

Firm Foundations

What Christians Believe

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“What Christians Believe about Biblical Authority”

Every religion has its own set of sacred writings. Each would claim to possess the truth in relation to spiritual things. What makes the Bible unique? Is there any reason to think the Bible is authoritative? Christians believe the Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice.

In contrast to the writings of other religions, the Bible stands alone. It's far superior in its content, its historical accuracy, its scheme of salvation, its textual integrity, and its influence.

The word “Bible” means “book.” It's “the” book, in contrast to all other writings. It's God's book. The Bible describes itself as a lamp that guides (Psalm 119:105), a mirror that reflects (James 1:23-25), water that cleanses (Ephesians 5:26), milk that nourishes (Hebrews 5:12-13), bread that sustains (Deuteronomy 8:3), meat that strengthens (Hebrews 5:14), honey that pleases (Psalm 19:10), rain and snow that produce fruit (Isaiah 55:10-11), fire that stirs (Jeremiah 20:9), a hammer that shatters (Jeremiah 23:29), a sword that pierces (Ephesians 6:17), gold that's precious (Psalm 19:10), silver that's pure (Psalm 12:6), and seed that's life-giving (1 Peter 1:23).

What is it that makes the Bible so special? Christians believe the Bible is God's Word, and as such it's unique in at least four ways.

God's Word is inspired (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

The Bible is not merely a compilation of religious writings produced by the minds of men. It's a book of truth revealed from the heart and mind of God.

Biblical Inspiration

When we use the word “inspiration” in common conversation it can refer to something that's uplifting or something that shows real skill. A moving novel might be “inspiring.” Mozart was an “inspired” composer. But when we use the word “inspiration” in regard to the Bible we mean something quite distinct. Inspiration is the process by which God “breathed out” His truths through human authors to be recorded in the pages of His Word. God guarded and guided the human authors to accurately write out revealed truth.

There were about 40 different human authors whom God used in this process of inspiration. They spanned a time period of over 1500 years, writing in three different languages (Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament, Greek in the New Testament). These human authors represented a variety of occupations including shepherds, soldiers, princes, priests, governors, kings, and fishermen. Yet God, through inspiration, guided their writings to include the distinct human personalities of the writers along with the precise truths of God. In the midst of all this diversity the Bible has a single, common theme—the person and work of Jesus Christ. This makes the Bible unique.

Second Timothy 3:14-17 says that “all” Scripture is inspired by God, or God-breathed. This means that the entire Bible is inspired. All of it is God's truth. This concept is sometimes called “plenary (or complete) inspiration.” Another related concept

is “verbal inspiration.” This means God inspired not just the concepts taught in the Bible, but the very words themselves. Each word is precious to God. Each word communicates to us the mind of God. Each word is worthy of our examination.

Moral Absolutes

Because the Bible is the inspired Word of God it speaks with authority. In our world, where truth is generally considered to be relative, it’s good to know that there’s an absolute standard of right and wrong. The Bible speaks about moral absolutes. Since God is unchanging His standards of holiness are unchanging. Therefore, we find the absolute base for morality firmly established in the Bible.

God’s Word is inerrant (Matthew 5:17-19).

Closely connected with the doctrine of inspiration is the doctrine of inerrancy. The Bible, because it’s God-breathed, is without error. When God guided the human authors to record His truth He enabled them to do so without historical, scientific, or spiritual errors. All of God’s Word is inspired. All of God’s Word is inerrant.

The Testimony of Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ was a great teacher. He also proved by His resurrection from the dead that His claims to deity were true. Therefore, what he says about the Bible is definitive. In Matthew 5:17-19 Jesus said that the smallest letter or even the smallest part of a letter of God’s Word would not pass away before all was fulfilled. His endorsement of the inerrancy of the Bible is significant. (See also John 10:35). Furthermore, Jesus frequently quoted from the Bible as an authoritative book.

Tests of Biblical Reliability

Skeptics might deny the validity of Christ’s claims, and therefore discount His teachings about the Bible. But there are other tests of biblical reliability, tests that further confirm the inerrancy of God’s Word. First of all, it’s important to realize that the Bible itself claims divine authorship. Over 3800 times the Bible uses words like “thus says the Lord.” In addition, the Bible is brutally honest when it comes to describing personal character. There’s no attempt to hide the failures of God’s people through the ages. This level of integrity helps substantiate the Bible’s claims to be authoritative. Also, there are no true contradictions in the Bible. What at first may appear to be discrepancies in some isolated cases find resolution upon more detailed study. These “internal” tests point to biblical reliability.

There are also certain external tests in confirming the reliability of the Bible. The fact that people have attempted unsuccessfully for years to destroy the Bible points to its supernatural origin. The Bible is indestructible. The Bible also changes lives, often in remarkable ways. The Bible has universal appeal; it’s not limited in its relevance to a certain time or culture. In addition, the Bible has been circulated throughout the world in

hundreds of languages. It must be a unique book. The Bible is accurate historically and scientifically when it speaks of issues in these fields of study. No true fact of science contradicts the Bible. Many Bible prophecies have already been fulfilled, verifying the reliability of this book. And the testimony of the human authors of the Bible, many of whom died as martyrs, along with the testimony of the early church confirm that the Bible is a reliable book.

In addition to these internal and external tests, the Bible passes with flying colors the tests of time. The transmission of the Bible down through the centuries shows how special this book is. The accuracy involved in the copying of God's Word far surpasses any other book of antiquity. The great number of ancient manuscripts of the Bible, in contrast to other early writings, also shows how highly people have valued the Bible. The Bible is inerrant, reliable in all it teaches and affirms.

The Question of Contradictions

Although there have been many attempts to find contradictions in the Bible, any such apparent discrepancy has been resolved through further study and reflection. There are no contradictions in the Bible. Let me give you one example. In Matthew 20:29-34 we read that Jesus healed two blind men while he was leaving Jericho. But in Mark 10:46-52 we read of just one blind man and that he called out to Jesus as Jesus was entering Jericho. However, even a cursory review of these texts, along with some careful reflection, would help us to conclude that one blind man called out to Jesus as He entered Jericho, but when Jesus left Jericho this blind man had rounded up another blind friend to help gain Jesus' attention. Jesus then healed them both. The Bible is reliable. It's inerrant. It's the Word of God.

God's Word is sufficient (2 Peter 1:3-4, 19-21).

Even though a person may accept the inerrancy and authority of the bible, it would still be possible to seek additional authoritative truth outside of God's Word. Sometimes Christians look to experience to form their beliefs rather than relying on the sufficiency of the Bible.

Sufficient Revelation

Peter wrote that the Scriptures are the tool by which God has granted all we need to know for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3-4, 19-21). When it comes to spiritual truth, we need go no further than the Bible. In fact, we could invest an entire lifetime in simply studying and applying the recorded Word of God and not begin to run short of material. God's Word is sufficient.

A Complete Bible

The Bible consists of 66 books which compose our Old and New Testaments. It's a complete revelation from God. But how did these books become a part of the Bible?

There had to be a standard by which ancient writings were considered to be inspired. This standard (called a “canon”) included a careful evaluation of the authorship, claims, content, relevance, and acceptance of these writings. Early church leaders didn’t designate certain writings as being inspired; they carefully identified those writings that were already inspired by God. With God’s guidance the canon of Scripture became clearly and widely accepted by the church. We can be confident that we have in our Bibles only those books that were inspired by God and that no inspired writing escaped the attention of God’s people. There are no lost books of the Bible. All we have is the entire Word of God, and it’s sufficient for our lives.

The Role of Experience

Human experience is a significant factor in our lives. However, we don’t evaluate the legitimacy of beliefs on the basis of experience. Experience is too subjective. The written word of God is objective. It’s the only valid rule of faith and practice. When our feelings or our experiences seem to dictate against the clear teachings of God’s Word, we must be careful to let the Bible be our base of authority.

God’s Word is relevant (Hebrew 4:12-13)

It’s essential for us to recognize how relevant the Bible is to our lives today. Although it was written centuries ago, its truth permeates all time. Hebrew 4:12-13 says the Bible pierces the human heart to discern right from wrong. It finds ready application in our lives. In the pages of God’s Word we can find practical instruction in such modern problems as money management, marital unfaithfulness, interpersonal conflict resolution, business practices, and a host of other topics.

The Bible’s Influence

No student of history can deny the influential effects of the Bible. Like no other book, the Bible has changed lives, challenged empires, influenced language and culture, and provided hope. Its message has turned countless millions from lives of depravity and despair to upright lifestyles and personal peace.

Interpreting the Bible for Today

To fully appreciate the Bible’s relevance in our lives today we must take care to interpret its words accurately. Anyone can twist the words of Scripture to make them support the most bizarre doctrines.

When we interpret the Bible we must remember why God gave us the Bible. He gave us the Bible to communicate His truths to our minds and hearts. He did not give us the Bible to confuse us, but to enlighten us. Therefore, we would expect to understand God’s Word in its normal, literal sense. To interpret the Bible figuratively will lead us to draw our own conclusions about truth. But to interpret God’s Word in its plain and ordinary sense will help us to really know the mind of God. A simple rule is to always

take the bible in its most obvious meaning unless there is strong evidence to interpret it in another way. Even then, a careful student of the Bible will seek confirmation from other mature Christians or written commentaries that can help us keep from manipulating God's relevant Word.

Illumination and Application

God will help us to understand His Word if we are ready to obey it. Illumination refers to God's work of applying the truths of His Word to our specific life circumstances. When we study the Bible and pray for God's direction, He will guide us to apply His Word in a way that will satisfy His holiness and our spiritual hunger. Too many Christians go to church or Bible study classes with no intention of letting God's Word make any changes in their lives. But God wants you to take His Word to heart. His Word is relevant to our lives.

“What Christians Believe about the Existence of God”

Fundamental to the Christian faith is belief in the existence of God. Hebrews 11:6 says those who seek to find spiritual peace must first of all be convinced that God exists. Once we accept the fact of God’s existence we can come to know Him better through His Word. In the Bible we find that God is our Lord, our King, our Shepherd, our Rock, our Fortress, our Shield, and our Father. He’s the Creator of the universe and He’s intimately interested in the lives of His people. Yet there’s a wide variety of opinions in the world today concerning the nature and existence of God. What is God like? Can we know Him? These questions find authoritative responses in the Bible.

The God of the Bible is a self-existent and personal God (Exodus 3:1-15).

When Moses met with God at the burning bush he learned two valuable truths about God. First of all, he received direct confirmation of the existence of God. In fact, God described Himself to Moses as the great “I Am,” the God who exists in and of Himself. God isn’t dependent on anyone or anything else for His existence. He’s self-existent. Second, Moses learned that God isn’t merely a supernatural force void of personality. God is a personal God. He thinks, feels, and acts. He’s concerned about the well being of His people. He interacts with people on a personal level and seeks personal faith in men and women everywhere.

God exists.

To state that God exists can lead us into the philosophical world. Humankind’s attempt to prove or disprove the existence of God through rational arguments fails to offer conclusive evidence. Those who claim there is no God (atheism) have no verifiable evidence for that claim. Those who think of God as an unknowable entity likewise cannot verify their beliefs. But the Christian finds verification for faith in God embedded in God’s revelation to us. He exists. He’s left His fingerprints on this world. He has spoken.

Without offering conclusive proof for God’s existence, there are several lines of reason that support the Christian’s belief in God. For example, when we try to explain the universe we often think in terms of cause and effect. One thing produced the next and so on. But when we push further back in our minds we eventually come to the ultimate, uncaused cause of the universe. There must be a beginning cause, God.

Order and design in our universe also point to the existence of a highly intelligent Creator. The intricacies of the created world point to God.

The fact that there’s a universal concept of a divine being points to the existence of God. If we were the product of purely natural forces, it would seem unlikely that all people in all cultures in all times would hold to a concept of a supreme being. God must exist.

Furthermore, the fact that there exists a foundational moral concept of right and wrong among a diverse spectrum of people demonstrates that there is a holy God.

All people experience some kind of guilt regardless of education or environment. There's a deeply seated sense that some things stand in violation to a perfect standard. That perfect standard rests in God.

We can know God.

Since God exists, it's either possible to know Him or it's impossible to know Him. Those who believe in a god we cannot know are called agnostics. But their position is without verification. The God of the Bible is a God who can be known. Within every human heart is a yearning to connect with a higher power. This sense of worship, exhibited in many ways in our world, shows that we expect to be able to know God. In fact, God has made it possible for us to know Him. He has revealed Himself.

God is personal.

To deny God's personality is to consider Him a mere force, for good or for evil. This is the view of pantheism; god is in everything and everything is god. But the God of the Bible is a personal God. The fact that we, His creation, have personality should be enough to convince us of His personality. Could an impersonal force create personality?

God has personality. Personality is generally defined as the possession of intellect, emotion, and will. It's personality that separates us from animal life. God, too, is a thinking, feeling, and acting being. He interacts with us at a personal level.

God has revealed Himself.

To believe that a personal God exists and yet has not revealed Himself to His creation is termed deism. According to this view God set the creation in motion and then stepped out of the picture to let it run its course. Such a view, like all the others, defies any verification. It's untrustworthy.

God has indeed revealed Himself to us. He's shown us His power through creation around us. He's spoken to us through His Word. He's revealed Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. Christians believe that God didn't abandon His creation. In fact, God has entered into space and time and history on many occasions, the most notable being the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God. He came in human form to show us God. He rose from the dead to prove His claim to deity. God has entered the human arena. He is not silent.

**The God of the Bible is a
transcendent and immanent God (Acts 17:24-27).**

When the apostle Paul stood before the philosophically minded men of Athens he described God as both transcendent and immanent. He said that God is completely independent of His creation and yet God calls men and women to seek Him at a personal level.

These two concepts—transcendence and immanence—at first glance seem to be poles apart. Transcendence basically means that God is absolutely distinct from His creation and is not bound to it in any way. He's well beyond our reach. Yet immanence means that God is intimately active in His creation and close at hand to interact with His people. Both concepts are true.

God's Attributes

When we study the attributes of God, those characteristics of God that make Him distinct from all other beings, we discover both His transcendence and His immanence. As a transcendent being, God is unchanging, all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere-present, sovereign over His creation, unlimited, and eternal. These attributes mark God off as completely separate from us.

Yet, other attributes of God are characteristics that even we are capable of possessing, though in a much more limited way. God is holy, just, gracious, merciful, faithful, and loving. We likewise are to exhibit these characteristics. In this way, through this common ground, God touches our lives. He's immanent. He's active in our lives. He's present with us.

Creation

God is the Creator and we are His creatures. As Creator, God is not bound by His creation. He's absolutely independent from creation. He stands, so to speak, outside of His creation. But because God is gracious and loving He's intimate with His creation. He penetrates creation and is actively present in it. He sustains creation, seeks to draw sinful people to Himself, and cares deeply for this world.

The Incarnate God

The greatest way in which God has demonstrated His immanence is through the incarnation. Through the incarnation God became a man. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. He came to show us His love, His holiness, His justice, and His grace.

**The God of the Bible is a
holy and just God (Revelation 15:1-4).**

Two great attributes of God that people sometimes overlook are His holiness and His justice. We tend to hear people emphasize the love of God and then question the suffering that takes place in the world. In Revelation 15:1-4 we get a brief glimpse into heaven where both God's holiness and His justice stand as worthy reasons for our adoration of God.

The Holiness of God

God is holy. This means that God is completely set apart from evil. He isn't the source of sin. He doesn't cause others to sin. He cannot tolerate sin. It's against the very character of God to allow sin in His presence.

Sin and Judgment

So where did sin come from? Sin is the result of willful choices made by free beings. Humankind chose to disregard God's holiness and live unto itself. We make that same choice every day. We've chosen a path that's contrary to God. Since it's against the very character of God to tolerate sin, He cannot simply overlook our disobedience. Our disobedience must be judged. In His grace, God warned about the consequence of sin—death. Judgment is inevitable. Of course, Jesus Christ took our judgment on the cross. Therefore, it's possible for us to enter the protective love of God through Jesus Christ. But judgment was necessary.

The Problem of Pain

When we realize that God is absolutely holy and just we have a basis for understanding the problem of pain. The suffering that takes place in this world isn't something that delights the heart of God. It grieves Him deeply. Suffering is the direct or indirect result of sin in every case. Apart from sin there would be no suffering. God could eliminate pain, but to do so He would have to prematurely take our lives. Such an act would be the least gracious of His options. Instead God has chosen to allow pain and suffering so that men and women would have ample opportunity to turn to Him for grace and eternal life. Otherwise we could expect only eternal pain, which is the just penalty for our sins.

When Life Isn't Fair

The justice of God also reminds us that God is completely fair. There's no injustice in Him. Yet in this world we often find injustice. The strong overpower the weak. The ungodly prosper while the Christian struggles through life. The innocent are victims of the greedy. These things go on constantly, often unchecked.

When we understand the justice of God we realize that He's completely fair in the big picture of eternity. Those things that are unfair in this life will find equity in eternity. God isn't limited to a human lifetime to measure out His justice. We can be sure His justice will be satisfied.

**The God of the Bible is a
gracious and loving God (Ephesians 2:4-7).**

Complementing God's attributes of holiness and justice are His grace and love. Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Love is His unconditional compassion and care. These two attributes go hand in hand, as we see in Ephesians 2:4-7.

God loves you.

Because of sin, everyone deserves isolation from God and eternal judgment. But God loves us. He cares for every individual with a deep and lasting love. He desires to shower us with His favor. He craves our fellowship, not isolation from His presence. God showed us His love through His plan for reaching and redeeming us.

The Grand Scheme of Redemption

Before He created the world God knew that humankind would stand in need of help. Because of our sin we would be hopelessly lost without God's intervention. So God planned the only way possible to release us from the penalty for our sins and still maintain His holiness and justice. He planned that His Son would carry our penalty Himself. That's why Jesus Christ came to earth, why He suffered and died on the cross, and why He rose from the grave. This is God's grand scheme of redemption. By it He bought us back from the slavery of sin, making it possible for us to enter into fellowship with God again for all eternity.

By Grace through Faith

This grand scheme of redemption in no way violates our God-created privilege of free choice. God never forces anyone to accept His Son. Instead, God has freely offered salvation to everyone. We enter into forgiveness and fellowship with God only when we accept by faith His Son, Jesus Christ. Faith means to believe (mental assent) and to receive (place full trust in) Jesus. It's here that many people miss the point of Christianity. It's not enough to simply know the facts about God's love and Christ's death. We must activate a relationship with God through personal faith. Then and only then can we begin to enjoy peace with Almighty God.

“What Christians Believe about the Trinity”

Science can describe gravity, but science can't explain gravity. We know that gravity is one of the greatest forces in the universe. Gravity keeps us from drifting off planet Earth into outer space. Gravity keeps the solar system in place, providing the necessary force that sustains the planets in their orbits around the sun. Gravity introduces us to the pavement when we stumble and fall. We can describe gravity, but we can't explain it. Why do celestial bodies attract? Why is there a constant tug between us and our planet? Gravity is one of the mysteries of God's creation.

When it comes to our attempts to explain God we find ourselves equally at a loss. We can describe God. But God is far more complex than our limited minds can comprehend. After all, who would want to worship a God who is simpler than our own thoughts? We would expect that God is far greater than His creation and is therefore beyond the full understanding of even His most intelligent creatures.

When Christians describe God we describe Him as existing in trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is descriptive, but a complete understanding of the triune nature of God is beyond our mental capabilities. There's nothing else in the whole universe that's comparable to the trinity. Any “illustration” of the trinity falls far short of the true nature of the Godhead. Nevertheless, the Bible does give us enough information to formulate an adequate understanding of the trinity. By “trinity” we mean a “tri-unity,” a “three-in-one” concept of God.

Belief in the tri-unity of God affirms the oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Throughout the Bible we read that there is only one God. There is no other. Deuteronomy 6:4 is a key verse on the oneness of God. The Lord is “one,” a unity of divine essence. Jesus quoted this very verse in Mark 12:29, indicating His own affirmation of this essential truth.

God is one.

Most of the nations surrounding ancient Israel held to polytheistic beliefs. They believed in a vast array of gods that were represented by various aspects of their lives—the sun, the changing seasons, life, death, and so on. But Judaism held firmly to the belief in one God. Christianity likewise embraces these roots of monotheism.

The Origin of Monotheism

Often religious historians will describe monotheism as the culmination of an evolution of religious beliefs. They assume that early humankind worshiped multiple gods and that monotheism is a late arrival on the religious scene. However, an equally valid view of religious development comes from the Bible's description of humankind's departure from truth. Accordingly, from the beginning of creation people held to a monotheistic understanding of God. Sin, however, distorted that accurate concept of God

and people began to attribute divine qualities to numerous objects. Only in Judaism, and subsequently in Christianity, did the original and accurate view of the oneness of God survive.

A Complex God

To say that God is one is to affirm the complex nature of God. He is beyond our full comprehension. As we will see, three distinct persons are called “God” in the Bible, yet there is only one God. Therefore, the God of the Bible must be complex. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one in their essential divine nature. They are not one simply in their purpose or in their interests, as we might describe a group of people being of one mind. They are one in their very essence. Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30).

Belief in the tri-unity of God affirms the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17).

While Christians affirm the oneness of God, it’s also true that the three persons of the triune Godhead are distinct persons. For example, in Matthew 3:16-17 we see Jesus (God the Son) being baptized while God the Father speaks His blessing from heaven and God the Holy Spirit descends from heaven to visibly endorse the testimony of Jesus.

Three Distinct Persons

Human language is limited when it comes to describing the complexities of deity. Historically, Christians have described God as one in “essence” (that which is essential to deity), yet three in “persons” (that which is distinctive regarding individuals). These distinctions appear in the Old and New Testaments alike. We read that God spoke with Himself, conferring within the triune Godhead at the time of creation (Genesis 1:26), at the fall of humankind (Genesis 3:22), at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7), and at the call of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8).

In the New Testament there are frequent references to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as distinct persons. Luke 1:35 describes the role of the Father and the Holy Spirit in the incarnation of the Son. In John 14:16-17 Jesus describes His promise to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit into the lives of believers. In 2 Corinthians 13:14 the apostle Paul describes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct.

Three Distinct Roles

Since the Godhead consists of three distinct persons it’s not surprising to learn that these three persons have distinct roles. In fact, there’s evidence in the Bible that a functional order exists within the trinity. This doesn’t imply an inferiority of essence, but simply a subordination of roles. For example God the Son willingly subordinates Himself to the Father, seeking to bring glory to the Father (John 14:13). God the Holy Spirit willingly subordinates Himself to the Son, seeking to bring glory to the Son (John

16:14). In regard to our salvation we read of the trinity's distinctive activities in Ephesians 1:3-14. God the Father planned our salvation from eternity past. God the Son provided for our salvation by dying on the cross. It's inaccurate to say that the Father redeemed us, but it's true that God (the Son) redeemed us. God the Holy Spirit applies salvation to the believer's life, regenerating us. Each role is necessary yet distinct.

Belief in the tri-unity of God affirms the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

When Jesus prepared to return to heaven He gave His disciples the Great Commission. In that final directive for the church Jesus said to baptize believers in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). This verse confirms the oneness of God while highlighting the divine nature of the three persons of the Godhead. In fact, there are a number of Bible passages that describe the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit in terms of deity.

All three share divine attributes.

The attributes of God, those qualities that set God apart from all others, are shared by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each possesses omniscience (Romans 11:33; Colossians 2:2-3; 1 Corinthians 2:10-12), omnipotence (Matthew 19:26; Revelation 1:8; Romans 15:18-19), and omnipresence (1 Kings 8:27; Matthew 18:20; Psalm 139:7-10). Each is characterized by eternality (Deuteronomy 33:27; John 1:1; Hebrews 9:14) and truth (John 3:33; John 14:6; John 16:13). Likewise, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each described as "holy" (John 17:11; Luke 1:35; Luke 11:13).

All three share divine activities.

There are certain activities that only God can perform. Since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit each participated in such activities each must be fully divine. These activities include creation (Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Genesis 1:2), inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16; Colossians 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21), salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 3:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 2:13), and the resurrection (Romans 6:4; John 2:19-21; Romans 8:11).

All three share divine associations.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are associated with deity in the Bible. Each is called "God" (John 6:27; Romans 1:7; John 1:1; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; Acts 5:3-4), and each is honored as God (John 4:23; John 9:38; Hebrews 10:29). These facts confirm the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the terms "Father" and "Son" in referring to the first and second members of the trinity are misconstrued to imply an origin for God the Son. But the Son was not created by the Father. He is eternally the Son of God. The term "Son" is a human term of relationship that implies much more than origin. It implies intimacy and a

shared essence. The “Father” and the “Son” are intimately related within the Godhead. Sonship, therefore, means that Jesus Christ is one with the Father.

Belief in the tri-unity of God affirms our practical relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 15:26).

Since there’s only one God and since three distinct persons are described as God in the Bible, the only possible conclusion we can draw is that our God exists in trinity. He is one in essence yet exists as three distinct persons. This doctrine is not simply a theological exercise. The doctrine of the trinity has practical ramifications.

Acceptance of the trinity prevents heretical extremes.

The early church wrestled with describing the triune nature of God. Much of the conflict over this doctrine came as a result of heretical teachings in the church. Some of these heretical teachings are present today in various forms. One heresy in the early church taught that God existed in three modes—at some times He was the Father, at other times the Son, and at still other times He functioned in the mode of the Spirit. This concept upheld the oneness of God at the expense of the distinctions of the members of the Godhead. Another heresy, Arianism (named after its founder, Arian) taught that Christ was of a different substance or essence than the Father. Christ was less than God. Several early church councils met to work out an accurate description of the triune nature of God. Tertullian (A.D. 160-220) first used the term “trinity” to describe the triune nature of God. The Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) denied Arianism and upheld the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whenever we dilute either the oneness of God or the deity of the three persons of the Godhead we run the risk of dishonoring God and His Word.

Acceptance of the trinity gives us assurance of salvation.

The triune nature of God is extremely significant when it comes to our salvation. The deity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is essential if His sacrifice on the cross is to have any value in removing our sins. A mere human death could not effectively take away sin. At the same time we find that the Holy Spirit confirms within our hearts the reality of our saved position with the Father based on faith in the Son.

Acceptance of the trinity revolutionizes our prayer life.

When we pray to God the Father we have access to Him only through a mediator. That mediator is His Son, Jesus Christ. Without the divine Son of God we could have no effective prayer life. In addition, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to help us pray effectively. When we pray we’re conscious of the triune nature of God.

Acceptance of the trinity provides us with a base for spiritual power.

John 15:26 says that Jesus would send the Spirit (the “Counselor” or “Advocate”) from the Father to live within believers. There’s a dynamic relationship between God and God’s people because of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit empowers us to serve God and live holy lives. Apart from the divine power of the Holy Spirit we would still be inadequate when it comes to living lives that are pleasing to God. The Holy Spirit is our source of power for living.

The triune God is awe-inspiring. He’s beyond our limited abilities to comprehend yet personal enough for us to love, enjoy, and worship for all eternity. As Christians we praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We worship the triune God.

“What Christians Believe about the Deity of Jesus Christ”

From the moment Jesus began His public ministry people have been asking the question, “Who is this Jesus?” The identity of Jesus Christ is of paramount importance. Some people in His day proclaimed Jesus to be simply a teacher. Others saw Him more as a man who did good deeds for others. Still others considered Jesus to be a demonically influenced radical. Some believed Jesus to be God in the flesh.

This wide array of opinions reflects not so much a confusing picture of Jesus as it does the confusion of the human mind when it comes to spiritual things. Jesus never altered His personal claims. He never strayed from a life that upheld those lofty claims. He said that He was God. The question we must each decide today is, “Who is this Jesus?” Our eternity depends on the answer to that most pressing question.

Jesus Christ claimed to be God (John 10:22-39).

One day the crowd surrounding Jesus asked Him to declare His identity. In no uncertain terms Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The response of the crowd shows us just how clear this statement was. The people picked up stones to kill Jesus because He was claiming to be God. Jesus went on to explain that even some human leaders were called “gods.” How much more appropriate it is that Jesus should declare Himself God since that is indeed who He is. Jesus was not toning down His declaration. Again, that’s obvious from the reaction of the crowd. Those who heard Jesus make these claims again tried to seize Jesus. This kind of confrontation over the identity of Jesus took place on several occasions. The people of His day clearly understood Jesus’ claims to deity (John 5:17-18; 8:58-59; 19:7).

Jesus’ Statements about His Deity

Jesus Christ didn’t hesitate to describe Himself in terms of deity. He is God. He declared this truth in a variety of ways. Jesus claimed to be pre-existent, having come from heaven (John 3:13). He claimed to hold a special relationship with God the Father (John 5:17-18) and that He was one with the Father (John 10:30). He even claimed to be the “I AM” (Jehovah, or Yahweh, the personal name for God) of the Old Testament (John 8:58).

On several occasions Jesus identified Himself with God the Father. According to Christ’s own claims, to receive Him is to receive the Father (Mark 9:37), to honor Him is to honor the Father (John 5:23), to believe in Him is to believe in the Father (John 12:44), to see Him is to see the Father (John 12:45; 14:9), to know Him is to know the Father (John 14:7), and to hate Him is to hate the Father (John 15:23). Clearly, therefore, Jesus claimed to be God.

Jesus’ actions affirmed His claims to deity.

Jesus not only spoke openly of His deity, but He also affirmed His deity through His actions. Jesus claimed the right and power to forgive sins, something that God alone

can do (Luke 7:44-49). Jesus placed His teachings on the level of Scripture (Matthew 5:21-22). He instructed people to pray in His name (John 14:13-14). Jesus also encouraged those who offered their worship to Him (Matthew 8:2; 14:33; 28:9,17; Mark 5:6; John 9:38; 20:28).

Jesus' followers were convinced of His deity.

It's one thing for a man to claim to be God. It's quite another thing to convince others of this claim, especially to convince those who are in constant personal contact. Jesus walked with His disciples long enough for them to personally evaluate His claims to deity. They were convinced. Peter (2 Peter 3:18), Matthew (1:22-23), and John (John 1:1) each wrote about Christ's deity. Thomas declared the risen Christ to be his Lord and his God (John 20:28). All of the eleven disciples put their lives on the line for this truth, most dying as martyrs.

Four Options

When we consider Jesus' claim to be God we can explain that claim in one of four ways. First, we might consider Jesus to be a liar. He intentionally misled His followers to believe He was God. But Jesus never showed a single character flaw in His entire ministry. To accuse Jesus of lying simply doesn't fit His character. Second, we might call Jesus a lunatic. He mistakenly thought and taught that He was God. But again Jesus showed no signs of insanity. Even under the extreme pressure of torture, legal trials, and crucifixion Jesus remained in complete control of His thoughts and words. Third, we might think of Jesus as a legend. He was a great teacher whose followers over the centuries embellished His teachings and proclaimed Him to be God. But the historical record won't bear this view. The written records of Jesus' life fall within the lifetime of many people who knew Jesus. No early writings refute the fact that Jesus claimed to be God. The final option, the only viable option, is that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be. He is Lord. He is God in the flesh.

Jesus Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecies (Luke 24:25-27).

Let's examine the evidence to see whether or not Jesus' claims to deity are valid. The first line of evidence involves the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. These predictions, written hundreds of years before the time of Jesus, could not have all been fulfilled by coincidence. Neither could the most cunning mind have come up with a way of intentionally fulfilling each prediction by human means. Only God could foresee and fulfill these prophecies. In Luke 24:25-27 Jesus described to two of His followers how the Old Testament prophecies pointed to Him, possibly using some of the following concepts.

Prophecies Concerning Christ's Birth

The Old Testament described the Messiah, the Christ, as coming from the seed of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) through the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:10) and the family of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). His birth was to be miraculous, a virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14). The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), an obscure venue for the arrival of a king. All of these predictions were fulfilled at the birth of Jesus Christ.

Prophecies Concerning Christ's Ministry

The Old Testament predicted that the Messiah would minister in the region of Galilee (Isaiah 9:1). The Holy Spirit of God would anoint His ministry (Isaiah 11:2). The Messiah's ministry would be preceded by the preaching of a mighty prophet (Malachi 4:5). Nevertheless, the Messiah would ultimately be rejected (Psalm 118:22). These predictions again find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Prophecies Concerning Christ's Death and Resurrection

Isaiah 52:13—53:12 is full of predictions concerning the death of the Messiah. The Messiah would be beaten and disfigured, despised and rejected, pierced and wounded, silent and accepting of His death. He would die with the wicked and be buried with the wealthy. Other passages of Scripture predict specific aspects of Jesus' death such as the piercing of His hands and feet (Psalm 22:16), the piercing of His side (Zechariah 12:10), and the casting of lots for His clothing (Psalm 22:18). Jesus' resurrection also forms a part of the predictive prophecies of the Old Testament (Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 53:11). Jesus alone fulfilled these predictions. He alone is God in the flesh.

Jesus Christ had a remarkable birth (Luke 1:26-33).

If God were to become a man, we would expect His entrance into the world to be unique. In fact, Jesus Christ had the most remarkable birth ever recorded in human history. Luke 1:26-33 provides us with one description of that most significant birth.

The Timing of Jesus' Birth

One of the greatest predictions about the Messiah is located in Daniel 9:25. In that prophecy God revealed that the Messiah would appear on the human stage at precisely the time Jesus came into the world. The precision of that prediction is amazing. In addition we realize that Jesus came to earth at an appropriate time in history. The nation of Israel was under Roman rule, looking anxiously for the arrival of a deliverer. The world had a universal language—Greek—and an international road network that would be just right for spreading the news about Jesus Christ. The timing of Jesus' birth was perfect.

Born of a Virgin

The most amazing aspect of the birth of Jesus Christ involves a young woman named Mary. Still a virgin, Mary became the mother of Jesus. Isaiah 7:14 predicted the virgin birth of the Messiah. The gospel writers confirm the virgin birth of Jesus (Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:30-35). The doctrine of the virgin birth is essential to the Christian faith. Were Jesus merely the product of human generation He would have been merely human. He could not have lived a sinless life. He could not have held the claim of deity. He could not have died for all humankind's sins and offered eternal life. But through the virgin birth God generated life in the womb of Mary in such a way as to guarantee the perfect union of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God, perfect and sinless God. Yet He is human, able to die for humankind's sins.

Unusual Circumstances Surrounding Jesus' Birth

Jesus was born in the midst of unusual circumstances. He was born in poverty, an unusual arrival for a king. He was born in Bethlehem as a result of the taxation policy of the Roman Empire. This place of birth fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament. Jesus' birth was announced to shepherds by an angelic host. Wise men from an eastern country visited the baby Jesus. King Herod feared Jesus and ordered the death of many infants in the Bethlehem area in an attempt to eliminate this infant king. These unusual circumstances again point out that Jesus is unique. He is God.

Jesus Christ lived a miraculous life (Matthew 11:2-6).

When John the Baptist needed confirmation concerning the identity of Jesus, Jesus pointed to the miraculous nature of His life (Matthew 11:2-6). No one ever lived a more extraordinary life than Jesus Christ.

The Influence of Jesus' Teachings

Most people will recognize the incredible influence of Jesus' teachings. Here is a man who never traveled far from home, never held a public office, never went to a university or school of higher education, and never wrote a book. Yet His teachings have made a greater impact on our world of any teacher ever known. He taught the importance of love and justice. He taught the difference between external ritual and heartfelt faith. He pointed people to God the Father in such a way as to make a lasting difference in their lives. He was truly a remarkable teacher.

The Power of Jesus' Miracles

Jesus confirmed the reality of His divine nature by exercising miraculous powers. In the New Testament we read that Jesus gave sight to the blind, returned mobility to the lame, helped the deaf to hear, restored lepers to health, and even raised the dead. Jesus walked on water, fed over five thousand people using a boy's small lunch, and

calmed a storm by His spoken command. Here was a man like no other. His miracles testify to His deity.

A Perfect, Sinless Life

In our day it's commonplace for public officials to come under the scrutiny of the press. There seem to be skeletons in every closet. No sensible individual seriously professes to be without sin of some kind. But Jesus claimed to be sinless. When His accusers sought to put Jesus to death they could find no legitimate charge to bring against Him. It was only because Jesus claimed to be God that they pursued His execution. But Jesus lived a perfect life. He was sinless. He is God.

Jesus Christ rose triumphantly from the grave (Luke 24:36-48).

The ultimate proof of Jesus' deity rests in His resurrection from the dead. Jesus died on the cross, a sacrifice for the sins of all humankind. He was buried and on the third day He rose from the grave as a triumphant savior. Jesus spoke with His followers, ate with them, instructed them, and encouraged them (Luke 24:36-48). Then He ascended into heaven. These events, historically accurate, demonstrate the validity of Jesus' claim to deity.

The Unique Circumstances of Jesus' Death

Jesus' death was no ordinary execution. To begin with, His trial was a great injustice. Since Jesus had committed no sin, His accusers had to drum up false evidence against Him. He was rushed from court to court until convicted by Pontius Pilate. He was beaten beyond recognition and nailed to a cross between two thieves. Even on the cross Jesus maintained His claim to deity. One thief believed Jesus and Jesus guaranteed his entrance into paradise. Darkness covered the land for several hours, an unusual occurrence in the middle of the day. One of the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross was so impressed by Jesus' death that he exclaimed his personal faith in Jesus as the Son of God. Everything about Jesus' death pointed to the supernatural.

Jesus' Burial and Resurrection

Jesus was buried in a rock-hewn tomb. What was especially unusual about His burial was the fact that a Roman guard was posted to be sure that no one disturbed the grave. But in spite of a Roman guard the grave was opened on the third day. Jesus was gone. Certainly His disciples didn't remove the body. They were fearful and would never have attempted to take on a Roman guard. Only Jesus' resurrection can account for the empty grave. Angelic messengers confirmed this event to some of Jesus' followers and Jesus Himself appeared to the disciples on a number of occasions following the resurrection. Jesus is alive. He is God.

Jesus is alive!

Following the resurrection Jesus ascended physically and visibly into heaven. But prior to His departure Jesus instructed His followers to tell the world the good news of salvation in Him. Jesus is alive today. Christians believe in the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus touches lives today. He forgives sins today. He comforts the sorrowing, strengthens the weak, and seeks the lost. In addition, Jesus is coming again. Because Jesus is God we worship Him and serve Him without shame, without reservation. He deserves our utmost devotion and confidence. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. He is God.

“What Christians Believe about the Virgin Birth”

From the very beginning of the church, Christians have believed that Jesus Christ became a man through the virgin birth. The concept of the virgin birth was predicted in the Old Testament, and it has significant theological and practical ramifications. However, in our modern era there has been a shift away from the supernatural. Some scholars have denied the reality of the miracles in the Bible. This denial has no historical basis. It's simply a reaction based on the presupposition that the miraculous did not take place. The virgin birth of Christ, one of the greatest miracles of the Bible, has therefore become suspect in the eyes of many. Nevertheless, the Bible presents the virgin birth as a historical fact, a fact that clearly impacts our concept of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The Virgin Birth is a sign of God's miraculous power (Isaiah 7:13-14).

One aspect of the miraculous nature of the virgin birth is the prophecy in Isaiah 7:13-14. God predicted the virgin birth hundreds of years before Jesus Christ was born. In that prophecy God tells us that the virgin birth would be a sign, an unusual event that would capture the attention of the world and verify the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

God is a God of Miracles.

To dismiss the miraculous out of hand is to deny what the Bible teaches about the power of God. The God of the Bible created the universe. He is certainly capable of performing miraculous events within the created order. God used all kinds of miracles to demonstrate His power in the world. He parted the Red Sea, defeated great armies, healed the sick, and raised the dead. In the New Testament we find that Jesus also performed great miracles. God is a God of miracles. Therefore, the virgin birth is fitting with the character of God.

The Prediction of the Virgin Birth

Isaiah 7:14 tells us that “the virgin” would conceive and give birth to a son. The term Isaiah uses for virgin must describe an unmarried, pure young woman. If a human father were involved in the conception of the child, this birth would not be a “sign.” It would not be significant in any way. Furthermore, when this verse was translated into Greek, the Greek term used is the specific word for “virgin.” It's this same Greek word that Matthew and Luke used in recording the event of Jesus' birth through the virgin Mary. God was predicting hundreds of years in advance the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus was “Immanuel,” God with us. God is a God of miracles.

**The Virgin Birth is a focal point of
God's intervention in human history (Luke 1:26-35).**

The historian Luke records the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. In Luke 1:26-35 he emphasizes the fact that Mary was a virgin when Jesus was miraculously conceived in her womb. The Holy Spirit of God generated physical life. God intervened in human history.

When God Interrupts the Flow of History

Deism teaches that God created the world and then stepped out of the affairs of humankind. But Christians believe that God has been active in this world from the beginning of creation. God has spoken directly to His prophets. He has worked directly and miraculously in the lives of His people. He also works continually in unseen ways to provide for our needs and to guide us through life. Some of the more obvious ways in which God has interrupted the flow of history include His sending the worldwide flood in the days of Noah, His call and blessing on Abraham, His deliverance of the nation of Israel from bondage in Egypt, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ through the virgin Mary. It's this miraculous incarnation that has served as the most significant example of God's penetrating the affairs of men and participating in human history. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, came to live with us.

The Historical Nature of the Virgin Birth

Matthew 1:22-23 and Luke 1:30-35 present the virgin conception and birth of Jesus Christ as historical realities. The fact that even Jesus' antagonists questioned the background of His birth (John 8:41, 48) indicates that Jesus' birth was unusual. There's no reasonable evidence for dismissing the historical gospel record of the virgin birth. Even the earliest non-biblical writings of the church uphold the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. The virgin birth fits all the criteria of historical accuracy.

**The Virgin Birth confirms the
incarnation of Jesus Christ (John 1:14).**

What took place at the virgin birth of Christ was a remarkable joining of divine and human in one person. God became a man. John 1:14 describes it like this: "The Word became flesh." We use the term "incarnation" to refer to the fact that God became a man, taking on human form to enter into our world and to provide a sacrifice for our salvation.

Jesus Christ is fully God.

When we talk about the person of Jesus Christ we must first of all describe Him as God. Jesus Christ didn't come into being as a baby in Bethlehem. He was preexistent. He was alive from eternity past. There has never been a time when Christ did not exist.

As the Son of God, He is eternal. In the incarnation, Christ did not give up His deity. He was and is fully God

Jesus Christ is fully human.

What took place at the incarnation was a wonderful joining of the divine and the human. The eternal Son of God took on a human body and a sinless human nature. He “became flesh” in order to live among us. He was born through the line of King David in order to have the right to sit on David’s throne. He took on a human body so that He could die for our sins. He became a man so that men and women could return to fellowship and harmony with God. When we describe Jesus as a man, we think about His earthly ministry. He walked and talked with His disciples. He grew hungry and tired. He felt the limitations of humanity. He was, as some Christians have described Him, as much a man as if He were never God. And, of course, He was as much God as if He had never become a man.

Jesus Christ is perfectly united as the God-Man.

The union between the divine and the human in the person of Jesus Christ is a tremendous spiritual mystery. In that perfect union, Jesus willingly limited His divine attributes and glory. He was a perfect man, without sin in thought or deed. He submitted Himself to God the Father and always fulfilled the Father’s will. His human nature and divine nature, while distinct, were joined eternally. He became “Immanuel,” God with us.

**The Virgin Birth displays the
humility of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5-11).**

While it’s true that Jesus Christ did not give up His deity in becoming a man, it’s also true that He limited the full display of His divine power and glory during His time on earth. This was an act of great humility. Philippians 2:5-11 describes that humiliation of Jesus Christ.

Christ “emptied” Himself.

Jesus Christ, although existing as eternal God, did not consider His high position to be so precious as to preclude His becoming a man. Of course, He could have simply ignored humankind’s sinful plight. But out of His mercy, Christ set aside His exalted position to become a baby, to become a man. He “made Himself nothing” or literally “emptied” Himself. This means Christ humbly set aside the independent use of His divine attributes, becoming subject entirely to the will of God the Father. It means Jesus Christ would for a time limit the display of His glory and splendor. The humility of Christ went to the extent of death on a cross. The Creator of the universe made Himself subject to the hands of those who nailed Him to a cross, who taunted Him for His lack of power, and who spit on Him as a fool. But God the Father has again highly exalted Jesus

Christ, through the resurrection and ascension, to His rightful place of power and authority.

God's Purpose in the Incarnation

The primary reason for Jesus Christ's coming into our world as a man was to redeem us from our sins and bring us back into fellowship with God. It was a gracious and merciful purpose. Jesus came to serve and to save. The New Testament expands on this general purpose of the incarnation, and we're responsible to respond to His coming in a personal way. For example, Jesus came to remove our sins (Hebrews 9:26; 1 John 3:5). We can respond to sin in our lives by confession, bringing our sins before Christ for forgiveness. Jesus Christ came to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15; Hebrews 2:14-15), and we're to respond with trust in Him to save us. He came to give life (John 10:10; 1 John 4:9). He wants us to live an abundant life, looking forward with confidence to our eternal life in heaven. Jesus came to destroy Satan (1 John 3:8), so we can live in victory over sin and temptation. Jesus Christ came to serve others (Mark 10:45). Following His humble example, we're to serve God and others as well.

The Wonder of the Incarnation

If we learn nothing else from the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we must certainly learn this one thing. Christ's humility in becoming a man, along with the mystery of His becoming a man, must fill our hearts with wonder at the greatness of our God. Has anyone lately set aside their own rights and privileges to help you out? Have you really ever given up any of your comforts to get involved in the life of someone who is in a desperate need? Possibly you could cite an example of self-surrender on a small scale. But Jesus Christ left the beauty and joy of heaven to become a man. He did that for you. Don't lose the wonder of the Savior!

The Virgin Birth is foundational for Christians today (Galatians 4:4-5).

Is it possible that an event that took place two thousand years ago could still make a difference today? When it comes to the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, the answer is a resounding "Yes"! According to Galatians 4:4-5, God sent His Son to become a man so that we might enter into a family relationship with God. He wants us to enjoy the full benefits of being a part of His family. Here are five aspects of the virgin birth that impact our lives today.

The Virgin Birth amazes us by nature of God's power.

When we consider the fact that a baby was born without the participation of a human father, we're amazed at the power of God. The Holy Spirit produced a perfect human fetus in the womb of Mary by a glorious and pure act of miraculous power. Life began where there was not human life before. We are still amazed at God's power.

The Virgin Birth assures us by nature of God's salvation.

Because of the virgin birth, we can find assurance that our sins are forgiven by God. We are saved from the penalty of our sins because God became a man to die on the cross.

The Virgin Birth humbles us by nature of God's mystery.

No one can fully comprehend the ways of God. We can see that the virgin birth of Christ was necessary. By it God the Son took on a sinless human nature. By it we have salvation. But we cannot fully grasp the mystery of this event. We're humbled when we consider our limited understanding. We're also humbled when we consider the humility that God the Son showed in becoming a man. The virgin birth forces us to dismiss our human pride.

The Virgin Birth endears us by nature of God's condescension.

Because Jesus Christ stooped to become a man, we are forever endeared to Him. He loves us so much that His place of honor in heaven became secondary to our need for salvation. How could we ever stop loving this Lord Jesus Christ?

The Virgin Birth motivates us by nature of God's devotion.

God is entirely devoted to His people. The incarnation of Jesus Christ shows us His devotion. Because God is devoted to reaching out to us, to saving us, and to helping us grow in godliness we're motivated to fulfill God's plan for our lives. He has done everything necessary to reach out to us in our place of need. Now we have the opportunity to reach out to Him, to experience His forgiveness, and to find our greatest joy in following His will. God is with us. Immanuel!

“What Christians Believe about the Resurrection of Christ”

Of all the world’s religions, only Christianity claims that its founder rose from the dead. Christians believe that Jesus Christ, after His death on the cross, came back to life again. He is alive today. The Christian faith, therefore, is a system of belief that focuses on life—eternal life for all who believe. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith, and without the resurrection there would be no Christianity.

Since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is an essential teaching of Christianity, it’s no wonder that many non-Christians have attempted to undermine the resurrection. However, some who have set out to destroy the doctrine of the resurrection have themselves become convinced of its truthfulness and have turned to Jesus Christ as their savior. All who have attempted to disaffirm the resurrection have failed in their endeavor. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is real. He is alive.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a physical event—the grave was empty! (John 20:1-9)

The New Testament presents the events surrounding the resurrection of Jesus Christ. John 20:1-9 tells us how Jesus’ disciples went to the tomb on that first Easter morning and found it empty. Jesus had risen from the dead.

Eyewitness Accounts of the Empty Tomb

Although we tend to look at the Bible as a single book, it really contains a collection of several eyewitness accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The disciples of Jesus simply recorded what they saw. They saw Jesus die on the cross. He was truly dead. They saw Him buried in the tomb of a wealthy man. They knew where the tomb of Jesus was. They saw the tomb empty on the third day. They saw Jesus alive, physically present with them. They spoke with Him, ate with Him, and walked with Him. They saw Jesus ascend into heaven. Jesus’ resurrection wasn’t simply a spiritual return to life. His resurrection was physical. He rose bodily from the grave. The tomb was empty.

Deficient Attempts to Explain the Empty Tomb

Those who oppose the teachings of Christianity seek to explain the empty tomb in various ways. It’s interesting to note that there have been no serious attempts to prove that the body of Jesus was still in the tomb. History confirms the fact that the tomb was empty. But why was it empty?

Some have said that Jesus never really died on the cross, but that He merely lapsed into a comatose state. Once He was placed in the coolness of the tomb, He revived. This “swoon theory” fails to account for the proclamation of the Roman soldier who declared Jesus to be dead. It fails to show how a beaten, weak man could move a huge stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. It fails to describe how Jesus could have

gotten past the guards at the tomb or how He could convince His disciples He had been victorious over death. It simply doesn't fit the facts.

Others have said that the disciples, or someone else, stole the body. But only the disciples could possibly have a motive for stealing the body of Jesus from the tomb, and the disciples were too cowardly to stand by Jesus during His trial. How would they have the boldness to attempt to steal a guarded body? How could they get past the Roman guard? Such an explanation is unreasonable.

Another theory on the empty tomb is that the disciples went to the wrong tomb. They got confused, and went to an unoccupied grave. But such an explanation is ludicrous. The Jews would have quickly pointed out the disciples' error if they had gone to the wrong tomb, and Christianity would have been crushed before it even got started.

In desperation some have even said that the body of Jesus decayed so quickly in the tomb that when the disciples entered the tomb on the third day the body was gone. This explanation shows the absurdity of attempts to explain the empty grave apart from a true resurrection.

Jesus is alive.

Why was Jesus' tomb empty? Because Jesus rose from the dead! He's alive. His body came back to life as a demonstration of His power. He left the tomb, met His followers, and ascended into heaven just as He predicted.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a historical event—the world was changed! (Acts 2:32-47)

Because of the eyewitness accounts of the risen Christ, we find that the resurrection was a historical event. It actually took place in space and time. Like other non-repeatable historical events, we rely on the records of those who were there at the time, and on the effects of those events over time. In the case of the resurrection, we know that the whole world was changed. Acts 2:32-47 records the first message Peter preached following the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That message convinced an unbelieving crowd that Jesus was God's Son. Why? Because of the resurrection, which was a major theme in Peter's message.

The Transformed Lives of the Disciples

The changes brought on by the resurrection of Jesus Christ started with His disciples. Those eleven men, scattered out of fear, came together again and boldly proclaimed the message of Jesus and the resurrection. Men who hid from the rebukes of others were transformed into men of great courage and ability. All of these disciples devoted the rest of their lives to the spread of the Christian faith. Most died as martyrs for the cause of Christ. This would not have been true if the resurrection were a hoax. These men were convinced that Jesus was alive. The resurrection transformed their lives.

The church is born.

The church began as a direct result of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was Christ Himself, after the resurrection, who instructed His disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit's power to invade their lives. When this event took place, the church was born. For two thousand years the church has proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Its critics have failed to stop the church. Only the resurrection can explain the existence, the longevity, and the influence of the church of Jesus Christ.

Our world has never been the same.

The whole world reflects the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Apart from the resurrection, Jesus would have been an obscure teacher from a little village in Palestine. But the name of Jesus Christ has spread around the world. Our calendars reflect the person of Jesus Christ, since we count our years from the time of His birth. He was an immeasurably influential person. Countless works that benefit humankind have been accomplished in His name. Because of the resurrection, Jesus Christ is the most significant person in all of history.

Jesus is real.

Jesus Christ is alive today, and He's still changing lives. Multitudes of Christians can testify to the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. He's given power to drug addicts to overcome their addictions. He's helped hurting marriages and families find restoration and love. He's helped bitter people become kind and forgiving. He's encouraged those who are in despair. He gives direction to those who need guidance. He gives hope in a hopeless world. He grants forgiveness to those in bondage to their sins. Jesus is still changing lives today. Jesus is alive.

**The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a
personal event—the Lord appeared! (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)**

First Corinthians chapter 15 is the most extensive description of the impact of Christ's resurrection in the whole New Testament. In the opening verses of this chapter we find that Jesus' resurrection was a personal event. Jesus rose physically and personally from the grave. He proved His resurrection by appearing to many people over a period of many days in a variety of settings. His appearances to His followers provide powerful evidence for the resurrection.

Jesus Christ predicted His resurrection.

Jesus Christ, on several occasions, predicted His own resurrection from the dead (Matthew 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:32; 27:63; John 2:18-22). He linked these predictions with His personal claims to deity. The resurrection, therefore, serves as a test case concerning the accuracy of Jesus' teachings and His claims. He had to rise

personally from the dead in order to verify His message. The resurrection itself was a tremendous event. The fact that Jesus predicted His own resurrection only adds to the miraculous nature of that event.

The Post-Resurrection Appearances of Christ

To prove that Christ Himself rose personally from the dead, He appeared to many of His followers. These appearances didn't take place just once or twice, but several times. Jesus didn't appear in the same place each time, nor to the same people. Some of His appearances were brief, while others were extended. These facts substantiate the truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As with the empty tomb, there have been attempts to explain away the appearances of Jesus Christ after the resurrection. Some people would say that the disciples were experiencing hallucinations. They so wanted to see Jesus again that they imagined His appearances. But so many people could not share the same hallucination, especially in view of the number of times Christ appeared and the various settings in which He showed Himself. These appearances were not the result of hallucination. One extreme explanation for the appearances of Jesus Christ after the resurrection claims that Jesus actually had a twin brother who, after the crucifixion, claimed to be Jesus alive from the dead. It's easy to see that when we wander from the truth of the resurrection we fall prey to extreme explanations. Only a risen Christ could appear to others as Jesus Christ did.

Jesus is Lord.

All that Jesus ever taught or claimed hinges on the resurrection. A dead savior isn't capable of granting life to His followers. But Jesus is alive. He is Lord, just as He claimed. Whether or not we accept His Lordship over our lives doesn't change the reality of who Jesus is. Jesus Christ is Lord.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was a climactic event—God's truth was verified! (1 Corinthians 15:12-28)

Jesus proved His claims by rising from the dead. The entire Christian faith rests on the reality of the resurrection. In fact, the apostle Paul stated in 1 Corinthians 15:12-28 that if Jesus didn't really rise from the dead there is absolutely no value to Christianity. Jesus' resurrection is that important. Through the resurrection, Jesus verified all the truth we have about God and His plan for His creation.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the pivotal doctrine of the Christian faith.

The idea of the resurrection is a unique doctrine. Only Christianity claims its leader's historical, physical resurrection. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ there would be no Christianity. Just think about it. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead then He isn't really God. If He isn't God, He lied about His ability to save us from our sins.

His claims about the accuracy of the Bible are invalid. Furthermore, we could trust nothing in His teachings as being reliable. This is why Paul said that, without the resurrection of Christ, Christians would be the most miserable people in the world. All hope would be gone. But since Jesus did rise from the dead, Christians have hope and purpose, forgiveness and joy.

Atonement accomplished!

The resurrection of Jesus Christ confirms the fact that His atoning work on the cross has been accepted by God the Father. Jesus died as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. But without the resurrection we could never know if that sacrifice was sufficient. Jesus' resurrection assures us that we can experience forgiveness and acceptance by God through Jesus Christ.

Our Hope for the Future

The resurrection of Jesus Christ also assures us of our own future resurrection from the dead. Christians believe in unending life beyond the grave. One aspect of that life is the resurrection of the body. That hope is based on the fact of Jesus' resurrection. Since we have the certainty of eternal life, we also have a purpose in this life. Our purpose is to please God, to serve Him, and to bring others to a saving understanding of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is coming again.

One final truth regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ involves Christ's return. Jesus predicted that He would rise from the dead, and He fulfilled that promise. He also promised He would come back to earth again. Based on His fulfilled predictions concerning the resurrection, Christians believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ as well. Jesus is alive. He isn't finished with His work on earth. One day He will return in His full glory. He will return as the living King of kings. This is true because He is the risen Lord.

“What Christians Believe about the Second Coming of Christ”

The fact of Jesus Christ's second coming to earth has often been clouded by extremists who have predicted specific dates for this climactic event. Setting dates for Christ's return is not a new phenomenon, but it certainly does distract from the truth about Christ's return.

Christians believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ. Many of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the work of the Messiah were not fulfilled in Christ's first coming, and so necessitate His return. In addition, Jesus Himself predicted His own return in power and majesty. The New Testament affirms this truth. Christians find personal motivation for holy living and evangelistic outreach because of the certainty of Christ's return.

Jesus Christ will return to earth visibly (Matthew 24:26-27).

In His great “Olivet Discourse” (Matthew 24-25) Jesus taught His disciples about end time events, including His own return. The world will be characterized by persecution, warfare, idolatry, and turmoil as the end approaches. Then Jesus Christ will return to set in order the affairs of this world. His return will be visible to all according to Matthew 24:26-27. It will not be a secret or hidden return, but a public and personal return of Christ.

The return of Christ will be literal.

In order to fully appreciate the prophecies concerning Christ's second coming, we must remember the nature of His first coming to earth. Jesus Christ came to earth in literal fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies. He was born of a virgin in the town of Bethlehem. His parents took Him to Egypt to protect Him from Herod. Jesus grew up in Galilee, performed great miracles, was betrayed by His own disciple, was crucified, and rose from the dead. These aspects of Christ's first advent were literal fulfillments of prophecy.

When we consider the second coming of Christ, we would therefore expect His return to likewise be a literal fulfillment of prophecy. When Jesus ascended into heaven, an angel announced that Jesus would return just like He departed (Acts 1:11). This would imply a visible return.

Every eye shall see Him.

Revelation 1:7 tells us that every eye will see Jesus Christ in His return to earth. The second coming of Christ will be evident to everyone living at that time. The return of Christ will be no secret. At that time the world will recognize Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Earth's inhabitants will in an instant know the foolishness of rejecting Him and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. Every knee will bow before the King of kings.

For the Christian, the return of Jesus Christ will mean tremendous joy. Sin will no more tempt us. Wickedness will no longer dominate our surroundings. Pain and sorrow will no longer plague us. We will be free from sin and its effects because we will forever be in the presence of our Lord. But for those who have rejected Christ, His second coming will be a day of great sorrow. For them Christ will return in judgment. It will be too late to change course once Christ appears. There will be judgment for the unbeliever, but Christ's reward and blessing for those who have trusted in Him.

Jesus Christ will return to earth unexpectedly (Matthew 24:42-44).

No one can know the timing of Jesus Christ's return. God has not chosen to reveal this to us. What we do know is that Jesus Christ could return at any time and that He will return unexpectedly. Matthew 24:42-44 says that, like a thief who strikes at an unexpected hour, Christ will return when people least expect Him. We are, therefore, to live watchful lives. Christians look forward to the return of Christ. We are to be consistent in our living, being ready at any time for Christ's return.

The Doctrine of Imminence

The doctrine of imminence means that Christ's return could take place at any moment. There is nothing preventing His return. While it's true that Christ delays His return out of gracious patience, waiting for more individuals to turn to Him for salvation (2 Peter 3:9), it's also true that He could return today. No prophecy of Scripture must be fulfilled before His return.

The doctrine of Christ's imminent return raises another aspect concerning future things. Many Bible students understand the return of Christ to take place not as a single event but as an event characterized by distinct phases. One phase of Christ's return involves His coming for the church. In this phase Jesus Christ does not show Himself on earth, but calls the church up to be with Him in heaven. This phase is sometimes called the rapture of the church. Following a period of persecution and turmoil on earth, the second phase takes place in which Jesus actually comes back to the earth to establish His reign. Although some see these phases as distinct, others see these phases as really just one event. In either case, Christians look forward to the return of Christ at any time.

No one knows the hour.

While it's true that Jesus Christ could return right now, it's also true that no human being knows the hour of His return. In fact, during His earthly life Jesus Himself stated that He did not know the hour of His own return (Matthew 24:36). We understand that Jesus Christ, although divine, lived by certain self-imposed restrictions when He became a man. In His humanity He did not operate based on His divine omniscience. Nevertheless, since Jesus has ascended to the Father we can confidently assume that He is fully conscious of the time of His own return to earth. But Christ has not chosen to reveal that time to us. It's extremely presumptuous, and radically disobedient, for us to set dates for the return of Jesus Christ. No one knows the hour of His return.

Prepared for Christ's Return

Since Jesus Christ will return unexpectedly, we must be prepared at all times. It's foolish to delay making a decision as eternally important as our decision about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Yet many people have never taken time to think about the claims of Christ for their own lives. They assume there will be another day. Of course, accidental death can prevent that day from coming. Likewise, the return of Christ could interrupt the flow of human history at any moment. We must give careful consideration today to the call of Jesus Christ.

As Christians we must, therefore, live faithfully for the Lord every day. The imminent return of Christ should never frighten us, but it should always motivate us to holy living. We want to please our Lord when He returns. The illustration of ancient marriage practices helps us to understand the Christian's desire to be ready at all times. In Bible times a bride and groom would enter into marriage through a contract. Often that contract would be composed by the parents of the couple. The bride and groom would not yet have met. At some undetermined time the groom would travel to the home of the bride and take her back to his home to be his wife. The bride never knew the time of her groom's arrival, so she would be prepared at all times to meet her beloved. In the same way Christians want to be ready at all times to meet the Lord Jesus Christ when He returns.

Jesus Christ will return to earth gloriously (Matthew 25:31).

Matthew 25:31 describes the return of Jesus Christ as a glorious event. He will return with all of His divine splendor and the splendor of heaven itself. This will be a fitting display of our victorious Lord and Savior.

The first coming of Christ was characterized by humility.

At the first advent Jesus Christ came into the world in the most humble of circumstances. His birth went largely unnoticed. His life was simple and austere. He came to redeem lost humankind. The reason for Christ's coming in humility was to give us the opportunity to receive Him out of love. God wants us to appreciate the gracious nature of His Son.

The second coming of Christ will be characterized by glory.

By contrast, the second coming will be characterized by the glory of Jesus Christ. What He veiled in His first coming He will put on full display at His second coming. We will see Jesus Christ in all His power, in all His majesty, in all His glory. Even for the devoted Christian it will be a time of realizing how inadequate our devotion has been to our Lord. All who see Christ will be awestruck by His majesty.

In order to begin to comprehend the splendor of Christ's appearance we can look at the Old Testament examples of those who saw God's glory. When Moses met with God on Mount Sinai he saw in a limited fashion the glory of God. That display of God's

glory transformed Moses. Moses, we read, had to put a veil over his face because of the radiance of God's glory. He was awestruck in God's presence. When Ezekiel saw the glory of God he could not find adequate words to describe the vision. Likewise, in the New Testament we read that the disciples at the transfiguration saw Jesus Christ in His glory and were amazed at what they saw. When we see Jesus in all His glory we'll bow in awe at His majesty.

Jesus Christ will return to earth triumphantly (Revelation 19:11-16).

Jesus Christ is our triumphant Lord. He conquered Satan at the cross. He conquered death at His resurrection. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. When He returns to earth He will return triumphantly. Revelation 19:11-16 describes Jesus Christ as a God of justice, one who will judge His enemies.

The Purpose of Christ's Second Coming

There are three reasons Christ must return. First, Christ must return to fulfill the prophecies of God's Word. Second, Christ must return in order to judge the nations. Everyone possesses a sense of justice. When there is injustice in our world we often respond by saying, "Someday they'll get what's coming to them." As limited as our sense of justice is, we do know that Jesus Christ will judge the world with perfect justice. Those who have stood in opposition to God or lived in apathy to the things of God must face judgment. Third, Christ must return in order to establish His righteous rule. He will establish His kingdom forever, never to be destroyed.

The Relevance of Christ's Second Coming

The second coming of Jesus Christ, though imminent, is still a future event. So what difference does it make for us today? The Bible presents a number of relevant aspects of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Understanding the return of Jesus Christ offers us comfort in times of difficulty (Romans 8:18). It can help us to prevent holding judgmental attitudes toward others (1 Corinthians 4:5). It prompts us to live with endurance (1 Corinthians 15:58), and it provides us with great encouragement (1 Thessalonians 4:18). When we contemplate the second coming of Jesus Christ we demonstrate our love for Christ, looking forward to His return (2 Timothy 4:8). Understanding His return demands a sense of urgency in our service (2 Timothy 4:1-5), promotes a sense of corporate fellowship in the church (Hebrews 10:25), and builds a sense of hope for the future (1 Peter 1:1). And, of course, since Jesus Christ could return at any moment we are motivated to live holy lives (1 John 3:2-3). Belief in the second coming of Jesus Christ is life changing.

Jesus Christ really is King.

Jesus Christ is coming again. He may come today. But if He delays His return, He does so in order to allow us the opportunity to grow in our love and service for Him.

When He comes in His glory as our triumphant King we will forever enjoy His presence. It's never too early to begin to worship Jesus Christ as our King of kings and Lord of lords. He really is our King.

“What Christians Believe about the Holy Spirit”

Our society today relies on multiple power resources more than ever. Everything we do seems to depend on some external source of energy. Our cars need gas. Our homes need electricity. Our radios and watches and toys all need batteries. Our demands for power have forced us to rely on nuclear power plants. Power is essential for daily living. When it comes to the Christian life we find that we need a special source of power as well. We can't live a godly life without the power of God at work in us. That's the role of the Holy Spirit.

God exists in trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It's the third member of the triune Godhead, the Holy Spirit, who maintains a special relationship with Christians today. Because Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit to live within us, we have a unique resource for living out the Christian life. The Holy Spirit grants us the power to grow in our walk with God. Although some religions teach that each person is a god, Christianity by contrast teaches that men and women can have God living within them through faith in Jesus Christ. If we are gods, our concept of deity is limited to the vices of humanity. But if God can live in us, then our concept of deity surpasses human limitations. God is holy and the indwelling Holy Spirit builds practical holiness into the daily experience of each growing Christian.

The Holy Spirit is a person (John 15:26).

A common mistake is to assume that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force. In reality, the Holy Spirit is a person. In John 15:26 Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit in personal terms. The Spirit is a “he” not an “it.” He possesses power, but He is not a mere force.

The Holy Spirit has personality.

We normally describe personality as the combination of intellect, emotion, and will. People have personality. God is personal. The Holy Spirit, likewise, is a personal being. He thinks. He feels. He acts. The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as searching out the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-12), experiencing love (Romans 15:30), and directing the activities of people (Acts 16:6-7). He is a person.

The Holy Spirit is God.

Not only is the Holy Spirit a person, but He's also God. He possesses the same characteristics as God the Father and Jesus Christ, including complete knowledge, unlimited power, and personal holiness. The Holy Spirit participated in creation (Genesis 1:2) and in the inspiration of Scripture (2 Peter 1:21). He gives spiritual life to those who trust in Jesus Christ (Titus 3:5). Throughout the New Testament the Holy Spirit is seen as one with the Father and the Son (Matthew 28:19 and Acts 5:3-4). To say that the Holy Spirit lives within us is to say that God indwells our lives. The Holy Spirit is God.

The Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin (John 16:7-11).

Jesus said that He would send the Holy Spirit who would convict the world of its guilty condition before God (John 16:7-11).

The Holy Spirit and Conviction

When you've done something wrong, have you ever felt an immediate sense of guilt? We regret our unfair actions or our impure thoughts. This is because of the Holy Spirit's convicting work. He activates our consciences to warn us when we're out of step with God. This sense of guilt, prompted by the Holy Spirit, should draw us to confession before God. Real relief can only be found in the forgiveness that comes through the blood of Jesus Christ. It's possible, however, to suppress our consciences and resist the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. We then become callous, less able to hear His voice in our hearts. That's why some people can violate God's principles with no apparent sense of remorse. But the Holy Spirit still convicts us of our sins.

Restraining Sin in the World

Because our sinfulness is so dominating, the world would soon become unbearable apart from the restraining work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit prevents humankind from reaching the full extent of its sin. Our newspapers are full of stories of human atrocity. Without the Holy Spirit's work in our world crime and wickedness would prevail. Government has a limited influence over the affairs of people. However, it's the Holy Spirit who prevents the wholesale takeover of sin in our society.

Regeneration and Spirit Baptism

When the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins we can turn to God for forgiveness. But we must first establish a new relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. When we recognize that only through Jesus can we have our sins forgiven and when we call on Him to change us we experience spiritual rebirth. This is called regeneration. Regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8). He breathes spiritual life into us where before there was only spiritual death. He makes us alive, able to respond to God. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit makes us a part of the body of Christ, uniting us once and for all with Him. This is called Spirit baptism (1 Corinthians 12:13). Through Spirit baptism we're placed permanently into the body of Christ to forever be a part of God's family. This spiritual union makes it possible for us to bring every sin to God and to know His complete forgiveness. It also guarantees a continual challenge to walk with God in deeper commitment to Him.

The Holy Spirit indwells every Christian (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Once we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, He takes up permanent residence in our lives. First Corinthians 6:19-20 tells us that our bodies are temples to God. The Holy Spirit lives in us.

Our Bodies as Temples

Because the Holy Spirit lives in us as Christians, we take God everywhere we go! He is involved in every conversation, every business transaction, every leisure activity, and every thought. Because God the Holy Spirit lives in us, we must show care in how we live our lives. We must also show care in how we treat our bodies. God is dishonored, even insulted, when we expose our bodies to damaging drugs or destructive habits. He wants His temples to be pure and holy, kept for His use.

Sealed Until the Day of Redemption

The fact that the Holy Spirit indwells us as Christians also implies that God holds permanent ownership of our lives. We belong to Him. Ephesians 1:13-14 says that the Holy Spirit is a seal, a mark of ownership and protection in our lives. God will keep us securely in His care until the day of redemption, that final day when we enter into His heavenly kingdom. Then we will enjoy the inheritance that all of God's children have in eternity. Then we will know real joy and peace.

Comfort and Guidance

Because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we enjoy God's comfort and guidance. Jesus described the Holy Spirit as a comforter, or counselor (John 14:16-17, 26; 16:7). He's a helper. He's called alongside to give us the kind of care we need in life. When we sorrow, He gives comfort. When we're perplexed, He guides us. When we're weak, He strengthens us. When we fall, He picks us up. When we're accused by Satan, He defends us. In fact, the word translated "Counselor" in relation to the Holy Spirit was a legal term referring to the defense attorney in a court of law. The Holy Spirit is our supreme advocate in every life situation.

The Illuminating Work of the Holy Spirit

There's one other very important task that the Holy Spirit does because He lives in us. He illuminates our minds and hearts to understand the Word of God. First Corinthians 2:12 describes the Holy Spirit as a teacher. He helps us to understand the practical application of God's Word to our daily experience.

The Holy Spirit equips Christians for service (1 Corinthians 12:7).

One exciting aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry to believers is His work of equipping us for service. Several New Testament passages, including 1 Corinthians 12:7, describe spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are special abilities that the Holy Spirit grants to each Christian so that we can perform spiritual acts of service for the glory of God.

The Purpose of Spiritual Gifts

Our mere human efforts to influence people's lives for eternity would be fruitless apart from the Holy Spirit. We can do nothing without the power of God (John 15:5). Spiritual gifts enable us to serve God on a spiritual level that would otherwise be impossible.

The Holy Spirit has granted us various spiritual gifts in order to serve the whole church. These gifts, while providing certain personal benefits, are intended for the benefit of the body of Christ. Therefore, we must be careful not to hide our gifts by failing to participate in the life of the church. This would dishonor the Holy Spirit who gave us these gifts.

Opening your Gifts

There are a variety of spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament. Some of these are quite spectacular in their outworking, such as the gift of performing miracles. But most of the spiritual gifts are not spectacular in appearance. They reflect the quiet and continuous working of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Some Christians believe that the spectacular gifts were a temporary endowment and are no longer active in the church today. Some of the spiritual gifts that we are certain exist today include such things as teaching, pastoring, evangelizing, encouraging, showing mercy, and demonstrating hospitality. While any of these activities might take place without the enablement of the Holy Spirit, they will only have an eternal value when the Holy Spirit is the one working through God's people to accomplish His purposes.

It's essential that every Christian participate in the ministry of the church. The Holy Spirit has adequately equipped every local church with just the right gifts to carry out that church's particular ministry. When Christians don't implement their gifts, the church suffers. Sometimes Christians fail to implement their gifts not because they are unwilling but because they do not know what their spiritual gifts are. In this case it's best for the growing Christian to ask other mature Christians for personal counsel and to experiment with various types of Christian service. In this way each Christian can discover and develop his or her own spiritual gifts.

**The Holy Spirit desires to fill,
or control, the Christian's life (Ephesians 5:18).**

There's one more important truth about the Holy Spirit that we must address. This is the filling of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 commands Christians to keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Need for Spiritual Power

We need to have the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives in order to overcome sin and temptation. We also need Him to help us serve Christ effectively. Therefore, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. To be Spirit filled doesn't mean that we lose touch with the real world. It simply means that we allow the Holy Spirit to control every aspect of our lives. We let Him call the shots. If He's not in control of our lives something or someone else is. We need to put God in charge of our lives daily, hourly, moment by moment.

How to be Filled with the Spirit

The Spirit filled life isn't some mystic experience, nor is it a radical concept for a few super-spiritual Christians. The Spirit filled life is to be the normal experience of every Christian. There are three Bible verses that help us to better understand the concept of the Spirit filled life. First Thessalonians 5:19 says that we are not to "quench" the Spirit. Ephesians 4:30 tells us not to "grieve" the Spirit. Galatians 5:16 instructs us to "walk in" the Spirit. These verses simply mean that we are to do nothing that would hinder the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. Instead, we're to yield ourselves to the Spirit of God and live in obedience to the Word of God. If we yield ourselves to God and obey His Word, we can be confident that we are Spirit filled.

Spiritual Fruit

The New Testament describes the fruit of a Spirit filled life as consisting of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). If we're consistently yielded to the Holy Spirit and obedient to God's Word we'll see personal growth in these aspects of our character. When such growth is lacking, we must go back and find out what we're missing. Yielding to the Holy Spirit means to consciously and willingly give every aspect of my life over to the purposes of God. Have I resisted His will in any way? Have I withheld from God any secret things in my life? Living in obedience to God's Word means knowing what God expects of me and then fulfilling His will for my life. Am I reading His Word faithfully? Am I in violation of any of His teachings?

Carefully scrutinize your own life. God wants to produce spiritual fruit in you. That fruit is more desirable than any earthly treasure. God also wants to work through you to touch the lives of others. Spiritual service is far more profitable than any other ambition. Give yourself completely to God and let the Holy Spirit work through you to make a difference in your world.

“What Christians Believe about Substitutionary Atonement”

Why did Jesus come into this world? Why did He willingly subject Himself to death on a cross? Wasn't there some other way for sinful humankind to be restored to fellowship with God? Jesus' mission in coming to earth through the incarnation was to die in our place, to die for our sins. He did this in order to satisfy divine justice and divine love. He did this to bring us back into an eternal relationship with God, to make us “at-one” (atone) with Him. While Christians have debated the nature of the atonement down through the centuries, the very fact that Jesus endured such a horrible death implies that there was no other way for us to be saved. If we could have been saved through good deeds or by following a loving example, Jesus' death at best overshot the goal and at worst involved unnecessary intensive suffering. Those who deny the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death tend to underplay the damaging effects of sin in our lives or the physical and spiritual horror of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus did die on the cross, and He died in our place. The atonement was substitutionary in nature.

Sin demands the substitutionary atonement (Isaiah 59:2-3; Romans 3:10-12).

The nature of the atonement is best understood in light of the nature of sin. If sin is no significant matter, more an error of judgment, then Jesus' atoning work on the cross is quite literally an act of overkill. But if we take sin seriously and see its effects as eternally damning, then the atonement is likewise a serious matter.

The Reality of Sin

It's safe to say that our modern culture merely winks at sin. We recognize that certain actions are inappropriate, but we generally reserve the idea of sin for hardened criminals who have committed atrocious acts of cruelty. Our day to day sins seem to be of no consequence. However, God's evaluation of sin is quite different. Sin is real. Everyone has sinned (Romans 3:10-12, 23). Our sins have separated us from any kind of meaningful relationship with God (Isaiah 59:2-3). Whether or not we consider a particular sin to be significant, God attributes our spiritually hopeless condition to such sin. Individual acts of sin reveal an inner nature that is bent on opposing God. We sin because, in our hearts, we are sinners.

The Hideousness of Sin

To take sin lightly is a grave mistake. Rather than thinking of sin as minor infractions of arbitrary rules, we must consider what the Bible says about sin. Sin is a violation of God's holy character. It constitutes us as “depraved” in God's sight. Sin infects our whole being—our intellect (sinful thoughts), our emotions (sinful attitudes), and our will (sinful actions). Even the best we have to offer God is considered filthy rags due to our sinful nature (Isaiah 64:6). God cannot look on us with favor due to the filth of our sins. Sin is hideous.

The Consequences of Sin

Because of sin we are eternally separated from the holy God who created us. Eternal death is the just reward for our sins (Romans 6:23). The Bible describes sinful humankind as dead (Ephesians 2:1), sick (1 Peter 2:24), polluted (Titus 1:15), enslaved (Romans 6:16), lost (Luke 15:3-7), bankrupt (2 Corinthians 8:9), and blind (John 9:39). Because we have sinned we can expect physical death, spiritual death, and eternal death. Apart from the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ we have no hope in this life or the next.

The Old Testament anticipated the substitutionary atonement (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Thankfully, God has intervened to rescue us in our fallen, hopeless condition. He planned in eternity past to provide atonement for our sins. God revealed this plan in the Old Testament through both the sacrificial system and specific prophetic statements.

The Sacrificial System

The Old Testament is filled with references to animal sacrifices as an essential part of worship by the people of God. Through this system of sacrifices God revealed the horrible nature of human sin and anticipated the perfect sacrifice that He Himself would provide through His Son, Jesus Christ. For example, Leviticus 4:1-12 describes the sin offering that involved sacrificing a bull as a symbolic way of transferring human sin to an innocent animal and then paying for that sin through a sacrificial death. Of course, these symbolic acts merely pointed ahead to the necessity of Jesus' death in our place. Hebrews 10:4 states clearly that animal blood cannot atone for human sin. A greater sacrifice was necessary.

Precise Prophecies

God also revealed the atoning work of Jesus Christ through specific Old Testament prophecies. One of the most outstanding of these prophetic descriptions of Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice is found in Isaiah 53:4-6. In that passage God's Servant, the Messiah, carries our infirmities and sorrows that result from our sins. He is pierced, punished, and crushed for our iniquities. It was God's plan to atone for our sins through a substitute, His Son.

Jesus Christ provided the substitutionary atonement (Mark 10:45; John 10:11, 18).

Jesus Christ came into this world to become the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He is the "Lamb of God" destined to die in our place.

The Purpose of Christ's Coming

Jesus Himself declared His purpose in coming into this world. In Mark 10:45 Jesus said that He came in order to serve and to save, to “give his life as a ransom for many.” The idea of a ransom involves the payment of a price. Jesus paid the price for our sins, satisfying the holy and just character of God and thereby making it possible for us to return to fellowship with God. In John 10:11 Jesus described Himself as the “Good Shepherd” who “lays down his life for the sheep.” Jesus came to lay down His life on our behalf. He came to be our substitute in death.

The Crucifixion

Jesus submitted to the most humiliating and horrible form of death, crucifixion. The very nature of Jesus' death reminds us of the hideous nature of our sin. On the cross Jesus not only experienced unimaginable physical agony. He also endured incomprehensible spiritual suffering. While hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out to God the Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). These words reveal the fact that Jesus experienced separation from God the Father—eternal death—on the cross. He took the punishment for all humankind's sin for all time and eternity.

A Selfless Self-Sacrifice

It's important for us to understand that Jesus' death on the cross was a voluntary act of self-sacrifice. John 10:18 records Jesus' own words on this subject. He declared that no one was able to take His life. Instead, He willingly surrendered His life for us. Because Jesus is God in the flesh, He has authority over life and death. He willingly laid down His life for our sins, taking our place on the cross. He also had authority to rise from the dead. His death and resurrection forever display Jesus' love for fallen humanity.

The New Testament reinforces the substitutionary atonement (Romans 5:6-11).

What the Old Testament predicted by way of the substitutionary atonement the New Testament elaborates and reinforces. It does so through a variety of doctrinal terms and concepts.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is, of course, integral to the concept of the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 9:26 states that Jesus sacrificed Himself for us. Sacrifice involves giving up something precious for someone else. Jesus gave up His rights, His reputation, and His life in order to pay for our sins on the cross.

Redemption

Redemption implies payment. In ancient times a compassionate individual might purchase a slave in the Roman markets in order to set that slave free. Jesus paid a price for our sins, a heavy price. First Peter 1:18-19 reminds us that our salvation wasn't purchased with silver or gold, but with the "precious blood of Christ."

Propitiation

Propitiation refers to the removal of God's righteous wrath. God is rightly angry with our sin. Jesus' substitutionary death on the cross satisfies God's wrath. God no longer must turn His back on us. Instead, He can turn toward us with open arms. This is what propitiation means. Luke 18:13 records this concept in Jesus' parable of the penitent sinner who asked God to be "merciful," or literally to be "propitiated" to him. Because Jesus died in our place, God has been propitiated and we can run into His open arms.

Reconciliation

Through the substitutionary atonement of Christ we can be reconciled to God. Reconciliation means that we are restored to a healthy and harmonious relationship with God. Romans 5:10 tells us that we have been reconciled to God through the death of His Son. Jesus died in our place. Therefore, through faith in Jesus and His substitutionary atonement, we can be restored to an eternal relationship with God.

“What Christians Believe about Assurance”

People need to know with confidence whether or not they stand in a right relationship with God. But is it possible to be certain of our salvation? There are two words that can describe an individual’s level of certainty when it comes to our eternal destiny—presumption and assurance. Presumption means to take something for granted, to boldly assume we are saved because of some self-established standard of righteousness. It is, therefore, presumptuous for us to say we know we will go to heaven because God will overlook our mistakes or because we’ve done more good things than bad. There’s no real basis for such statements.

On the other hand, assurance means a settled confidence in Christ’s saving work on the cross. It’s a certainty based on the promises of God’s Word. Assurance means that Christians can humbly say, “I know I’ll go to heaven when I die, because God has promised salvation to all who believe.” It’s wrong to be presumptuous. It’s essential to have assurance!

Of course, there’s a third word that describes many, probably most, people. That word is uncertainty. Even some Christians cannot state with certainty any sense of God’s acceptance. Did God intend for us to be certain of our relationship with Him? It seems likely that a God who is gracious, a God who went to all the trouble to send His very Son to die on a cross for us, would want us to know with certainty whether or not we stand in a right relationship with Him. And indeed, this is the case. The Bible clearly presents the requirement of salvation—faith alone in Jesus Christ. Likewise, the Bible teaches us that we can know with certainty about our spiritual standing with God. Assurance is available to every believer.

Assurance of salvation is basic to God's will for our lives (1 John 5:11-13).

The First Epistle of John speaks repeatedly about “knowing” that we have eternal life. In 1 John 5:11-13 we read that assurance is basic to God’s will for our lives. God wants us to be sure of our salvation. Assurance is built on our relationship with Jesus Christ. Anyone who has the Son has life, and anyone who does not have the Son does not have life. It’s that simple. In this brief letter, the Apostle John shows us how we can know we have the Son of God in our lives. In fact, John said he wrote this letter so that we might know (be assured) that we have eternal life.

A Definition

We can define assurance with five elements. Assurance is (1) a settled confidence. Assurance is our perception of God’s saving work in our lives. It’s possible, of course, for a person to be saved and not sense assurance. That Christian will vacillate, always seeking to reaffirm a salvation commitment. But God wants us to be settled in our position with Him. Assurance is a settled confidence (2) in the sacrificial death of Christ. The difference between presumption and assurance is found in the base of our salvation. We depend not on our own standards of righteousness but on Christ’s death on the cross. Assurance is a settled confidence that the sacrificial death of Christ (3) has

been applied to my personal spiritual condition. It's not enough to simply know that Jesus died. We must appropriate that sacrificial death to our own lives. Assurance is a settled confidence that the sacrificial death of Christ has been applied to my personal spiritual condition (4) by an act of faith. We can only enter into a saving relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Faith involves mental assent plus trust. We believe Christ died for us and we place our trust in His death to save us. Assurance is a settled confidence that the sacrificial death of Christ has been applied to my personal spiritual condition by an act of faith, (5) guaranteeing my eternal acceptance by God.

The guarantee of acceptance by God is stated in the Scriptures. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). The Bible states over and over again the certainty of salvation for those who believe.

Contrasts

To understand assurance, it's helpful to consider three contrasts. First, assurance isn't based on feelings but on facts. A Christian may feel insecure, defeated, or even physically ill and thereby conclude he or she is not accepted by God. But feelings fluctuate. The fact of salvation through faith does not change. Second, assurance is not based on works, but on grace. My good works don't prove that I belong to Christ. Even Jesus condemned people who merely did good works (Matthew 7:21-23). Obviously a failure to produce good works should cause us to examine our hearts in regard to salvation, but real assurance is based on grace. Third, assurance isn't based on performance but on the promises of God's Word. We can know we're saved because God has promised us salvation in Christ. He doesn't go back on His promises. Our performance will fail, but God's promises never fail.

The Importance of Assurance

Assurance is necessary for vitality in the Christian life. Christians who fail to appreciate their secure position in Christ will find it difficult to grow in deeper ways with God. The nagging question of salvation will occupy their pursuit of God. It's necessary, therefore, for Christians to become settled in their understanding of salvation in order to experience personal peace and personal growth. In addition, personal evangelism—reaching others for Christ—will become more dynamic when the question of assurance is settled.

Assurance and Security

Security is a concept that's related to assurance. Both truths point to our eternal salvation. Assurance is our perspective, or vantage point on salvation. We view our salvation as an accomplished reality through faith in Christ. Security is God's perspective on salvation. He keeps us secure in Him. Security is a permanent relationship between God and the believer established at the moment of salvation based on God's power and guaranteed to us through the promises of His Word. Key verses that

describe our secure position in Christ include John 10:27-30, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 1:12, and 1 Peter 1:5.

**Assurance of salvation is verified
by changes in our lives (2 Corinthians 5:17).**

Although it's true that assurance isn't based on our good works, we can find verification of our assured position in Christ by examining the changes He has made in our lives. According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, God makes all things new through faith in Jesus. The apostle John describes several of the new changes that should be evident in the life of a true believer. We find assurance of our faith when we experience . . .

A New Desire to be Obedient (1 John 2:3)

Obedience to Christ's commandments is the natural result of being a child of God. What seemed in the past to be a rigid set of legalistic standards imposed on us by God now is seen as a beneficial code of conduct designed to please our heavenly Father. We now delight in the law of God.

A New Hunger for God's Word (1 John 2:5-6)

In order to obey God we must know what God says. As Christians, we therefore find a new hunger for the Word of God. First Peter 2:2 says we are to crave pure spiritual "milk" like a newborn baby.

A New Love for Others (1 John 2:10)

Christians find that they will grow in their ability to love those who in the past seemed unlovable. God's love for us, unworthy as we are, makes it possible for us to look at others in a new light.

A New Hatred for Sin (1 John 2:15)

The world and its sinful enticements stand in the way of spiritual growth. Christians discover that their interests change. The sinful things that used to bring pleasure are no longer satisfying. Sin becomes more and more reprehensible.

A New Recognition of the Presence of the Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24)

When we come to Jesus Christ through faith the third member of the trinity—the Holy Spirit—takes up residence in our lives. He literally indwells us. But Christians may not become aware of His presence immediately. The Holy Spirit often works in quiet ways. Sensing His presence comes when we find new courage to speak up for Christ or discover new abilities to serve Christ. But it's also the ministry of the Holy Spirit to give us inner peace and confidence in our relationship with God. We may expe-

rience an inexplicable relief from our spiritual turmoil or the worries brought on by circumstances around us. This is the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

**Assurance of salvation is attainable
through a settled faith in Christ in our lives (1 John 5:1).**

Can the average Christian experience assurance of salvation? Yes! God wants you to know beyond a doubt that you stand in a right relationship with Him. That's why He has given us the promises in His Word. Assurance is attainable, and it comes through a settled faith in Christ. First John 5:1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one. He is God's Son. He lived a perfect life. He died a sacrificial death. He rose triumphant over death. He is alive today. Those who trust in Christ are, at that very moment of faith, born anew as children of God. What can Christians do to experience assurance and begin moving forward in their faith? Here are three suggestions.

Distinguish between facts and feelings.

If you're prone to rely heavily on your feelings, recognize that your perception of your salvation will change with your feelings. Begin to build a factual basis for assurance. Memorize Bible verses that guarantee your salvation. Ask God to help you view your salvation as a completed transaction, like a contract, that doesn't change.

Establish a milestone marker in your spiritual journey.

Many Christians cannot point to a specific time or place at which they received Jesus Christ and entered into eternal life with Him. But every Christian can establish a milestone marker in his or her life. Write out your personal salvation testimony, including special people and events that helped you come to Christ. Write on the flyleaf of your Bible a dated statement of your salvation experience or of a special commitment to move on from assurance to new growth in Christ. Describe to someone else your faith in Jesus Christ and what it means to you.

Ask God to show you the changes He is making in your life.

Often Christians fail to see how much their lives have changed in Christ. It's helpful for us to look back over the years and see how we're different since we came to Christ. Ask someone close to you if they see any changes. More important, ask God to point out even subtle changes in your life. Be alert to the casual comments of people who say something about changes they see in you. God is at work in the lives of all His children. You'll see His hand in special and sometimes unique ways. Thank Him for making you His child, and thank Him for the assurance of salvation that He's granted to you. Assurance can be yours in Jesus Christ.

“What Christians Believe about Outreach”

Jesus Christ came to introduce men and women to God. Apart from Christ we are separated from God’s fellowship. In fact, our sins are so predominant in our lives that we would never seek after God apart from His prompting in our hearts. He has made us in such a way as to sense a deep lack of satisfaction in life without Him. But we tend to try to fill that emptiness with other relationships, other pleasures, other things. That’s why God reached out to us in the person of Jesus Christ to bring us to Himself. Outreach, therefore, is an integral part of the Christian faith. God reached out to us. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must reach out to others.

The message of Christianity has long been termed the “gospel.” The word “gospel” means a good message, or good news. Whenever there’s good news we like to share it with others. Whether it’s the birth of a new baby, a promotion at work, or the purchase of a new car, we like to tell those closest to us about those things that bring joy to our lives. The message about Jesus Christ is extremely “good news.” It’s something that brings joy to the hearts of believers. It’s something about which we want to tell others. More than that, the gospel is a message that others must hear if they’re to ever enter into a saving, satisfying relationship with God.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ is exclusive by its very nature (John 14:6; Acts 4:8-12).

Because God loves people so much and wants them to find spiritual peace, we might conclude that the gospel is an inclusive message. That is, we might assume that everyone will enjoy the benefits of Christ’s death on the cross. However, God is also just. He must punish sin. Therefore, we find that the message of the gospel is exclusive. The gospel of Jesus Christ excludes other belief systems. They’re invalidated by the cross. Jesus claimed that no one could come to God except through Him (John 14:6). The Bible also says that apart from Jesus Christ there is no other way of salvation (Acts 4:8-12).

The Unique Claims of Christianity

We must understand that Christianity sets itself apart from other religions as unique. Only in Christianity do we find a faith system that begins with God’s efforts to reach people as opposed to people’s efforts to reach God. Only in Christianity do we have a credible description of God becoming man to reach humankind. This “incarnation” took place in the person of Jesus Christ. Only in Christianity do we have a physical resurrection as the basis of faith. Only in Christianity do we find real forgiveness for sins.

Syncretism and Salvation

A very natural approach to religion is to attempt to take the best teachings of all belief systems and blend them together. This approach is called syncretism. The

problem with syncretism is that it cannot allow for mutually exclusive doctrines. For example, in regard to salvation Christianity says faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ is the only possible path. Other religions base salvation on human efforts and good works. These two concepts cannot be harmonized. They're contradictory. Therefore, syncretism is impossible when it comes to religion. Where other world religions conflict with Christianity it becomes apparent that truth must stand in contrast to error. The truth as it's found in the Bible doesn't yield to the errors of false religions.

Sincerity is not enough.

Christianity defies the validity of other world religions. This isn't to say that those who hold to the teachings of other religions are any less sincere about their beliefs. But sincerity isn't enough. It's possible to believe that the ice on a pond is sufficiently thick to hold you up, and this belief might be sincere. But if the ice is not thick enough you'll fall into the water in spite of your sincerity. Sincerity is not as important as reality—truth.

Are those who haven't heard about Jesus lost?

The exclusive nature of the gospel raises the question, "Are those who haven't heard about Jesus lost?" That is to say, is it right to suggest that those who have had no opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ without hope of salvation? We understand from Romans 1:18-20 that God, through the testimony of His creation, has provided enough truth for everyone to pursue a sufficient knowledge of Him. It's due to humankind's sinful suppression of the truth that more truth has not been made known. So God is just in condemning all who have not responded to His truth. They're "without excuse," as the Bible says. But God, in His love for the lost, has commissioned His followers to go to all people groups with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**The gospel message of Jesus Christ demands
faith alone as the condition for salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10).**

One of the unique features of Christianity is that human effort plays no role in salvation. The only condition for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:8-10 clearly portrays salvation as a result of faith, excluding works as a condition for salvation.

The Meaning of Saving Faith

People demonstrate faith in many ways. We show faith when we drive down the road, trusting that the oncoming driver will stay in his or her lane. We show faith when we depend on a doctor's diagnosis and pursue medical treatment. We show faith when we step onto an elevator, expecting that those who designed and built this device knew what they were doing. Faith is a knowledgeable trust in someone else, a trust that's often a matter of life and death.

Faith in Jesus Christ is a knowledgeable trust in Him to be sufficient to save us from the penalty of our sins. It involves a mental assent to the claims of Christ, including His deity, the substitutionary nature of His death, and His power to forgive sins. It also involves a choice, a choice to depend on Him for salvation rather than on our own efforts or on the claims of someone else. We express this choice by responding in our hearts to the claims of Christ, receiving Him as our Savior. We may first express this choice through prayer, calling on Him to enter our lives and deliver us from the penalty of our sins.

Where do good works fit in?

When Christians says that good works don't produce salvation, we're not denying the value of good works. Ephesians 2:10 teaches that good works are to be the result of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. But the order is essential. Good works don't lead to salvation, they follow our salvation. Once we've placed our faith in Christ we begin to grow. This growth includes good works. We now desire to please our heavenly Father, to experience the joy that comes in following God's way, and to help others in need. In fact, Christianity has done more by way of serving the world through humanitarian efforts than has any other religion. So, good works are important. They're the fruit of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ is urgent for the whole world to hear (Acts 1:8).

Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is exclusive by its very nature, it's easy to see how urgent it is for Christians to carry that message around the world.

The Importance of Personal Evangelism

Personal evangelism refers to our efforts to personally present the gospel message to those individuals in our circle of relationships. God has called every believer to share his or her faith. Our homes, our schools, and our communities need Christ. Unless we obey Christ's Great Commission, those around us might not hear clearly the truth of God's Word. Personal evangelism will include upright living and the testimony of caring acts of kindness. But it must also include verbal testimony to the truth of the gospel.

Phases of Evangelistic Impact

First Corinthians 3:5-8 describes evangelism as a process with various phases. Like crops that grow in the field, people need to be cultivated in order to understand and accept Christ. We can find tasteful ways of planting the seed of the gospel in the lives of our friends. We must then water it carefully and consistently. Our consistent Christian lifestyle, our availability to help those we're trying to reach, and our gentle reminders about the importance of Jesus Christ in our lives all contribute to the work of evangelism. But we must remember that it's God who makes the seed grow. We can never produce

spiritual interest or life in our friends. We can only plant and water. But God will work through our efforts to produce spiritual fruit.

The Importance of World Missions

Acts 1:8 tells us to be witnesses in our own neighborhoods while at the same time making an impact on the whole world. Obviously we can't be in more than one place at a time. That's why Christians must take an active, participatory interest in world missions. While we witness in our arena of influence, we're to support and encourage others who are witnessing for Jesus Christ around the world. It would be beneficial for every Christian to have at least one close friend on the mission field.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ is the compelling focus of every growing Christian (Romans 1:16).

To be a Christian and not reach out to others with the gospel is to stifle your faith. Any Christian who wants to grow in a deeper walk with God must be actively involved in outreach. To the growing Christian, the gospel is the power of God (Romans 1:16). We aren't ashamed of its content, nor of our participation in the gospel. Even the most timid Christian can be active in evangelism. Here are three thoughts on steps you can take to reach out to others with the gospel.

Build bridges.

Much of the most effective evangelism takes place through personal relationships. Unfortunately, many Christians have few non-Christian friends. We tend to isolate ourselves from the world by maintaining close ties only with other believers. But God wants us to reach out to unbelievers around us. We can begin by praying for a lost friend and then building relational bridges through joint activities or social events. These efforts to become personally interested in someone else form the seed-planting phase of outreach.

Live out a winsome testimony.

An essential element of our outreach is our own personal lifestyle. People see us in real life. They observe our faith in action. Therefore, we must live consistent lives, presenting to others a genuinely winsome testimony for Christ. In this way we can water the seed we've planted.

Proclaim and persuade.

It's possible to know non-Christian friends and live a consistent Christian lifestyle, but unless we verbalize our faith we haven't completed our responsibility in outreach. People need to hear from us how Jesus Christ has made a difference in our lives. They need to hear the basic truths of the gospel. They need to hear how to respond

to the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to enjoy the benefits of salvation. Every Christian should be prepared to give a clear presentation of Jesus Christ, and then be willing to speak up for Him when an appropriate opportunity arises. We must be ready to reap when God works in a person's heart.

God has called us to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ. We know that it's not our job to convert a person's heart—only God can do that. We're merely messengers. But we're messengers with the most significant message in the universe. Therefore, we must present the message of Christ persuasively. We must be ready to explain and defend the truths of Christ. We must rely on the Holy Spirit to help us in our evangelistic efforts.

There's a world around us that's lost. Many people are without Christ today, and they'll continue to live without Christ for all eternity unless Christians take seriously their call to witness for Him. Now is not a time to offer excuses. Now is a time to begin an intentional effort to reach someone for Christ.

“What Christians Believe about the Church”

Every institution has its critics. The church is no exception. Over the centuries there have been numerous attempts to disregard the church, to dismiss it as irrelevant to life. Indeed, the church itself has been far from perfect. It is, after all, made up of people—redeemed people, but people with their faults. Nevertheless, the church is still a remarkable institution. It’s God’s plan to reach the world through the church. In spite of its many failures throughout history, the church has always had a core of Christians who were committed to the truths of God’s Word and to living lives of integrity. This true church continues to make a lasting impact on the world today. The church is alive. It’s blessed by God. It’s the unique focal point of God’s work in the world today. It’s the real hope for our world. As such, every Christian must take an active role in the church in order to accomplish God’s will. The New Testament presents three pictures that help illustrate the purposes and the importance of the church.

As the body of Christ, the church is a dynamic institution (Romans 12:3-8).

The first picture of the church is that of a body, a living entity with various body parts or members. Romans 12:3-8 teaches that the body of Christ, the church, is alive. It’s dynamic.

The Birth of the Church

Every living organism has a beginning, a birth. The church was born on the Day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. After Jesus Christ had returned to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit to indwell Christians. It was this event that marked the beginning of the church as we know it. The Holy Spirit gives life to the church. Christians must depend on the Holy Spirit of God to direct and empower them for service in God’s work.

People Regenerated by God

A common misconception is to equate the church with a building. We see “churches” everywhere we go. It’s also a misconception to think of the church purely as an organization, as if it were simply a charitable corporation. The church is not a building, nor is it an organization. The church is people. Wherever Christians gather together with the purpose of fulfilling the functions of a church, a church exists. Buildings and organization can help the church to accomplish its purposes better, but the church is people. In addition, the church is people regenerated by God. This makes the church quite distinct from clubs or social organizations. The members of a church have experienced new life in Christ, life that comes by faith in His death and resurrection.

Growth in the Church

The body of Christ, the church, is to be a growing organism. Growth takes place on two levels. First, there is personal spiritual growth. Every Christian is responsible to grow in his or her relationship with God. This takes place through the application of God's Word in our lives, through obedience to God's will. The second level of growth in the church is corporate growth, growth in numbers. The book of Acts carefully points out that the early church grew numerically as the first Christians proclaimed Jesus Christ. God wants the church to grow in both ways—we desire quantitative and qualitative growth.

Working Together as a Body

Since every Christian is a “member” of the body of Christ, each must serve Jesus Christ in cooperation with the other members. The church should be characterized by harmony. God has granted various spiritual gifts or abilities for each Christian to use in helping fulfill the purposes of the church. When each member contributes to Christ's ministry in the church, the church and its members will grow.

A Healthy Body

Like the human body, the church must maintain good health. Good health involves the right diet and plenty of exercise. The church must feed on the Word of God. The Bible is the source of nourishment for God's people. When a church neglects the teaching and preaching of the Word of God, it will quickly lose spiritual health. The church must also exercise. It must put into practice the truths of God's Word. A healthy exercise program includes worship, holy living, serving one another, and outreach. Spiritual health in the church requires careful attention to God's direction. We cannot take spiritual health for granted.

As the temple of Christ, the church is a stabilizing institution (1 Corinthians 3:10-17).

The second picture of the church is that of a temple, a building dedicated to the presence and glory of God. We have already seen that the church is not a building. The church is people. However, there are some ways in which this living, breathing church is like a building. First Corinthians 3:10-17 describes the church as a temple with Jesus Christ as the foundation. First Peter 2:4-5 says the church is made up of “living stones,” Christians in a vital relationship with Jesus Christ. As a temple, the church is a stabilizing institution.

The Dwelling Place of God

In the Old Testament the people were instructed to build a temple for God. This temple was the focal point of Israel's worship. This was where God made His presence

known among His people. A temple is a dwelling place of God. In the New Testament we find that the church has become God's dwelling place. God has taken up residence within the lives of His people. God the Holy Spirit indwells every Christian, seeking to accomplish His purposes in our lives. The church, then, is the dwelling place of God. God is present individually in the lives of His people, and He is present in the church as a gathered assembly of Christians.

The Church and Society

The church provides a stabilizing influence on society. Those countries that have been blessed by a strong Christian presence have experienced great benefits from the church. These benefits include such things as social relief for the needy, educational institutions for all classes of people, medical assistance, and a host of benevolence efforts for individuals in need. Where overseas missionary outreach is taking place, the church is providing many of these same benefits. Along with such benevolence efforts, the church has provided a stabilizing moral influence to society over the centuries. As a temple of God, the church has been a solid, helping institution in the world.

A Sure Foundation

When the Bible describes the church as a building, it presents Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, or foundation stone, of that temple. The church is built on the work of Jesus Christ. He, in a very real sense, is the guiding power at work in the church. When a church focuses on Jesus Christ it will find God's rich blessing. A church that builds on Jesus Christ is a church characterized by love, generosity, moral purity, outreach, and spiritual maturity. Our goal is to be like Christ.

Order and Design in the Church

Any building, to be strong and enduring, must be built according to sound architectural principles. The church, too, is built with order and design. The New Testament describes the importance of godly leaders, such as pastors and deacons, in the church. It speaks of order in the worship of God, through such practices as communion (the Lord's Supper) and baptism. It also describes basic organizational principles that help the church to grow in strength. God established the church with a design for growth.

Who builds the church?

In the early church, the apostles and prophets were instrumental in the spread of Christianity. Men like Peter and Paul established churches throughout the Roman Empire. Over the centuries God has raised up leaders to help build the church. But like many building projects that employ the labors of many individuals, there is one ultimate builder. Jesus Christ is the one who builds His church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus stated that He would build His church in such a way that nothing could destroy it, not even the powers of hell. Since it's Jesus Christ who builds the church, the church cannot be destroyed. It will fulfill the purpose God has ordained. We, therefore, would be wise

to honor and support the church, recognizing the church to be God's way of working His will in the world today.

**As the bride of Christ, the church is
a cherished institution (Ephesians 5:25-27).**

A third New Testament picture for the church is that of a bride. The church is the bride of Christ. Ephesians 5:25-27 describes Christian marriage and pictures the love of a husband for his wife as being like Christ's love for His bride, the church. In Revelation 19:6-9 we read of the great joy that will be expressed in Heaven when the church, Christ's bride, will be united with Him.

Purity and Maturity

Every bride prepares herself with great care for the wedding day. She wants every aspect of her appearance to be just right for her future husband. As the bride of Jesus Christ, the church is preparing for the wedding day. Christians are to grow in their purity, maintaining holy lives in honor of their bridegroom Jesus Christ. In addition to purity, the church is to grow in maturity. There is to be an ongoing deepening of the Christian's relationship with Christ.

Worship

Newlyweds adore one another. There is great joy and satisfaction in the marriage relationship. In an infinitely grander way, the church is to adore and worship Jesus Christ. Worship is at the heart of the church's overall purpose. We worship God in all His greatness. We worship God for His gracious love for us. We acknowledge the right of God to be supreme in our lives. God deserves our worship. Jesus Christ is worthy of our utmost devotion, love, adoration, and worship.

Christ's Blessing on the Church

Since the church is the bride of Jesus Christ, Christ has chosen to bless and honor the church. He promised to build His church, to beautify His church, to bless His church. He will not let His church fail. There are many organizations that help carry on the work of the church, but only the church has the guaranteed blessing of Christ.

Loving Christ's Beloved Bride

Jesus loves His church. If we as Christians claim to love Jesus Christ, we will also love what He loves. To love the church means to visibly and actively identify with a local body of believers for worship, fellowship, growth, and outreach. Christians who attempt to live for God apart from the church will lose their intensity for Christ, just like a glowing ember dies out when it's removed from the fire. Christians need the church.

Christians need to be actively involved in the church. Our love for Christ demands a love for His bride.

The church is a remarkable institution. It's far from perfect, since it's composed of imperfect, redeemed people. But the church is a powerful force in the hand of God to reach this world. The church deserves our respect, our allegiance, our involvement, our support, our prayers, and our love. In demonstrating this kind of commitment to the church, we show our true commitment to our Savior Jesus Christ.

“What Christians Believe about Angels”

Prominent actors on the stage of biblical history include a special class of supernatural beings called angels. These “messengers,” as their name implies, hold a certain fascination in our minds. They are also the objects of a great deal of confusion. We tend to misunderstand the nature and activities of angels due to a variety of popular misconceptions. For example, the Bible never teaches that people, after they die, become angels. Since the Bible is our ultimate source of truth, we’ll look to its pages to help us understand angels.

Angels are personal beings, specially created by God (Psalm 148:1-5).

Psalm 148:1-5 tells us that angels are a part of God’s creation. As such, they’re subject to God’s purposes. They, with all creation, are to render praise to God and fulfill God’s design for their existence.

Angels as Unique in God’s Creation.

God is the creator of all things, living and inanimate. We see the physical creation around us—the sun, the stars, the planets, earth and all its inhabitants. Likewise, we’re a part of this physical creation. We possess human bodies. But angels are unique. They are spirit beings, beings that have no physical bodies. Nevertheless, angels are real. They’re intelligent creatures, surpassing humankind’s mental capacities. They’re powerful, surpassing humankind’s physical strength. They have the ability to feel and to choose and to worship. This means angels have the characteristics of personality.

God created angels early in His creation work. They were present when God created the earth, and they cheered on God’s creative splendor (Job 38:4-7). Angels are not, as some people have supposed, the spirits of deceased humans. We do not become angels at death. Angels are distinct creatures, made by God’s hand. Neither are angels simply mythological beings. The Bible presents them as real.

We also know that all the angels that exist were made directly by God. There is no reproduction among angels (Matthew 22:30). Each angel is unique, distinct from all the rest.

Physical Appearances of Angels

Although angels do not possess physical bodies, they have appeared numerous times in physical form. These appearances tell us something about the nature of angels. While some angels have appeared bearing wings, most have appeared in purely human form. Wings would speak of the speed of angels in carrying out God’s purposes. Their human form would speak of their role as God’s helpers in human affairs. Some angels “glowed” with the splendor of heaven’s glory. Others possessed eyes all over their “bodies,” indicating their intelligence, alertness, and insight into God’s ways. We usually

think of angels as wearing white robes and flying around with wings. In reality, angels have appeared in numerous forms.

The Vast Array of Angels

No one knows for certain how many angels God created. Revelation 5:11 says there are at least ten thousand times ten thousand of these beings in heaven worshiping God around His throne. Quite possibly the number of angels exceeds the number of people who have ever lived on earth.

There are various classes of angels. We read about the “seraphim,” whose purpose it seems is to worship and praise God without ceasing (Isaiah 6:1-4). The “cherubim” seem to be responsible for declaring and defending God’s holiness. Two angels are named in the Bible—Gabriel, the messenger of God, and Michael, the head of all the angels.

The vast number and variety of angels speaks of God’s creative power and glory. Our God is a remarkable God.

Angels are powerful beings, acting as servants from God (Hebrews 1:4-7, 13-14).

The first chapter of the book of Hebrews sets up a distinct contrast between Jesus Christ and angels. In describing the superior nature of Christ, this chapter also teaches us about angels. Angels are servants of God. God has sent them to serve His people. Christians, therefore, have the advantage of angelic oversight and care.

The Activities of Angels in the Old Testament

Angels have been serving God and God’s people throughout recorded history. The Old Testament mentions angels over 100 times. We find angels guarding the way to the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned, thereby protecting humans from living indefinitely in a sinful condition. Angels spoke with Abraham about the promise of a son. Angels rescued Lot and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Angels surrounded Elisha and protected him from the Aramean army. An angel shut the lions’ mouths to protect Daniel. Angels appeared to several of the prophets to reveal God’s truths.

The Activities of Angels in the New Testament

The New Testament is likewise filled with angelic activities, mentioning angels over 160 times. There we see angels announcing the birth of Jesus and later declaring His resurrection from the dead. An angel directed Philip to tell an Ethiopian official about Christ. An angel rescued Peter from prison. Angels appeared in John’s vision of God’s throne in heaven. Angels served as messengers of God’s truth and servants of God’s people.

Guardian Angels

In Matthew 18:10 Jesus said that children have a special relationship to angels. Apparently angels watch over children. The Bible doesn't teach the common notion that everyone has a guardian angel, but we do know that angels are involved in protecting God's people. Whether each person has a specific guardian angel or the host of angels simply provide general care is uncertain. What is certain is that we are never alone. God the Holy Spirit lives within each Christian. Other Christians provide help and comfort for us. Furthermore, even angels watch over us in a special way.

The Army of Heaven and Spiritual Warfare

The Bible describes angels as composing a mighty army of God. We read about the "heavenly host," implying that the angels have a kind of military order. Michael is called the "archangel," that is, the highest authority among the angels (Jude 9). Jesus spoke of angels in military terms, saying that He had at His disposal "legions" of angels (Matthew 26:53). This military description of angels is fitting since there exists all around us, seen and unseen, a great spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12). The angels are but one resource for the Christian's victory over Satan. Other resources include the Word of God, prayer, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the church itself. We are not left to our own limited power in dealing with spiritual conflict. God has equipped us well for living victoriously.

Angels are reverent beings, exemplifying the worship of God (Isaiah 6:1-4; Revelation 5:11-12).

One of the most impressive aspects of angelic activity is their example of worship. Angels delight in extolling the greatness of God. When Isaiah the prophet saw a vision of God's throne (Isaiah 6:1-4), he witnessed angels proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy" to the Lord! Revelation 5:11-12 describes worship by angels as they gather around the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Christians can learn a great deal about the primacy of worship by studying angels.

The Holy Character of Angels

Unlike people, angels are not fallen creatures. Apparently in the early history of creation there was a time when all the angels had an opportunity to rebel against God. Many of them did rebel, with Satan as their leader. These are the demons about which we read in the Bible. But many, many angels remained firm in their position of holiness before God. These are the ones we call "angels" today. They know the dangers of becoming unholy, but have never experienced sin themselves.

Angels Fascinated with Salvation.

According to 1 Peter 1:12 angels are fascinated by the subject of salvation. The gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sins by His death on the cross, is of special interest to angels. Since they have never sinned, they have never needed to become the recipients of God's saving grace. Therefore, His grace to us is amazing to angels. This fact should remind every Christian that our salvation is a tremendous gift, a wonderful and awe-inspiring reality.

Angels in the Presence of God

Angels in the presence of God never cease to worship God. Worship is not a dull activity, isolated to an hour on Sunday mornings. Worship is a total, loving response of all we are to the awesomeness and splendor of all God is. To worship God is a high privilege. To engage in endless praise of our Creator is the greatest pursuit. God is worthy of our worship.

Angels teach us that worship is a high privilege. They also teach us that worship is a humbling experience. The angels in Isaiah's vision covered their faces with their wings out of reverence for God. The angels in Revelation bowed before God in fearful respect.

Angels also teach us that worship is an exuberant experience. There was no holding back when the angels pronounced the birth of Jesus Christ. There was no conserving of feelings or energy when the angels proclaimed the greatness of Christ in the book of Revelation. Worship will be exciting if God excites our lives. Angels know the thrill of being in God's presence. We, too, as Christians have Christ in our lives. In addition, we have experienced the greatness of God's grace. Therefore, we should follow the angelic example and excel in worshipping our God.

“What Christians Believe about Satan and Demons”

Satan and the occult are topics that always have an audience, whether among Christians or within the secular world. We hold a certain fascination for the supernatural. Many people dabble in such occult practices as séances and horoscopes, often without realizing the subtle dangers involved. There’s even a “church” devoted to worshipping Satan. Such activities take place in many countries around the world, even in the so called scientific western countries. However, satanic worship and the occult stand in direct contrast to God and His holy purposes for our lives. To play with the occult is to disregard the teachings of God and His Word, the Bible. Many Christians would never think of engaging in occult practices, yet they fear Satan and demons, not understanding that Satan is a defeated foe. Therefore, we should understand what the Bible says about Satan and demons.

Satan and his demons are real beings (Job 1:6-12).

The Bible consistently presents Satan as the enemy of God. Satan is a real being who possesses the attributes of personality—intellect, emotion, and will. People have often portrayed Satan in mythical terms, such as a man with a red suit, hooves, horns, and a pitchfork. The Bible does describe Satan as a dragon because of his destructive ways. But Satan is no myth. Satan and demons are real.

The Old Testament affirms their existence.

In the book of Job we read of Satan and his demons reporting to God. They are subject to God’s sovereign rule. According to this Old Testament account, Satan attacked God’s servant Job, attempting to draw Job away from God. The whole book is devoted to the struggles that people face in dealing with such opposition.

In the early chapters of the Bible Satan appears on the scene in the form of a serpent, tempting Eve to sin (Genesis 3:1-4). Satan enticed King David to sin against God (1 Chronicles 21:1). The Old Testament attributes idolatry to demonic influence among the nations (Psalm 106:36-37). The prophet Daniel wrote about demonic warfare (Daniel 10:12-13), and the prophet Zechariah describes Satan as one who falsely accuses God’s people (Zechariah 3:1-2).

Jesus Christ affirmed their existence.

Because Jesus Christ is the Son of God, He’s the ultimate authority in regard to all truth. Jesus affirmed the existence of Satan and demons during His earthly ministry, referring to Satan twenty-five times in the gospel accounts. He faced and overcame Satan’s temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). On a number of occasions Jesus cast demons out of those who were demon possessed. Jesus actually placed the reality of Satan and demons on the same level of truth as His own claims to divine power (Matthew 12:22-29).

The New Testament writers affirmed their existence.

Every New Testament writer mentioned Satan or demons as real beings. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe incidences in which Jesus cast demons out of people. Paul describes spiritual warfare, including the opposition Christians experience from Satan and demons (Ephesians 6:11-12). The author of Hebrews refers to Christ's defeat of Satan (Hebrews 2:14). James instructs us to resist the devil (James 4:7) as does Peter (1 Peter 5:8-9). John describes the ultimate defeat of Satan (Revelation 20:10). The New Testament frequently refers to Satan and demons as real beings with real powers.

Human experience affirms their existence.

Human experience is not definitive when it comes to spiritual truth. Only God's Word is authoritative and reliable. But when human experience conforms to the teachings of God's Word, these experiences can help us in our understanding of spiritual truths. There have been numerous documented cases of demon activity. Missionaries often describe situations in which supernatural occurrences have taken place. Christians from a variety of backgrounds have seen the effects of satanic power. Not every Christian will have encounters with overt demonic activity, but it should not surprise us that Satan is still active in the world today.

**Satan and his demons are
fallen beings (Isaiah 14:12-15; Ezekiel 28:11-19).**

Why did God create Satan? After all, God is good and Satan is evil. But God did not create Satan as evil. He created Satan as a good being with an ability to choose right over wrong. God created humankind in the same way, with a freedom to choose God's ways. Satan, however, chose against God's holiness. His personal self-pride prompted him to rebel against God. Isaiah 14:12-15 describes this fall of Satan, as does Ezekiel 28:11-19.

Created as a Part of the Angelic Class

According to the Ezekiel passage, Satan was one of the created angels known as "cherubim." He was a beautiful creature, perfect and wise. His original name was Lucifer, or Morning Star, according to Isaiah. As an angel, Satan would have stood in God's presence, subject to God's purposes and observant of God's holiness.

The Fall of Satan

Because of pride, Satan thought he could be like the Most High God. It was this sin that caused Satan's banishment from fellowship with God, which will ultimately result in Satan's eternal punishment. When Satan fell, other angelic beings followed him

in this rebellion against God. These fallen angels are the demons described in the Bible. They form an unholy, Satanic army (Matthew 12:24-29; 25:41; 2 Peter 2:4; Revelation 12:7). When Satan fell, it's possible that he drew as many as one-third of the angels with him in his rebellion against God (Revelation 12:3-4).

Satan's Evil Purpose

It's Satan's intent to thwart the purposes of God. He opposes anything that brings glory to the Creator. Satan's most significant attack on God's plan for creation was to entice humans to sin against God. In this way, Satan helped bring about a second rebellion. In so doing, Satan may believe that he will one day be able to overpower the Almighty God and secure his own place as sovereign over creation. It's also possible that Satan knows his doom is sealed and that victory over God is impossible. Satan is, therefore, attempting to prevent anything that would further glorify God. Either way, the human arena has become the focal point of the spiritual conflict.

Satan and his demons are powerful beings (Mark 5:1-13; Jude 9).

Satan and his demons are extremely powerful. People in the Bible who were demon possessed displayed superhuman strength, breaking chains and resisting confinement (Mark 5:1-13). Even outside the physical realm Satan displays extraordinary power. Michael the archangel did not attempt to stand up to Satan on his own, but depended on God to rebuke Satan (Jude 9). It's possible that Satan is the most powerful being in all of God's creation.

Limited Supernatural Power

Satan, as powerful as he is, is limited in his power. Only God is all powerful. Satan cannot overthrow God. But Satan and his demons do display tremendous power. Demons can interact with the physical creation in remarkable ways. They can cause human sickness (although not all sickness is demonically produced), move physical objects, appear to people's senses, and perform miraculous but deceptive deeds. Demons can also reveal hidden truths or predict future events. People who involve themselves in fortune telling, divination, astrology, and séances are opening themselves up to demonic activity. Some of these things may at first seem harmless, but such activities run contrary to God's commands. We should recognize, respect, and avoid the power of Satan and demons.

Demon Possession

Is demon possession real? According to the New Testament, Jesus cast demons out of a number of individuals. Demons can invade the body of a person and take control of that person's actions. But true demon possession only takes place when an individual has been in some way involved in occult practices, opening the door for demonic activity.

We should be careful not to attribute every psychological disturbance to demon possession. Medical treatment often relieves the symptoms of what some might see as demon possession. However, we should not assume that demon possession does not occur. It's a real phenomenon, one that can be overcome only through the power of Jesus Christ.

The Christian and Spiritual Warfare

An even more pressing concern than demon possession is the daily spiritual warfare around us. Satan and his demons want to distract us from faith in Jesus Christ. They want us to fail in our relationship with God. But by the power of Jesus Christ we can live pure lives that bring glory to God.

Satan and his demons are deceptive beings (Matthew 4:1-11; 2 Corinthians 11:14).

Temptation is usually not obvious. We find ourselves deceived into thinking that a certain activity is going to be acceptable, or that certain thoughts are acceptable in God's sight. Satan is deceptive. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world without the pain of the cross. But Jesus easily saw through this deception and rebuked Satan with Scripture. However, we're more easily deceived by Satan's methods and must stand guard against his tactics.

An Angel of Light

Second Corinthians 11:14 reminds us that Satan doesn't always appear as an enemy. He usually "masquerades" as an angel of light. His ways are deceptive and seductive. He entices people to believe that a moment of physical pleasure is desirable even though sexual immorality will destroy a conscience and a marriage. He tricks people into becoming inoculated by religion without seeing the need for total dependence on Jesus Christ for salvation. He distracts people with good things so that they will not pursue the best things. Satan is a master of deception.

Satan's Methods

We're not left in the dark about Satan's methods of drawing us away from God. The Bible describes his schemes (2 Corinthians 2:11), and our own personal experience with temptation should instruct us in how to avoid sin. For example, Satan denies God's ways as being true, prompting us to deny absolute truth. He sometimes distorts the truth to make error sound appealing. Satan uses discouragement to keep us from moving forward in our faith. He sometimes distracts us from following God's plan for our lives. He is a destroyer, tearing down our self-worth, our hopes, our confidence, our joy, our health, our reputation, and our sensitivity to God's grace. Satan loves to divide Christians, using disunity as a tool to prevent the church from making an impact on

society. He demeans and accuses us in our hearts, prompting us to dwell on our sins rather than on God's forgiveness. Satan is a cunning enemy of our souls.

The Nature of Temptation

Satan may even use temptation itself to deceive us. We might think that we are extremely wicked just because we are tempted so often. But temptation, by nature, is not sinful. Sin is the act of succumbing to temptation. Even Jesus was tempted by Satan, yet Jesus never sinned. We must also be careful not to give Satan too much credit. Not every temptation comes from him. We, as fallen creatures, have a sinful nature that points us toward sin as well. Temptation can come from Satan, from the world, or from within ourselves. But the remedy is always the same—dependence on the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for power over sin.

Satan and his demons are defeated beings (Matthew 25:41; Colossians 2:15).

In spite of Satan's tremendous power, he is a defeated foe. God has prepared a place of eternal punishment for Satan and his demons (Matthew 25:41). Through the cross, Christ guaranteed the final defeat of Satan (Colossians 2:15).

Satan's Defeat at the Cross of Christ

Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, God predicted the defeat of Satan—the crushing of the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). Satan's plan to overthrow God by corrupting humankind has itself been overthrown by Christ's death on the cross. This act of Christ brought about our rescue from Satan's dominion (Colossians 1:13-14), disarmed Satan's power over us (Colossians 2:15), destroyed death as a tool of Satan (Hebrews 2:14-15), and unraveled all of Satan's plans (1 John 3:8). Because of the cross, Satan is defeated and his sentence has been pronounced.

Satan's Defeat in the Lives of Christians

Although Satan's ultimate fate is sealed, he is still active today. But Christians can live in victory over sin and Satan. Ephesians 6:10-18 tells us to equip ourselves for battle using the spiritual armor of God. James 4:7-8 teaches us to draw near to God so we will be better able to resist the devil. We draw near to God through prayer and devotional time with Him. First Peter 5:8-9 calls us to demonstrate self-control, being alert to Satan's methods. In practical terms we must, through consistent discipline, learn to turn Satan's attacks into victories for God. Satan wants us to dishonor, rather than glorify, God. But if we, when we're tempted to sin, instead turn to God and praise Him for His grace and power in our lives Satan will soon give up. His purpose will be thwarted. Of course, temptation will return. But if, by God's power, we win one battle at a time we'll find even greater success at living the Christian life.

Satan's Defeat at the End of Time

The ultimate and final defeat of Satan will take place in the end times, before we enter into eternity with God. It's a mistaken notion to believe that Satan will rule as king over hell. Hell is a place of punishment and torment specially prepared for Satan and the fallen angels (Matthew 25:41). In hell, Satan and the demons will suffer eternally for their rebellious sins against God (Revelation 20:10). God is perfectly just. God is unlimited in His power. We, as God's children by faith in Jesus Christ, need not fear Satan and demons. We need not cringe at Satan's temptations. Christ's power is far greater. We can face Satan as the defeated foe he is. We can face temptation with confidence in the power of God. We can experience victory over sin every day through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“What Christians Believe about Death and the Afterlife”

Someone has suggested that every man and woman is seeking to answer three basic life questions. Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? These questions are closely related, because they each focus on the reality of something outside ourselves. They focus on God and our relationship to Him.

The question of death and the afterlife has captured the imagination of people throughout history. Even in our own day there is no lack of interest in this subject. Bestselling books describe near-death experiences. Psychological studies evaluate death and the grieving process. Everyone is touched by the death of a loved one sooner or later. What does the Bible say about death and life after death?

Death is the irreversible separation of the body and the spirit (Hebrews 9:27-28; James 2:26).

Have people died and come back from death to describe the afterlife? Certainly Jesus Christ rose from the dead and the Bible accounts for several people who experienced a supernatural resurrection by the power of God. But according to Hebrews 9:27-28 humankind is destined to die once and then face judgment. This means that normally death is irreversible. Apart from Jesus Christ and His resurrection no one has ever returned from the dead under normal circumstances. James 2:26 describes death as the separation of the body and the spirit. The immaterial part of a person leaves the body at death and cannot return until the resurrection. This is how the Bible describes death.

Defining Death

Modern science finds it extremely difficult to define death. Clinical death involves the cessation of various bodily functions, such as the heartbeat or brain wave activity. Yet people have often been resuscitated from such conditions. Actual death is irreversible. The Bible defines death as separation. In fact, there are three kinds of death. First is spiritual death. This means that men and women are separated from God's fellowship. Spiritual death is the consequence of sin. We are in need of redemption and forgiveness in order to become spiritually alive. Second, there is physical death. This is the separation of the body and the spirit, at which time the body begins its return to the dust of the ground and the spirit goes on to eternity. The third kind of death is called eternal death, which means unending separation from God's fellowship in a place of punishment, hell.

Death and the Intermediate State

The near-death experiences of countless individuals seem to indicate that the intermediate state is one in which the human spirit is released from the body to interact with other spirit beings. But, of course, the human spirit returns to the body, after which these individuals have told their experiences. Although most of the attention is focused

on the joy of these experiences, there is evidence that some near-death experiences are terrifying.

It is always dangerous to build our beliefs on experience alone. The revealed truth of God in His Word, the Bible, is the only reliable source of information about life after death. Obviously the experiences of those in near-death situations are remarkable, but near-death and irreversible death are quite distinct. Furthermore, many of the near-death experiences people have reported stand in contrast to the teachings of the Bible. It seems likely that many of these experiences are prompted by the human mind rather than actual reality.

According to the Bible, the human spirit at death goes immediately to its eternal home (2 Corinthians 5:6-9). There is no intermediate activity, nor is there an opportunity to choose to return to life again to accomplish some incomplete task. Those who are near death may certainly gain this awareness of a life purpose, but those who truly die have no such opportunity. Death is the final point of departure from earthly life.

Death and Judgment

Again, Hebrews 9:27-28 tells us that once a person dies he or she faces judgment. This means that our eternal destiny is decided in time, in the here and now. There is no second chance. Judgment is based on the decisions made in life. The Bible does describe a future judgment at the end of time, but that judgment seems to be the pronouncement of the final verdict. Our initial judgment will be immediate. For the Christian this means God will acknowledge the death of Jesus Christ as sufficient for the individual's sin. The verdict will be one of acquittal. For the unbeliever, however, God will pronounce the verdict of guilty and with it the penalty of separation from God. Although many Christians believe in a purgatory, an intermediate place between death and judgment, the Bible never speaks of purgatory. Instead, the Bible describes an immediate transfer of the soul to its eternal destiny.

Death and the Christian

Death is a result of sin. God warned Adam that if he disobeyed divine law he would die. As a penalty for sin, death is our mortal enemy. But death is a defeated enemy according to 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. The Christian doesn't need to fear death. Jesus Christ, through His resurrection from the dead, has given victory to His followers in regard to death. Death for the Christian has lost its "sting." It has become a doorway into God's presence. The Bible describes death for the Christian as "sleep" for the body (1 Thessalonians 4:14), a "departure" to a better life (2 Timothy 4:6), and an "exodus" from bondage (2 Peter 1:13-15). The apostle Paul described our entrance into the presence of Christ as being far better than this life (Philippians 1:23-24). Yet, Christians still recognize the necessity and benefits of carrying out God's plan for their life on earth. Christians regard suicide as an inappropriate usurping of God's authority over our lives. Even though death and the afterlife are preferable, we're still to fulfill God's purpose for our lives here on earth. We must, therefore, honor His wise decision in regard to the time of our departure. The Christian looks forward to eternity while serving Christ faithfully and joyfully in this life.

**Hell is a real place of endless punishment for
the unredeemed (Luke 16:19-31; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).**

It's popular to assume that God, because of His goodness, would never send anyone to hell. But God's attributes of justice and holiness cannot allow sin to go unpunished. His goodness has provided for our forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Those who reject God's goodness have no other option. They are destined for hell. The Bible describes hell as a real place. It's not a mythical construct, but an actual place of endless punishment for the unredeemed. Jesus described hell as a real place on a number of occasions. In Luke 16:19-31 Jesus painted a picture of a man in hell, a man in constant and endless torment. Paul described hell as a place where people are shut out from God's presence (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

Biblical Descriptions of Hell

The Bible describes hell as a place of endless torment. It's a "lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15). Those in hell will experience continual weeping (Matthew 8:12), anger (Matthew 8:12), agony (Luke 16:24), thirst (Luke 16:24), pain (Mark 9:48), fire (Mark 9:48), and darkness (2 Peter 2:17). Through all of this the inhabitants of hell will be fully conscious of their lost and hopeless condition.

The Inhabitants of Hell

God created hell as a place of punishment for Satan and the rest of the angelic host that rebelled against Him (Matthew 25:41). Hell is not a place in which Satan reigns as a king. In hell Satan will suffer with all who have sinned against God. This punishment will include people as well, those who have not accepted God's Son, Jesus Christ. It's true that Jesus Christ hints at varying degrees of punishment in hell (Luke 10:13-15; 12:47-48), but this will provide no sense of comfort for those in this place of torment. We can be sure that God's judgment will be fair. He certainly will not send anyone to hell who doesn't fully deserve that punishment. But anyone who would refuse to receive God's Son has already condemned himself or herself. There is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. Hell will be inhabited not only by wicked people, but by seemingly good people who, because of pride or the unseen wickedness of their hearts, refused to rely on Jesus Christ for their salvation. The Christian has a duty to warn others of this impending judgment, pointing the way to salvation through Jesus Christ.

**Heaven is a real place of eternal joy in the
presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-10; Revelation 21-22).**

Heaven is also a real place. The Bible describes heaven as a place of eternal joy. It's the place where God will dwell with His people.

Biblical Descriptions of Heaven

The Bible gives us some remarkable pictures of heaven. In John 14:1-3 Jesus describes heaven as a home. It's God's "house," and in that house there are many spectacular dwelling places for all His people to enjoy throughout eternity. Paul describes heaven as a place where we can fully enjoy the presence of the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-10). Hebrews 11:13-16 describes heaven as a homeland, a place for which Christians long with great anticipation. Revelation 21-22 provides a lengthy description of heaven. In contrast to hell, heaven is a place devoid of crying, mourning, pain, or death (Revelation 21:4). It's characterized by beauty, splendor, comfort, and joy (Revelation 22:1-5).

The Inhabitants of Heaven

The primary feature of heaven is the presence of God. God will dwell among His people in heaven. The angels of God dwell in heaven as well. Regarding human inhabitants of heaven, Revelation 21:27 clearly states that only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life will be there. Paul describes the book of life as a record of God's faithful people (Philippians 4:3). We can conclude that everyone who has placed faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ is recorded in the Lamb's book of life and will, therefore, spend eternity in God's presence in heaven.

The Certainty of Going to Heaven

Although most people expect to go to heaven when they die, many do not enjoy any certainty in this expectation. Indeed, these expectations are often built on false concepts of God's forgiveness. People too often assume they will be judged for their actions, with their good deeds outweighing their bad deeds. But sin is so comprehensive in our lives that our only deliverance must come through Jesus Christ. We cannot possibly eliminate our sinfulness through good works.

Nevertheless, God's Word teaches us that we can know with certainty that we will go to heaven. This certainty is not a presumption based on our own character. Instead it's a certainty based on our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. When we trust in Jesus Christ by faith we're granted eternal life. First John 5:11-13 guarantees our salvation. We can know with certainty that we will go to heaven because God is a God who keeps His promises.

The resurrection is the miraculous reunion of the body and the spirit for all eternity (John 5:28-29; Philippians 3:20-21).

The resurrection of the body for eternity is a part of the Christian's confident hope. Since death—the separation of the body and the spirit—is irreversible in human terms, the resurrection is miraculous in nature. Only God can reunite the body and the spirit.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

It's impossible to overstate the significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has truly risen from the dead and therefore speaks with authority when it comes to life after death. On the cross, Jesus cried out to God the Father, "Into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). At this point Jesus died, His spirit departing from His body. Three days later Jesus rose from the grave, having reunited His spirit and His body through the resurrection.

The Resurrection Experience of the Just and the Unjust

We often speak of the joy and blessing of the Christian's resurrection. But we also know that the unbeliever will be raised to life again in order to enter eternity in a physical body. Jesus describes the resurrection of the just and the unjust (John 5:28-29). The resurrection of those outside of Christ will lead to condemnation and judgment. The resurrection of the Christian will lead to life and heaven.

A Perfect Body

What will the believer's resurrection body be like? The Bible gives very few details about the resurrection body, but we do know that our future bodies will be perfect. Philippians 3:20-21 says that our bodies will be like Jesus' resurrection body. In our resurrection bodies we'll be able to recognize one another. We'll experience no pain, illness, or weakness. We'll be perfectly fit for life with God in heaven, unhampered by the limitations of this mortal body.

Implications of the Resurrection and the Afterlife

There is life after this life, and we have only this lifetime to prepare for eternity. The decisions we make today will carry over into the next life. We must, therefore, look intently at the claims of Jesus Christ and decide to live for Him. Apart from Christ, there is only judgment and hell. With Christ, there is forgiveness, joy, and heaven. We must choose for or against Jesus Christ, for or against heaven. Furthermore, Christians must consider with urgency the teachings about hell. There's a lost world around us, a world in desperate need of Christ. Along with the urgency of taking the gospel to others, Christians must live with expectancy. We look forward to the return of Jesus Christ and our opportunity to be with Him for all eternity. The joys of heaven motivate us to live pure lives now and to tell others about the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“What Christians Believe about Prayer”

Christians believe in the power of prayer. Unlike other religions in which prayer is a ritualistic repetition of phrases or creeds, Christianity values heartfelt communion and communication with God. Prayer yields comfort for people in a time of testing. Prayer is the vehicle for worshiping and praising God from the heart. Prayer provides an avenue for personal confession and forgiveness. Prayer moves the heart of God. It's impossible for a Christian to grow spiritually without growing in his or her prayer life. Such is the importance of prayer.

God has decreed to display His power in response to prayer (2 Chronicles 7:14; Matthew 7:7-11).

Throughout the Bible God's people relied on prayer as a means of securing God's blessing. God has decreed that we must pray. More than that, God has invited us to bring our needs before Him. He delights to listen to and act upon our prayers. In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God invites us to humble ourselves and pray. Matthew 7:7-11 records one of Jesus' significant teachings on prayer, reminding us that God is a good heavenly Father who desires to meet our needs through prayer.

Prayer and the Sovereignty of God

The concept of prayer raises the question of God's sovereignty. Since God is completely in control of the events and affairs of His creation, how can prayer make any difference in His activities? Some might respond to this question by saying that prayer is for our benefit, but that our prayers don't really change God's plans. Others might assume that God controls our prayers as well. However, the Bible presents prayer as a real and voluntary activity in which Christians are to participate. Furthermore, the Bible teaches that God does indeed operate in response to our prayers. The answer seems to lie in the concept of limited control. God has given us a certain amount of freedom. We can pray, or we can choose not to spend time in prayer. God has also chosen to fulfill certain aspects of His plan only through the prayers of His people. He will certainly accomplish His perfect will for His creation regardless of our prayers or obedience. But in many aspects of God's will for us, our prayers are essential. This means that we cannot manipulate God to obey our will. Such a concept is foolish. What this does mean is that in most things we must pray if we want to see God at work. Prayer is, therefore, essential in the overall plan of God.

The God Who Hears our Prayers

People pray to any number of "gods." But the God of the Bible is a living God, a God who hears and answers our prayers. Contrary to popular opinion, we do not all worship the same God. Clearly, the God of the Bible can only be approached in the name of Jesus Christ. Those who pray apart from acknowledging the person and work of Jesus Christ are in reality praying to another god. The God of the Bible is a listening

God. He is a Father to those who have trusted Him for salvation. He invites us to pray, and listens readily to our needs. Unlike the gods of pagan religions, our God does not need to be appeased through incantations or rituals. He desires our prayers and answers in accordance with His will. Like children, we can approach our heavenly Father with confidence in His love and care.

Biblical Examples of Answered Prayers

There are numerous examples in the Bible of people who prayed and received God's help. Let's look at two examples. In the Old Testament we read about Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal. These false prophets went through all kinds of contortions in order to gain Baal's attention and gain his response. Then Elijah stepped forward, knelt quietly and humbly before the true and living God, and fire fell immediately from heaven in response to Elijah's prayer (1 Kings 18:16-40). In the New Testament the early church saw God's power through prayer. Peter had been imprisoned for preaching about Jesus. He was on death row. But in direct response to the prayers of those early Christians God miraculously released Peter from prison (Acts 12:1-19). Over and over again the New Testament writers exhort Christians to pray, declaring that God still desires to hear and answer our prayers.

Conditions for Answered Prayer

Recognizing that God has decreed to answer our prayers, we must also recognize that we don't have a "blank check" with God. He's not obligated to answer our prayers. Out of His grace He has promised to answer our prayers based on certain conditions. First of all, we must pray in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14; 15:16). To deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ means that God will not respond to our prayers. We must pray in Jesus' name—we must approach God with Jesus' authority rather than our own. Second, we must pray according to God's will (John 15:17; James 4:3). It's senseless to think that God would violate His ultimate and perfect will just to answer our prayers. In our praying, we must seek to understand and apply God's will. Third, we must pray in faith, believing God can answer our requests (Matthew 21:22; James 1:6). This means that we must pray with expectancy.

Jesus Christ modeled the essential nature of prayer (Luke 11:1-4).

The growing Christian looks to Jesus Christ for his or her example of godly living. Throughout His earthly ministry Jesus modeled prayer as an essential element of the Christian life. We might suppose that Jesus, since He's God in the flesh, would not need to pray to the Father. Yet even before the incarnation there was ongoing communication within the divine godhead. In His incarnation Jesus continued to communicate with God the Father, using prayer as the vehicle for that communication. If God the Son would pray, certainly we need to pray. In Luke 11:1-4 the disciples learned

from Jesus' example about the importance of prayer. They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus is still our supreme teacher in the school of prayer.

The Prayer Life of Jesus

Jesus' earthly ministry was characterized by prayer. He prayed before feeding the five thousand (Matthew 14:19). He prayed at the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41-42). Jesus prayed that the Father would be glorified (John 12:27-29), and that believers would grow in their faith (John 17:1-26). On the night before the crucifixion Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-44), and He prayed from the cross itself (Luke 23:34). In fact, the Gospels record a number of instances when Jesus spent time alone, using those opportunities of solitude for prayer (Luke 4:1-2, 42; 5:16; 6:12; 9:10, 18, 28; 22:41).

The Lord's Prayer

In teaching His disciples how to pray, Jesus presented a model prayer—"The Lord's Prayer." It's recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4. This model prayer provides a pattern for us. We must first of all come to God as our Father. This implies a vital faith relationship with God. He's our Father in Heaven, and He deserves our worship as the holy (hallowed) God. We must then come to God in submission, desiring that God's kingdom would come and that God's will would be done here on earth. Next we must come in humility, depending on God for our daily bread. Then we must come to God in repentance, confessing our sins to Him and finding His gracious forgiveness. We must also come to God in full recognition of our sinful tendencies, asking Him to deliver us from the influence of temptation. Finally, we must come to God in worship. We should express the glory of God through prayer.

Balancing Petitions with Praise

It's all too easy for us to become imbalanced in our prayers. It's a human tendency for us to rush right into our list of prayer requests without first thanking God for previous answers to prayer. A balanced prayer life, however, will include a strong dose of praise and thanksgiving, as well as confession. Furthermore, our prayers must include not only our own needs, but the needs of others around us. In fact, we should build a worldwide perspective into our prayer life.

**Every Christian has the incredible privilege of
direct communion with God through prayer (Matthew 6:5-8).**

Jesus warned against pretentious and ritualistic prayers. In this warning, found in Matthew 6:5-8, He reminds us that as believers we have an awesome opportunity, a privilege, to meet with God at any time. God wants us to pull away from the hectic routine of our daily schedules and spend time in communion with Him.

The Necessity of Salvation

Does God answer the prayers of those who are not Christians? The Bible clearly teaches that God is committed to responding to the prayers only of His children (Proverbs 15:29; John 9:31; James 5:16). While God may choose to intervene in the life of an unbeliever in order to lead that person to Himself, prayer is the unique privilege of God's own people. Salvation is the foundation of our prayer life.

The Danger of Ritualistic Prayer

Jesus warned against prayer that is not heart activated. Praying for selfish reasons, such as public recognition and prestige, accomplishes nothing in God's sight. Likewise, repeating prayers that are hollow and heartless is ineffective. Many religious people around the world are accustomed to simply repeating the same phrases or prayers over and over. But when these prayers come only from the lips and not from the heart, they are worthless. In fact, such prayers are dangerous because they numb a person's sensitivity to God. They provide a false sense of assurance. God calls us to pray from the heart, to pray with meaning.

The Priesthood of the Believer

A precious doctrine of the Bible is the priesthood of the believer. This simply means that every true Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2:5, 9). A priest is an individual who has access to God's presence. As priests, believers have the privilege of access to God at any time and in any place (Hebrews 10:19-23). We can always speak to God and know that He hears us. It's not necessary to go through human mediators. Jesus Christ alone is our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). With such an incredible privilege, it would seem that we would spend more time in prayer. Sometimes we don't pray more because we don't sense God's presence. We don't have the confidence that God is really listening to us. Our prayers seem to simply bounce off the ceiling rather than reach the throne of God. This misconception, however, is an issue of faith. God has promised to hear our prayers. We must learn to trust God's promises and pray even when we don't "feel" that those prayers are being heard. God's promise is far greater than our feelings.

The single most important discipline of the Christian life is prayer (Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6-7).

In describing the spiritual armor necessary for victorious Christian living, Paul concludes with a call to prayer (Ephesians 6:18). Unless we depend on God through prayer, that armor is insufficient. In Philippians 4:6-7 Paul reminds us that everything we think or do must be bathed in prayer. Our work and our worries belong to God. Prayer is essential in everything.

Prayer as Foundational

Our first response to life's struggles, rather than our last, should be prayer. Prayer is foundational to all we do. When we open the pages of the Bible to feed our souls from God's Word we should pray for God's direction. When we drive to work or to the store we should pray for God's protection. When we face difficulties that seem insurmountable we should pray. Prayer is to be the constant communion of our hearts with almighty God (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Like breathing, prayer should become second nature to the Christian.

Persistence in Prayer

Jesus taught His followers that we must be persistent in our praying. In Luke 11:5-8 Jesus told a parable about a man who needed bread for some guests who arrived at his home late at night. The man went to his friend and knocked at the door, asking for some bread. The friend refused to answer the door. But the man persisted in knocking until the friend answered the door and provided the bread. Jesus said that we should persist in knocking at the door. We should not weary of praying to God for the needs of others. Many Christians have found that it took years of praying before a loved one turned to Christ. Persistence in prayer is essential.

Hindrances to Effective Prayer

Prayer is essential in the Christian life. But often our prayers are hindered by a variety of spiritual roadblocks. For example, if we hold onto sin in our life God will not hear our prayers (Psalm 66:18; Isaiah 59:1-2). When we pray with selfish motives our prayers are ineffective (James 4:3). Likewise, disharmony in the home will hinder our prayer life (1 Peter 3:7). A lack of generosity (Proverbs 21:13), forgiveness (Mark 11:25), or faith (James 1:5-8) will also hinder effectiveness in prayer.

There are also some practical hindrances to an effective prayer life. We may for some reason underestimate the importance of prayer in our lives, or fail to set aside adequate time for prayer. We may find it difficult to secure a quiet, private place for prayer. We may also have a difficult time remembering what to pray for, or how God has answered our prayers. We need to aim for consistency in prayer.

Building Consistency in Prayer

How can we improve our commitment to prayer? It begins with the recognition of the great importance of prayer in molding our own lives and in moving the heart of God in behalf of the needs of others. With a determination to make prayer central in our lives, we can then take some practical steps. We might write into our schedules a daily time for prayer, and then keep our appointment with God. We could develop a prayer notebook or journal to record prayer requests and God's responses to our prayers. We need to find a quiet, private room where we can meet alone with God. We must allow adequate time to wait on God and listen to His voice. We could also seek out a friend or two with whom we can develop a partnership in prayer. Spiritual fellowship and prayer

go hand in hand. Above all, we must remember the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. He made prayer the highest priority. We, too, need to so prioritize prayer that this spiritual discipline becomes the foundation of all we do. God has decreed to work through the prayers of His people. Let us pray!