

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 1

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 con-



Creation of stars and planets, by Michelangelo

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.¹

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

Five facts to know about God

1. God is omnipotent—able to do whatever he wants. He is the Almighty.
2. God is immortal, constant in character, always reliable. He is the Eternal.
3. God is omnipresent—unlimited by space and time. He is always near.
4. God is omniscient—knowing all truth and all wisdom. Father knows best.
5. God is consistently good, never selfish. God is love.

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

For further reading

Now that you’ve had an introduction to God, wouldn’t you like to know him better? We get to know God in several ways: through nature, through our experience with the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, through spiritual disciplines and through the words of other believers.

To learn more about God, read the Bible, especially the New Testament. Try a modern translation such as *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson, or *The New Living Translation*, published by Tyndale. For evidence of God’s existence, we recommend the following (easiest listed first):

- Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe*
- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
- Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*
- C. Stephen Evans, *Why Believe?*
- James Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?*
- William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*
- C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*
- Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God and Other Modern Myths*

For good discussions of the attributes of God:

- Max Anders, *God: Knowing Our Creator*
- Paul Little, *Know What You Believe*, chapter 2
- Gilbert Bilezekian, *Christianity 101*, chapter 2
- J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*
- Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, chapters 8-15

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.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do the evils in this world weaken our faith in God, or strengthen it?
2. If God is good, why did he make humans fallible, able to choose wrong?
3. What does God say about the way we use his creation?
4. How can God be distant to one person, but near to another?
5. Can we trust a God who has all power but isn't always good? Can we trust one who is always good but is limited in power?
6. In what way is God like Jesus, and in what way is he different?
7. Does God’s mercy cause you to admire him, or to ignore him?

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 2

Responding to God with faith

The previous article highlighted two qualities of God—his greatness and his goodness. 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.

Here, we want to focus on the “so what” question. 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. In this chapter, we’ll look at trust; in the next chapter we’ll discuss worship.

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, either. 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. He doesn’t like to, but he does.

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 possible objections, all the philosophical arguments about God. But we are forced to make a choice

Five facts to know about faith

1. God loved us even when we were his enemies; he will be faithful in all circumstances.
2. The resurrection of Jesus shows that God has the power to save us even from death.
3. When we trust God, we obey him, knowing that his commands are for our good.
4. No one has perfect faith; we grow in faith through life experiences.
5. Doubts and questions can lead us to trust Christ even with the unknown.

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.

By Joseph Tkach

Questions for Discussion

1. Which is most reassuring to you: God's love or his power?
2. Does God love us even when we rebel against him?
3. How was your faith immature when you first believed? How have you grown?
4. Do you find that Scripture strengthens your faith?
5. Has prosperity weakened your faith?
6. Do you tend to trust something else—money, government, or friends?

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 3

Responding to God with worship

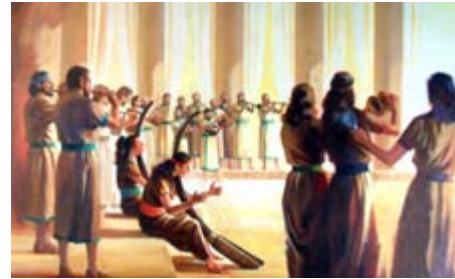
We respond to God with worship, because worship is simply giving God what is fitting. He is praiseworthy, not only for his power but also for his gentleness.

Most people praise power, but gentleness is also praiseworthy. Let's think about it. Raw power is neither good nor bad, neither to be praised in itself or condemned in itself. Dictators have power, volcanoes have power and bacteria have power, but we do not praise such power. Power is praiseworthy only when it is used in a good way, in a way that helps others.

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 greatness is, and God is both good and great.

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



Worship, as depicted by Ken Tunell

honor God. We do that not only in worship, but also in the way we live every day.

We honor God when we serve other people using the gifts God has given us. We honor God when we forgive instead of seeking revenge. We honor God and show that he is great when we shape our lives around him, when we value his loving word to us more than the ways of the world. We honor God when we look to Scripture instead of society, when we meet our obligations and responsibilities to others instead of shirking them.

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 of his Son (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 power and his patience. 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. Life works best if we live the way God intended us to. And this is our reasonable service. 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, praise for the praiseworthy, 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 a new song to the Lord, to shout for joy, to use harps, flutes, tambourines, trumpets, cymbals — even to worship with dancing (Psalms 149-150). The picture is one of exuberance, of unrestrained joy, of happiness that is 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

Five facts about worship

1. God wants us to worship, to respond to him with praise and thanks.
2. Only God is worthy of our worship and total allegiance.
3. Worship should be sincere, not a performance.
4. If we really respect and love God, we will do what he says.
5. Worship is not just something we do at church — it involves everything we do.

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 Mosaic requirements and restrictions. 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.

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 must include obedience. This obedience must include 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 reminds me of Isaiah's scathing criticism of people who perform worship rituals while indulging in social injustices:

When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? 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 that these 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 it is to be genuine, must 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.

True worship is much more than outward actions — it involves a total 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 with magic words or magic water — it happens through time spent in fellowship with God. Worship involves all of life. We see this especially in the words of Paul.

Paul's expansive view of worship

Paul used 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 a few hours 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 member 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).

Friends, 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.

By Joseph Tkach

Questions for Discussion

- What characteristic of God do you feel most thankful for?
- Some Old Testament sacrifices were completely burned up — nothing left but smoke and ashes. Have you ever felt that any of your sacrifices were like that?
- Spectators cheer when their team scores a goal or wins a game. Do we respond to God with equal enthusiasm?
- For many people, God is not very important in day-to-day life. What is most important for people you know?
- Why does God care about the way we treat other people?

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 4

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 like compassion, surprise, sorrow and apprehension (Matt. 9:36; Luke 7:9; John 11:38; Matt. 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” (Phil. 2:7), “born under the law” (Gal. 4:4), “in the likeness of sinful man” (Rom. 8:3). Since he came to save humans, the author of Hebrews reasons, it was necessary that he “shared in their humanity” (Heb. 2:14-17).

Our salvation depends on the reality of Jesus’ hu-



Calming the storm, depicted by Ken Tunell

manity. His role as our intercessor, our high priest, depends on his experience as a human (Heb. 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 Tim. 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 (Matt. 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 (Matt. 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 (Matt. 7:23).
- He said that the words of Moses were not enough (Matt. 5:21-48).
- He claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath—the Lord of a God-given law! (Matt. 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

Five facts about Jesus

1. Jesus was a physical, mortal human.
2. Jesus has the authority of God.
3. Jesus had shared in God's glory.
4. It is appropriate for people to worship Jesus.
5. Jesus is truly human and truly divine, showing us what God is like and what humanity should be.

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" (Matt. 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; Matt. 26:24; Mark 9:12; Luke 22:37; 24:46). He was the king of peace who would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zech. 9:9-10; Matt. 21:1-9). He was the son of man who would be given all power and authority (Dan. 7:13-14; Matt. 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” (Col. 1:16; 1 Cor. 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 (Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:17). Both tell us that he is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), “the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 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 looks 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 (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). He lived without ever sinning (Heb. 4:15). He was blameless, without impurity (Heb. 7:26; 9:14). He committed no sin (1 Pet. 2:22); in him there was no sin (1 John 3:5); he knew no sin (2 Cor. 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 (Heb. 10:7).

On several occasions, people worshiped Jesus (Matt. 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38). Angels refuse worship (Rev. 19:10), but Jesus did not. Indeed, the angels worship Jesus, the Son of God (Heb. 1:6). Some prayers are addressed to Jesus (Acts 7:59-60; 2 Cor. 12:8; Rev. 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 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet 3:18; Rev. 1:6). He has the highest title that can ever be given (Eph. 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!” (Rev. 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 (Rev. 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” (Phil. 2:9-11, quoting Isa. 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 (Isa. 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” (Rom. 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’” (Heb. 1:8).

“In Christ,” Paul said, “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 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.

However, it can be misleading to say “Jesus is God,” as if there were a simple equality between the two words. For one, Jesus was also a man, and secondly, Jesus is not *all* of God. We cannot say that “God is Jesus.” In most cases, “God” means “the Father,” and that is why the Bible so rarely calls Jesus

God. But the word can legitimately be used for Jesus, for Jesus is divine. As the Son of God, he is a person in the triune Godhead. Jesus is a unique person—in him God and humanity are joined.

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 genuinely 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 as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures... the dif-

ference 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 Cor. 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 (Heb. 4:15). With Jesus as our Savior, we can be confident that our salvation is secure.

By Michael Morrison

Questions for Discussion

1. Is it easier to think of Jesus as a human, or as a God? Are you troubled by his divine characteristics, or by his humanity?
2. Which of Jesus’ words or actions best shows that he was divine?
3. Do we slight the Father when we worship Jesus? Do we slight Jesus when we worship only the Father?
4. What does Jesus reveal to us about God? About humanity?

Copyright © 2001 Grace
Communion International.
All rights reserved.
Scriptures are quoted from
*The Holy Bible, New
International Version*,
copyright 1974, 1978,
1984 International Bible
Society. Used by
permission of Zondervan
Bible Publishers.

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 5

Why Jesus gives us hope

The Old Testament is a story of frustrated hope. It begins by telling us that humans were created in the image of God. But it was not long before we humans sinned, and we were kicked out of paradise. But along with the word of judgment also came a word of promise—God said that one of Eve's descendants would crush the enemy (Genesis 3:15). A deliverer would come to rescue the people.

Eve probably hoped that her first child would be the solution. But it was Cain, and he was part of the problem. Sin continued, and it got worse. There was a partial salvation in the time of Noah, but sin continued. There was the sin of Noah's grandson, and then of Babel. Humanity continued having problems, having the hope of something better but never able to achieve it.

Some important promises were given to Abraham. But he died before he received all the promises. He had a child, but no land, and he was not yet a blessing to all the nations. But the promise continued. It was given again to Isaac, and then Jacob. Jacob and his family went into Egypt and became a great nation, but they were enslaved. Even so, God remained true to his promise. With spectacular miracles, God brought them out of Egypt.

But the nation of Israel fell far short of the promise. Miracles didn't help. The law didn't help. They kept on sinning, kept on failing, kept on doubting, kept on wandering for 40 years. But God was true to his promise, and he brought them into the land of Canaan, and with many miracles, he gave them the land.

But that did not fix their problems. They were still the same sinful people, and the book of Judges records some of the grossest of sins. How could this messed-up nation ever become a blessing to the other nations? They kept on sinning—falling into idolatry again and again. God finally let the northern tribes of Israel be taken into captivity by Assyria. You'd think that



would have made the Jews repent, but it didn't. The people failed time and again, and God let the Jews be taken into captivity, too.

Where was the promise now? The people were right back where Abraham had started from, in Mesopotamia. Where was the promise? The promise was in God, who cannot lie. He would fulfill his promise no matter how badly the people failed.

God let the Jews stay in Babylon for 70 years, and after that, a small percentage of them returned to Jerusalem, and the Jewish nation became a shadow of its former self. They got a taste of freedom, then a taste of being ruled by Rome. They weren't any better off in the Promised Land than they had been in Egypt or Babylon. And they groaned: Where is the promise that God gave Abraham? How are we going to be a light to the nations? How are the promises to David going to be fulfilled if we can't even rule ourselves?

Under Roman rule, the people's hopes were frustrated. Some gave up hope. Some joined an underground resistance movement. Others tried to be more religious, more worthy of God's blessing. Everyone longed for God to do something.

A glimmer of hope

God started in the smallest possible way—as an embryo in a virgin. Behold, I will give you a sign, he had said through Isaiah. A virgin will conceive and bring forth a child, and you will name him Immanuel, which means “God with us.” But he was first called Jesus — the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means, God will save us.

God began fulfilling his promise with a child conceived out of wedlock. There was some social stigma attached to that—even 30 years later the Jewish leaders made snide comments about Jesus' parentage (John 8:41). Who would believe Mary's story about angels and supernatural conception?

God began fulfilling the hopes of his people in a way that they did not recognize. No one would have guessed that the “illegitimate” baby was the answer to the nation's hopes. A baby can't do anything, can't teach anyone, can't help anyone, and can't save anyone. But a baby has *potential*.

Angels told shepherds that a Savior had been born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:11). He was a Savior, but he wasn't saving anyone right then. He even needed to be saved himself. The family had to flee to save the baby from Herod, the king of the Jews.

But God called that helpless baby a Savior. He knew what that baby would do. In that baby were all the hopes of Israel. Here was the light to the Gentiles; here was the blessing for all nations; here was the son of David who would rule the world; here was the child of Eve who would crush the enemy of all humanity. But he was just a baby, born in a stable, his life in danger. But in his birth, everything changed.

When Jesus was born, there was no sudden influx of Gentiles coming to Jerusalem to be taught. There was no sign of political or economic strength—no sign except that a virgin had conceived and had given birth—a sign that no one in Judah would believe.

But God had come to us, because he is faithful to his promises, and he is the basis of all our hopes. The history of Israel shows again and again that human methods do not work. We cannot achieve God's purposes by our own efforts. God does not do things the way we think, but in the way he knows will work.

Five facts about hope

1. God made great promises to Abraham, but they were not fulfilled in Old Testament times.
2. Because of persistent sin, God let the Jews be taken into captivity.
3. God's answer to humanity's problem began in the least expected and least visible way.
4. We still do not see the complete answer to all of earth's problems, but we have hope in God's promise.
5. Believers do not experience all the promises in this life, but have hope and confidence in Jesus.

Our way always gets messed up. We think in terms of laws and land and kings and kingdoms of this world. God thinks in terms of tiny beginnings, of spiritual rather than physical strength, of victory in weakness rather than power.

When God gave us Jesus, he fulfilled his promises and brought about everything he had said. But we didn't see the fulfillment right away—all we saw was a baby. Most people didn't believe it, and even those who believed could only hope.

Fulfillment

We know now that Jesus grew up to give his life as a ransom for our sins, to bring us forgiveness, to be a light to the Gentiles, to defeat the devil, and to defeat death itself in his death and resurrection. We can see how Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises.

We can see much more than the Jews could 2,000 years ago, but we still do not see everything there is. We do not yet see every promise fulfilled. We do not yet see Satan chained where he can deceive the nations no more. We do not yet see all nations knowing God. We do not yet see the end of crying and tears and death and dying. We still long for the final answer—but in Jesus, we have hope and assurance.

We have a promise, a promise guaranteed by God, ratified by his Son, sealed by the Holy Spirit. We believe that everything will come true, that Christ will complete the work he has begun. Our hope is beginning to bear fruit, and we can be confident that all the promises will be fulfilled—not necessarily in the way we expect, but in the way that God has planned.

He will do it, as promised, through his Son, Jesus Christ. We may not see it now, but God has already acted, and God is working even now behind the scenes to bring about his will. Just as in the baby Jesus we had hope and a promise of salvation, so in the risen Jesus we now have hope and promise of completion. That is true of the growth of the kingdom of God, it is true in the work of the church, and it is true in each of our lives.

Hope for ourselves

As people come to faith in Christ, his work begins to grow in them. Jesus said that we must each be born again, and when we come to believe in him, the Holy Spirit overshadows us and begets in us a new life. Just as Jesus promises, he comes to live within us. Someone once said, “Jesus could be born 1,000 times, and it would do me no good, unless he is born in me.” The hope that Jesus gives to the world does us no good unless we accept him as *our* hope. We need to let Jesus live in us.

However, we do not yet have the fulfillment of all the promises that God has made. We do not yet have all the life and goodness that he offers. What we have is hope, and a down payment, and a promise of better things to come. What we have now is just a baby in comparison to the glory that God will give us later.

We might look at ourselves and think, I don’t see much here. I’m not much better than I was 20 years ago. I still struggle with sin, doubt and guilt. I am still

selfish and stubborn. I am not much better at being a godly person than ancient Israel was. I wonder if God is really doing anything in my life. It doesn’t seem like I’ve made any progress.

The answer is to remember Jesus. Our spiritual beginning may not seem good for much right now, but it is, because God says it is. What we have in us is only a down payment. It is a beginning, and it is a guarantee from God himself. The Holy Spirit in us is a down payment of glory yet to come.

Luke tells us that the angels sang when Jesus was born. It was a moment of triumph, even though humans couldn’t see it that way. The angels knew that victory was certain, because God had told them so.

Jesus tells us that the angels rejoice whenever a sinner repents. They are singing for every person who comes to faith in Christ, because a baby has been born. That baby might not perform very well. It might have many struggles, but it is a child of God, and God will see to it that his work is done. He will take care of us. Though our spiritual lives are not perfect, God will keep working in us until his work is done.

Just as there is tremendous hope in the baby Jesus, there is tremendous hope in the baby Christian. No matter how long you have been a Christian, there is tremendous hope for you, because God has invested in you, and he will not abandon the work he has begun. Jesus is evidence that God always keeps his promises.

Joseph Tkach

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Israel fail to be a light to the other nations?
2. Why didn’t the Jewish people recognize Jesus as the Messiah?
3. What hopes do people have for the world today?
4. The lesson of ancient Israel is that human methods do not work. Why do we get so discouraged when our efforts do not work?
5. Why do we find it hard to believe that God will finish the work he began in *us*?

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 6

How Jesus helps us in everyday trials

Jesus is a remarkable person, God in the flesh. It was important that he came in the flesh, to become part of humanity so that he could reconcile humanity with God. We'll say more about that in the next unit. Here, we'd like to comment on how it is relevant to our day-to-day lives.

From birth to death, Jesus had a difficult life. He had moments of joy, and moments of pain—and we are no better than he is, so we cannot expect a trouble-free life. In this world, Jesus said, we will have trials. He warned his disciples about the cost of following him: They would have to take up the cross each day, willing to suffer and die, if need be, for their faith in Jesus Christ (Luke 9:23).

Whether or not we believe in Jesus Christ, we will have troubles. But when we believe in him, we can be confident that he *understands* our troubles. He knows what we are going through. That does not make our troubles go away, but it helps us to know that not even God in the flesh was exempt from trouble. Jesus learned from the things he suffered (Hebrews 5:8) and *because* of that, he is “able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

When we struggle with the downside of being human, it helps us to know that our Savior struggled with it, too. We have a Savior who knows what it's like. In Jesus, we can see that God himself is willing to suffer. That means that even if we can't understand our trials, we know that there is a good reason for them. Paul tells us that we will not only share in Jesus' resurrection life, we also share in his life of suffering (Philippians 3:10-11). We have difficulties in this life, but many joys as well. The two go together.

Rejoicing and trials

Peter wrote, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (1 Peter 1:6). Most non-Christians and even some Christians continue to be



Depiction of Jeremiah after being lowered into a cistern (Jeremiah 38:6).
Illustration by Ken Tunell

surprised and puzzled by this combination of trials and rejoicing. How is it possible to be joyful when we suffer? Of course, we are not rejoicing *that* we have a trial (there is no particular virtue in suffering itself), but we rejoice *despite* our trials. How can that be?

Let's notice what Peter wrote: “In *this* you greatly rejoice.” What is the “this” that gives us great joy? In context, we see that it is salvation, the fact that we can be confident that God will give us an eternal inheritance. We have a wonderful future guaranteed for us. This has been demonstrated to us by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and God's power is shielding us until we receive the promised glory (verses 3-5). The same power that raised Jesus will also raise us to glorious immortality!

Peter speaks of joy again in verse 8. He acknowledges that we do not yet see our Savior. We do not yet have our promised inheritance. In fact, we are suffering grief in all kinds of trials. But yet we can rejoice. Why? Because “you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (verse 9). We rejoice in the salvation we are already receiving through faith.

Faith involves our minds, our hearts and our wills. It means that we understand and accept certain things about God. It means that we respond emotionally to these things, such as with love because we understand he loves us, and with joy because we understand that he is giving us so much, and with trust because we understand and believe his promises for our eternal salvation. And when our understanding and our emotions are in agreement, then our wills are also. The decisions we make throughout each day are pleasing to God because he has brought us to the point that we *want* to do his will.

But we do not yet have the promised inheritance. We have not yet reached the time when there is no more crying and no more death. We all experience both crying and death. Our pains and sorrows are caused by our enemy — sin. We rejoice because we know that Jesus has conquered our enemy, and he promises that we share in his victory!

We suffer because of our own mistakes and sins. We also suffer because the people around us are captives of sin, and sin hurts not only the sinner but innocent bystanders, too. We are often the innocent bystanders who suffer from the fallout of the sins of others. And Satan, the enemy of God and the archdeceiver, works hard to feed and encourage the sinful nature in every person, thereby bringing even more pain and destruction to all, including persecution on the saints.

God not only promises to help us in our trials, he also promises us *trials!* Christ did not come to bring us a trouble-free life. Instead, he warned us that we would have strife within our families because of him (Matthew 10:34-36), that we would have trials (John 16:33) and that we would be persecuted (John 15:20). We enter the kingdom through many trials (Acts 14:22), and every Christian will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). We should not think it unusual when trials afflict us (1 Peter 4:12).

Jesus said, If you want to follow me, take up your cross. Be willing to suffer, even to lose your life, if

Five facts about trials

1. We have difficulties whether or not we believe in Jesus.
2. Jesus promised that his followers would have trials.
3. Jesus also promised that eternal joy would be vastly more than our temporary trials.
4. There is joy in heaven and on earth whenever anyone turns to God.
5. Faith in the future gives us reason to rejoice despite our troubles.

you want to follow me. The Christian life involves suffering; we should not be surprised when it happens. Jesus said that a servant is not greater than the master. If Jesus, our Lord and teacher, became a human to suffer and die to serve us, if suffering was part of his training (Hebrews 2:10; 5:8), it should be no surprise that it is also part of ours. In these trials, we can rejoice only because we know that Christ has promised us something far better.

Not worth comparing

But despite the suffering we sometimes experience, we rejoice in salvation. How can we rejoice despite our sufferings? Paul gives an oft-quoted explanation: “Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Paul explains that we will receive a great inheritance — in fact, we are “co-heirs with Christ” (verse 17). We will share in his inheritance of glory. Today, we share in his suffering, but the day will come when we will share fully in his glory. The present suffering is part of God’s plan for us. It is part of what prepares us to fully enter the glory of Christ. “We share in [Christ’s] sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (verse 17).

Our Lord was a man of sorrow, yet he was also full of joy (Isaiah 53:3; Luke 10:21). When he suffered, he did so with the assurance that deliverance and glory would follow in due course (Hebrews 2:12).

Jesus told his disciples to rejoice in their salvation. Truly, the glory ahead is so great that we can rejoice with Jesus and all believers despite our present-day difficulties. The joy of salvation and the hope of glory

are so much greater than our present pains, that there is no comparison. It's infinitely more than a million-to-one ratio!

May God grant us the eyes and ears of faith to believe in and stand on his great and precious promises! He is with us, his beloved children, even in our darkest moments. He never forsakes nor leaves us. He will see us through to the end, through every trial, every pain and every sin. He is always beside us and he never stops loving us, even when we are too weak to know it. Praise God for his eternal love!

Joy in the gospel

We have been promised great rewards, and that gives us great reason to rejoice — no matter what the circumstances we happen to be in now. Paul wrote, “In all our troubles my *joy* knows no bounds” (2 Corinthians 7:4).

And our own joy is increased all the more by the salvation of *others*. Paul put it this way: “What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, *you* are our glory and joy” (1 Thessalonians 2:19-20). Just as there is joy in heaven whenever a sinner repents, there is also joy on earth, in all who see life from God's eternal perspective.

It is no surprise that the people of God find great joy in the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. To the church at Philippi, Paul wrote: “The important thing is that in every way...Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice” (Philippians 1:18). Paul rejoiced to learn of people who responded in faith to the message and would be present in God's family when our Lord and Savior comes.

The apostle John shared the same joy: “It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have *no greater joy* than to hear that my children are walking in the truth” (3 John 3-4).

As the children of God, we share this joy with all believers, with the angels in heaven, and with God himself — joy in the preaching of the gospel, joy in

hearing of people who come to faith in Christ and joy in people who continue to walk in the path of faith. Such pure joy in the redemption and salvation of people made in God's image, such fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us, shapes our passions, our values and our goals.

The use of our time, the habits of our thoughts, the health of our emotions and the quality of our words and actions toward one another are positively influenced by this life-cleansing joy in the love, kindness and power of God. Our private worship time, our collective worship with the church, our volunteer work, our giving of time both to the church and to people in need, our participation in small groups for prayer, study of the Word and worship — all these spring from the joy of God in us, joy produced by his gracious work in our lives and in the lives of others.

Even our financial support for the work of the church is a reflection of our joy in the things God values. Our giving to the church demonstrates the importance we place on the treasures of the kingdom of God as compared to the things of this world.

Through the church we reach out as the body of Christ with the gospel message, and we give the gospel credibility as we give ourselves to God's transforming work in us. God desires that we each serve him in a personal way *and* that we serve him and one another as a body, the body of Christ. “You are all members of one another,” Paul wrote. We are not called to be in relationship with God without one another.

We are called into the *fellowship* of the people of God, into the *household* of God. In Christ, we have communion with God and, through Christ, with one another. Jesus' command is that we love one another, and it is *as his body*, the church, that we proclaim the gospel in the world and teach his ways.

Together, we can have an even greater impact than we can as individuals, even though our individual impact is also essential to the health of the whole body. The gospel is a great source of joy for us all — joy in receiving the message and in giving it to others!

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 7

Why did Jesus have to die?

Jesus The Old Testament tells us that God appeared as a human being on several occasions. If Jesus wanted only to heal and teach, he could have simply appeared. But he did more: he became a human. Why? So he could die. To understand Jesus, we need to understand his death. His death is part of the gospel message and something all Christians should know about.



But Jesus allowed this work to come to a sudden end. He could have avoided arrest, but he chose to die instead of expanding his ministry. Although his teachings were important, he had come not just to teach, but also to die.

Death was an important part of Jesus' ministry. This is the way we remember him, through the cross as a symbol of Christianity or through the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Our Savior is a Savior who died.

Born to die

Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). He came to give his life, to die, and his death would result in salvation for others. This was the reason he came to earth. His blood was poured out for others (Matthew 26:28).

Jesus warned his disciples that he would suffer and die, but they did not seem to believe it. "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'" (Matthew 16:21-22).

Jesus knew that he must die, because the Scriptures said so. "Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected?" (Mark 9:12; 9:31; 10:33-34). "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.... 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day'" (Luke 24:26-27, 46).

It all happened according to God's plan: Herod and Pilate did only what God "had decided beforehand should happen" (Acts 4:28). In the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus knew that he would soon be crucified, Jesus asked his Father if there might be some other way, but there was none (Luke 22:42). His death was necessary for our salvation.

The suffering servant

It was written in the Old Testament, Jesus had said. Where was it written? Isaiah 53 is one of the prophecies. Jesus quoted Isaiah 53:12 when he said: "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled

in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment” (Luke 22:37). Jesus, although without sin, was to be counted among sinners. Notice what else is written in Isaiah 53:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

For the transgression of my people he was stricken.... Though he had done no violence ... it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer ... the Lord makes his life a guilt offering.... He will bear their iniquities.... He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors (verses 4-12).

Isaiah describes someone who suffers not for his own sins, but for the sins of others. And though this man would be “cut off from the land of the living” (verse 8), that would not be the end of the story. “He will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.... He will see his offspring and prolong his days” (verses 11, 10).

What Isaiah wrote, Jesus fulfilled. He laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:15). In his death, he carried our sins and suffered for our transgressions; he was punished so that we might have peace with God. Through his suffering and death, our spiritual illness is healed; we are justified, accepted by God. These truths are developed in more detail in the New Testament.

Dying an accursed death

“Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse,” says Deuteronomy 21:23. Because of this verse, Jews considered any crucified person to be condemned by God. As Isaiah wrote, people would consider him “stricken by God.”

The Jewish leaders probably thought that Jesus’ disciples would give up after their leader was killed. And it happened just as they hoped — the crucifixion shattered the disciples’ hopes. They were dejected and said, “We had hoped that he was the one who was

going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). But their hopes were dramatically restored when Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, and at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled them with new conviction to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ. They had unshakable faith in the least likely hero: a crucified Messiah.

Peter told the Jewish leaders, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 5:30). By using the word tree, Peter reminded the leaders about the curse involved in crucifixion. But the shame was not on Jesus, he said—it was on the people who crucified him. God had blessed Jesus because he did not deserve the curse he suffered. God had reversed the stigma.

Paul referred to the same curse in Galatians 3:13: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’” Jesus became a curse on our behalf so we could escape the curse of the law, which is death. He became something he was not, so that we could become something we were not. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

He became sin for us, so that we might be declared righteous through him. Because he suffered what we deserved, he redeemed us from the curse of the law. “The punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” Because he suffered death, we can enjoy peace with God.

Message of the cross

The disciples never forgot the shameful way that Jesus died. Indeed, sometimes that was the focus of the message: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). Paul even called the gospel “the message of the cross” (verse 18). Paul reminded the Galatians that “before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified” (Galatians 3:1). That was how he summarized the way that he preached the gospel.

Why is the cross good news? Because the cross is the means by which Jesus rescued us from death. Paul focused on the cross because it is the key to Jesus being good news for us. We will not be raised into glory unless in Christ we are made “the righteousness of God.” Only then can we join Jesus in his glory. The

crucifixion is part of the process by which we are transformed from the old creation to the new.

Paul says that Jesus died “for us” (Romans 5:6-8; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:10); he also says that he died “for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3; Gal. 1:4). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24; 3:18). Paul also says that we died with Christ (Romans 6:3-8). Though our union with him in faith, we participate in his death.

It is as if we were on the cross, receiving the curse that our sins deserved. But he did it for us, and because he did it, we can be justified, or proclaimed as righteous. He takes our sin and death; he gives us righteousness and life. The prince became a pauper, so that we paupers might become princes.

Although Jesus used the word ransom to describe our rescue, the ransom wasn’t paid to anyone in particular—this is a figure of speech to indicate that it cost Jesus an enormous amount to set us free. In the same way, Paul talks about Jesus redeeming us, buying our freedom, but he didn’t pay anyone.

God loves people—but he hates sin, because sin hurts people. God wants everyone to change (2 Peter 3:9), but those who don’t will suffer the result of their own sins.

In the death of Jesus, our sins are set aside. But this does not mean that a loving Jesus appeased or “paid off” an angry God. The Father is just as merciful as Jesus is, and Jesus is just as angry about sin as the Father is. He is angry at sin because sin hurts the people he loves. Jesus is the Judge who condemns (Matthew 25:31-46), as well as the Judge who loves sinners so much that he dies for them.

When God forgives us, he does not simply wipe away sin and pretend it never existed. Sins have serious consequences—consequences we can see in the cross of Christ. Humanity’s tendency to sin cost Jesus pain and shame and death.

The gospel reveals that God acts righteously in forgiving us (Romans 1:17); his mercy is part of his righteous character. He does not ignore our sins, but takes care of them in Jesus Christ. Metaphorically, God presented Jesus as a sacrifice for our forgiveness. Sin has consequences, and Jesus volunteered to suffer the consequences on our behalf. The cross demonstrates God’s love as well as his justice (Romans 5:8).

As Isaiah says, we have peace with God because of what Christ did. We were once enemies of God, but

through Christ we have been brought near (Ephesians 2:13). In other words, we have been reconciled to God through the cross (verse 16). It is a basic Christian belief that our relationship with God depends on Jesus Christ, including his death.

Christianity is not a list of things to do—it is accepting that Christ has done everything we need to be right with God—and he did it on the cross. “When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son” (Romans 5:10). God reconciled the universe through Christ, “making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20). He did this before we believed it, before we were even born. And since we are reconciled through him, all our sins are forgiven (verse 22)—reconciliation, forgiveness and justification all mean the same thing: peace with God.

Victory!

Paul uses an interesting image of salvation when he writes that Jesus “disarmed the powers and authorities” by making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). He uses the word for a military parade: the winning general brings captured enemy soldiers in a victory parade at home. They are disarmed, humiliated, and put on display. Paul’s point here is that on the cross, Jesus did this to our enemies.

What looked like a shameful death for Jesus was actually a glorious triumph for God’s plan, because it is through the cross that Jesus won victory over enemy powers, including Satan, sin and death. Their claim on us has been fully satisfied in the death of the innocent victim. They cannot demand any more than what he has already paid. They have nothing further to threaten us with.

“By his death,” we are told, Jesus was able to “destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14). “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Victory was won on the cross.

Sacrifice

Jesus’ death is also described as a sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice draws on the rich imagery of Old Testament sacrifices. Isaiah 53:10 calls our Savior a “guilt offering.” John the Baptist calls him the Lamb “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Paul calls him a “sacrifice of atonement,” a “sin offering,” a “Passover lamb,” a “fragrant offering”

(Romans 3:25; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 5:7; Ephesians 5:2). Hebrews 10:12 calls him a “sacrifice for sins.” John calls him “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10).

Several terms are used to describe what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Different New Testament authors use different words or images to convey the idea. The exact terminology or mechanism is not essential. What is important is simply that we are saved through the death of Jesus. “By his wounds we are healed.” He died to set us free, to remove our sins, to suffer our punishment, to purchase our salvation. The conclusion is simple: “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

Michael Morrison

Copyright © 2001 Grace Communion International. All rights reserved. Scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright 1974, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. Illustration by Jody Eastman.

Seven images of salvation

The New Testament uses a wide range of images to express the richness of the work of Christ. We may describe these images as analogies, models or metaphors. Each gives part of the picture:

Ransom: a price paid to achieve someone's freedom. The emphasis falls on the idea of being freed, not the nature of the price.

Redemption: the basic idea is “buying back,” or for a slave, buying freedom.

Justification: being put right with God, as if declared by a court to be in the right.

Salvation: the basic idea is deliverance or rescue from a dangerous situation. The word can also suggest restoration to wholeness, a healing.

Reconciliation: the repair of a broken relationship. God reconciles us to him. He acts to restore a friendship, and we respond to his initiative.

Adoption: making us legal children of God. Faith brings about a change in our status, from outsider to family member.

Forgiveness: This can be seen in two ways. In legal or financial terms, forgiveness is like the cancellation of a debt. In terms of personal relationship, forgiveness means the setting aside of personal hurt or injury.

(Adapted from Alister McGrath, *Understanding Jesus*, pages 124-135).

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 8

Commemorating the crucifixion

Almost 2,000 years ago, a Jewish carpenter was condemned as a dangerous religious and political rebel. He was executed in one of the most painful and shameful punishments ever known: flogging and crucifixion. This form of death was a scandal to both Jews and Gentiles.

Nevertheless, Jesus' followers made a point of remembering his death—not just the fact that he died, but also that he died in such a shameful way. In their written stories about Jesus, they devoted lengthy sections to his horrible death. They set aside one day each year as the anniversary of his death.

Why is Jesus' death so important to Christians—and so central to the Christian faith?

Of greatest importance

Jesus' death is listed as of “first importance” in Paul's summary of the gospel message: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared...” (1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Paul even characterized his own preaching as “the message of the cross” (1 Corinthians 1:18). “We preach Christ crucified,” he said (verse 23).

Jesus' death was predicted in Scripture, and was necessary (Luke 24:25-26; Acts 3:18; 17:3). It was necessary not just for the Messiah to *die*, perhaps in a painless way, but to *suffer*, and to be crucified for our salvation. It was an essential part of Jesus' ministry, and an essential part of the gospel. Jesus had predicted his own suffering and death, even his death on a cross (Mark 8:31-32; 9:31; 10:33-34; Matthew 20:19; 26:2; John 12:32-33). He was sure it had to happen the way it did (Matthew 26:54)—it was his purpose, his mission (John 12:27). He had to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 53 (Luke 22:37).

Jesus said that his death would be a ransom to save other people (Mark 10:45). At his Last Supper, he said that he gave his body on behalf of other people, and he gave his blood to form a new covenant, or a new relationship between God and humanity, based on forgiveness (Luke 22:19-20; Matthew 26:28). He was, as Isaiah had predicted, an innocent person who suffered and died to ransom the guilty. God laid our sins on Jesus, and he was killed for *our* transgressions to buy *our* freedom.

Jesus not only predicted his death, he also explained its significance for us—and this is why it is good news. He gave his body for us—for our benefit. He allowed his blood to be shed so we might be forgiven. Jesus was the mediator between God and humans. His death enables us to have a covenant with God—a relationship of promise and loyalty. Indeed, the death of Christ is the *only* way for our salvation. That is why Jesus, even though he knew what pain awaited him, “resolutely set out for Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). It was the reason he had come.

Publicizing a scandal

The resurrection of Jesus was wonderful news. It was a hope-filled message. Because of that, it would have been easy for the apostles to emphasize Jesus' resurrection and skip over his shameful death. Indeed, we read in Acts that they preached the resurrection—but they also boldly reminded people of the ignominious punishment Jesus had received (Acts 2:22-24; 3:13-15; 4:10; 5:30-31; 7:51-53; 10:37-40; 13:27-30).

Not only did they admit the cross, they also called it a *tree*—a word that would remind Jews of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, which says that anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. By using the word *tree*, the apostles drew extra attention to the shameful way Jesus had died. Why did they emphasize the shameful way that Jesus died? Because

it was important. The Scriptures had predicted it, Jesus had predicted it, and it was necessary for our salvation.

The cross involves shame as well as pain (Hebrews 12:2). It involves a “curse” (Galatians 3:13-14). Paul did his best not to offend people, but he emphasized the crucifixion even though he knew it was offensive (Galatians 5:11; 3:1; 6:14). The cross was the *center* of his gospel (1 Corinthians 1:23; 2:2; Philippians 3:18).

Paul gives the spiritual significance of the cross: Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He was made sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was a sacrifice so that we might be justified, or declared right, so that we might not receive the punishment our sins deserve (Romans 3:24-26). He carried our sins, and their penalty, on his cross (1 Peter 2:24). “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

It is through the cross that we can be given the blessing promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:14). It is through the cross that we are reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:16). It is through the cross that God forgives our sins, taking away the written note of debt that was against us (Colossians 2:13-14). Our salvation depends on the cross of Christ.

Since we fail to keep the law perfectly, we fall under its curse (Galatians 2:10). We all deserve the death penalty (Romans 3:23; 6:23). Jesus, being sinless, did not need to die, but he willingly suffered the result of our sins. The righteous died for the unrighteous. He received punishment, which we deserve, so we could receive forgiveness, even though we do not deserve it. He received death so that we might receive life.

John Stott writes that the crucifixion shows three truths:

First, our sin must be extremely horrible. Nothing reveals the gravity of sin like the cross.... If there was no way by which the righteous God could righteously forgive our unrighteousness, except that he should bear it himself in Christ, it must be serious indeed....

Secondly, God’s love must be wonderful beyond comprehension.... He pursued us even to the desolate anguish of the cross, where he bore our sin, guilt, judgment and death. It takes

a hard and stony heart to remain unmoved by love like that....

Thirdly, Christ’s salvation must be a free gift. He “purchased” it for us at the high price of his own life-blood. So what is there left for us to pay? Nothing! (*The Cross of Christ*, page 83)



The Lord's Supper commemorates Jesus' death on the cross.

A memorial of death

The cross was the focus of Jesus’ mission as a human. His job was not done until he was crucified and resurrected. Jesus did not tell his disciples to remember his miracles—they were to remember his *death*. Jesus eliminated many rituals, but he commanded a new one: the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. He told us to participate in these reminders of his death because his death, and our participation in his death, is the key to our salvation. We remember Jesus’ death not just as something that happened to Jesus—it is relevant for us today. The Lord’s Supper looks to the past—Jesus willing giving

his life to us—and to the present—his union with us now, and the future—his promise to return.

In baptism, we picture our participation in Jesus' death (Romans 6:3). Spiritually speaking, are we crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20), and on a daily basis, we are to crucify our sinful passions and desires (Galatians 5:24; Romans 8:13). To follow Jesus, we must take up our cross each day (Luke 9:23), willing to deny wrong desires. The Lord's Supper reminds us of what our life is all about.

Jesus' death is our pattern for daily living—it is a picture of complete submission to God, a picture of willingness to reject sin and choose righteousness. Jesus died for us, Paul says, so that we should no longer live for ourselves, but instead live to serve Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:15). Since our old self was crucified with Christ, “we should no longer be slaves to sin” (Romans 6:6). Instead, we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, willing to serve him (Romans 6:13; 12:1). Because he died for us, we “die to sins and live for righteousness” (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus' death is evidence that God loves us—it shows us that God cares about us so much that he did something to solve our problem, to rescue us from the pain and death our sinfulness brought upon us (Romans 5:8-10). Since God did not spare his own Son, we can be confident that he will give us everything we need for salvation (Romans 8:32). His love for us becomes an example for how much we should love one another (Ephesians 5:1-2).

The death of Jesus gives us some important freedoms:

- We are no longer prisoners of the law (Galatians 3:23; Romans 7:6).
- We are no longer slaves of sin and passions (John 8:34-36; Romans 6:6-7, 16; Titus 3:3).
- We are no longer enslaved by death or fear (Romans 8:2; Hebrews 2:14-15).
- We have overcome the world and the evil one (1 John 5:4-5; 1 John 2:13-14; Revelation 12:11).

With this freedom, we are to be slaves of righteousness, slaves of Jesus Christ. He died for us so we may live for him (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). This is how we should respond to the love of God shown to us in the cross of Christ.

The cross is also an example for us when we suffer. Peter reminds us that when we suffer unjustly, we should remember the example of Jesus, who suffered unjustly for us, setting an example for us (1 Peter 2:19-23). In Hebrews we are also told to remember Jesus when we grow weary of our troubles, for he endured great opposition for us (Hebrews 12:2-4). Unjust suffering is part of the Christian calling, and part of the example Jesus set for us. “A servant is not greater than his master” (John 15:20). The Lord's Supper reminds us of what Jesus' life was all about, and that we are called to follow him.

When we suffer, we are also encouraged by knowing that a crown of glory awaits us, just as it did for Jesus. When we identify with him in his cross, we will also share in his glory (Romans 8:17-18; 2 Corinthians 4:17).

Many people may think that the cross is foolishness, but it shows us the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:17-25). It was a stroke of genius, a brilliant maneuver. It simultaneously shows us how ugly sin is, and how beautiful God's love is, and the extent of his commitment to ensure our salvation. It shows us the penalty of sin and offers forgiveness. It shows both justice and grace. It breaks the power of sin and death, and gives us power to overcome. The cross gives us visible evidence that our sins have been dealt with once and for all, that our struggles are not in vain, and that a crown of glory awaits us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is certainly worth remembering.

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 9

Trials and faith

Many Christians have been taught that they are guaranteed a way to escape trials. They point to biblical promises that God will intervene for those who have faith in his Son.

However, God not only promises to help us in our trials—he also promises us trials! Christ did not come to bring us a trouble-free life. Instead, he warned us that we would have strife within our families because of him (Matthew 10:34-36), that we would have trials (John 16:33) and that we would be persecuted (John 15:20). We enter the kingdom through many trials (Acts 14:22), and every Christian will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). We should not think it unusual when trials afflict us (1 Peter 4:12). The fact that Jesus Christ suffered when he was in the flesh reminds us that we will also suffer.

Nevertheless, Scripture also says that if we ask for anything in Jesus' name, then he will do it for us (John 14:12-14). Well then, some Christians reason, we can ask for a trouble-free life, and if we have enough faith, then Jesus will make sure that we have no troubles.

John 14:12-14 says we can have anything we ask for. Can we claim that as a promise for whatever we want? No—in a passage like this there are unstated qualifications, qualifications that are explained elsewhere in Scripture. Consider for a moment this fact: Some Christians earnestly prayed that a certain person would be president. Others prayed in Jesus' name for someone else. Christians in each group prayed in faith, but Jesus did not answer all their requests in the same way.

The unstated qualification is that God answers only according to his will (1 John 5:14). God will not respond to prayers that violate his sovereign will. He often has reasons we cannot see. We do not know his will perfectly, and it is quite possible for us to believe something that is not true. Our faith is no guarantee

that the answers we seek will happen, since our faith may be mistaken. I have yet to hear of a literal mountain moving into the sea.

In various competitions and wars, some Christians ask God to give them victory; people on the other side ask the same, and God cannot give both of them what they want. We may ask God for a million dollars—many Christians have—but not receive, no matter how many things we buy “on faith,” confident that God will supply. We can have full confidence in Jesus Christ—confidence that he saves us—without having faith that he is a genie performing all our requests made in his name just because we use the right words and believe.

Faith and healing

Many Christians have firmly believed that God would heal a loved one. They prayed in faith. Some believed that they had confirmation from other believers or from other miracles. So they were genuinely surprised, even dumbfounded, when the loved one died. What they had believed with such certainty turned out not to be true. Their faith could not heal the person—only God could heal, and he chose not to, despite their prayers, their faith, God's love and God's promises.

When such disappointments happen, a new trial sets in. If faith in the healing turned out to be a mistake, what about faith in Christ? Was it also a mistake? That is one of the dangers of the “word of faith” teaching—it links faith in our Savior to faith in specific predictions. Did Jesus promise to heal every disease? He did not heal Epaphroditus, as least not as fast as people wanted him to (Philippians 2:27). Even in his earthly ministry, Jesus did not heal everyone (John 5:3-9).

Didn't Jesus suffer for us, paying the penalty of all

sin? Doesn't that mean that we have no reason to suffer? Some say so, but we should test this line of reasoning with another fact: Jesus died for us. Does this mean that we should never die? The penalty of sin has been fully paid, so we do not need to die. We already have eternal life (John 5:24; 11:26). But the fact is, every Christian dies. There is something wrong with the line of reasoning. We do not yet experience everything Jesus accomplished for us.

There will come a time when we will be raised imperishable. There will come a time when we never experience pain. There will come a time when we receive the full benefits of Jesus' redemption. But that time is not yet. Now, we share in Jesus' sufferings (1 Peter 2:20-21).

Jesus promised persecution, not freedom from pain and sorrow. When Paul was beaten, stoned, and imprisoned, he felt pain, even though Jesus had paid the penalty of all sin. Paul had great faith, but also many sufferings (2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; 4:12). Although Jesus atoned for all sin, Christians still suffer despite their faith—and sometimes because of their faith.

We suffer from persecution, and we suffer the incidental pains of living in a world in which sin is still common. Sin hurts innocent people, and sometimes we are the innocent people who are hurt. Sometimes it results in early death, sometimes in slow and pain-filled death. We may suffer physical damage from a burning, a beating, a car accident or asbestos fibers. Our health may suffer from exposure to cold, from smoke in a house fire or chemicals in our food. We may be hurt by wild animals, large or small, or even microorganisms. God has not guaranteed to protect all his people from all possible problems.

Is it always God's will to heal people who have faith in Christ? The biblical evidence is that he sometimes does, and sometimes does not. Stephen was killed, James was killed. Eventually all the first Christians died of something. Yet, how many times did God save them out of danger before they eventually died? Perhaps many times.

Have you ever wondered about preachers who claim to heal all infirmities, yet they themselves wear eyeglasses? There is no reason why biblical promises would apply to one kind of ailment but not the other. The scriptures sometimes cited in support of a

universal promise of healing do not make any exceptions for eyesight, age, accidents or anything else. Both Scripture and experience tell us that these verses were not intended as universal guarantees.

Some have been healed, sometimes dramatically. These are examples of special favor, grace and mercy. We should not take these examples of exceptional grace and create universal promises out of them.

And we especially should not imply that people who aren't healed do not have faith. Sometimes their faith is demonstrated through their suffering—they remain confident that God will do what is best for them. Whether they live or whether they die, whether they have prosperity or poverty, whether they are sick or in health, they trust in God. There is nothing wrong with their faith. What is wrong is a teaching that implies that they are somehow not doing enough.

Purpose of trials

Well, since God promises us trials, and he promises to help us in and through our trials, what are they for? Why does God allow any evil? We do not fully know, but we know that God does allow evil, and Jesus himself was willing to endure it, and he is still enduring it patiently. The Scriptures tell us about a few benefits of trials:

- “Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4).
- “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Hebrews 12:11).
- “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” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

In short, we learn things from suffering that we cannot learn from studying. Suffering shapes our character in a way that words cannot fully describe. Even Jesus learned from his sufferings (Hebrews 5:8), and we are also called to take up a cross and suffer with him. “If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory” (Romans 8:17).

Trials are not pleasant, but we are comforted by the fact that God is at work in our lives, and he is able to retrieve good from all things. He has the knowledge and the compassion to work in our lives for his glorious purpose. We do not always understand what specific lessons we are supposed to learn from a particular trial, but the overall lesson is always to trust in God.

Often, a trial of faith is just that—a trial of *faith*. In trials, we must trust God despite our physical circumstances, and by trusting God, we are growing in our faith relationship with him. This is of infinite importance, since in Christ we are everything we can be, and without him we are nothing.

An untried faith can be weak. Anyone can persevere when things are good. A tried faith is stronger, and the bond between us and God grows stronger. God wants a personal relationship with his children, a relationship characterized by faith, trust and love. This bond of faith can be strengthened by our trials. Trials teach us to rely on God for our every need. Whether our trial is health, or money, or relationships, or a problem in the church, we are to look to Christ.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 10

Alive forevermore!

Jesus did not stay dead for long. Early Sunday morning, near sunrise, some disciples discovered that the Son of God had risen. They did not see the resurrection itself, but they saw Jesus, alive and well. Over a period of 40 days, they saw Jesus on numerous occasions. Then he rose into heaven.

But Jesus is not taking a vacation. His ministry continues, even in heaven. He serves and leads the church, interceding for us, helping us, preparing us for eternal glory. Christ will return, and after he has subdued every enemy, he will give everything to the Father. Mission accomplished.

Resurrection

Many people have a hard time believing that Jesus rose from the dead. In their experience, dead people always stay dead. They are skeptical of such an extraordinary claim. The disciples must have been mistaken, they say, or else they made it up.

The disciples were skeptical, too. When they went to the tomb, they expected to find a body. When they did not find a body, they first assumed that someone had stolen it. They did not expect a resurrection. It was only when Jesus *appeared* to them that they believed that he was alive again.

Most Jews believed that there would be a resurrection at the end of the age, when everyone would rise for judgment (Daniel 12:2). But a resurrection into glory before the end was just as unexpected as a crucified Messiah. Although Jesus had taught both these ideas (Matthew 16:21; 17:23; Mark 9:9), the disciples didn't understand or believe this (verse 10). They expected him to stay dead.

But if Jesus is the sinless Son of God, then he is



The women discovered that the tomb was empty.

unique among the billions of people, and he did not deserve death. We should be surprised if he were *not* resurrected. We also have evidence that gives us confidence that Jesus rose from the dead (as we will cover in our next article).

Many of us also have experiences in our own lives that convince us that God exists, that he sometimes causes miracles, that Jesus is alive and the Holy Spirit is active in his people. This gives us further reason to believe that Jesus is alive.

Significance of the resurrection

The resurrection meant life for Jesus—but a far better life than what he had on earth, the glory that he had with the Father before his incarnation (John 17:5). By his resurrection, he was powerfully revealed as the Son of God (Romans 1:4)—the resurrection declared who he had been all along. The resurrection proves that God will judge the world through Christ (Acts 17:31).

But the resurrection also means life for *us*. As Paul says, we will “be saved through his life” (Romans 5:10). If you “believe in your heart that God raised

him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14). Our salvation depends not just on Jesus’ death, but also his resurrection (1 Peter 3:21).

Even justification, most commonly associated with Jesus’ death, is also a result of his resurrection (Romans 4:24-25). Our salvation depends on the entire sequence of incarnation: his birth, ministry, death and resurrection.

Our baptism pictures our participation in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Rising from the water pictures our new life (Romans 6:4) and it pictures our future: “We will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (verse 5). “When he appears, we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2). Our resurrected bodies will be like his (1 Corinthians 15:42-49).

God has “made us alive with Christ...raised us up with Christ” (Ephesians 2:5-6). We were “raised with him” (Colossians 2:12). By faith in Christ, we are spiritually united to him. Our sins are given to him and paid by him, his righteousness and life are given to us, and we join him in his resurrection. “He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8:11). His resurrection is promise that we will also live again!

Ascension

After Jesus was resurrected, he “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). On the last day, “he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight” (verse 9). He did not simply disappear. He went up bodily into the sky, as a visible indication that he was going into heaven. His post-resurrection appearances had come to an end. (His later appearance to Paul was abnormal—1 Corinthians 15:8.)

As the disciples stared at the sky, two angels appeared and told them that Jesus would return “in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). What were the disciples to do in the meantime? They were to wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (verse 4), and then they were to be witnesses for Jesus throughout the world (verse 8). They testified that he is alive, that salvation is available through him.

At the right hand

Jesus did not just go to heaven—he was “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33). “God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior” (Acts 5:31). Being at the “right hand” is a figure of speech meaning “in highest authority.” Jesus was exalted to the highest place in the universe, second only to God himself (Philippians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 15:27). He is

Resurrection appearances

Before dawn, Mary Magdalene finds the tomb open and reports the body gone (John 20:1-2). Other women arrive and are told by angels to tell the disciples (Matthew 28:5-7; Luke 24:1-9). They visit the tomb and find it empty (John 20:3-10).

1. Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18).
2. Jesus appears to two women (Matthew 28:9-10).
3. Jesus appears to two men on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-33).
4. At some unspecified time, Jesus appears to Peter (verse 34).
5. Jesus appears to ten of the Eleven (verse 36; John 20:24).
6. One week later, Jesus appears when Thomas is present (John 20:26-29).
7. Later, seven disciples see Jesus at the Sea of Galilee (John 21:1-22).
8. The Eleven meet Jesus on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:16-20).
9. At an unspecified time, Jesus appears to 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6).
10. Jesus appears to James at another time (verse 7).
11. Jesus appears to the Eleven just before ascending to heaven (Acts 1:6-11).
12. He appears to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-5).

Adapted from Murray J. Harris, *3 Crucial Questions About Jesus*, pages 107-109.

exalted above the heavens, ruler of all things (Hebrews 7:27; 1:2).

At least 12 times, Scripture says that Jesus is at the right hand of the Father. Five of these are quotes from Psalm 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” The picture is that the Father gives Jesus a throne, even while there are enemies to be subdued. God will take care of the enemies; Jesus is secure in his authority. Using the Latin word for “sit,” this is sometimes called the “session” of Christ—being seated on his throne.

Ministry

Using his position of power in heaven, Jesus continues working for our salvation. He sends the Holy Spirit to us (John 15:26; 16:7), and the Holy Spirit testifies about Jesus and helps us understand what he taught (John 14:26; 15:26). The Spirit is the way that the Father and the Son live within us (14:18, 23).

Jesus is our Advocate (1 John 2:1). He is like a defense attorney who “speaks to the Father in our defense”—if anyone accuses us, Jesus is there as a perpetual reminder that our sins have been covered by his sacrifice. It is therefore pointless to make accusations (Romans 8:33-34) — there is no condemnation for anyone who has faith in Christ (verse 1).

The risen Christ intercedes for us, to defend us from accusation and to give us help. “He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Hebrews 7:25). “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Because he can sympathize with our weaknesses, we can be confident that he will give us the help we need in our struggles (Hebrews 4:15-16).

The book of Hebrews calls him our high priest, who sacrificed himself for us and now lives to help us

(Hebrews 2:17; 3:1). Since our sins are forgiven through his death, we can approach God with confidence (Hebrews 10:19). “And since we have a great priest over the house of God,” we are encouraged: “let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (verse 22).

Jesus is our mediator, who resolves conflicts and brings us to God (1 Timothy 2:5). He ushers us into the throne room of heaven, assuring us that God will hear us with favor. This is part of the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is also our Shepherd (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20), implying that he loves, protects and provides for us. Peter brings similar images to mind when he calls Jesus “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). Jesus watches over us. The book of Revelation tells us that we are shepherded by a Lamb, a gentle guide who sacrificed himself for us (Revelation 7:17). He will supply our needs, because he knows what they are.

God assigned Jesus to be Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15), and the church is to submit to his leadership in everything (Ephesians 5:24). As head, he has supremacy over all things (Colossians 1:18; 2:10). Jesus already has all authority on heaven and earth (Matthews 28:18). God has already seated him above every power and authority (Ephesians 1:20-22; Colossians 2:10).

Through faith, we join Jesus in his amazing journey. We are crucified with him, we rise with him, we are joined with him by the Holy Spirit. We will be given glory with him and will reign with him forever (2 Timothy 2:11-12). Believe the good news!

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 11

Evidence of the resurrection

Christians, Jews, and atheists agree that Jesus was crucified and buried. The crucial belief for Christianity is that he was also resurrected — as evidence that he is the Son of God, the teacher of truth, the door and the way of salvation, the firstfruits of the resurrection. This article presents the evidence for his resurrection.

First, most historians agree that the early disciples *believed* that Jesus had risen from the dead. Although at Jesus' death they were dejected and fearful, they were soon dramatically different: They risked their lives repeatedly to preach about Jesus. Even Christians in the second and third centuries (as well as many today) put their lives on the line to preach about Jesus.

Of course, erroneous ideas abound, and people sometimes give their lives for erroneous ideas — but only if they *think* they are true. People do not put their lives on the line for things they don't believe. The disciples never wavered in their belief in Jesus' resurrection. None of them ever changed their story under the pain of persecution. Even agnostic historians will admit that the disciples believed that Jesus had been resurrected.

Now we can consider how dozens of disciples could come to such a conviction. Perhaps the first possibility we could consider is that Jesus didn't really die. Perhaps it wasn't really him on the cross. Maybe Judas led the soldiers to the wrong man, or a substitution was somehow made at the last minute (as Muslims believe). Is it possible that the disciples were in such a state of shock that they did not recognize the substitute on the cross, nor when they took him down to anoint and wrap his body for burial? Was it then a coincidence that the tomb somehow became empty, and his disciples thought he had reappeared? No, all this stretches the imagination so much that this is not seriously considered.

Well, then, perhaps Jesus did not die on the cross



— he just went into a coma, and then later revived. Is this a plausible historical possibility? Would Roman soldiers botch a crucifixion and take down a body without noticing that the person was still alive? Would this severely injured person then be able to revive, unwrap his own grave clothes, roll away his own tombstone, and convince his disciples that he had good health? Then after 40 days he would never be seen again? No, this borders on the preposterous.

Perhaps the disciples helped Jesus revive. They rolled away the stone, unwrapped the clothes, bandaged the wounds, and told a story about getting their leader back alive out of the grave — a story that turned quickly into a tall tale about resurrection and miraculous appearances, a story that the disciples never tried to set straight. Not only is this historically implausible, it turns the disciples into frauds and deceivers — and yet, as we mentioned above, people do not give their lives for something they know is false. This does not provide a believable explanation for the rise of Christianity, rooted in the early first century in the conviction that Jesus had risen from the dead — and this faith spread first in Jerusalem, where the facts could be investigated most easily!

It is not historically likely that Jesus could have survived the crucifixion. Well then, could the disciples have made up the resurrection? Did they steal the body, hide it somewhere, invent the story of a guard, and then preach a resurrection with conviction? This does not make sense, either. These fishermen did not make up the biggest lie in history, going against all the facts of life and death as they knew it, going against all religious beliefs of the day, going against Jewish

and Roman authorities, risking their lives to tell the story they made up, without any of them ever betraying the conspiracy. No, these folks were not conniving liars. Their words and deeds do not suggest any such deception. Their behavior matched their message.

As a side point, we might also observe that the evidence of the empty tomb is *indirect*. (If it wasn't empty, the Jewish leaders could have stopped the

Reconstructing the argument

How did people respond to the claims that Jesus had been resurrected? The initial reaction for almost everyone (including the disciples themselves) was probably "That's preposterous." A more serious response is reported in Matthew 28:11-15:

While [the disciples] were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, "You must say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this comes to the governor's ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

Some critics believe that this passage was invented by Matthew, but the story is too complex for that. It shows several levels in the argument. It reports not just a distant memory, but a fact that could be verified when it was written: unbelieving Jews were claiming that the disciples stole Jesus' body while the guard slept.

Matthew probably included this passage in his Gospel to respond to such a claim, and he probably considered it as the claim most worth refuting. The unbelieving Jews apparently agreed that Jesus' tomb was empty; they made no allegations that Jesus was buried elsewhere, or that the disciples went to the wrong tomb.

To reconstruct the argument:

1. First, the disciples say that the tomb is empty.
2. The unbelieving Jews then say, that's because the disciples stole the body.
3. The believers then say, We couldn't have, because there were guards.
4. The unbelievers say (rather than denying the existence of a guard), the disciples stole the body while the guards were asleep.
5. Finally, Matthew explains that the guards were bribed to say that this happened while they slept.

The argument assumes that in Matthew's day, the unbelieving Jews talked of a guard at the tomb. It was the first of many attempts not just merely to deny the resurrection, but to explain the evidence in a different way. This column is excerpted from a much longer academic article on our website: <http://www.wcg.org/lit/jesus/hist-res.htm>

whole problem by producing the body.) And yet according to the Gospel stories, the empty tomb did not convince all the disciples. They were convinced only when Jesus appeared, and it is on the basis of the appearances that they preached the resurrection. If they had gone to the trouble of stealing the body, surely they would have used the empty tomb as part of their evidence. The fact that they didn't, tells us that they had what they thought was much better evidence: eyewitnesses of a living Jesus.

As another indirect evidence of the authenticity of their faith, we can observe that the Gospels report that women were the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb and the risen Christ — and the testimony of women was not accepted in that culture. If the disciples were trying to make up a story, they would have invented witnesses who had more authority. It is not likely that these fishermen would have been so subtle in creating evidence, and yet be so bold in preaching.

And what about the fact that the Gospel stories vary somewhat? If this had been an enormous conspiracy, wouldn't they ensure that the story was told in exactly the same way by everyone? The most believable explanation again is that the disciples genuinely believed Jesus to be resurrected, and each one told it the way he or she remembered it.

Now let's consider another possibility: grave-robbers (hoping for riches in the rich man's tomb) got the guards to drink so much wine that they fell asleep; then the graverobbers took the body and dumped it in the desert. The guards, wanting to cover up their failure and knowing the fears of the religious leaders, made up the story of the angels and the resurrection, and were bribed to blame the disciples. Then the disciples had hallucinations of a risen Jesus.

However, did all the disciples have the same hallucination, several times, against their expectations, against their religious beliefs? Did the hallucination eat and drink, speak, and then suddenly cease 40 days later? This is not the way hallucinations work. The evidence does not match this hypothesis, either.

Let's consider one more idea, that the idea of resurrection was just a religious allegory (sometimes described as a "myth," meaning religious ideas expressed in allegorical stories), and Christianity made a big mistake in taking it literally for almost

2,000 years. There are several problems with this idea. First, the Gospels are not written in a mythological style. And it is clear that the resurrection was understood in a literal way even in the first century, when eyewitnesses of Jesus were still available to either support or refute the story. There was no time for legends to develop. The biblical writers give us history: This is what I saw. This is what it meant. They denounce the idea of myth. They are presenting what they saw.

The disciples were not deceived, nor were they deceivers. They just tell us what they believed, and it is clear that they believed that Jesus died and was buried and was resurrected. And it is clear that the reason they believed this is because they saw it with their own eyes.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1-3)

The disciples clearly believed that Jesus rose from the dead. Why did they believe this? The most plausible explanation is that Jesus actually rose from the dead. All other theories are far-fetched and historically unlikely.

When we also take into consideration the need for God to intervene in humanity to save us, and the Old Testament predictions of a suffering servant who would give his life for his people, the explanation that makes the most sense is that the disciples believed that Jesus was resurrected because Jesus appeared to them and *told* them he was resurrected. That is why they had such a transformation in their beliefs, and why they preached with such conviction. As Luke puts it, by looking at the evidence we "may know the certainty of the things we have been taught" (Luke 1:4).

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 12

Responding to the resurrection: praying with confidence

How do we respond to the risen Jesus? The book of Hebrews tells us: Since Jesus has risen into heaven as our great high priest, then we can have *confidence* to enter God's presence, and because of that, we *should* enter his presence (Hebrews 10:19-22).

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.... Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:14-16). In other words, since Jesus has risen from the dead, we should pray, and we should do it with confidence.

The risen Jesus makes a difference in our lives *through prayer*. Because he is now in heaven, we have the guarantee that our prayers will be heard. We pray "in Jesus' name" — as if putting his signature at the end of our letter. He intercedes for us, prays for us! God listens to us just as well as he listens to Jesus himself.

Prayer: a cry for help

Some people make prayer sound like a duty, as a work that faithful Christians must perform. Some make it sound like we ought to pray seven times a day, or three times a day, or all night long, or rise before dawn, or spend at least two hours every day, following the example of this or that famous person.

I think Christians should pray not as a duty,

but out of *need*. After all, prayers are requests. There are no biblical commands for us to pray at certain times or in certain ways. We are not told to follow Jesus' example in praying all night, or Daniel's example of facing Jerusalem.

But Scripture everywhere assumes that God's people *do* pray. We are not told to pray for specific amounts of time, but *all* the time (1 Thessalonians 5:17; Ephesians 6:18). We are not told to kneel or stand or lie on the floor when we pray. Rather, we are told to do everything while praying (Philippians 4:6).

Why so much prayer?

Prayer is, in its simplest sense, a request. The most common Hebrew and Greek words for prayer mean "ask." Whenever we ask God for anything, we are praying—and it is right that we ask. Paul told the Philippians to ask for whatever they wanted (Philippians 4:6).

That is why we should pray: We are to ask God for the things we need. The better we know ourselves, the more we will know that we are incredibly needy people. Of ourselves, we can do nothing. If we want to accomplish anything worthwhile, we must seek God's help. We must depend on him. Prayer is a cry for help. And since our needs never end, our prayers should never cease.

Rely on God

Self-reliance is sin. It is arrogant for us tiny

creatures to think that we can do whatever we want, that we can control our own destinies, that we can decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. Humans have neither the wisdom nor the power. The universe exists only because Christ is upholding it by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:3). We exist only because our Creator supplies our needs (Acts 14:17).

Yet (I speak from experience) even believers sometimes forget about our minute-by-minute need for God, and we may go through the day with scarcely a thought, scarcely a thanks for what God is doing for us. He is upholding us even as we ignore him.

Even when we face problems, we sometimes struggle on and on, trying to solve the problems with our own strength, with our own strategies, instead of realizing that needs and desires should be shared with God in prayer (Philippians 4:6). We act as if everything depends on us, when everything actually depends on God. He knows our needs, and he wants us to trust him.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us, especially when we are too unthinking to ask for ourselves (Romans 8:26-27). The Holy Spirit stands in the gap and helps us in ways that we do not know. So when we fail to pray constantly, the Holy Spirit steps in. Even so, we cannot turn all prayer over to the Holy Spirit and let him do all the talking while we go through life unawares.

We *need* to pray. We will be happier, less stressed, more fulfilled, if we keep in mind that we live in the presence of God, that in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). The more we are aware of God, the better our understanding of life will be, for God is the frame of reference that we need. When we see life in his context, we see it accurately.

God is not a genie who grants our every wish. That is because we often do not

understand what we really need. We may pray for escape from a trial, but God is using that trial to teach us something far more important than temporary comfort. We may pray for a neighbor to come to Christ (and we *should* have that desire), but God knows this may not be the right time. God may want *us* to be more involved in the person's life.

Frankly, there are so many things wrong with this world that we should have many desires, for ourselves, for our churches and for this world. We have much to pray about.

Prayer is our cry for help. In prayer, we admit that we are not self-sufficient, that we cannot handle everything on our own. In prayer, we acknowledge a relationship between God and us, a relationship in which God has promised to provide our needs and to bless us in ways he knows are best. Prayer is an act of worship, for it acknowledges that God has power and that he is dependable.

Thanks

God supplies our needs, and it is appropriate for us to thank him for doing so. Every breath we take is a gift from him. All the beauty in nature is a gift from him. The wonderful variety of sights, sounds, smells and textures is a gift from him. Our conversations with God should include thanks as well as requests. This is a form of praise, to acknowledge that he is the giver of every good thing.

As we thank God, we remind ourselves of our place in the universe—a place of great honor as a target of God's affection, and a place of dependence on his graciousness. Giving thanks is a way to know who we are and why we exist; it reminds us that the universe functions only through his gift.

Some may say: "I already know that. Why do I have to keep telling God something he already knows?" I think it is only through saying it that we are really mindful of it; it is

too easy for us to go through the day without really being aware that life functions best if we remember it as a gift. This is supported by the biblical commands for us to be thankful, and to continually give thanks to God in our prayers (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18).

The Bible similarly tells us to pray with persistence, giving the same request again and again. We know by faith that God heard us the first time, and that he knows our earnestness even without our persistence, so I conclude that his command for our persistence is really for our own good. We need to tell ourselves again and again what the desires of our heart are, and that we trust God with them.

This does not mean that prayer is just a means of talking to ourselves, or of reminding ourselves of abstract truths. No, Scripture assures us that prayer is a genuine conversation with God. Our requests really go to heaven, and are really heard and answered by God. Our thanks really go to God; we must see him in the picture. Often, it is in prayer that God speaks to us, when we grow in our understanding of what he wants us to think or do.

We have never-ending thanks for what God does for us day to day, thanks for the promises he has made for our future, and thanks for what he has already done in Christ to ensure that future. Our thankfulness for Jesus Christ turns naturally to dedicating ourselves to doing God's will. We eagerly want to respond with faithful allegiance to one who loves us so much.

Our existence, our joy, our pleasures our sanity, are all dependent on God's day-to-day favor toward us through Jesus Christ. We have much to be thankful for — indeed, everything we have and ever hope to have is a gift for

which we need to be thankful.

Our thanks should include our appreciation for who God is — and here our prayers blend thanks and praise. We exalt his power, his wisdom, his mercy, the beauty of his love. We praise him for who he is, not just for what he gives us, for in actuality, he gives us himself.

My cry for help

Finally, my friends, I ask you to pray for your local church. It takes God's strength for your congregation to make a difference for the kingdom in your community. You need divine help to work together and to tackle the impossible. You need to pray. Pray for your local leaders, too. Those who lead worship music need divine blessing. Those who speak should speak the words of God (1 Peter 4:11), and this cannot be done from human wisdom.

And pray for me, too. Even the most talented human could not do the work God sets before me. I need divine help, and I pray for it, and I receive it. And just as Paul asked his churches to pray for him (Colossians 4:2-3, etc.), I ask you to pray for me, too. The difficulties I face personally, and the difficulties I face in serving the church, mean that I need God's help. We all need help. We all need to pray.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 13

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 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, who was 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).

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" (Isa. 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.

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

For further reading:

- Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*. Eerdmans, 1975.
- J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step With the Spirit*. Revell, 1984.
- Max Anders, *What You Need to Know About the Holy Spirit*. Nelson, 1995.
- Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker, 1992. Chapters 28-29.

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 14

Can you hear the Holy Spirit?

When the church in Antioch gathered for worship, the Holy Spirit spoke to them: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Does the Holy Spirit speak to us today? Can we hear what he says to us today?

Paul tells us that those who are led by the Holy Spirit are the children of God (Romans 8:14). We should expect the Holy Spirit to lead us, and we need to know how he does it.

In different ways

God works in different ways with different people. He spoke in different ways to Adam, Abraham, Moses, Deborah, Samuel, Elijah, Mary and Paul. He can speak in different ways to us today. The messages given to Philip (Acts 8:29) and Peter are so specific (Acts 10:19) that distinct words may have been involved. But he spoke in a different way at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). It is only after all the discussion had taken place that the apostles concluded that the Holy Spirit had made the decision for them (verse 28).

Just as the Holy Spirit decides to give different abilities to different people (1 Corinthians 12:11), he works with us in different ways. A person with the gift of miraculous words is likely to hear the Spirit in a different way than a person with the gift of compassion. The Spirit will lead a teacher in a different way than a server, because he has different jobs for each person.

The Spirit shapes us in different ways, and as a result, we value different goals. Someone with the gift of administration will value order and organization; someone with the gift of serving will ask whether people are being helped; someone with the gift of encouragement will focus on peoples'

attitudes; people with the gift of generosity will look for needs that they can fill. And the Spirit works with us in the way that he has caused us to be, according to our interests and values.

For some people, he speaks subtly, in general principles; for others, he must speak with unmistakable details. Each of us must listen in the way that God has made us, in the way that he chooses to deal with us. The important thing is that we listen—that we are ready and willing to hear what he says. We should be looking for his leadership rather than ignoring it.

Dangers

There are several dangers to take into account. First, all sorts of people have claimed to hear the Holy Spirit when he didn't really speak to them. They have made false prophecies, given foolish advice, led people into cults and made Christianity look bad. If God spoke to them, they badly misunderstood what he was saying. So there's a danger of “hearing” things that God never said. We should be careful, for we do not want to use his name in vain.

A second danger is that some people, afraid of hearing incorrectly, refuse to hear anything at all. But as Dallas Willard has pointed out, we should not “shun the genuine simply because it resembled the counterfeit” (Hearing God, p. 88). Our Father in heaven does speak to us, and the Holy Spirit does lead us, and we will shortchange ourselves if we close our ears.

Hebrews 3:7 says that the Spirit speaks in the words of Scripture, and we should not refuse to follow what he says. He does communicate to us today, convicting us of what we should do, guiding us in how we serve God.

A third danger is that some people seek the Holy Spirit for selfish reasons. They want the Spirit to make their decisions for them, to tell them what job to take, which person to marry, when to move and how to live. They want the Holy Spirit to be like a Ouija board or a horoscope, to save them the trouble of thinking and making decisions.

But God wants us to grow in maturity, to learn through experience what is right and wrong (Hebrews 5:12-14). And many of the decisions we face are not matters of sin and righteousness—they are simply choices, and God can work with us no matter which we choose, so he leaves the choice up to us. So the Holy Spirit doesn't speak on everything we want him to.

Some people would like to have the Holy Spirit as a conversational companion to keep them company. They want to chat, but the Holy Spirit isn't involved in idle words. He does not call attention to himself (John 15:26).

He is often silent because he has already given us enough information and advice. He wants us to use what he has already given; he has been training our conscience to respond rightly to what faces us. That does not mean that we rely on ourselves, but that we rely on what God has already done in our lives and what he has already taught us.

Scripture

The Holy Spirit speaks to us primarily through the Scriptures that he inspired to be written and canonized. This is our foundation of faith and life, the word that everyone has access to, the word that can be studied and discussed most objectively. Often the word that we need to hear has already been written, and the Spirit simply needs to bring it to mind. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, for example, his responses were quoted from Scripture. He had studied and memorized those words, and in each situation the Spirit led him to the appropriate response.

The Spirit does not bypass our need to think, or our need to read and meditate on his words. If we are not seeking the words he has already given in Scripture, then we should not expect him to suddenly give us new words for new situations. Nor can we expect the random-access method of

Scripture skimming to provide good answers for difficult questions. We cannot force, coerce or goad the Spirit to speak when he does not choose to speak.

With Scripture, there is the potential for nearly constant communication with God, as we read and pray and live consciously in God's presence. As we pray, we should also listen, for God may use our meditations to help us understand what we should do. We have the responsibility to read and study, for the Spirit usually works with words that are already in our minds. He works with our vocabulary, with our ways of reasoning, with the desires and values he has given us.

The devil can use Scripture, too, and the Bible is often misunderstood and misused. But it is still an important means of being led by and hearing the Holy Spirit. Scripture is the standard of comparison for all other words from God. If we think that the Spirit is leading us to do something, our first question needs to be, "Is this in agreement with Scripture?" The Spirit does not contradict himself. He does not lead us to lie, steal, gossip or be greedy, for he has already told us that those things are not godly.

So if we think the Spirit is leading us in one direction, we need to check it with Scripture—and the only way we can do that is to know what Scripture says. We need to study it, and since we will never know it all, we need to *keep* studying it. Memorization can be helpful, but what we need most of all is understanding. We need to see the principles of salvation, Christian living and divine love, the way that God works with his people; that will help us understand how he is working with us.

Experience

We can also hear the Holy Spirit through experience. God sometimes changes his methods with us, but most often he works with us in a similar way from one year to another. Through experience, we see how he has answered our prayers and led us in past situations. This will help us recognize his "voice" when he speaks to us in the present. Experience comes through time, submission and meditation. The Spirit helps the humble, not the self-exalting.

We can gain even more wisdom by drawing on the experience of other Christians. The Spirit does not isolate us, but puts us into a church, into a community of other believers. He distributes his gifts so that we stay together, work together and benefit from one another's strengths (1 Corinthians 12:7). In the same way, we can help one another hear the Holy Spirit because we each have different experiences of how God works in our lives.

When a message from God comes to one person, other people are to consider it carefully (1 Corinthians 14:29). They are to consider, for one thing, whether it is really a word from the Lord. The Spirit can speak through the community as well as through certain individuals — the Jerusalem conference is a good example of that. The people learned from their experiences with the Gentiles, saw that those experiences agreed with the Scriptures (Acts 15:15), and through the discussion heard the decision of the Spirit (verse 28).

The Holy Spirit often speaks to people through other people: in worship songs, in small group discussions, in a whispered word of encouragement, in a silent smile, a picture or a magazine article. There are many ways we can learn from others, to receive godly guidance from others. But this is for each person to discern. Rarely does the Spirit tell one person to give orders to another.

Sermons are a common means of spiritual speech. Those who speak should strive to speak the

words of God (1 Peter 4:11), so those who speak in church should strive to listen to God as they prepare the sermons, and those who hear the sermons should likewise listen for the words of the Lord. We need to let our worship services be times of listening, of thinking, of communing with God so that we are letting him change us to be more like Christ. Let us draw near to him, and he will change us.

Circumstances are another experiential means of "testing the spirits." We may have an open door, or all the doors may be closed. Barricades may test our convictions, or they may be signals that we need to ask whether we have correctly understood the directions. They force us to think again, to seek God again, to check with Scripture, and to check with others who have spiritual maturity.

Responding to the Holy Spirit

If we want to hear, we need to listen. But if we want to hear in the biblical sense, we also need to obey. If we hear his voice, if we believe that God is telling us to do something, then we need to respond. We need to do what he has gifted us to do. We are to submit to God, because what he says is for our own good. We bring him honor, and we bring ourselves blessings, by doing his will. It begins with listening. Can you hear the Holy Spirit? It is something worth thinking about.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 15

Can you trust the Holy Spirit to save you?

A friend recently said that the main reason he was baptized 20 some years ago is that he wanted to receive the power of the Holy Spirit so that he could overcome all his sins.

His intentions were good, but his understanding was a bit flawed. (No one understands perfectly, of course, and we are saved by God's mercy despite our misunderstandings.)

The Holy Spirit is not something we can “switch on” to achieve our overcoming goals, like some kind of supercharger for our willpower. The Holy Spirit is God, present with us and in us, giving us the love, assurance and close fellowship that the Father has for us in Christ. Through Christ, the Father has made us his own children, and the Holy Spirit gives us the spiritual sense of knowing that (Rom. 8:16).

The Holy Spirit gives us intimate fellowship with God through Christ, but he does not suspend our ability to sin. We still have wrong desires, still have wrong motives, still have wrong thoughts, words and actions. Even though we may want to stop a particular habit, we find that we are still unable to do it. We know that it is God's will for us to be freed from this problem, but for some reason we still seem to be powerless to shake its influence over us.

Can we believe that the Holy Spirit really is at work in our lives—especially when it seems like nothing is really happening, because we are not being very “good” Christians? When we struggle with sin again and again, when it seems like we are not changing much at all, do we conclude that we are so messed up that not even God can fix the problem?

Babies and adolescents

When we come to faith in Christ, we are born again, regenerated, by the Holy Spirit. We are new creatures, new persons, babes in Christ. Babies are not powerful, not skilled, not self-cleaning. As they grow, they acquire some skills, and they also begin to realize that there is a lot they cannot do, and this sometimes leads to frustration. They fidget with the crayons and scissors and fret that they cannot do as well as an adult can. But the fits of frustration do not help—only time and practice will help.

This is true in our spiritual lives, too. Sometimes new Christians are given dramatic power to break a drug habit or a bad temper. Sometimes new Christians are instant “assets” to the church. But more often than not, it seems, new Christians struggle with the same sins they had before, have the same personalities they had before, have the same fears and frustrations. They are not spiritual giants.

Jesus has overcome sin, we are told, but it sure seems like sin still has a grip on us. The sin nature within us has been defeated, but it still treats us like we are its prisoners. O wretched people that we are! Who will save us from the law of sin and death? Jesus, of course (Romans 7:24-25). He has already won the victory—and he has made that victory ours.

Alas! We do not yet see the complete victory. We do not yet see his power over death, nor the complete end of sin in our lives. As Hebrews 2:8 says, we do not yet see all things under our feet. What we do is trust Jesus. We trust his word that he has won the victory, and we trust his word that in

him we too are victorious.

Still, even though we know we are clean and pure in Christ, we would also like to see progress in overcoming our personal sins. Such progress may seem excruciatingly slow at times, but we can trust God to do what he has promised—in us as well as in others. After all, it is his work, not ours. It is his power, not ours. It is his agenda, not ours. When we submit ourselves to God, we have to be willing to wait on him. We have to be willing to trust him to do his work in us in the way and at the speed he knows is right.

Adolescents often think they know more than Dad knows. They think they know what life is all about and that they can handle it all pretty well on their own. (Not all adolescents are like that, of course, but the stereotype is based on some evidence.) We Christians can sometimes think in a way similar to adolescents. We may begin to think that “growing up” spiritually is based on right behavior, which leads us to start thinking of our standing with God in terms of how well we are behaving. When we are behaving well, we might tend to look down on people who don’t appear to have their act together so well. When we aren’t behaving so well, we might fall into despair and depression, believing God has left us.

But God does not ask us to make ourselves right with him; he asks us to trust him, the one who justifies the wicked (Rom. 4:5), who loves us and saves us for the sake of Christ. As we mature in Christ, we rest more firmly in God’s love demonstrated supremely for us in Christ (1 John 4:9). And as we rest in him, we look forward to the day described in Revelation 21:4: “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.”

Perfection!

When that day comes, Paul says, we will be changed in the twinkling of an eye. We will be made immortal, imperishable, incorruptible (1 Cor. 15:52-53). And God redeems the inner person, not just the outer. He changes our innermost being, from weak and corruptible, to glorious and (most important of all) sinless.

Instantly, at the last trump, we will be changed. Our bodies will be redeemed (Rom. 8:23), but more than that, we will finally see ourselves as God has made us to be in Christ (1 John 3:2). We will then see plainly the as-yet-invisible reality that God has made true in Christ.

Through Christ, our old sin nature has been defeated and demolished. In fact, it is dead. “For you have died,” Paul puts it, “and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). The sin that “so easily entangles us” and which we strive to “throw off” (Heb. 12:1) is not part of the new person God has made us to be in Christ. In Christ, we have new life.

At Christ’s appearing, we will at last see ourselves as our Father has made us in Christ. We will see ourselves as we really are, as perfect in Christ, who is our true life (Col. 3:3-4). It is for this reason, because we have already died and been raised with Christ, that we work to “put to death” whatever in us is earthly (v. 5).

We overcome Satan (and sin and death) in only one way—by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). It is through the victory of Jesus Christ, won on the cross, that we have victory over sin and death, not through our struggles against sin. Our struggles against sin are expressions of the fact that we are in Christ, that we are no longer enemies of God, but his friends, in fellowship with him through the Holy Spirit, who works in us both to will and to do God’s good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Our struggle against sin is not the cause of our righteousness in Christ. It does not produce holiness. God’s own love and grace toward us in Christ is the cause, the only cause, of our righteousness. We are made righteous, redeemed from all sin and ungodliness, by God through Christ because God is full of love and grace, and for no other reason. Our struggle against sin is the product of the new and righteous self we have been given in Christ, not the cause of it. Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8).

We hate sin, we struggle against sin, we want to avoid the pain and sorrow for ourselves and others that sin produces, because God has made us alive in Christ and the Holy Spirit is at work in us. It is because we are in Christ that we fight the sin which

“so easily entangles us” (Heb. 12:1). But we gain the victory not through our own efforts, not even our own efforts as empowered by the Holy Spirit. We gain the victory through the blood of Christ, through his death and resurrection as the incarnate Son of God, God in the flesh for our sakes.

God has already done in Christ everything that needed doing for our salvation, and he has already given us everything we need for life and godliness simply by calling us to know him in Christ. And he did this simply because he is so almighty good (2 Peter 1:2-3).

The book of Revelation tells us that there will come a time when there will be no more crying and no more tears, no more hurt and no more pain, and that means no more sin, for it is sin that causes pain. Suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye, the darkness will end and sin will no longer be able to deceive us into thinking we are still its prisoners. Our true freedom, our new life in Christ, will shine forever with him in all its glorious splendor. In the meantime, we trust the word of his promise.

Joseph Tkach

Copyright © 2002 Grace Communion International. All rights reserved. Scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright 1974, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 16

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” may include 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 (Ephesians 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—and that was God's plan all along.

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 17

Responding to grace in our relationships

How do we respond to God's grace? One way that we respond is by extending grace to others, in our families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. If we are going to live with God forever, we will also be living with each other forever. We were designed not for eternal isolation, but for living together and interacting with one another.

Life's greatest joys come in our relationships with other people. Life's greatest hurts come from other people, too. So if eternal life is going to be happy, we need to learn to get along with people without hurting them. The essential ingredient we need here is love. The most important commandment, Jesus said, is to love God, and the second-most-important command is, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31).

If we are going to be like Jesus, we need to love people—even people who are hard to love. Jesus set the example for us, coming to die even for the people who hated him. As good parents know, love means a willingness to be inconvenienced, a willingness to set aside our own concerns to attend to the needs of someone else. Love is a lot more than good feelings—it must also include good actions.

Willing to serve

God is good not because he is powerful, but because he is good. He always uses his power to help other people, not to serve himself. We praise people who risk their lives to save others; we do not praise people who had the power but refused to use it. We admire self-sacrifice, not selfishness.

Jesus came to serve, not to lord it over people (Matthew 20:28). He told his disciples they should not be like power-hungry rulers, but should set an example by helping people. "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (verse 26). Jesus shows us what the Father is like (John 14:9)—not just what he was like 2,000 years ago, but what he is like all the time.

True greatness is not in power, but in service. God sets the example; as does Jesus. The meaning of life is not in having authority over others, but in helping people. That is the only way that eternal life is going to be enjoyable for everyone.

Jesus set many examples of service. A special one happened the evening before his crucifixion. He got down and washed the 12 disciples' feet as a lesson in humility and service. "I have set you an example," he said, "that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). Don't consider yourself too important to kneel down and help somebody. Leaders in the church should be servants.

Paul said we should "serve one another in love" (Galatians 5:13). "Carry each other's burdens," he wrote, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

If we are selfish, we will never be satisfied, but if we serve, we will find it self-rewarding. We are more satisfied when we help than when we take. Jesus told us this because it is so unlike the assumptions that most people make.

"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 want to be like Jesus, if we want to have a meaningful life, then we need to serve others.

Serving in the church

One way that we serve others is by being active participants in a community of believers—a church. No church is perfect, just like no person is perfect, but the church is something that God designed to help us on our journey with Jesus. The church teaches us about Jesus, reminds us of his grace and promises, and gives us opportunities to worship together. The church helps us keep our purpose in focus.

The church also gives us opportunities to exercise patience and forgiveness. We may not like these “opportunities,” but they still help us learn to be more like Jesus. Paul reminds us of the example we follow: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13). “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Educators know that we learn by listening, but we learn much more when we participate. Jesus taught his disciples not just in words, and not just in his example, but also by giving them work to do. “He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick” (Luke 9:2). After his resurrection, he again assigned them work: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). And they learned as they went.

If you want to be like Jesus, get involved in his work. He left it to us, not because we could do a better job than anyone else, but because it is for our good. We will learn more, and be changed more, by getting involved.

Different talents

Have you ever noticed that different people have different strengths? Believing in Jesus does not eliminate our differences. Being like Christ does not mean that we all have to look alike, dress alike and act alike. In fact, God purposely gives different strengths to different people (1 Corinthians 12:11).

We are not to brag about our abilities, nor to wish we had someone else’s (verses 14-26). Rather, we are to use our skills “for the common good” (verse 7).

Some people are very talented, but no one has all the talents that society needs. God makes sure that everybody is lacking something, so that we learn to work together. “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). The church is a great place to learn to be like Jesus by serving other people.

We are to serve people’s physical needs, and also their spiritual needs. One of the biggest spiritual needs that this world has is the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The church is called to take this message to the world; each believer has a message that can encourage and help many others, and we will become more like Jesus if we become less self-conscious and more willing to share the message.

Why do we share the gospel? It is not a means of getting brownie points with God. It is not a way for us to brag about how good we are. Rather, it is a way to serve others, to help them with one of their most serious needs in life.

People need to know that God loves them, that their lives have meaning and purpose, that there really is hope even when physical life seems pointless. God has good news for them, and we share it because people need it.

Of course, it is deeply satisfying to be used by God to help someone else. Sharing the gospel gives us a tremendous sense of significance, because we are taking part in a work of eternal worth, sharing in the work of God himself. That’s part of what it means to be like God, to be like Jesus. God made us in such a way that we would find our deepest satisfactions in doing the work that he himself does. We were made for this!

Relationships of grace

We are saved by grace, not by our works. God sent Jesus to die for us, and he forgives us, not on the basis of our works, but because of his mercy. Now, if God is like that, and we were born to be like God, what does this say about our relationships

with one another? It totally transforms them!

If we follow Jesus, grace needs to fill our families, our friendships and our workplaces. Being like Jesus means that we are not always demanding to get our own way. We are not bragging about ourselves or insulting others. Paul describes the results of God at work in our lives: “The fruit of [God’s] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

“Honor one another above yourselves,” Paul writes (Romans 12:10). “Live in harmony with one another” (verse 16). “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2).

“Encourage one another and build each other up.... Always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 5:11, 15).

Husbands, how would it make a difference in the way you treat your wife? (See Ephesians 5:25.) Wives, how would it affect you? (See verse 22.) Those who are employed, how would it affect your work? (See Ephesians 6:5-8.)

We all start out unlike Jesus. We start as sinners, as enemies of God, as selfish, self-seeking people. And yet that is precisely what we need to be saved from, to be rescued from. So there’s a lot of changing that needs to happen.

If we are to be like Jesus, our relationships may have to change a lot. It won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight. It takes time, so we need patience with the process, both in ourselves and in others. We need faith that God will finish the work he has started in us.

God has the most fulfilled, most satisfying life possible—and he wants us to enjoy eternal life, too. He wants us to be like he is. God is “compassionate and gracious ... slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7).

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 18

Is Jesus the only way of salvation?

People sometimes object to the Christian belief that salvation is available only through Jesus Christ. In our pluralistic society, tolerance is expected, even demanded, and the concept of freedom of religion (which permits all religions) is sometimes misinterpreted to mean that all religions are somehow equally true.

All paths lead to the same God, some say, as if they have traveled all of them and have come back from the destination. They are not tolerant of the narrow-minded folks who believe in only one way, and they object to evangelism, for example, as an insulting attempt to change the beliefs of other people. Yet they themselves want to change the beliefs of people who believe in only one way.

What about it—does the Christian gospel really teach that Jesus is the only way of salvation?

Other religions

Most religions are exclusive. Orthodox Jews claim to have the true path. Muslims claim to have the best revelation of God. Hindus believe that they are right, and Buddhists believe what they do, not surprisingly, because they think it is right. Even the modern pluralists believe that pluralism is more right than other ideas.

All paths do not lead to the same God. The different religions even describe different gods. The Hindu has many gods, and describes salvation as a return to nothingness — certainly a different destination than the Muslim emphasis on monotheism and heavenly rewards.

Neither the Muslim nor the Hindu would agree

than their paths eventually lead to the same destination. They would rather fight than switch, and the Western pluralists would be dismissed as condescending and uninformed, and an offense to the faiths that the pluralists do not want to offend.

We believe that the Christian gospel is correct, while at the same time allowing people to not believe it. As we understand it, faith requires that people have liberty not to believe.

But while we affirm the right for people to believe as they decide, this does not mean that we believe all faiths are true. Allowing other people to believe as they wish does not mean that we have to quit believing that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

Biblical claims

Jesus' earliest disciples tell us that he claimed to be the one and only path to God. He said, If you don't follow me, you will not be in the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:26-27). If you reject me, you will not be with me in eternity (Matthew 10:32-33).

Jesus said that God "has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:22-23). Jesus claimed to be the exclusive means of truth and salvation. People who reject him are also rejecting God.

"I am the light of the world," he said (John 8:12). "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as

well” (John 14:6-7). People who claim that there are other ways to salvation are wrong, Jesus said.

Peter was equally blunt when he told the Jewish leaders, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Paul also made it clear when he said that people who did not know Christ were “dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). They had no hope, and despite their religious beliefs, they did not have God (verse 12). There is only one Mediator, he said—only one way to get to God (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus was the ransom that everyone needed (1 Timothy 4:10). If there were any other law, or any other path that offered salvation, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21).

It is through Christ that the world is reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20-22). Paul was called to spread the gospel among the gentiles. Their religion, he said, was worthless (Acts 14:15). It is like the book of Hebrews says: Christ is not just better than other paths—he is effective whereas they are not (Hebrews 10:11). It is an all-or-nothing difference, not one of relative benefit.

The Christian teaching of exclusive salvation is based on what Jesus himself said, and what the Scriptures teach. And this is tightly linked to who Jesus is, and our need for grace.

Our need for grace

The Bible says that Jesus is the Son of God in a unique way. As God in the flesh, he gave his life for our salvation. Jesus prayed for some other way, but there was none (Matthew 26:39). Salvation comes to us only through God himself entering the human world to suffer the consequences of sin, absorbing the penalty himself, to free us from it, as his gift to us.

Most religions teach some form of works as the path of salvation—saying the right prayers, doing the right things, hoping it will be enough. They teach that people can be good enough if they try hard enough. But Christianity teaches that we all need grace because we cannot be good enough no

matter what we do or how hard we try.

It is impossible for both ideas to be true at the same time. The doctrine of grace teaches, whether we like it or not, that no other paths lead to salvation.

Future grace

What about people who die without hearing about Jesus? What about the people who lived before Jesus was born, in a land thousands of miles away? Do they have any hope?

Yes—precisely because the Christian gospel is the gospel of grace. People are saved by God’s grace, not by pronouncing the name “Jesus” or having special knowledge or special formulas. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world, whether they know it or not (2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 John 2:2). His death was an atoning sacrifice for everyone—past, present, future, Palestinian or Peruvian.

We are confident that God is true to his word when he says he “wants everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Although his ways and times may often be invisible to us, we nonetheless trust him to love the humans he has made. Jesus said plainly: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17).

We believe that the resurrected Christ has conquered death, and therefore not even death can pose any barrier to his ability to lead people to trust him for salvation. We don’t know the hows or whens, but we can trust his word. Therefore we can believe that one way or another he urges every person who ever lived, or who ever will live, to trust in him for salvation—whether before they die, at the point of death, or even after they are dead. If some people in the last judgment turn to Christ in faith when they at last learn what he has done for them, then he will certainly not turn them away.

But no matter when people are saved, or how well they understand it, it is only through Christ that

they can be saved. Well-intentioned good works will never save anyone, no matter how sincerely people believe that they can be saved if they try hard enough. The whole point of grace, and of Jesus' sacrifice, is that no amount of good works, no amount of religious deeds, can ever save anyone. If such a path could have been devised, then God would have done it (Galatians 3:21).

If people have sincerely tried to attain salvation by working, meditating, flagellating, self-immolating or any other humanly devised means, then they will learn that their works do not earn them anything with God. Salvation is by grace, and only by grace. The Christian gospel teaches that no one can earn it, and yet it is available to all.

No matter what religious path a person has been on, Christ can rescue them from it and set them on

his own path. He is the only Son of God who provided the only atoning sacrifice that everyone needs. He is the unique channel of God's grace and salvation. This is what Jesus himself taught as true. Jesus is exclusive and inclusive at the same time—the narrow way and the Savior of the entire world—the only way of salvation, yet available for all.

God's grace, shown most perfectly in Jesus Christ, is exactly what everyone needs, and the good news is that it is freely given to all. It's great news, and it's worth sharing.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 19

Christian life

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, we have begun the Christian life. But accepting Christ is only a beginning—God isn't finished with us yet.

After we come to faith, what do we do? How does faith make a difference in the way we live? What does God want to do with us? How does he want to change us? And how do we make the transformation easier?

God's goal in our lives

God wants each of us to “be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). We are in the process of “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul worked so that Christ would be “formed” in the believers (Galatians 4:19). He described our goal in this way: “Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

As children of God, we are to become more like the Son of God. He is not only our Savior, he is also our example, showing us what humans should be like. When we believe in Christ, we have a new identity and a new purpose for living. Our new identity is “child of God.” Our purpose is “to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24)—we are to act like the new person that we are.

What an enormous goal! We are to be like God. God is changing us to be more like himself—more like Jesus, who showed us what God is like when living in the flesh.

Obviously, we cannot make ourselves Godlike. But God can—and he is! He does not do this against our will, but only as we agree to what he is doing. And by the Holy Spirit working in our hearts

and minds, he is helping us agree. “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

We do not need to be like Christ in carpentry skills, cultural customs or physical appearance. Rather, we are to be like him “in true righteousness and holiness.” In our morality and in our devotion to God, we are to be like Jesus Christ. That is the purpose of the Christian life, that we grow to be more like him.

We need to be changed on the inside, in our thoughts. Paul says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We are “being renewed in knowledge in the image of [our] Creator” (Colossians 3:10). When we think like Christ, we will be like him.

Submitting ourselves

God is the one who does the work, but we are involved. We can resist his work, or we can submit ourselves to cooperating with it. In the history of Christianity, three practices stand out: prayer, Bible study and worship. Millions of Christians have found that these practices (sometimes called spiritual disciplines) help us to present ourselves to God for him to do his work in our hearts and minds.

In prayer, we acknowledge our need for God. We are reminded that he is our standard, the reference point for our lives. We grow in love for God by praising his power and thanking him for his mercy. We set each day in its proper context, praising him for every good thing and acknowledging his purpose for our lives. We confess our needs and seek his help, not just for our physical needs but also for the spiritual transformation that we also need.

Prayer was a constant part of Jesus' life, and if he needed it, we need it even more. But sometimes it is difficult. We don't always know what to say, what to ask, or how to praise. It isn't easy to set aside time. But we need to—regularly.

In prayer, we not only talk to God, we also listen to what he says as the Holy Spirit may bring certain thoughts to our minds. How do we know whether those ideas are from God, or merely from our own brain? To discern the difference, we need training in the mind of God—training that we get in Bible study.

Scripture was important to Jesus. He knew it well and considered it authoritative. He used Scripture to reject the devil's temptations (Matthew 1:1-11). He said that we should not "live on bread alone"—we also need "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (verse 4).

We need the words of Scripture. God caused these books to be written for our instruction and encouragement (2 Timothy 3:16). Scripture helps change our thoughts to be more like Christ's.

The early Christians devoted themselves to learning doctrine from the apostles (Acts 2:42). We get the same teachings from the New Testament. Part of God's plan for our transformation is the study of Scripture. He doesn't force us to do it—it's our choice.

It isn't always easy—for two reasons. First, parts of the Bible are hard to understand, and sometimes the meaning is debatable. There is depth in Scripture that can last a lifetime. We understand some of it the first time, a little more the second time, and a little more the third time. So we can't expect to understand it all right away. It's helpful to focus on what we do understand, not on what we don't.

However, for most people, the hardest part about Bible study is taking the time to do it. We need to make it a habit, a regular discipline. Many Christians find it helpful to read a small portion of the Bible each day, thinking and praying about it. Devotional books are often helpful. The main thing is to form a habit, and keep at it.

Worship is a third discipline that helps us grow to become more like Christ. Jesus said that God is looking for people who will worship him sincerely

(John 4:23). The early Christians devoted themselves to fellowship, breaking bread and prayer (Acts 2:42). They gathered for worship. The more we worship God, the closer to him we will be. Our faith will be stronger when we are in frequent contact with others who have faith.

There are many other spiritual disciplines, or tools for spiritual growth. These include meditation, fasting, solitude, simplicity, generosity, service and others. In all these, we must remember that spiritual growth is not our own achievement. We do not become like Christ through self-discipline. Rather, the disciplines are merely a way to let God do his work with less resistance from us.

Jesus Christ as Lord

In the Greek New Testament, one of the most common titles of Christ is *kyrios*, usually translated as "Lord." This Greek word could refer to a landowner, a government official or another person of authority. It could also refer to God, as it frequently did in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

When the Roman emperor wanted people to call him *kyrios*, he was claiming to be "the" lord, the supreme authority—and Christians refused. Instead of saying "Nero is Lord," they would say "Christ is Lord," even though it sometimes cost them their lives. Although they obeyed Roman laws whenever they could (Romans 13:1-7), they could give unqualified allegiance only to Jesus Christ. Only he has supreme authority. He is the Lord.

Peter tells us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Peter. 3:15). As our Lord, Jesus is two things: Protector and Boss. We are to trust him and obey him. He who gave his life for us can be counted on to give us what we need.

This does not mean everything we want, and it doesn't always mean health and money. In fact, Jesus may even give us trials (Acts 14:22; Hebrews 12:5-11), but we need to trust that he knows what he's doing, that it is for our good.

The apostle Paul had many trials, but he "learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). Sometimes he was poor, and sometimes he had plenty, and Christ was his source of strength even when he was hungry (verses 12-

13). His Lord provided as much as he needed at the time. Sometimes he provided a way to escape a trial; sometimes he provided strength to endure it.

Our Lord is also our Master, who gives commands and expects us to obey. Paul talked about the obedience that comes with faith (Romans 1:5); James said that faith without obedience is dead (Jas. 2:17). In our actions, we show whether we trust Christ. He died for us, and in response, we live for him and serve him (2 Corinthians 5:15). We offer ourselves to God, to be used in righteousness (Romans 6:12-13).

Faith, hope and love

Why should we obey God? The simplest reason is: It's our duty. Through his death on the cross, Christ has purchased us (Acts 20:28), and it is only fair that we do what he says. We are children of God, and we are to do what he commands. Of course, we do not obey in order to be saved. Salvation comes first, and obedience should follow.

But obedience goes deeper than duty. Obedience should come from the heart, done because we want to, not grudgingly, because we have to. So why should we want to obey? There are three main reasons: faith, hope and love.

In faith, we believe that God's commands are for our own good. He loves us and wants to help us, not give us unnecessary burdens. As our Creator, he has the wisdom to know how we should live, what works best and what causes the most happiness in the long run. And we have to trust him in that; his perspective is much better than ours.

Obedience expresses faith in his wisdom and love. Obedience is what he made us for (Ephesians 2:10), and life works better if we are in tune with the way we were made.

Obedience also involves hope in a future blessing. If there is no future life, then Christianity would be foolish (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). Jesus promised that his disciples would find eternal life worth far more than anything they might have to give up in this age (Mark 10:29-30). Everyone who is saved will have the joy of knowing God in eternal life, but there are also rewards in addition to eternal joy.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to "store up for

yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). Several of his parables indicate that we will be rewarded for what we do in this life. God rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul also wrote about rewards: "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:8). This is not talking about salvation, but about rewards in addition to salvation. He described the judgment as a fire that tests the quality of every person's work. "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward" (1 Corinthians 3:14). If it is burned up, he will lose it, but he will still be saved (verse 15).

But reward is not the only reason we work, for we are children of the King, not employees who do only what we get paid for. Our final motive for obedience is love. This includes love for people around us, because they will be better off if we obey God than if we do not. God's instructions are sensible, not arbitrary rules. They help people get along with other people.

But most of all, it is our love for God that causes us to want to obey him. He has done so much for us, that we cannot help but be thankful and want to please him. "If you love me," Jesus says, "you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (verse 23). John later wrote, "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3). "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar.... But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him" (1 John 2:4-5).

Obedience can also tell other people that we love God. Obedience says that he is great and good and wise, and we adore him. Obedience says that God is important to us, that he is valuable, that he deserves our loyalty. Let your good deeds be seen, Jesus said, so that people can see them "and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

"Live such good lives among the pagans," Peterer wrote, "that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peterer 2:12). A good example can help people be favorably disposed to God. "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27).

Help the gospel be associated with good things, not bad. Our love for God means that we want to bring him favorable publicity, so that others will come to love him, too. A bad example will bring the gospel into disrepute (Titus 2:5). Those who flaunt their sins cannot be counted as members in good standing (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

Sanctification

Much of what we have been discussing comes under the theological term *sanctification*, which means “making holy.” Through his death on the cross, Christ has already sanctified us (Hebrews 10:10). That means he has set us apart for himself, for his use. We are holy, and Scripture frequently calls us “saints”—which means “holy ones.” We are dedicated to God.

But in another sense, we are still in the process of being made holy (verse 14). The work is not yet done. Perhaps you’ve noticed that our behavior isn’t always what it ought to be. In the process of sanctification, our thoughts and behaviors are being brought into conformity with what they ought to be. We are holy children of God, and we ought to live like it.

Although God enables and energizes this process, Christians have an active part in it. They are repeatedly told to think, speak and act in certain ways. “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12).

God “has saved us and called us to a holy life,” Paul wrote (2 Timothy 1:9). He exhorts us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, doing the will of God (Romans 12:1-2). He encourages us to “live a life worthy of the Lord” and to “please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified ... that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7). “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

To be like Jesus, to live like Jesus—this may seem like an unrealistic goal. But it is our goal nonetheless, for God is the one doing the work in us. Despite our inabilities, we can be confident that he will finish the work in us (Philippians 1:6). Although our progress may sometimes seem slow, we trust in Christ, not in ourselves.

Paul expressed an excellent attitude: “Not that I ... have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). Christ has taken hold of us for his purpose, which is that we are to be conformed into his image. So we press onward, confident in him, striving to do his will.

“One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (verses 13-14).

Press onward!

Michael Morrison

<p>We believe 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.—<i>Statement of Beliefs of the Grace Communion International.</i></p>
--

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 20

The goal of the Christian life

What is the goal of the Christian life, and how do we help one another get there?

One old catechism says that our chief goal in life is to glorify and enjoy God forever. This is true. Scripture says that we were created for God's glory and to proclaim his praises (1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 1:11-12; 1 Peter 2:9). We exist to worship God, and in order to be genuine, this worship must come from the heart. It must be a genuine expression of our real feelings. We adore God above everything else, and we submit to his every command.

How do we help people get to this point? I think we are simply unable to achieve such a task. It is God who changes people's hearts; it is God who converts the soul, who leads people to repentance, who touches people with love and grace. We can describe God's amazing love and his astonishing grace and we can set an example of adoration and dedication to our Savior, but after all is said and done, it is God who changes each person's heart.

Yet another way to describe our goal in life is to become more like Christ—and here I think we can briefly sketch some practical ways in which we can help one another as we grow toward that goal.

It is God's plan for each of us that we "be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Even in this life, we "are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul labored with the Galatians "until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). He told the Ephesians that our goal is "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

In Christ, we have a new identity and a new purpose for living. The new self is "to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). What a concept! We are to be like God not just in the resurrection, but even, to the extent possible, in this life. We are becoming like Jesus, who showed us what God is like when living in the flesh. We are not just hoping to be like him in the next life—we are already to be like him in this life.

Obviously, we do not need to look like him physically. We do not try to match his carpentry skills, his language skills, his knowledge of agriculture or Roman history. Rather, we are to be like him "in true righteousness and holiness." In our behavior and in our devotion to God, we are to be like Jesus Christ.

Be transformed!

How is the transformation accomplished in our lives? Paul exhorts, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Our new self "is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10). Both heart and mind are involved. Behavior is, too. These three work together in those who are being transformed by Christ.

The mind alone is not enough. If only the mind is involved, we may be like demons who know truths about God but do not obey him. Simply knowing the truth is not enough. We must not only hear, but we must also *do* (Matthew 7:24).

Behavior alone is not enough. If we go through the motions without really believing in God, we are

play-actors. And even if we believe in God and do the right actions, if our heart is far from God, our worship is in vain. If we sing God's praises without really feeling any affection for him, we are hypocrites.

In short, we need right beliefs, right actions, and right emotions. If the heart is right and our beliefs are right, then right behavior will be the result. We *want* right behavior, but we need to remember that it is the result of other things, and not the ultimate goal.

Now, as I asked in my introduction, how do we help one another grow toward our Christian goal? How do we help one another become transformed to become more like Christ in righteousness and holiness?

Several steps

I see three or four steps in the process. First, there is conversion. We can preach the gospel—and we should!—but God is the one who must change the hearts and produce a response. We should present the gospel message as clearly as we can, in as many ways as we can, with biblical terms and with modern terms, but we do not claim credit for the effectiveness of God's message. We just want to be faithful stewards, delivering the truth that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to rescue us from our sin.

Second, there is nurture. Jesus commanded his disciples to make more disciples, to make more students, to teach them the things he commanded. Paul instructed Timothy, Titus, and others to teach the truths of the Christian faith. Doctrine is important, and this is an area that Scripture specifically instructs us to work on. Every church leader should strive for accuracy in doctrine, as defined by Scripture.

I wish that doctrinal orthodoxy could be easier to achieve. We all need to distinguish essential doctrines from nonessential doctrines. We cannot make every theological conclusion a test of true Christianity. Even some of the "essential" doctrines are not essential for a person's salvation, but they

are essential for a church to be faithful transmitters of God's message.

Third, in addition to doctrinal nurture, there is also nurture of the heart. This is why Christian growth should occur in *community* with other Christians. Social experiences, that is, the things we do *together*, help us grow emotionally. These may be positive emotions such as love and forgiveness, or the negative emotions that result from the sin that inevitably comes with interpersonal relationships. These painful feelings probably help us grow much more than the positive feelings do as we learn to cope with them and work through them with God's loving support and help.

The social/emotional nurture cannot be done in a book—it is done locally, through small groups and other informal relationships, guided and modeled by pastoral leadership. The pastor helps people grow not by doing everything for them (even if that were possible), but by teaching and equipping members to do it themselves, for one another. The best quality of pastoral care is found in small groups. Members who choose to be in a small group are in effect choosing to get themselves more intimately involved in the pastoral care of the church. Small groups help make a church healthy.

Behavioral changes

When members are growing in doctrinal understanding, coming to *know* God more, and in emotional maturity, coming to *love* God more, they will be growing in other ways, too. Their behavior will be changing. They will be treating one another with more love, patience, joy, peace, humility and forgiveness. They will be avoiding sexual immorality, greed, and dishonesty.

The more we know and love God, the more we live like him. The heart change causes a change in behavior. The heart change is what gives room for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

These behavior changes are rooted in a changed heart, but the process is often slow. Pastors have a responsibility to continually encourage behavior changes so that Christians new and old, strong and

weak, will be encouraged to live up to the new life God is creating in them. God is working in us, but he does not do it for us. He changes our hearts and gives us what it takes to respond to him in righteousness, but he expects us to exercise the faith to *use* this “freedom to obey” that he has won for us.

People who flaunt their immorality are not members in good standing. We welcome repentant and struggling sinners, but not unrepentant, uncaring ones. Our model is Jesus Christ, who welcomed white-collar criminals and prostitutes, but did not welcome people who thought they had no need for repentance.

As we strive to imitate our Savior and Teacher, Jesus Christ, we need to look especially at his relationship with the Father, and his relationship with the people around him. His relationship with the Father was characterized by prayer and by his thorough knowledge of and reliance on Scripture.

Prayer and study have formed the core of Christian spiritual growth for centuries. They are important! Why? Not as another “duty” or legalism, but as the way of being with God so that we can

hear his voice in our lives and be reminded of our true condition: that we are redeemed from sin, we belong to him, our salvation is secure in him, he loves us infinitely, he is our ever-present Helper and he will never leave nor forsake us.

Jesus was committed to people—he loved the lost, and he criticized people who thought they were religiously superior to others (a feeling that usually stems from a works-oriented approach to worship). He was committed to a close relationship among believers—his disciples related not just individually to him as students to their teacher, but also to one another. Jesus formed them into a group, a body, that would in time give itself mutual support, a community that would reach out to others and invite them in.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 21

The purpose of blessings

How do we respond to the life God has given us? One important aspect of our response is a willingness to help other people. The good things God gives us should be used to serve others.

People often ask why God allows trials. When we are in a trial, we want to know why. Why has this pain come upon us? Why me? We may even stay awake at night thinking about it, praying about it.

But have we ever considered why God allows blessings? We usually don't lie awake at night wondering why God has allowed such a thing to happen to us. We act like it's normal for God to give us a good life. We usually accept these blessings, give thanks and enjoy them without a lot of further thought.

But we really do not deserve blessings, so when they come, we ought to ask, Why? God doesn't owe us anything. He has not promised us health and wealth. Yet every one of us has blessings, and we need to ask, Lord, why has this happened to me?

What is normal?

The parable of the fig tree in Luke 13 gives us an illustration about blessings. If we start in verse 1 we will see the context of the parable: "There were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices."

And it seems that the people assumed the victims were somehow more sinful than others. That was the thought Jesus answered in verse 2: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse

sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

The common assumption was that people got what they deserved, that pain and suffering are a result of sin. But the cause is not always the sin of the people who are suffering. Sin hurts innocent people—that is one reason that God hates it so much—so people who suffer are often suffering because of someone else's sin.

The people of Jerusalem used an example of Galileans who suffered. Now Jesus uses an example of Jerusalemites who suffered: "Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (verses 4-5).

In this fallen world, disasters are normal, and our response to them should be repentance. That is the context of the parable of the fig tree.

A tree with a purpose

Then Jesus told the parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down'" (verses 6-9).

The owner could have used the space for

grapevines, but he wanted figs, so he planted a fig tree. But the tree wasn't doing what it was supposed to do. The owner made a business decision: Get rid of it. It's just taking up space.

Jesus was not giving us agricultural advice. The parable is not really about trees—it's about people. When Jesus first gave the parable, he was talking about the Jewish people. But the same principle applies to Christians today. God wants people to bear fruit—good results. He wants them to love him, but most people are just taking up space, doing nothing in particular. But God did not create us to do nothing—he created us to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are not for our own benefit, just as fruit does not benefit the tree that produced it—good works are to help others.

God doesn't want us doing nothing. He made us for more than being selfish. We are to love our neighbors. That means doing something. It means producing fruit. It means making a difference in other peoples' lives. Of course, we can't fill every need of every person. But each of us is able to help some people in some ways. Are we a blessing to other people?

Blessings for the tree

But Jesus also offers forgiveness. The parable doesn't end with the removal of the fig tree. It has a different twist, and that's what we need to focus on now. The vinedresser asks for patience and mercy. Wait, he says, let me give the tree some special attention. Let me dig around it and put in some manure to fertilize the tree. And if it still doesn't produce any fruit, then we'll cut it down.

The vinedresser is saying, in effect, Let me give this tree lots of blessings, and if it doesn't start producing fruit after it has been blessed, then we'll get rid of it. So, if we have blessings in our lives, perhaps we should consider them as fertilizer given to us so that we will bear some fruit and do some good and not just take up space.

We have all had times in our lives when we have been unfruitful. God is patient and merciful. He gives us blessings anyway, with the hope that we

will begin to bear fruit again. We deserve punishment, but sometimes we get grace and blessings, and the purpose is that we bear fruit. Blessings afford us an opportunity to be a blessing to others.

Can't judge by appearances

If someone saw the tree being fertilized, he might assume that the tree was especially good to deserve such treatment. But the truth would be the opposite. In this case, the tree with blessings is the bad tree.

Likewise, a person who is being richly blessed may not be particularly righteous. Maybe the person is, but maybe not — the blessings may have been given because the person was unfruitful. He or she is being fertilized in the hope that those blessings will help the person become a blessing to other people.

This parable challenges some common assumptions. People don't always get what they deserve. People who have trials may have been fruitful Christians. It may be that they are simply being pruned for a while to help them produce more fruit in the future.

And on the other hand, when we are blessed with abundance, we would like to think that we are being rewarded for good behavior. Perhaps, but it's not necessarily so.

Even worse, when we have blessings we find it easy to look down on people who have trials. But the well-fertilized tree is not necessarily better than the vines that have been pruned. It may even be worse. We cannot judge by appearances.

Blessings are for sharing

It is easy for people to receive blessings and enjoy them for themselves. Ironically, though, blessings can distract us from God and into ourselves. But blessings are given to us so that we might produce more fruit, and if we don't, there is a word of warning here. Blessings are a sign of God's grace, that is, his goodness to us even though we don't deserve it, not a reward for good works. We

need to use them in the way that God wants.

Grace is given to us so that we will bear fruit for God and for other people, so that we might help others and become a blessing to others. Grace enables us to become a conduit of God's love and grace and blessing to others.

Just as he has loved us, we should also love others. Just as he has been forgiving toward us, we should be forgiving toward others. Just as he has been generous with us, we should be generous with others.

Let us think about how we might use our physical blessings for God's glory. We all have spiritual blessings, too, and we need to think about how God may want us to bear fruit with those, to use them for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Blessings are wonderful, and as God's people, we can learn how to share them with others, just as God shares his good gifts with us.

Joseph Tkach

Copyright © 2000 Grace Communion International. All rights reserved. Scriptures are quoted from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, copyright 1974, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 22

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 the gospel, 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 believers.

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 (verses 24-30). It is like a fishnet that catches bad fish as well as good (verses 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 (verse 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” (verse 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” (verse 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 (verse 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” (verse 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” (verse 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 Thess. 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 (verse 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 (verse 3). The entire meeting should “be done for the strengthening of the church” (verse 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

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 23

Six functions of the church

Why do we meet together each week for worship and instruction? Couldn't we, with a lot less bother, worship at home, read the Bible and listen to a sermon on the radio?

In the first century, people gathered weekly to hear the Scriptures — but today we have our own copies of the Bible to read. Then why not stay at home to read the Bible on our own? It certainly would be easier — cheaper, too. Through modern technology, everyone in the world could listen to the best preachers in the world, every week! Or we could have a menu of options, and listen only to the sermons that apply to us, or only to subjects we like. Wouldn't it be lovely?

Well, not really. I believe that stay-at-home Christians are missing out on many important aspects of Christianity. I hope to address these in this article, both to encourage faithful attendees to get more out of our meetings, and to encourage others to return to weekly attendance. To understand why we gather each week, it is helpful to ask, *Why did God create the church? What purposes does it have? By learning the functions of the church, we can then see how our weekly meetings serve various purposes in God's desire for his children.*

You see, God's commands are not arbitrary things just to see if we will jump when he says *jump*. No, his commands are given for our own good. Of course, when we are young Christians, we may not understand *why* he commands certain things, and we need to obey even before we know all the reasons why. We simply trust God, that he knows best, and we do what he says. So, a young Christian may attend church simply because that's what Christians are expected to do. A young Christian may attend simply because Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up meeting together."

So far, so good. But as we mature in the faith, we should come to a deeper understanding of *why* God

tells his people to meet together.

Many commands

Let's begin exploring this subject by noting that Hebrews is not the only book that commands Christians to assemble with one another. "Love one another," Jesus tells his disciples (John 13:34). When Jesus says "one another," he is not referring to our duty to love all human beings. Rather, he is referring specifically to the need for disciples to love other disciples — it must be a mutual love. And this love is an identifying characteristic of Jesus' disciples (v. 35).

Mutual love does not express itself in accidental meetings at the grocery store and sporting events. Jesus' command presupposes that his disciples are meeting with one another on a regular basis. Christians should have regular fellowship with other Christians. "Do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers," Paul wrote (Galatians 6:10). To obey this command, it is essential that we know who the family of believers is. We need to see them, and we need to see their needs.

"Serve one another," Paul wrote to the church in Galatia (Galatians 5:13). Although we should serve unbelievers in certain ways, Paul is not using this verse to tell us that. In this verse, he is not commanding us to serve the world, and he is not commanding the world to serve us. Rather, he is commanding *mutual service among those who follow Jesus Christ*. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Paul is talking to people who want to obey Jesus Christ, telling them about a responsibility they have toward other believers. But how can we carry each other's burdens unless we know what those burdens are — and how can we know unless we meet each other regularly?

“If we walk in the light...we have fellowship with one another,” John wrote (1 John 1:7). John is talking about those who walk in the light. He is talking about spiritual fellowship, not casual acquaintances with unbelievers. If we walk in the light, we seek out other believers with whom to have fellowship. Similarly, Paul wrote, “Accept one another” (Romans 15:7). “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other” (Ephesians 4:32). Christians have special responsibilities toward one another.

Throughout the New Testament, the early Christians met with one another to worship together, to learn together, to share their lives with one another (for example, Acts 2:41-47). Everywhere Paul went, he raised up churches, rather than leaving scattered believers. They were eager to share their faith and zeal with one another. This is the biblical pattern.

But some people today complain that they don’t get anything out of the sermons. That may be true, but it’s really not an excuse to stop attending the meetings. Such people need to change their perspective from “get” to “give.” We attend worship services not just to get, but also to *give* — to give worship to God with our whole heart and to give service to other members of the congregation.

How can we serve others at church services? By teaching children, helping clean the building, singing hymns and special music, arranging chairs, greeting people, etc. We provide an atmosphere in which others can get something out of the sermons. We fellowship, and find out needs to pray about and things to do to help others during the week. If you aren’t getting anything out of the sermons, then at least attend in order to give to others.

Paul wrote, “Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). “Spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” (Hebrews 10:24). This is the specific reason given in the context of the Hebrews 10:25 command for regular assemblies. We are to encourage others, to be a source of positive words, whatsoever things are true and lovely and of good report.

Consider Jesus as an example. He regularly attended synagogue and regularly heard readings of Scripture that didn’t add anything to his understanding, but he went anyway, to worship. Maybe it was boring to an educated man like Paul, but he didn’t let that stop him, either.

Duty and desire

People who believe that Jesus has saved them from eternal death really ought to be excited about it. They enjoy getting together with others to praise their Savior. Of course, sometimes we have bad days and don’t really feel like attending. But even if it is not our desire at the moment, it is still our duty. We can’t just go through life doing only the things we *feel* like doing — not if we follow Jesus Christ as our Lord. He did not seek to do his own will, but the Father’s. Sometimes that’s what it boils down to for us. When all else fails, the old saying goes, read the instructions. And the instructions tell us to attend.

But why? What is the church for? The church has many functions. We have grouped them before into three categories — upward, inward and outward. That organizational scheme, like any scheme, has both virtues and limitations. It is simple, and simplicity is good.

But it does not show the fact that our upward relationship has both a private and a public expression. It glosses over the fact that our relationships within the church are not exactly the same for everyone within the church. It does not show that service is given both inward and outward, both within the church and to the community around.

To help bring out additional aspects of the church’s work, some Christians have used a four- or five-fold scheme. For this article, I will use six categories.

1) Worship

Our relationship with God is both private and public, and we need both. Let’s begin with our public interaction with God — worship. Of course, it is possible to worship God when we are all alone, but the term *worship* usually suggests something we do in public. The English word *worship* is related to the word *worth*. We declare God’s worth when we worship him.

This declaration of worth is made both privately, in our prayers, and publicly, in words and songs of praise. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are called to declare God’s praises. The implication is that this a *public* declaration. Both Old and New Testaments show God’s people worshipping *together*, as a community.

The biblical model, in both Old and New Testaments, is that songs are often a part of worship. Songs express some of the emotion we have with God.

Songs can express fear, faith, love, joy, confidence, awe and a wide range of other emotions we have in our relationship with God.

Of course, not everyone in the congregation has the same emotion at the same time, but we nevertheless sing together. Some members would express the same emotion in different ways, with different songs and different styles. Nevertheless, we still sing together. “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). We have to meet together to do this!

Music should be an expression of unity — yet often it is a cause for disagreement. Different cultures and different age groups express praise for God in different ways. Almost every church area has several cultures represented. Some members want to learn new songs; some want to use old songs. It seems that God likes both. He enjoys the psalms that are thousands of years old; he also enjoys new songs. It is helpful to note that some of the old songs — the psalms — command new songs:

“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” (Psalms 33:1-3).

In our music, we need to consider the needs of people who may be attending our services for the first time. We need music that they will find meaningful, music that expresses joy in a way that they comprehend as joyful. If we sing only those songs that we like, it sends the message that we care about our own comfort more than we care about other people.

And we cannot wait until new people start attending before we start learning some contemporary-style songs. We need to learn them now, so we can sing them meaningfully. But music is only one aspect of our worship services. Worship includes more than expressing emotion. Our relationship with God also involves our minds, our thought processes. Some of our interaction with God comes in the form of prayer. As a gathered people of God, we speak to God. We praise him not only in poetry and song, but also in ordinary words and normal speech. And the Scriptural example is that we pray together, as well as individually.

God is not only love, but also truth. There is an emotional component and a factual component. So we need truth in our worship services, and we find truth

in the Word of God. The Bible is our ultimate authority, the basis for all that we do. Sermons must be based in that authority. Even our songs should be truthful.

But truth is not some vague idea that we can discuss without emotion. God’s truth affects our lives and hearts. It demands a response from us. It requires all our heart, mind, soul and strength. That is why sermons need to be relevant to life. Sermons should convey concepts that affect how we live and how we think on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc., in the home and on the job.

Sermons need to be true, properly based on Scripture. Sermons need to be practical, directed to real life. Sermons also need to be emotive, properly calling for a heart-felt response. Our worship includes listening to God’s Word, and responding to it with repentance from sin and with joy for the salvation he gives.

We can listen to sermons at home, either on tape or on radio broadcasts. There are many good sermons available. But this is not the full church experience. As a form of worship, it is only partial involvement. It is missing the community aspect of worship, in which we sing praises together, in which we respond together to the Word of God, in which we exhort one another to put the truth into practice in our lives.

Of course, some members cannot attend services because of ill health. They are missing out — as most of them know quite well. We pray for them, and we also know that it is our duty to visit them to make mutual ministry possible for them (James 1:27).

Although shut-in Christians may need to be served in physical ways, they are often able to serve others in emotional or spiritual ways. Even so, stay-at-home Christianity is an exception based on necessity. It is not what Jesus wants his able-bodied disciples to do.

2) Spiritual disciplines

Worship services are only *part* of our worship. The Word of God must enter our hearts and minds to affect what we do throughout the week. Worship can change its format, but it should never stop. Part of our response to God involves personal prayer and Bible study. Experience shows us that these are essential for growth. People who are becoming more spiritually mature hunger to learn from God in his Word. They are eager to give him their requests, to share their lives with him, to walk with him, to be aware of his

constant presence in their lives.

Our dedication to God involves our heart, mind, soul and strength. Prayer and study should be our desire, but if they are not yet our desire, we need to do them anyway.

It reminds me of the advice that John Wesley was once given. At that time in his life, he said, he had an intellectual grasp of Christianity, but he did not *feel* faith in his heart. So he was advised: Preach faith until you have faith — and once you have it, you will certainly preach it! He knew he had a duty to preach faith, so he was supposed to do his duty. And in time, God gave him what he lacked. He gave him heart-felt faith. What he had formerly done out of duty, he now did out of desire. God had given him the desire that he needed. God will do the same for us.

Prayer and study are sometimes called spiritual disciplines. “Discipline” may sound like a punishment, or perhaps an unpleasant thing we have to force ourselves to do. But the real meaning of the term *discipline* is something that “disciples” us, that is, teaches us or helps us learn. Spiritual leaders throughout the ages have found that certain activities help us learn about God.

There are many practices that help us walk with God. Many church members are familiar with prayer, study, meditation and fasting. And there are other disciplines we can also learn from, such as simplicity, generosity, celebration or visiting widows. Church attendance is also a spiritual discipline, giving benefits for the individual relationship with God. We may also learn more about prayer, study and other spiritual habits by attending small groups in which we see how other Christians practice these forms of worship.

Real faith leads to real obedience — even when that obedience is not comfortable, even when it is boring, even when it requires us to change our behavior. We worship him in spirit and in truth, at church meetings, at home, on the job and everywhere we go. The church is composed of God’s people, and God’s people have private worship as well as public worship. Both are necessary functions of the church.

3) Discipleship

Throughout the New Testament, we see spiritual leaders teaching others. This is part of the Christian lifestyle; it is part of the great commission. “Go and make disciples of all nations...*teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-

20). Everybody must be either a learner or a teacher, and we are usually both at the same time. “Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16). We must be learning from one another, from other Christians. The church is an educational institution.

Paul told Timothy, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). Every Christian should be able to teach the basics of the faith, to give an answer concerning our hope in Jesus Christ.

What about those who have already learned? They should become teachers, to pass the truth along to new generations. Obviously, a lot of teaching is done by pastors. But Paul commands *every* Christian to teach. Small groups provide one way in which this is done. Mature Christians can teach both in word and in example. They can tell others how Christ has helped them. When their faith is weak, they can seek the encouragement of others. When their faith is strong, they can help the weak.

It is not good for man to be alone, nor is it good for a Christian to be alone. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

By working together, we help one another grow. Discipleship is often a mutual process, one member helping another member. But some discipleship flows more purposefully, with more direction given to it. God has appointed some people in his church for that very reason: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

God provides leaders whose role is to prepare others for their roles. The result is growth, maturity and unity, if we allow the process to work as God intended. Some Christian growth and learning comes from peers; some comes from people in the church who have the specific assignment of teaching and

modeling the Christian life. People who isolate themselves are missing out on this aspect of the faith.

As a church, we have always been interested in learning. We were concerned to know the *truth* on as many subjects as we could. We were eager to study the Bible. Now, it seems that some of the zeal has been lost. Perhaps this is an inevitable result of doctrinal change. But we need to regain the love we once had for learning.

We have much to learn — and much to apply. Local congregations need to offer Bible studies, classes for new believers, training in evangelism, etc. We need to encourage lay ministry by giving permission, giving training, giving tools, giving control and getting out of the way!

4) Fellowship

Fellowship is clearly a mutual relationship among Christians. We all need to give and to receive fellowship. We all need to give and receive love. Our weekly meetings demonstrate that fellowship is important to us, both historically and right now. Fellowship means a lot more than talking to each other about sports, gossip and news. It means sharing lives, sharing emotions, bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another and helping those who have need.

Most people put a mask on to hide their needs from others. If we are really going to help one another, we need to get close enough to one another to see behind the masks. And it means that we have to let our own mask fall down a bit so others can see our needs. Small groups are a good place in which to do this. We get to know people a little better and feel a little safer with them. Often, they are strong in the area in which we are weak, and we are strong where they are weak. So by supporting one another, we both become stronger. Even the apostle Paul, although he was a giant in the faith, felt that he could be strengthened in faith by other Christians (Romans 1:12).

In ancient times, people didn't move around as often. Communities would develop easier in which people knew each other. But in industrialized societies today, people often do not know their neighbors. People are often cut off from families and friends. People wear masks all the time, never feeling safe enough to let people know who they really are inside.

Ancient churches did not need to emphasize small groups — they formed them naturally. The reason we

find it necessary to emphasize them today is that society has changed so much. To really form the interpersonal connections that ought to be part of Christian churches, we need to go out of our way to establish Christian friendship/study/prayer circles.

This will take time, yes. It really takes time to fulfill our Christian responsibilities. It takes time to serve others. It even takes time to find out what kinds of service they need. But if we have accepted Jesus as our Lord, our time is not our own. Jesus Christ makes demands on our lives. He demands total commitment, not a pretend-Christianity.

5) Service

When I list "service" as a separate category here, I am emphasizing physical service, not the service of teaching. A teacher is also a washer of feet, a person who illustrates the meaning of Christianity by *doing* what Jesus would do. Jesus took care of physical needs such as food and health. In a physical way, he gave his life for us. The early church gave physical help, sharing their possessions with the needy, collecting offerings for the hungry.

Paul tells us that service should be done *within* the church. "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Galatians 6:10). Folks who isolate themselves from other believers are falling short in this aspect of Christianity. The concept of spiritual gifts is important here. God has placed each of us in the body "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). Each of us has abilities that can help others.

Which spiritual gifts do you have? You can take a test to find out, but much of the test is really based on your experience. What have you done in the past that turned out well? What do other people say you are good at? How have you helped others in the past? The best test of spiritual gifts is serving within the Christian community. Try a variety of roles in the church, and ask others what you do best. Volunteer. Every member should have at least one role in the church. Small groups are again an excellent opportunity for mutual service. They provide many opportunities for work, and many opportunities for feedback on what you do well and what you enjoy doing.

The Christian community also serves the world around us, not only in word, but also in deeds that go with those words. God did not just speak — he also

took action. Actions can demonstrate the love of God working in our hearts, as we help the poor, as we offer comfort to the discouraged, as we help victims make sense of their lives. It is those who need practical help who are often the most responsive to the gospel message.

In some ways physical service may be seen as supporting the gospel. It can be seen as a method of supporting evangelism. But some service should be done with no strings attached, no attempt to get something in return. We serve simply because God has given us some resources and has opened our eyes to see a need. Jesus fed and healed many people without any immediate appeal for them to become his disciples. He did it simply because it needed to be done, and he saw a need that he could fill.

6) Evangelism

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel,” Jesus commands us. Frankly, we need a lot of improvement in this area. We have been too conditioned to keep our faith to ourselves. Of course, people cannot be converted unless the Father is calling them, but that fact does not mean that we shouldn’t preach the gospel!

To become effective stewards of the gospel message, we need a cultural change within the church. We cannot be content to let other people do it. We cannot be content to hire other people to do it on the radio or in a magazine. Those forms of evangelism are not wrong, but they are not enough.

Evangelism needs a personal face. When God wanted to send a message to people, he used people to do it. He sent his own Son, God in the flesh, to preach. Today he sends his children, humans in whom the Spirit is living, to preach the message and give it appropriate shape in each culture.

We need to be active, willing and *eager* to share the faith. We need enthusiasm about the gospel, an enthusiasm that communicates *at least something* about Christianity to our neighbors. (Do they even know that we *are* Christians? Does it look like we are *happy* to be Christians?) We are growing and improving in this, but we need more growth.

I encourage all of us to give thought to how we might each be Christian witnesses to those around us. I encourage every member to obey the command to be prepared to give an answer. I encourage every member to read about evangelism, and to apply what they read. We can all learn together and spur one another on to good works. Small groups can provide some training for evangelism, and small groups can often become agents of evangelism themselves.

In some cases, members may learn faster than their pastors. That’s OK. The pastor can then learn from the member. God has given them different spiritual gifts. To some of our members, he has given a gift for evangelism that needs to be awakened and directed. If the pastor cannot equip this person for this form of ministry, the pastor at least ought to encourage the person to learn, and implement, and provide examples for others, so that the whole church might grow. In this six-fold scheme of the work of the church, it is important to mention evangelism specifically.

Conclusion

I have commented at length on the purposes of the church, and I have highlighted areas in which we need growth. I hope that people find it helpful to see the bigger picture of what we are doing.

Most people who read this article are faithful and supportive. However, I would like to add a few words for people who don’t attend anymore. I cannot know your heart. I do not know all your hurts and questions. But I do know that you are missing out on a significant percentage of the Christian life. The biblical picture throughout is that Christians meet together regularly. If you are not, please consider attending again. There is so much God wants to do in your life.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 24

Responding to the church with teamwork

Sometimes Christians assume that full-time pastors serve the Lord more than other members do. Although that may be true in some cases, it is not true in all cases. Paul tells us, “Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Whenever a Christian works in a bank, he or she does it for the glory of God. A Christian who teaches school does it to glorify God. A Christian who takes care of children at home glorifies God in changing diapers and scrubbing floors. They are all serving the Lord—full-time, perhaps 100 hours a week!

Every member lives to the glory and honor of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). Every member serves him as circumstances and abilities allow. Every member is a witness of Jesus Christ working in this world—and that includes secular occupations just as much as it does religious jobs. Jesus himself served God by working as a carpenter for many years. Even today, Christian carpenters serve God in the work they do.

Members have a mission

As we know, the church is not a building. It is not a social club or a self-benefit society. The church is the people of God. That means both ministers and lay members. Now, let's consider that the church has a mission to the world. The people of God have a mission to the world. Both ministers and members have a mission to the world.

Lay members have a prominent role in the church's mission—partly because there are many

more lay members than there are ordained ministers. Another reason for the importance of lay members is that lay members are more often “in the world.” Due to the nature of their job, ministers often interact mostly with people who are already Christians. It is the lay members who are mixing with non-Christians on a daily basis—on the job, in the neighborhoods, in hobbies and sports. They set examples of Christ-like life, hopefully a life that evidences hope and joy despite the troubles of this world. Non-Christians need that kind of example.

The church meets for worship and fellowship a few hours each week. What is the church doing most of the time, during the rest of the week? Much of our time is spent mixing with the world, in our jobs, in our neighborhoods, even in our families. Most of the time, the church is *dispersed*, setting an example in the world. This is part of our Christian calling, part of our mission, even part of our worship as we seek to glorify God in all that we do.

Our weekly worship services should fill us with the joy of salvation and strengthen and instruct us in living in Christ throughout the week. They remind us of what life is for. They also give us opportunity to come together into the presence of God and express thanks to him for what he has done in our lives the preceding week. They give us opportunity to join the angelic choir in praising him in collective song and prayer. They help us seek guidance from his Word regarding how we serve him in the coming week.

Likewise, our small group meetings give us opportunity to reflect on the Word of God and share

with one another the work God is doing in our lives, so that we might encourage one another, and pray for one another that our service might be all the more effective.

All members are ministers of Jesus Christ. We all serve him. Some serve him primarily in prayer, some in helping the poor, some in their family and neighborhood responsibilities, etc.—each according to our circumstances, each according to our abilities. Pastors serve him in pastoring his flock; members serve him in contributing to the spiritual health and unity of the flock, and we all serve him throughout the week in our ordinary activities, too.

When Christ said, take up your cross and follow me, he was not referring to pastors only! We cannot pay someone else to do our Christian service for us. Pastors are to lead, to teach, to equip members for service. But each of us must do our own duty, as we have been called and gifted by the Holy Spirit. All Christians follow Christ in denying the self and in serving others. The Lord served others, and service is not beneath the dignity of anyone who accepts Jesus' death as being payment for his or her sins. He served us, and calls on us to serve others, to do good to all.

The question is not *whether* we serve Christ throughout the week—it is *how* we serve him. Whether we want to or not, we represent Jesus Christ in the office, on the highway, in our homes. Are there other ways in which I could help my neighborhood? The new covenant emphasizes what we do throughout the week—this is where doctrine comes to life to illustrate the fact that we are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. He is living in us, Paul says, and the effect he can have in our lives is limited only by the vitality of our faith in him.

Most of us are quite responsive to the will of our Lord. But many of us are not used to thinking of ourselves as ministers of Jesus Christ. Every member is ministering, being led by Christ to work and serve in the world. This fact magnifies the importance of what we do in the name of Jesus throughout the week—not just in the work we do, but also in our relationships with the people we work with.

The fact that our work is a ministry magnifies

the importance of community service. Works of service are of value in themselves, of course, but they are also opportunities to witness to what Christ is doing in our lives. Some people are better at sharing the gospel in words; some are better at sharing it through their work. And when Christians work together, they can often be even more effective than either one would be alone.

Mutual support

Throughout the week, members are at the “front line” of the church's work. We can support each other in prayer in this work. We need to be *aware* of how we are serving, and how others are serving, so that we might better encourage them. We can share our experiences and opportunities whenever we meet. Worship services can also strengthen and equip us for this work. Our success as a church is measured in large part by what we do *during the week*. When members are doing good in Jesus' name throughout the week, and when they are being energized and encouraged by what they do and hear at worship services and in their small group meetings, then the gospel is being spread.

When members realize that they are ministers of Jesus Christ, they have a realistic view of who they are, what they have been called for, and how to live. Their identity is in Christ. They come to worship services not only to give worship, but also to receive instruction that will help them serve even better during the week. Perhaps that also generates fewer complaints of “I'm not getting fed” and more thoughts of “How can I glorify God in my life?”

The pastor's job is to provide vision and leadership as he equips members for their ministries. For one thing, this means helping them connect to God, from whom all ministry should originate. This means inspiring, encouraging, comforting, exhorting and challenging. It includes preaching and administration, and it also includes training leaders for small groups and developing and mentoring leaders for other ministries.

The church, from the pulpit and in small groups, can provide moral support for the work that is being done, helping remind one another that our activities are serving Jesus Christ, and that he gives us the power and courage to carry out his will. In small

groups and other activities, the church also provides practical opportunities for skills to be developed and spiritual gifts to be discovered and ministries to be encouraged.

Pastors have a difficult job. How can members help their pastors? For one thing, pray for them. The pastors' job cannot be done without supernatural help. For another thing, ask pastors what to do to help. Be a volunteer—don't wait for an assignment. Third, help create an environment of love in the congregation. This will give "weak" members comfort and "space" while they work through some of their needs. Strong members need to assist in the ministry of reconciliation, of

soothing hurts within the body of Christ, of encouraging, comforting and edifying one another.

Fourth, many members have some pastoral skills. They can even help equip other members for works of ministry. They can invite other members to join them in their ministries during the week. They can mentor and set examples of service. In small groups and one-on-one, they can share their faith in Christ with other members, to strengthen their faith. They can pray for other members. In all these ways, members can assist the pastor.

Every member is a minister.

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 25

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

Inerrancy and Infallibility

Some evangelical Christians believe that Christians should call the Bible inerrant; others prefer to call the Bible infallible. Although in normal usage these words mean practically the same thing, in theology they are used for different concepts.

Inerrant generally means without error in theology, history or science. *Infallible* (sometimes called limited inerrancy) refers to doctrine; it does not insist on scientific and historical accuracy, since those are outside of the Bible's purpose.

Our *Statement of Beliefs* uses the less-specific word, *infallible*. On that we can all agree, since people who believe in inerrancy also believe in infallibility.

John Stott, who accepts inerrancy, nevertheless lists "five reasons why the word *inerrancy* makes me uncomfortable. First, God's self-revelation in Scripture is so rich—both in content and in form—that it cannot be reduced to a string of propositions which invite the label 'truth' or 'error.' 'True or false?' would be an inappropriate question to address to a great deal of Scripture. [Commands are neither true nor false.]

"Second, the word *inerrancy* is a double negative, and I always prefer a single positive to a double negative. It is better to affirm that the Bible is true and therefore trustworthy....

"Third, the word inerrancy sends out the wrong signals and develops the wrong attitudes. Instead of encouraging us to search the Scriptures so that we may grow in grace and in the knowledge of God, it seems to turn us into detectives hunting for incriminating clues and to make us excessively defensive in relation to apparent discrepancies.

"Fourth, it is unwise and unfair to use *inerrancy* as a shibboleth by which to identify who is an evangelical and who is not. The hallmark of authentic evangelicalism ... is not whether we subscribe to an impeccable formula about the Bible but whether we live in practical submission to what the Bible teaches....

"Fifth, it is impossible to prove that the Bible contains no errors. When faced with an apparent discrepancy, the most Christian response is neither to make a premature negative judgment nor to resort to a contrived harmonization, but rather to suspend judgment, waiting patiently for further light to be given us" (*Evangelical Truth*, pp. 61-62).

There is an additional problem with the word *inerrant*: It must be carefully qualified. Even one of the most conservative statements about Scripture admits that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions, inexact quotations, and observations based on a limited viewpoint ("The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Article XIII, printed in Norman L. Geisler, editor, *Inerrancy*, Zondervan, 1979, page 496).

In other words, *inerrant* does not mean "without error of any kind." Further, inerrancy applies only to the autographs, not to the copies that we have today. These qualifications seem to drain *inerrancy* of much of its meaning. The main point, as Millard Erickson says, is that "the Bible's assertions are fully true when judged in accordance with the purpose for which they were written" (*Introducing Christian Doctrine*, p. 64). That is a wise qualification.

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 a 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

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 26

The importance of doctrine

“I don’t want to study doctrine,” one person said. “I’m tired of doctrine. I want sermons to be short and inspiring — I don’t want them to be doctrinal.”

I can understand the feeling. Doctrinal arguments can certainly be wearisome, and doctrine can turn people off. Yet I must point out that we still need doctrine — not in the sense of arguments, but in terms of understanding our faith. A “doctrine” is a “teaching,” and the important teachings of the church are those relating to *truth about God*.

Sermons should be inspiring, but the kind of inspiration we need comes not from the speaker’s skill, but from truth about God. For example, we can be inspired and have confidence about the future because of what God has done in Jesus Christ. We can be optimistic even in a troubled world because we have been taught about Jesus Christ. Our teachings and beliefs about Jesus are doctrines, truth about God, and the foundation of all that we do.

Enduring Christian faith is not built merely on good feelings, on brief moments of sensing God’s presence in the beauty of the creation, or on a short inspirational story once a week. Good feelings and moments of inspiration are indeed wonderful blessings — but those feelings alone cannot lead us into the changed life of unity and reconciliation with God that comes through knowing and believing in Jesus Christ. We need enduring faith, and *that* is built on knowing and understanding truth about God.

That is why doctrinal instruction is important, and why Christians need more than a 10-minute

sermon once a week. We are dealing with eternal truths and ultimate realities, as well as the less important, but seemingly more urgent matters, of day-to-day life. Sometimes a profound point can be made in 10 minutes, but continually growing in understanding of who God is and what he has done needs a certain regular and on-going commitment of time.

What Jesus has done for us, as well as how that affects us and the way we live, must be explained again and again, continually, week after week, from many different angles, examining again and again the many different biblical lessons, prophecies, instructions and stories that God has given us to teach us about it. If most sermons are only 10 minutes long, we can easily see that it might take 20 years to cover all the subjects that are worth covering. But Christians need more than that.

It is easy to be simplistic in 10 minutes, to present only one side of the story. But Christian life is complex. People do not automatically grasp how the cross of Christ should affect the way we treat our neighbors, and they do not automatically believe everything they hear. Most aspects of Christianity take more than 10 minutes to explain. The sermon has to be for new people as well as for long-time members.

Need for classes

Ideally, churches would offer both discipleship classes and sermons. The classes would be more doctrinal and explanatory, with opportunity for questions and discussion. They would be geared toward specific groups, such as new Christians, teenagers, pre-teens and others. Then, the sermons

could be shorter, with more of a motivational orientation, based on a short passage of Scripture. Motivation cannot come out of thin air or from a certain speaking style — it should come from truth about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The sermon must include some solid instruction, not just clever sayings and nice ideas.

Inspiration and exhortation cannot be separated from truth and discipleship. Bible study and doctrinal study is a form of worship, and may be done in a worship service. The sermon should be used for both instruction and encouragement. Doctrinal subjects can be covered through a series of biblical expository sermons.

A biblically grounded doctrinal sermon or Bible study takes greater mental energy, both in preparation and in listening, than a 10-minute “thought for the week.” But Christians want to understand their faith, and Christian leaders and teachers should help them do so. Christians realize that faith in Christ goes much deeper than just good feelings and inspirational sayings, and they enjoy and appreciate being fed in all the good things the Word of God has to offer.

Of course, I am not advocating long sermons. There is no virtue in talking longer than people can pay attention. Some speakers can hold attention better than others, but even the best can’t get 100 percent. However, speakers should do their best to explain the Word of God, explain something of its significance, to show how it relates to faith in Christ, how it relates to practical matters of life and death, and how it is based on what God has said and done. That will take some time, and it will take some work from the audience as well as from the speaker.

How long should a sermon be? A good length is probably between 30 and 45 minutes, with flexibility for special situations. Some speakers are less gifted and may be more effective if they give shorter sermons, giving some of the sermon time to other members for testimonials, inspiring stories or scriptural insights on a topic related to the sermon theme.

In part, it depends on how much spiritual nourishment people are getting during the week. Are they opening themselves to God’s instruction in

prayer, Bible study and small group fellowship? Sometimes it seems as if the people who do the most Bible study are also the most interested and excited about listening to sermons. They have a hunger for God. Christ is, after all, the most important thing in our lives and in our future.

I am convinced that doctrine is important — even though not all doctrines are equally important. For some people, it seems, earthquakes are just as important as the resurrection of Christ. Perhaps they seem more relevant to life today, but in actuality, Jesus’ resurrection is always more important to us, even if we are in the middle of an earthquake. The doctrine of the resurrection is always relevant — especially when death is a real possibility! It is vital that all sermon and Bible study instruction be rooted in Jesus Christ.

How to avoid heresy

Christians need a strong doctrinal foundation that will help them discern crucial teachings from less-important ideas. Some Christians are attracted by New Age teachings or the teachings of quasi-Christian cults because of a lack of doctrinal grounding. We need to teach doctrine, because only doctrine will give people a defense against heresies that are preached with enthusiasm and confidence.

The early church had a great need for doctrine. The New Testament is filled with doctrine — with information about Jesus Christ and the difference he makes in our lives. But not all biblical teachings are of equal importance. For example, the teaching that the apostles numbered 12 is not as important as the teaching that Jesus was raised from the dead.

Core beliefs

The early church developed a short list of doctrines they felt were essential for new believers to know and accept. Different regional churches had slightly different lists, and in time these lists became more standardized. They are now called creeds, from the Latin word for “I believe.” These creeds were simple statements of belief. [See our website for articles on the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.]

Our church also has a Statement of Beliefs, developed through much discussion in our doctrinal

team. This provides a list of basic doctrines. It doesn't include everything, but even our Statement of Beliefs is longer than a list of what is *essential* to Christian faith. The doctrinal team has therefore developed a shorter list of ten essential beliefs, which we are calling a Doctrinal Summary. These are the core doctrines. These could form the basis for a series of sermons, and would provide a stable doctrinal foundation. Here is the Doctrinal Summary:

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.

Friends, I hope that these doctrines never become boring and never seem irrelevant. Granted, we human speakers can sometimes make them sound boring and irrelevant, but the doctrines themselves are vital for us all. These are short and inspiring doctrines. I for one am thankful that God has given his truth that is worth teaching again and again, as we follow the Teacher, Jesus Christ.

Joseph Tkach

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 27

'Be devoted to Scripture'

One of Christianity's most important doctrines is that of the authority of Scripture. Scripture is the basis for what we teach.

Faith is an important part of Christianity—an essential part. But not just any faith will do—our faith must be in something that is true. Faith must not be a false hope—it must be based on evidence. And such evidence needs to be taught. The church Jesus founded is to be a teaching church, and his people are to be people who are learning. (The term “disciple” means “one who learns.”)

People who believe in a Savior will be eager to learn more about him. They will hunger and thirst not just for a feeling about God, but also for knowledge of God that involves facts. They will want to learn. Doctrine is important—the New Testament makes that clear. Jesus told the church to *teach*. The book of Acts tells us that the apostles gave teaching a high priority. Paul repeatedly wrote that teaching was important. Teaching is an important part of our work.

The importance of the ministry of the word

After Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit filled the disciples and the church began to grow by the thousands. What did the people do? “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

There were many unusual needs, partly because some of the people had come to Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost and ended up staying for months longer than they expected. How did the people respond to this unexpected need? “Selling

their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (verse 45).

Can we imagine what it must have been like? A new community was being formed—new leaders, new followers and new structures. The old social system, like an old wineskin, did not work for these people. Many were cut off from family and former friends, so new ties had to be forged. At first, everyone's needs were taken care of informally. But eventually a system was created to meet the needs. Donations were given to the apostles for redistribution to the needy (Acts 4:34-35).

As important as this charitable work was, the apostles did not spend all their time with it. They continued to focus their attention on teaching: “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42).

Apparently the disciples delegated to other believers the responsibility of taking care of the poor. However, it wasn't long before people began to complain. The system wasn't working fairly, they said (Acts 6:1). If we had been apostles, we might have been tempted to step in to make sure that things ran right. But the Twelve resisted that temptation. They allowed lay members to take care of this need.

Why did the apostles back away from this important need? “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.... We will...give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (verses 2-4).

Note the priority set by these spiritual leaders: praying, teaching and preaching. This priority still exists. Spiritual leaders should not get bogged down

in things that take them away from prayer and the Word of God. Our primary role in the church is teaching and preaching, and we cannot do that without a firm foundation in prayer and study.

That is easier said than done. Many pastors face seemingly never-ending demands on their time. Often the requests are for legitimate needs, and each would be a good use of time—but when added all together they become an unmanageable burden. As much as pastors would like to help everyone who approaches them, they must prioritize their time and delegate secondary responsibilities as the apostles did (Acts 6). High on the priority list is prayer, and a ministry of the word.

Here I would like to emphasize the importance of “the ministry of the word.” This phrase encapsulates diligent study of Scripture, careful thought about the message, systematic teaching, and persuasive preaching.

Teaching and preaching

Scripture emphasizes the importance of doctrine, of teaching, of truth. Jesus’ commission to the church includes teaching (Matthew 28:20). A concordance will quickly show that “teaching” was a large part of Jesus’ own ministry. It is the truth that sets people free, and the truth needs to be taught. Good feelings and pleasant words are not enough.

In the early church, the apostles preached and taught:

- “The apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 4:2).
- “At daybreak they entered the temple courts...and began to teach the people” (Acts 5:21).
- “They never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (verse 42).
- “Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people” (Acts 11:26).
- “Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord” (Acts 15:35).

- “Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God” (Acts 18:11).

- “I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20).

- “He preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

The apostle Paul

Paul called himself a teacher (1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). He taught in all of his churches (1 Corinthians 4:17), and the Holy Spirit also moved him to write to many of his churches. Throughout his letters, he teaches about the gospel. His letters are examples of the teaching that the early church was built on and immersed in. These letters were read in the churches and were the foundation of faith and practice.

Paul urged the Thessalonians to “stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15). He told the Ephesians that they “were taught...in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21). He told the Colossians, “We proclaim [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone.... Continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught.... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 1:28; 2:6-7; 3:16).

Paul told the Corinthians that everything in their worship meetings should be done for edifying or building the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 14:26). No matter what spiritual gift is being used, it should be used to edify. Edification is the priority. The only words we should speak should be “helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29).

Everything Paul did was for the purpose of edification (2 Corinthians 12:19). “Make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (Romans 14:19). “Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11). This continues to be an important part of our work today. We have the God-given responsibility to teach our members.

The pastoral epistles

After Paul had preached the gospel, raised up churches, corrected doctrinal errors, and trained assistants, he passed the baton of leadership to others. When the end of his life neared, he gave instructions to the next generation of church leaders. In the letters to Timothy and Titus, he also tells us that church pastors have an important responsibility:

- “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Timothy 4:13).
- “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (verse 16).
- “These are the things you are to teach and urge on them” (1 Timothy 6:2).
- “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).
- “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).
- “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:2-3).
- A church leader “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).
- “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1).

Clearly, doctrine is important in the church. We need solid teaching, based on diligent and accurate study of Scripture. We do not need anyone’s pet theories, but rather teaching that has been tested against the ideas of other faithful Christians.

Solid teaching doesn’t necessarily make us feel good. Solid teaching sometimes challenges our comfort zones. This is sometimes what we need.

Work is required

It is arrogant and dangerous for any one person to make his or her own interpretation the final word, and to proclaim all who disagree as incorrect and therefore not led by the Holy Spirit. No, when we approach Scripture it is helpful to do it in the context of the believing community today as well as the historic Christian church. Just as we hope that others learn from us, we also hope that we can learn from what others through their Christian experiences and discussions of Scripture.

Often, one group or school of thought can identify errors that another school of thought cannot see. So with caution, we can learn from others, and in some cases, they can point out areas in which we need further research. That doesn’t mean that we blindly accept what others say. If we wanted to do that, we would find it impossible, because some ideas contradict others. We cannot believe them all!

So what is the standard of truth? It is Scripture. That is why it is essential that we strengthen our foundation in Scripture.

The ministry of the Word takes work. It takes time. Pastors need to spend a considerable amount of time studying, researching and preparing sermons that have a solid foundation behind them. Most of this work will never be seen, but it is necessary. We should have a library, but we do not bring the library with us when we preach. We do not cite every fact we’ve found. We do not quote every Greek word we’ve examined. We have to take the time to distill the message of Scripture, to point out its relevance for modern life, and to present it in an interesting way.

A pastor must be active and “at home” in his study, with reference works and technical resources. He must also be active and “at home” in the marketplace, where those to whom he ministers live and work. His role is to bridge the gap between the two—to translate and explain the gospel clearly and in an interesting, compelling way.

Pastors have the responsibility to teach the members—and members of the church have the responsibility to study. Let us devote ourselves to prayer and study, preaching and teaching.

Joseph Tkach

Five simple rules for Bible study

The Bible is a complex book, but it has a simple message. There's enough wisdom in it for a lifetime of detailed study; and there is also wisdom that beginners can easily find. Here are a few basic rules to get you started on the right foot.

If you have never read a 1,000-page book, the Bible may seem difficult and unapproachable. The strange names and strange customs might be intimidating. But perhaps you *want* to read the Bible, despite its difficulties, because you have heard that it can tell you more about the God who made you and who loves you. It can tell you about Jesus, your Savior, and what he did and taught. There's treasure hidden somewhere in this book, but you aren't quite sure how to go about finding it.

Here are five simple rules to help you:

Start

It is a big book, and nothing will change that. The only way to begin is to begin. The ten-mile hike begins with the first step. So start reading! But don't try to read it all at one time. The Bible wasn't designed for fast reading. It is not a novel, a mystery, or a thriller. Rather, it is a collection of different types of writing.

Genesis, for example, contains several types of story covering several major characters. Each requires some thought of its own, so don't be in a hurry to rush onward just to say you've done it. Take your time, a little bit each day. Structure your schedule so that you will have some time set aside for this. But where do you start?

Genesis has some interesting stories, and Exodus starts with a great story, but then the story slows dramatically, and most people lose interest by the time they get to Leviticus and Numbers, which are even slower.

It's probably better to start in the New Testament, with the stories of Jesus. Mark is a fast-moving Gospel, and Acts has a great story flow. This will then put Paul's letters in context.

Don't feel obligated to read everything "in order"—the Christians in Rome did just fine reading Romans first. Feel free to skip around a bit, reading the Gospel of Luke, then the letter of Hebrews, or whatever. Later, you might want to try

an Old Testament book, such as Psalms or Samuel.

When you begin each book, put the date on the first page. That way you'll know which books you've read, and which you haven't. Eventually you'll get to them all—if you keep at it.

You may want to get a modern translation, too. There's nothing especially holy or helpful about 400-year-old English. Try the New International Version, the New Living Translation, or other modern versions.

Read

If you read only one sentence, you might *misunderstand* it. For example, if I shout "Fire!" you might not know whether I am warning you of danger, or telling you to shoot a gun. The word needs a context before you can understand it.

The same is true of sentences in Scripture. For example, "No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you." To understand this sentence, we need to know who is speaking, who he is speaking to, and why. We need a context.

So if you want to understand what is going on, you need to read *passages*, not lift sentences off the page as if they had independent meaning. Sometimes they do, but most often they do not, and the only way to know whether they do is to read at least a few sentences before and some after, to get a feeling for what the passage as a whole is talking about. Who is talking, who is doing what, and why?

Many modern translations help us see the context by putting the words into paragraphs and giving subtitles for the major sections. These markers are usually a helpful indication of where one subject stops and another starts. The point is to *read* each verse in context, not as a totally independent thought.

Ask

Unfortunately, we don't understand everything we read. We don't understand everything in a modern novel or movie, either, but we can nonetheless enjoy the flow of the story. But when it comes to the Bible, people often get troubled when they don't understand everything. After all, it is a message from God, and we are supposed to

understand it, and we feel stupid when we don't.

OK, let's make it clear: Nobody understands all of the Bible, even after studying it for 50 years. Nobody understands everything the first time they read it. (Some people *think* they do, but they have a bigger problem!) When it comes to the things of God, we are all a little bit ignorant. So relax. If you don't understand something, ask questions. Ask the Bible. (Talk out loud if you want to, but don't expect to hear any voices.)

Ask the Bible: Who is talking here? How does he or she feel? Why are these people doing things this way? Would I probably do the same thing? Are we supposed to take this literally, or is it really talking about something else? Is it something good, or something bad? Is there anything in the text itself to give me clues to help me understand?

Sometimes the answers are clear, sometimes they are not. Sometimes we just have to write a big question mark in the margin and move onward. That's just the way the Bible is. Maybe we'll understand it five years later. Maybe a Bible handbook could help us understand. We don't know, but what we know for sure is that we don't understand it right now. That's OK. Sometimes it's just best to move on to another passage. It's OK to have questions.

Talk

Often, the things you don't understand, someone else does—and vice versa. So when we have questions about the meaning of the Bible, we can talk about it with other Christians. They may have already studied the very same question, and may be able to make it clear.

Or you might want to share something you learned and enjoyed. Perhaps you've seen a proverb that applies to a situation you are in. Perhaps you have read a story of faith that you wish you had. Or

maybe it was a glimpse of how great God is. Talk about these things, too, to encourage one another.

The New Testament describes the early church as a fellowship, as a group of people who spoke often to one another about the things of God. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings. They enjoyed what they learned, and talked about their joy.

In the modern world, Christians often talk before or after church, or in small groups that meet during the week in homes—small groups that meet for the specific purpose of praying together, discussing Scripture, and helping one another. One of these groups could help you in your Bible reading. So that's a good step for better understanding: Talk about the Bible with other Christians.

Don't stop

Since it's a big book, and since we don't understand it all the first time, it is essential that we keep at it. If you really want to understand how God speaks to us through the Bible, then you need to form a life-long habit of reading, thinking, and talking about the Bible.

We will die before we know it all—there is always more to learn. This should be a motivation to keep at it, not to quit. There are indeed treasures hidden in the Bible, and it takes patience and persistence to seek them out. Some gems we can find right away; others will come to light only after many years. There's always something waiting for us to see.

And we all have to admit it, we aren't getting any younger. We forget things. We forget lessons we once learned, we forget promises we once knew. If we aren't refreshing our memory of Scripture, then we will be slowly losing something we once had. Out of sight, out of mind.

So don't quit—keep reading the Book!

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 28

The end—only the beginning

If there is no future, Paul writes, then it would be foolish to have faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:19). Prophecy is an essential and very encouraging part of the Christian faith. Bible prophecy announces tremendously good news for us. We will find it most encouraging if we focus on the core message, not debatable details.

The purpose of prophecy

Prophecy is not an end in itself—it declares a more important truth. God is reconciling humanity to himself, forgiving our sins and restoring us to friendship with him. Prophecy proclaims this reality.

Prophecy exists not just to predict events, but to point us toward God. It tells us who God is, what he is like, what he is doing, and what he wants us to do. Prophecy urges people to receive reconciliation to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Many specific prophecies were fulfilled in Old Testament times, and we still await the fulfillment of others. But the sharp focus of all prophecy is redemption—the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that comes through Jesus Christ. Prophecy assures us that God is in control of history (Daniel 4:17); it strengthens our faith in Christ (John 14:29) and gives us hope for the future (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).

Moses and the prophets wrote about Christ, including the fact that he would be killed and resurrected (Luke 24:27, 46). They also foretold events after Jesus' resurrection, such as the preaching of the gospel (verse 47).

Prophecy points us to salvation in Jesus Christ. If we don't get salvation, prophecy will do us no

good. It is only through Christ that we can be part of the kingdom that will last forever (Daniel 7:13-14, 27).

The Bible proclaims the return of Christ, the last judgment and eternal punishment and rewards. With these predictions, prophecy warns humanity of the *need* for salvation as well as announces the guarantee of that salvation. Prophecy tells us that God calls us to account (Jude 14-15), that he wants us saved (2 Peter 3:9) and that he has in fact saved us (1 John 2:1-2). It assures us that all evil will be defeated and that all injustice and suffering will end (1 Corinthians 15:25; Revelation 21:4).

Prophecy encourages believers that our labors are not in vain. We will be rescued from persecutions, vindicated and rewarded. Prophecy reminds us of God's love and faithfulness, and helps us be faithful to him (2 Peter 3:10-15; 1 John 3:2-3). By reminding us that all physical treasures are temporary, prophecy encourages us to treasure the as-yet-unseen things of God and our eternal relationship with him.

Zechariah points to prophecy as a call to repentance (Zechariah 1:3-4). God warns of punishment, but looks for repentance. As shown in the story of Jonah, God is willing to reverse his predictions, if only the people will turn to him. The goal of prophecy is to turn us to God, who has a wonderful future for us; the goal is not to satisfy our itch to know "secret" things.

A need for caution

How can we understand Bible prophecy? Only with great caution. Well-meaning prophecy buffs have brought disrepute on the gospel with

erroneous predictions and misguided dogmatism. Because of such misuse of prophecy, some people ridicule the Bible and scoff at Christ himself. The list of failed predictions should be a sober warning that personal conviction is no guarantee of truth. Since failed predictions can weaken faith, we must be cautious.

We should not need exciting predictions to make us serious about spiritual growth and Christian living. A knowledge of dates and other details (even if they turn out to be correct) is no guarantee of salvation. Our focus should be on Christ, not on assessing the credentials of potential Beast powers.

An obsession on prophecy means that we are not giving enough emphasis to the gospel. People need to repent and trust Christ whether or not his return is near, whether or not there will be a millennium, whether or not America is identified in Bible prophecy.

Why is prophecy so difficult to interpret? Perhaps the biggest reason is that it is often given in figurative language. The original readers may have known what the symbols meant, but since we live in a different culture and time, we cannot always be sure.

Psalms 18 is an example of figurative language. Its poetry describes the way that God delivered David from his enemies (verse 1). David uses several images for this: escape from a grave (verses 4-6), earthquake (verse 7), heavenly signs (verses 8-14), even a rescue at sea (verses 15-18). These things did not literally happen, but biblical poetry uses such imaginative figures of speech. This is true of prophecy, too.

Isaiah 40:3-4 tells us that mountains will be brought low and a road made straight—but this is not intended to be taken literally. Luke 3:4-6 indicates that this prophecy was fulfilled by John the Baptist. The prophecy was not about mountains and roads at all.

Joel 2:28-29 predicted that God's Spirit would be poured out on "all flesh," but Peter said it was fulfilled with several dozen on Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). The dreams and visions that Joel predicted may not have been literal, but Peter did not press the prophesied details that far—and neither should we. When we are dealing with

figurative language, the fulfillment is not intended to match the prophecy literally.

These factors affect the way people interpret biblical prophecy. One reader may prefer a literal meaning, another may prefer a figurative meaning, and it may be impossible to prove which is correct. This forces us to focus on the big picture, not the details. We are looking through frosted glass, not a magnifying glass.

In several major areas of prophecy, there is no Christian consensus. Ideas about the rapture, the tribulation, the millennium, the intermediate state and hell are widely debated. (See our website for articles on some of these subjects.) These details are not essential.

Although they are part of God's plan, and important to him, it is not essential that we get all the right answers—especially if we think less of people who have different answers. Our attitude is more important than having all the right answers.

Perhaps we can compare prophecy to a journey. We do not need to know exactly where our destination is, what path we will take, or how fast we will go. What we need most of all is to trust in our trailblazer, Jesus Christ. He is the only one who knows the way, and we won't make it without him. Just stick with him—he will take care of the details.

With these cautions in mind, let's look at some basic Christian beliefs about the future.

The return of Christ

The benchmark event for our beliefs about the future is the second coming of Christ. There is tremendous consensus on the fact that Jesus will return.

Jesus told his disciples he would "come again" (John 14:3). He also warned his disciples not to waste their time trying to figure out when that will be (Matthew 24:36). He criticized people who thought that time was short (Matthew 25:1-13) and those who thought there would be a long delay (Matthew 24:45-51). No matter what, our responsibility is the same: to be ready.

Angels told the disciples that just as surely as Jesus had gone into heaven he would also return (Acts 1:11). He will be "revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels" (2

Thessalonians 1:7). Paul called it “the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Peter said that Jesus would be “revealed” (1 Peter 1:7, 13). John also said he would appear (1 John 2:28), and Hebrews 9:28 says that “he will appear a second time...to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

There will be “a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). There will be no mistake about it.

Two other events will occur when Christ returns: the resurrection and the judgment. Paul writes that the dead in Christ will rise when the Lord comes, and believers still alive then will also rise to meet the Lord as he comes to earth (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). “At the last trumpet,” Paul writes, “the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:52). We will be transformed—made glorious, powerful, imperishable, immortal and spiritual (verses 42-44).

Matthew 24:31 seems to describe this event from another perspective: Christ “will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.” In the parable of the weeds, Jesus said that he will send out his angels at the end of the age, “and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (Matthew 13:40-41).

“The Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done” (Matthew 16:27). Judgment is also part of the master’s return in the parable of the faithful servant (Matthew 24:45-51) and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

Paul says that when the Lord comes, “he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (1 Corinthians 4:5). Of course, God already knows each person, and in that sense, judgment occurs long before Christ’s return. But it will be then that judgment is made public for everyone.

The fact that we will live again, and that we will be rewarded, is tremendous encouragement. After

discussing the resurrection, Paul exclaims: “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58).

The last days

To arouse interest, some prophecy teachers ask, “Are we living in the last days?” The correct answer is “yes”—and it has been correct for 2,000 years. Peter quoted a prophecy about the last days and said it applied to his own day (Acts 2:16-17). So did the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 1:2). The last days are a lot longer than some people think. Jesus triumphed over the enemy and began a new age.

Wars and troubles have plagued humanity for thousands of years. Will it get worse? Probably. Then it might get better, and then worse again. Or it will get better for some people while growing worse for others. The misery index goes up and down throughout history, and this will probably continue.

But through the ages, it seems that some Christians want it to get worse. They almost hope for a Great Tribulation, described as the worst time of trouble the world will ever see (Matthew 24:21). They have a fascination with the Antichrist, the Beast, the man of sin, and other enemies of God. They often believe that any given terrible event indicates that Christ will soon return.

It is true that Jesus predicted a time of terrible tribulation (Matthew 24:21), but most of what he predicted in Matthew 24 was fulfilled in the siege of Jerusalem, A.D. 70. Jesus was warning his disciples about events that they would live to see, and that people in Judea would need to flee to the mountains (verse 16).

Jesus predicted constant tribulation until his return. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said (John 16:33). Many of his disciples gave their lives for their belief in Jesus. Trials are part of the Christian life; God does not protect us from all our problems (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12). Even in the apostolic age, antichrists were at work (1 John 2:18, 22; 2 John 7).

Is a Great Tribulation predicted for the future? Many Christians believe so, and perhaps they are right. But millions of Christians throughout the world face persecution today. Many are killed. For each of them, the tribulation cannot get any worse than it already is. Terrible times have afflicted Christians for two millennia. Perhaps the Great Tribulation is a lot longer than many people think.

Our Christian responsibilities are the same whether the Tribulation is near or far—or whether it has already begun. Speculation about the future does not help us become more like Christ, and when it is used to pressure people into repentance, it is sadly misused. Speculation about the Tribulation is not a good use of our time.

The millennium

Revelation 20 speaks of a 1,000-year reign of Christ and the saints. Some Christians interpret this literally as a 1,000-year kingdom that Christ will set up when he returns. Other Christians view the 1,000-year period figuratively, symbolizing the rule of Christ in the church before his return.

For example, the number 1,000 may be used figuratively (Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 50:10), and there is no way to prove that it must be taken literally in Revelation. Revelation is written in a highly figurative style. No other scriptures speak of a temporary kingdom to be set up when Christ returns. Indeed, verses such as Daniel 2:44 suggest that the kingdom will be eternal, without any crisis 1,000 years later.

If there is a millennial kingdom after Christ returns, then the wicked will be resurrected and judged 1,000 years after the righteous are (Revelation 20:5). But Jesus' parables do not suggest any such interval (Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29). The millennium was not part of Jesus' gospel. Paul wrote that the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected on the same day (2 Thessalonians 1:6-10).

Many more details could be discussed on this topic, but it is not necessary here. Scriptures can be gathered in support of each view. But no matter what a person thinks about the millennium, this much is clear: The time period described in Revelation 20 will eventually end, and will be followed by an eternal and glorious new heavens and new earth, which are

For further reading

Max Anders, *What You Need to Know About Bible Prophecy* (Nelson, 1997).
Gleason Archer, ed. *Three Views on the Rapture* (Zondervan, 1996).
Gilbert Bilezekian, *Christianity 101* (Zondervan, 1993), chapter 8.
Darrell Bock, ed. *Three Views on the Millennium* (Zondervan, 1999).
Millard Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (Baker, 1992), part 12.
E.W. Fudge and R.A. Peterson, *Two Views on Hell* (InterVarsity, 2000).

greater, better and longer than the millennium. So, when we think about the wonderful world tomorrow, we might want to focus on the eternal, perfect kingdom, not a temporary phase. We have an eternity to look forward to!

An eternity of joy

What will eternity be like? We know only in part (1 Corinthians 13:9; 1 John 3:2), because all our words and ideas are based on the world today. Jesus described our eternal reward in several ways: It will be like finding a treasure, or inheriting many possessions, or ruling a kingdom, or attending a wedding banquet. It is like all these things, but so much better that it could also be said that it is nothing like them. Our eternity with God will be better than our words can describe.

David put it this way: "You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Psalm 16:11). The best part of eternity will be living with God, being like him, seeing him as he really is, knowing him more fully (1 John 3:2). This is the purpose for which God made us, and this will satisfy us and give us joy forevermore.

And in 10,000 years, with zillions yet to come, we will look back on our lives today, smiling at the troubles we had, marveling at how quickly God did his work when we were mortal. It was only the beginning, and there will be no end.

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 29

The resurrection— our hope for the future

The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:13-14 that “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” In other words, if there isn’t any resurrection, our faith is pointless.

If Christianity is simply about this physical life and then we die to never exist again, then it really doesn’t matter what we do or how we live or what we believe. As Paul said in verse 19, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”

If there is no future for us, then our lives would more sensibly focus on having a good time while we can (verse 32). If there is no resurrection, then we would not be helpful for us to believe in Christ, because that might mean sacrifice and persecution. And if there is no resurrection, then the crucifixion of Christ didn’t really achieve anything for us, and we are still in our sins (verse 17).

But there is a resurrection, not only for Christ but also for us, and this is an essential part of the Christian faith. Let’s look at the significance of this doctrine—not just for the future, but for day-to-day living, as well. It is relevant every day of our lives.

Biblical evidence

The Old Testament doesn’t say much about the resurrection. Ezekiel says a little bit, and Daniel says a little bit, but our belief is based mostly on the

New Testament. Jesus talked about the resurrection in several parables. He even called himself the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). The resurrection is mentioned several times in the book of Acts, and in the book of Hebrews, but in most passages we don’t learn much except that there *will be* a resurrection.

There are two passages that describe the resurrection in a little more detail—Paul’s first letter to the church in Thessalonika, and his first letter to the Corinthians.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, Paul writes,

“We do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For 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, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be

with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

Here, Paul isn't saying much about the resurrection except its timing. There will be a resurrection, and the reason we know that is because Jesus, the example of true humanity, was himself raised from the dead. We believe in his resurrection, so we believe that he will also resurrect all who believe in him, and this will happen when Jesus returns to earth. Christians who have died will rise, and Christians who are alive will be changed and rise into the clouds to meet the Lord as he returns, and we will be with him forever.

In 1 Corinthians Paul goes into more detail, explaining not only that there will be a resurrection, but he also comments briefly on what we will be like in the resurrected state. First, he compares the resurrection to the planting of a seed. The seed looks like a seed, but the plant that grows from it looks quite different, depending on what kind of seed it is (verses 37-38).

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body” (verses 42-44).

After we are resurrected, we will be different, perhaps as different as a leaf is from a seed. The important differences are that we will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual—and we will look like Christ:

“Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an

eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (verses 49-53).

Here Paul is using a different figure of speech, that of putting on new clothes. The point that he stresses the most, the point that he mentions the most, is that we will be imperishable—our bodies will not deteriorate, and we will never die. We will have new, glorious bodies, transformed by the Holy Spirit to be like Christ.

Eternal significance

What significance does this doctrine have for us? The eternal significance is that we will live forever—and not just live forever, but we will live forever *with Christ*—and not just that, but we will have glorious bodies that are like *his*, with power and glory and life that's far *better* than what we know now.

There is a great reward waiting for us, a reward that compensates for the difficulties we sometimes have in Christianity. The eternal reward is important—as Paul said, if faith is good for this life only, then it isn't good enough. But there *is* an afterlife, there is a resurrection, and there are wonderful rewards waiting for us. No matter what kind of sacrifices we make in this life, they are well worth making, because we will be given 100 times and more in the world to come. The resurrection is an important part of this picture.

Day-to-day significance

Our belief in the resurrection has important consequences for our day-to-day lives, too, as noted above. For example, knowing about the resurrection helps us deal with the difficulties and persecutions of believing in Christ when most people around us do not. When our life and ministry runs into problems, we do not just quit. We do not say, Let's eat and drink and be merry, because nothing really matters much. No, we see that there is a future, and

life *does* matter, and we want to live with our future in mind.

The doctrine of the resurrection goes hand in hand with the doctrine of the judgment. As Jesus said, some will rise to a resurrection of life, and others to a resurrection of judgment. This says that God cares about the way we live. He has something to say about the way we live, and he will call us into *account* for the way we live.

The good news tells us how we can be acquitted on the day of judgment—it tells us we can be found righteous through faith in Christ. The gospel is built on the reality of the resurrection and the judgment. The existence of the resurrection explains why the gospel is necessary, and why it is good news.

The gospel is good news not only for the people who believe, but also for the people who do not *yet* believe. There is an *infinite* significance to the gospel we preach. We are not talking about a few years of better feelings, or even 70 years of good things—we are talking about eternal life, an eternity that is infinitely better than anything this life has to offer. So we know that what we do in serving Christ, what we do in supporting the gospel, is *worth doing*. It is important for all who need to hear the gospel.

The fact of the resurrection emphasizes the importance of sharing the good news with other people. This is the way Paul ends the resurrection chapter: “Therefore [because there is a resurrection], my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that *your labor in the Lord is not in vain*” (verse 58).

The resurrection is not just an interesting bit of trivia about the future—it has practical consequences for our lives today. It gives us reason to work, reason to persevere through whatever difficulties we might face.

The resurrection is also relevant for day-to-day Christian conduct. We see this in Romans 6: “We were 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” (verse 4). Paul explains in verse 6 that “our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.”

Paul is talking about a change in behavior. When we identify ourselves with Christ, we put to death the deeds of sin. We put them out of our lives, and we walk and live in a new way, just as Christ was raised from the dead into a new life. So our behavior reflects the death and resurrection of Christ. Out with the old, and in with the new.

In verses 11-13, Paul tells us,

“Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”

Because there is a resurrection, we are to live in a new and different way. Instead of serving the desires of the flesh, we seek to serve the Lord, because we will be with him forever. We can escape condemnation through faith in Christ—but God’s forgiveness doesn’t mean that he does not care about the way we live. He still cares, he still makes commands, and understanding the resurrection helps us walk in newness of life.

As 1 John 3:2-3 says,

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him *purifies* himself, just as he is pure.”

John goes on to say in verses 4-6 that when we live in Christ, we do not go on sinning. We quit. But if we do sin, as we all do, then we have a defense attorney standing by, Jesus Christ, and the

atonement sacrifice has already been given for us. So there is no condemnation for us, but there is still the fact that people who believe in the resurrection also change the way they live. Knowing that we will live with Christ forever changes the way we live with him right now.

Last, knowing about the resurrection gives a new perspective to death. We know that death does not end it all; we know that we will see our loved ones again; we know that life will go on forever. Hebrews 2:14-15 tells us that Jesus “shared in our 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.”

By knowing about the resurrection, we are freed from the fear of death. That enemy has been conquered, and we are the recipients of the victory that Christ has won! He has triumphed over death,

and we share in his life, freed from the fear of death. As we read in 1 Thessalonians, we do not grieve like other people do. We still have grief (and that’s OK, because death is still an enemy, even though a defeated enemy), but we have a hope that others do not have.

Knowledge of the resurrection helps us die faithfully, in hope and confidence for the future. We know that the best is yet to come. As 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says, “Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

Michael Morrison

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 30

Sharing the good news

After Jesus had been resurrected and had appeared to his disciples for several weeks, he took them to the Mount of Olives. The disciples asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). In other words, where are we now in the prophetic timetable? Are we near the end?

And Jesus answered, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (verses 8-8). In other words, you don’t need to know the prophetic timetable. What you need to do is to preach the gospel.

What Jesus said to the disciples is still true: Our place in prophecy is not to calculate dates, but to preach the gospel. We do not need to worry about the *next* phase of God’s plan—we need to be diligent about the phase of history we are *currently* in. This is the church age, the gospel-preaching age, and we need to be doing the work he has assigned us.

Evangelism is central to our mission, as described in Jesus’ “Great Commission”: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

For apostles only?

However, a few people have wondered: “Since it

was the apostles who were commanded to preach the gospel in these verses, how do we know that it applies to us today? Isn’t our role just to set a good example, and then give the gospel to people only when they ask about it? The Bible does not actually command us to preach to the public, does it?”

Some might argue that the command is given to the apostles, not to us. True, the command is directed to the apostles. They were commanded to preach the gospel and baptize believers. But there is a bit more to the story.

Let’s go back to Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus told his apostles to teach people to obey everything he had commanded them. And one of his commands to them was to preach, and as a result, the apostles taught believers to obey Jesus’ command to preach the gospel. In effect, Jesus gave a self-perpetuating command. Future disciples were to carry on the commission. Matthew ended his book with a command that his readers needed to obey.

Verse 20 tells us that Jesus promised, “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Jesus did not promise merely to be with the apostles, but with the church throughout the centuries. The commission is likewise applicable to all the church, from the earliest apostles even to the end of the age. The New Testament records the results of Christ being with and motivating apostles and many other believers to preach the gospel.

A word about ‘preach’

Before we look at examples in the New Testament about the church carrying out the

command to preach, let us take a moment to better understand the Greek words usually translated “preach” or “preaching.” Some Christians are put off by the idea that all believers are called on to “preach.” They understand “preaching” as standing up in a group and speaking convincingly and forcefully about the gospel. Naturally, very few people are equipped to do that kind of “preaching,” and do it effectively and responsibly.

But “preach” is only one of the possible ways the Greek words can be translated. One of the words commonly translated “preach” is *euaggelizo*, and it means “to bring or announce good news.” Certainly, the common understanding of “preach” is an important way in which the good news is announced. But that common understanding is certainly not the only way to bring the gospel.

Notice, for example, such passages as Luke 1:19 and 2:10, in which *euaggelizo* is translated “show” or “bring” the good news. Our concept of “preach” needs to expand to include the many other ways the gospel can be given to others. The concept intended with *euaggelizo* is that of a person or persons getting across the message of the good news of the gospel to other people. There are many ways in which that can be done in addition to preaching.

Another word usually translated “preach” is *kerysso*, and this means to herald, to proclaim, to make known. This can be done by public preaching, certainly, but it can be done in other ways too. The word used in Mark 16:15 and translated “preach” is *kerysso*.

Different translations often use different words to translate *kerysso* or *euaggelizo*. For example, in Luke 9:2, the King James Version translates *kerysso* as “preach,” while the New American Standard translates it “proclaim.” In Luke 1:19, the KJV translates *euaggelizo* as “shew thee these glad tidings,” while the NAS translates it as “bring you this good news” and the New International Version has it “tell you this good news.”

Getting the gospel to others, then, is not limited just to popular notions of preaching. On the

contrary, informing others about the grace of God in Jesus Christ can take many, many forms, and all of us are gifted by the Spirit to bring the gospel to others in one way or another.

Evangelism in the early church

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the apostles carrying out Jesus’ commission. They declared that Jesus is the Christ, that he was crucified and raised from the dead, and that salvation is available through him. It was a Christ-centered message, an “evangelistic” or “gospel-oriented” message.

But was the gospel proclaimed by the apostles alone? Certainly not! Stephen did great works in the name of Christ, and argued that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 6:8-10). Before the Sanhedrin, he forcefully argued that Jesus is the Righteous One, the Messiah, predicted in the Scriptures (Acts 7:51-52). And his dying words were a testimony to God’s forgiveness of sins in Christ (verse 60).

God inspired Stephen, and he inspired many others. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered.... Those who had been scattered preached the word (*euaggelizo*) wherever they went” (Acts 8:1, 4). Even at risk of their lives, these lay Christians saw to it that the gospel was given to others. They were simply doing what Christians do naturally. They felt compelled—led by the Holy Spirit—to tell others the good news that God had blessed them with. Luke presents the story as a good example for us to follow.

Next, Philip went “to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there” (verse 5). God blessed this evangelism by converting some of the Samaritans. The gospel continued to expand.

“Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good

news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-21). Again, God inspired his people to tell the good news about Jesus, and he blessed the results.

Paul was given a special commission as an apostle to the gentiles. But Luke tells us that Paul was not the only one who shared the good news with them. "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:34). Clearly, Luke does not think that the commission applied only to the apostles. His book serves as an example of what future generations of the church should do.

Also in the book of Acts, we might note the example of Apollos, who "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Later, Paul rejoiced that even more people were preaching Christ (Philippians 1:15-18; *kyrusso* is used in verse 15; *kataggello*, meaning "proclaim," is used in verses 16 and 18).

Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5) to do the work of an evangelist (*euaggelistes*—a bringer of good news). God gives some of his people a gift for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Training can make their gift even more effective. The church could not fulfill its mission if all it ever did was wait for people to come to it. It needs to be intentional about going out in the name of Christ and reaching people with the good news.

Personal evangelism

At one level or another, evangelism involves every member of the church, every disciple of Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, each member should become more competent with the Christian message. "By this time you ought to be teachers," Hebrews 5:12 says, implying that anyone who has been a Christian for a while should be able to teach others the good news.

God has given the "message of reconciliation" to

all who are reconciled by Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We are to encourage other people to be reconciled to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the church obeys the commands of Christ and we conduct ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27), people will indeed come to us and ask for help. This is evangelism by example, and it adds to rather than replaces our responsibility to preach. We are to do both. Part of our example should be our willingness to give credit to the One who works within us.

We are a holy people, called to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). How do we do this? In part, by living "such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (verse 12).

It is in the context of setting a good example that Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Example and evangelism go hand in hand.

In the world today, the Christian way of life stands out. When society is pessimistic and apathetic, the Christian hope and purpose are more noticeable. People need and want the peace of Christ, whether they understand it yet or not. When they ask for help, we can explain in our own words why we have hope in Jesus Christ. A good example and a wise witness to our faith help preach the good news.

Paul encouraged Christians to live "without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:15). But the Christian's role in the community does not stop with avoiding sin. Paul's very next words are "as you hold out the word of life" (verse 16). Their works were combined with their words. Good deeds go with the gospel, and the combination is an effective form of evangelism.

Prepared to give an answer

Each Christian should be able to explain the basics of the faith. Perhaps not in an eloquent way, and certainly not in an argumentative way, but in simple confidence. We know the peace of God in our lives. We know that we will be resurrected. We know that life is worthwhile. We know that our sins are forgiven. We know that God sent his Son to die for us, and that he now lives for us. We know he wants us to stop living for ourselves and start living for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Christians can't explain every verse of the Bible, but they can give their own testimony as to why they believe. They can't prove every point with an iron-clad argument, and they don't need to. What makes their testimony believable is their "good behavior in Christ" (1 Peter 3:16). When we give an answer for the hope that lies within us, the evidence is in our works as well as in our words. The two reinforce each other to make each more effective than they would have been on their own.

Not every member is equally gifted at explaining eloquently the grace of God, and not every member will do it in the same way. "Evangelism," in the

sense of continually approaching others with the gospel, is a spiritual gift, and we cannot expect every Christian to have this particular gift. But all Christians are commanded to be ready to give an answer. All of us should want our neighbors to have the blessing of knowing Christ, rather than living in ignorance. All Christians should be ready to be used by God when appropriate situations arise.

Personal evangelism should not be ignored. The Holy Spirit leads each Christian in behavior and in word. That means that each of us should be a good example in the community and be a faithful witness of the faith that lies within us. If you are a more reserved person, if religion is not the first subject you want to bring up, that's OK. Be zealous for Christ in the way God has gifted you—but always be ready to give an answer. Being ready includes eagerness, not just having the right words.

Christ's commission to bring the gospel to others is a continuing part of our work. That is why we are committed to the work of evangelism—this is one of the ways in which we obey Jesus Christ. This is part of our commission, part of our responsibility.

Joseph Tkach