Revelation 20:1-3. Not only is Satan bound, but he is also locked up and sealed. The picture is one of zero influence, not a partial influence. True, Jesus did speak of binding Satan, and true, he did defeat Satan on the cross. However, Jesus Christ's victory over

Satan has not yet been fully implemented. Satan is still active, still deceiving huge numbers of people. The original readers, who were being persecuted by a beastly empire, would not so readily assume that Satan has already been bound where he can deceive the nations no longer. The readers knew well that the vast majority of the Roman Empire was in a state of deception.

Briefly, the amillennialist might say in reply: True, we can allow God to reveal new things, but we cannot assume in advance that every unusual thing in the book of Revelation is in fact a new thing. Rather, it may be an old idea in new clothing. The idea that one resurrection *could* be separated by a time gap does not mean that it actually is. And our imagination of what the original readers *felt* about Satan should not control our exegesis of what the apocalyptic symbolism really means. We cannot build an elaborate scheme out of a subjective impression of a book written in figurative language.

Conclusion

Now that we have seen the two most common views of the millennium, what can we say? We can safely say that "some Christian traditions interpret the Millennium as a literal 1,000 years to precede or follow the return of Jesus, while others believe that the scriptural evidence points to a figurative interpretation: an indeterminate time span commencing with Jesus' resurrection and concluding with his return."

The millennium is not a defining doctrine of who is a true Christian and who is not. We do not want to divide Christians by their interpretive choices on this matter. We recognize that equally sincere, equally educated and equally faithful Christians can come to different conclusions on this doctrine.

Some members of our church are premillennial, some are amillennial, and some have other views. But we have much to agree on:

- We all believe that God has all power and will fulfill all his prophecies.
- We believe that Jesus Christ has brought us into his kingdom even in this age.
- We believe that Christ has given us life, that we go to be with him when we die, and that we will be resurrected.
- We agree that Jesus has defeated Satan, yet Satan still exercises some influence in this world.
- We agree that Satan's influence will be completely stopped in the future.
- We believe that everyone will be resurrected and judged by a merciful God.
- We believe that Christ will return, and will triumph over all enemies, and will lead us all into an eternity with God.
- We believe in a new heavens and new earth in which righteousness dwells, and this wonderful world tomorrow will last forever.
- We all believe that eternity will be better than the millennium.

We have much to agree on; we do not need to divide due to differences in the *sequence* in which God will do his will.

The chronology of the last days is not part of the church's commission. The gospel is how we can *enter* the kingdom, not about the chronology of when things happen. Jesus did not stress chronology; nor did he emphasize a kingdom that would last for a finite period of time. Out of the 260 chapters in the New Testament, only part of one is about the millennium.

We do not make the interpretation of Revelation 20 an article of faith. We have more important things to preach, and we have better news to preach. We preach that through Jesus Christ, we can live with God

not just in this age, not just for 1,000 years, but forever and ever in joy and peace and prosperity that never ends.

Michael Morrison, 2000

A Balanced Approach to the Millennium

1. Almost all Christians agree that Christ will return, and that there will be a judgment.

2. No matter what Christ does after his return, no believer will be disappointed.

3. The eternal age is much more glorious than the millennial age. At best, the millennium is second-best.

4. The precise chronological sequence is not an essential part of the gospel. The gospel is about how to enter the kingdom, not the chronological or physical details of particular phases of that kingdom.

5. Since the New Testament does not emphasize the nature or timing of the millennium, we conclude that it is not a central plank in the church's commission.

6. People can be saved without any particular belief about the millennium. This point is not central to the gospel, and members may have different opinions on it.

7. No matter which view a member holds, he or she should acknowledge that other Christians sincerely believe that the Bible teaches something else. Members should not condemn or ridicule those who hold other views.

8. Members may educate themselves about other views by reading one or more of the books mentioned above.

<p>This article is an excerpt of www.wcg.org/lit/prophecy/3views.htm. See it for a discussion of postmillennialism.</p>

Historical Documents of the Christian Church

A creed is a brief statement of faith used to enumerate important truths, to clarify doctrinal points, and to distinguish truth from error. Creeds are usually worded to be easily memorized. The word *creed* comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning, “I believe.” The Bible contains a number of creed-like passages. For example, Jews used the *Shema*, based on Deuteronomy 6:4-9, as a creed. Paul wrote simple creed-like statements in 1 Corinthians 8:6; 12:3; and 15:3-4. 1 Timothy 3:16 also appears as a creed, a concise statement of belief.

As the early church spread, there was a practical need for a statement of faith to help believers focus on the most important doctrines of their Christian faith. The Apostles’ Creed is appropriately named not because the original apostles wrote it, but because it accurately reflects the teaching of the apostles. Church fathers Tertullian, Augustine, and other leaders had slightly different versions of the Apostles’ Creed, but the text of Pirminius in A.D. 750 was eventually accepted as the standard form.

As the church grew, heresies also grew, and the early Christians needed to clarify the defining boundaries of the faith. In the early 300s, before the canon of the New Testament had been finalized, controversy developed over the divinity of Jesus Christ. At the request of Emperor Constantine, Christian bishops from across the Roman Empire met at the town of Nicea in 325 to discuss the matter. They wrote their consensus in the form of a creed, called the Creed of Nicea. In 381, another major council was held at Constantinople at which the Creed of Nicea was slightly revised to include a few more doctrines. The resulting Creed is called the

Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, or more commonly, the Nicene Creed.

In the next century, church leaders met in the city of Chalcedon to discuss, among other things, questions about the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. The result was a Definition of Faith they believed to be true to the gospel, true to apostolic teaching, and true to the Scriptures. This statement is called the Definition of Chalcedon or the Faith of Chalcedon.

Regrettably, creeds can become formal, complex, abstract, and sometimes equated with Scripture. When properly used, however, they facilitate a concise basis for teaching, they safeguard correct biblical doctrine, and they create a focus for church fellowship. These three creeds are widely accepted among Christians as consistent with the Bible and as statements of true Christian orthodoxy, or right teaching.

The Nicene Creed (A.D. 381)

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On

the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy, all-embracing and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

(Translation based on *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979)

The Apostles' Creed (c. A.D. 700)

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy all-embracing Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

(Translation based on *I Believe*, by

Alister McGrath, Downer's Grove, Il.: InterVarsity Press, 1997)

The Definition of the Union of the Divine and Human Natures in the Person of Christ (Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451)

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach people to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in humanness, truly God and truly human, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his humanity begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer (*Theotokos*); one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.

(Translation from *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979)

