

The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
ONE

THE ARTICLES OF FAITH



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Lesson One

The Articles of Faith

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what makes a tree a tree? Or a house a house? Or a person a person? Or to ask it another way, what qualities must something possess before we call it a tree or a house? These are complex questions that philosophers have been pondering for thousands of years. And we face a similar question when we approach the study of Christian theology. After all, there are countless churches that we would consider to be “Christian,” and many of them disagree about many things. So, it’s useful to ask, “What doctrines are fundamental and essential to Christian theology?”

Now, of course, as we ask this question, we need to be clear that individuals can be saved even if they have a very poor understanding of theology. Our commitment to Christ is sufficient to make us Christians. At the same time, it’s fair to say that there are several essential ideas that must be present in any theological system before it deserves to be called “Christian.” And since the early centuries of the church, the *Apostles' Creed* has provided a useful summary of these core beliefs.

This is the first lesson in our series on The *Apostles' Creed*, a well-known and widely used summary of what Christians believe. We have entitled this lesson *The Articles of Faith* because we will be looking at the *Apostles' Creed* as a summary of the articles or doctrines that must be affirmed by all those who would call themselves “Christian.” The *Apostles' Creed* appeared in various forms during the early centuries of the church. But it was standardized by about A.D. 700 in Latin. A popular modern English translation reads as follows:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,**

**The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.**

Our discussion of the *Apostles' Creed* as the articles of faith will divide into three parts. First, we will speak of the history of the creed. Second, we will provide an overview of its statements. And third, we will focus on the importance of its doctrines for today. Let's begin with the history behind the *Apostles' Creed*.

HISTORY

As we survey the history of the *Apostles' Creed*, we will focus on two matters. On the one hand, we will look at the development of the creed, considering things like its authorship and date of composition. And on the other hand, we will look at the purpose of the creed, the reason the church thought it was important to create and to use it. We'll turn first to historical development of the *Apostles' Creed*.

DEVELOPMENT

It was once believed and taught that the *Apostles' Creed* was written in the first century by the twelve apostles themselves. It was even said that each apostle contributed one of the creed's twelve distinct theological statements. However, there is virtually no evidence that this took place, or even that any apostles were directly involved in the writing of the creed. But if the apostles didn't write the creed, who did?

The question of who wrote the Apostles' Creed is an open one because we do not have an author signed up for it. Almost certainly though these questions are questions that were asked of baptismal candidates going back perhaps as far back as forty or fifty years after Christ. So, a person would be asked, do you believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth? And we know this because a number of people talking about their baptismal experience will refer to various of these questions. And by 200 A.D., Tertullius refers to what is called the Old Roman Creed which is almost identical to the Apostles' Creed and he refers to it in terms of those baptismal questions, "Do you believe," "Do you believe." The first reference to the Apostles' Creed, per se, is by a man named Rufinus in 390 A.D., and he relates the story that each of the twelve apostles, including Matthias who replaced Judas, gave one of the affirmations in the creed. There really is no proof for that theory, but the idea that in fact, these affirmations go all the way back to the apostles certainly has good basis.

— Dr. John Oswalt

In the writings of early Christians, there are many lists of essential doctrines that resemble the *Apostles' Creed*. On the one hand, there are rules of faith that catalog and explain fundamental beliefs in some detail. The writings of the early church fathers indicate that written rules of faith summarized the beliefs and practices of the churches that produced them. For example, Origen included a rule of faith in the beginning of his work, *On First Principles*, and Irenaeus included one in book 1, chapter 10 of his famous work *Against Heresies*. Rules of faith like these were intended to preserve the teachings of the church, and were used to train its people — especially its leaders. Often, these rules varied from congregation to congregation. Generally speaking, they included affirmations of important doctrines, as well as moral teachings and traditions.

On the other hand, some ancient doctrinal lists are in the form of creeds. These were short lists that summarized the doctrinal portions of the church's rule of faith, especially its most critical beliefs. These were often recited in liturgical settings, such as baptisms. In the first and second centuries, it may have been the case that each local congregation had its own creed, or way of summarizing essential biblical truth. But by the third or fourth century, some creeds were rising to greater prominence and being used in multiple churches.

One ancient creed that rose to prominence in this manner was the creed from the church in Rome, often called the *Roman Creed*. This creed is so similar to the *Apostles' Creed* that many scholars believe the *Apostles' Creed* to be simply a later version of the *Roman Creed*.

But regardless of its precise origins, what is beyond question is that the *Apostles' Creed* eventually came into widespread use, especially in Western churches. In the early centuries, its precise wording varied somewhat from church to church. But in the eighth century the wording was generally standardized into the form that we recognize and use today.

With this understanding of the historical development of the creed in mind, we should look at the purpose behind the creation and use of the *Apostles' Creed*.

PURPOSE

In our day, many Christians are suspicious of creeds, and it isn't difficult to understand why. Although very few people would outspokenly claim that a creed has the same authority as Scripture, sometimes well-meaning Christians treat certain creeds as if they were equal to the Bible itself. But no creed should ever be elevated to this level in theory or in practice.

The Bible is our only inspired, infallible rule of faith and practice. Creeds, on the other hand, are fallible teaching tools that summarize our understanding of Scripture. And as we are about to see, the *Apostles' Creed* was created to help Christians learn and remain true to the teachings of the Bible.

We will investigate the purpose of the *Apostles' Creed* in three steps. First, we will look at Scripture as the original repository of true doctrine. Second, we will look at the churches' traditional teachings as affirmations of Scripture. And third, we will see that the *Apostles' Creed* was intended to summarize the churches' traditional

understandings of Scripture. Let's begin with the fact that dedicated Christians have always affirmed that Scripture is the basis of our doctrine.

Scripture

Listen to the words of the early church father Origen in the Preface to his work *On First Principles*, written in the early third century:

All who believe ... derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teachings of Christ. And by the words of Christ, we do not mean those only which He spoke when He became man ... for before that time, Christ, the Word of God, was in Moses and the prophets... Moreover ... after His ascension into heaven He spoke in His apostles.

Origen taught that Scripture in all its parts was the word of Christ, and that it was the source of all true doctrine.

And listen to the words of the early third-century bishop Hippolytus, in section 9 of his work *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*:

There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source.

The early churches believed that the whole Bible was Christ's word, given to believers by the apostles. In this regard, they affirmed the concept that theologians often call *sola Scriptura* or Scripture alone. This is the perspective that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith, and the final arbiter in any theological controversy.

We find a clear example of this in the writings of Basil, who was elected bishop of Caesarea in A.D. 370. Basil was a strong defender of the traditions or customs of the church, and often expressed his beliefs that these traditions could be traced back to the apostles. Nevertheless, when there was a question about the truthfulness of these traditions, he appealed to Scripture as the final authority. Listen to Basil's words in his *Letter 189*, written to Eustathius the Physician:

Let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.

Here Basil admitted that some churches affirmed one set of customary ideas in their rule of faith, while other churches had contradictory customs. So, he appealed to Scripture as the highest authority to settle the matter.

The early church relied strongly on Scripture as the basis for all its doctrine. But they still depended on the traditional teachings of the church to summarize and protect the teachings of Scripture.

Traditional Teachings

Now, it is reasonable to wonder why the church felt it was necessary to preserve its traditional teachings. Wasn't it enough simply to preserve the Bible, and to let the Bible speak for itself?

Well, there's a need to formulate concise, clear statements on what the church believes, especially because there are false teachers who teach things that aren't in line with what the apostles taught and what the Bible teaches. And so, especially in response to these false teachings, the church needed to formulate a clear summary statement on what it believed.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The church had the Scriptures as the basis of its faith, but of course, the Scriptures were very long and literacy was very limited. So, it was best for the church to summarize basic doctrines in one creed in order for people to understand and comprehend the faith without having to read the entire Bible.

— Dr. Riad Kassis, translation

The Apostles' Creed was especially valuable, even necessary in early church history because the Canon of Scripture was not formally listed until around A.D. 397. So what was the authoritative faith of the church? It was summarized in the Apostles' Creed. But at that time we had the Bible. So, why should we continue to have the creed? Because we can't require people to understand the whole Bible before we accept them as Christians. The Apostles' Creed still summarizes the essential teachings of the Bible in a simple way. And for this reason, it must continue to be used even now.

— Dr. Paul Chang, translation

False teachers created many problems in the church. Some even denied central aspects of the gospel itself. In response to these circumstances, godly Christian leaders created short summaries of the central teachings of Scripture so that all Christians would know and affirm the basic content of the faith. Listen to the way Origen described the problem in another section of the Preface to his work *On First Principles*:

There are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles, and remaining in the Churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolical tradition.

Notice what Origen said here. He did not say that the teaching of the church was infallible, or that it would always be perfect. Rather he said that the teaching of the church was to be accepted as true, as or because it had been transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles and preserved until his own day. In other words, in Origen's day, the teaching of the church was still an accurate summary of Christ's words in Scripture. And for this reason, the church in his day was able to use it as a "standard" or "rule of faith" for testing doctrines. But the ultimate authority rested in the New Testament, not in the contemporary church.

We might illustrate this idea by thinking of a chain made of several links. The early church wanted to hold fast to the teachings of Christ, which could be found in Scripture. This makes Christ the first link. The apostles had direct contact with Christ, and were taught directly by him. So, their teachings are the second link in the chain. The apostles then preserved their knowledge of Christ in Scripture, making Scripture the third link in the chain. Each of these three links was perfect and infallible because it was superintended by the Holy Spirit.

But the fourth link, the traditional teachings of the church, was different. The transmission of these customs was not infallible; the Holy Spirit did not guarantee that they would be kept free from error. In fact, as we have already seen, the customs of some churches were contradicted by the customs of others.

Some of these teachings pertained to minor matters of practice — things that Scripture does not directly address. But other traditions summarized the original meaning of Scripture, especially with regard to major articles of faith, like those listed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

When it came to these central beliefs, the traditions had been confirmed by many church leaders in many places throughout the ages. Moreover, they could be verified by direct appeals to Scripture. This is why Origen felt confident in setting forth the church's traditional teachings as a rule of faith.

Nevertheless, this link was not infallible. It was always possible for the churches, for its councils, and for individual Christians, to make mistakes. Listen to the words that Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the third century, wrote in his *Epistle 73* against the doctrines held by Stephen, Bishop of Rome:

Nor ought custom, which had crept in among some, to prevent the truth from prevailing and conquering; for custom without truth is the antiquity of error.

Cyprian's point was that some ancient Christian views and practices were not rooted in the truth handed to us from the apostles. Instead, they were "the antiquity of error" — errors that had crept into the church a long time ago. In fact, it was precisely this problem

of human fallibility that made it important for the church to record its rule of faith in written form. Origen and other early church fathers wrote down the church's rule of faith to make sure that Christians throughout the world would be able to compare their doctrines to the traditional ones. Church councils also recorded traditional teachings so that their judgments would inform Christians in different places and times.

In all cases, the goal of preserving the church's traditional teachings was to ensure that the churches did not stray from the original meaning of Scripture, in order that believers would rightly understand the teachings of the apostles, in order that they would firmly grasp and live by the words of Christ.

The Bible is a very big book, and so you can't, in one sense, just let it speak for itself. You need to give a good summary of it. Even within the New Testament there are major challenges to the doctrine of who Christ is. And you can see the apostles trying to argue and to say, "No, this is the truth." And that issue continues into the second century A.D. Some major challenges to the doctrine of who Jesus is, and to the nature of the Bible. And so they had to summarize the biblical faith as pithily, as shortly as they could do. And that gave rise to the Apostles' Creed. The important thing to remember is they're not actually trying to add to the Bible, they're trying to elucidate and to draw out its meaning.

— Dr. Peter Walker

As Basil wrote in his work *On the Holy Spirit* in A.D. 374:

What our fathers said, the same say we ... But we do not rest only on the fact that such is the tradition of the fathers; for they too followed the sense of Scripture.

Now, we should mention that in guarding its traditional teachings, the early church was not terribly worried about minor points of doctrine. They were focused on central, fundamental beliefs and practices. This is clear from the kinds of arguments they made in their writings, and from the kinds of things they listed in their written rules of faith.

For example, they wrote against Docetists, who denied the humanity of Christ. They wrote against Gnostics, who believed that the God of the Old Testament was evil, and who permitted all sorts of fleshly sins. And they wrote against many other false teachings that challenged the basic tenets of Scripture.

Having talked about Scripture and the church's traditional teachings, we are ready to look at how the *Apostles' Creed* summarized the church's traditional teachings for individual believers.

Apostles' Creed

As we have seen, the *Apostles' Creed* was largely used to confirm that new Christians believed the fundamental teachings of the Bible. In much the same way that modern churches disciple new believers in classes and Bible studies, the early church used creeds to train new believers in the basics of the faith.

Augustine, the famous Bishop of Hippo who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, summarized the value of creeds in a sermon to catechumens, new believers preparing for their baptisms. In this sermon, the creed he had directly in mind was the *Nicene Creed*, but his words accurately summarize the purpose and use of all sorts of creeds in the early centuries of the church. In *A Sermon to the Catechumens: on the Creed*, Augustine wrote this:

These words which you have heard are in the Divine Scriptures scattered up and down: but thence gathered and reduced into one, that the memory of slow persons might not be distressed; that every person may be able to say, able to hold, what he believes.

As Augustine indicated here, the central teachings of Christianity are scattered here and there in Scripture. So, the ancient churches summarized Scripture's core doctrines in creeds. This ensured that every believer — even, as he put it, “slow” or uneducated persons — could affirm and hold fast to the fundamental teachings of Scripture.

Of course, since many congregations had different creeds, there was a sense in which they also had different minimum standards of belief. Some churches did not require sufficient understanding on the part of new believers, while others excluded believers who had true faith but lacked advanced theological knowledge. As a result, a person might qualify as a believer in some congregations but not in others. And in light of this disparity, the early church recognized the need for a creed that would be acceptable to every congregation that called itself Christian.

The *Apostles' Creed* rose to prominence in order to fill this need. It was a short, straightforward statement of beliefs that could and should be understood by all professing Christians.

The Apostles' Creed is actually a narrative summary of the Christian's faith. And it points out the fact that even though we believe that every single word of the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God, we are in need of a summary to help people understand what the essence of the gospel is. The Apostles' Creed is just that kind of summary. Emerging from so early in the Christian tradition, encapsulating what the apostles taught on the basis of Christ's revelation to them concerning the essence of the faith. “I believe.” Everything flows from that. And so, what's so important here is that the Apostles' Creed helps us to say everything we have to say in order to say enough to communicate the gospel.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Now that we have spoken of the history of the *Apostles' Creed*, we are ready to provide an overview of its affirmations. This big picture of what Christians believe can be just as useful today as it was in the early centuries of the church.

OVERVIEW

Over the years, theologians have described the content of the *Apostles' Creed* in a variety of ways. In this lesson, we will approach the creed's articles of faith from three perspectives. First, we will address the doctrine of God himself. Second, we will speak of the church. And third, we will address the topic of salvation. Let's begin with the doctrine of God in the *Apostles' Creed*.

GOD

The doctrine of God is absolutely essential to all that we say in terms of our Christian theology, our Christian faith, our Christian practice. Everything that we have in terms of how we understand ourselves, understand the world, understand our meaning and purpose, all goes back to who God is. Every single Christian doctrine whether it be salvation, the church, last things in terms of the future, all of that is rooted and grounded in the God who exists, the God who is triune. All of our hope and confidence in this life, all of what we think of in terms of our salvation and forgiveness of sins; all is rooted back in the God who has planned it all, the God who has brought about his will and purpose and the God who will end it all in terms of bringing his plan to accomplishment. So everything goes back to who we think God is.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

There are two major aspects of the doctrine of God that appear in the *Apostles' Creed*. First, the creed is structured around the belief that God exists in Trinity. And second, it makes statements about the different persons of God, namely the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Let's look first at the Trinity.

Trinity

You'll notice that the *Apostles' Creed* is divided into three main parts, each of which begins with the statement "I believe." The first section speaks of belief in God the Father. The second section is about belief in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. And the third section summarizes belief in the Holy Spirit, and lists his active ministries.

Now, we should point out that not all ancient versions of the creed include the words “I believe” before the articles concerning Jesus Christ. In their place, many simply use the word “and,” which in this context carries the same force as the words “I believe.” In all cases, however, the division of the creed, according to the persons of God, has been universally recognized by the church. This formula is Trinitarian. That is, it is based on the belief that there is only one God, and that this God exists in three persons, namely the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This is the same formula we find in passages like Matthew 28:19, where Jesus gave his disciples this commission:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

Here, just as in the *Apostles' Creed*, the mention of these three names together and on equal terms implies that while the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all distinct persons, they are only one God.

Now, admittedly, the *Apostles' Creed* does not specifically mention the word “Trinity,” or spell out its details. But remember that the creed was intended to be a summary of beliefs, not a comprehensive statement of faith. And when it was used in the church’s liturgy, everyone in the church knew that to mention these three persons of God in this way was to imply the concept of the Trinity.

Now, not every Christian understands the full meaning of the word Trinity, so we should pause to explain it. The Trinity is commonly stated this way:

God has three persons, but only one essence.

By the term person, we mean a distinct, self-aware personality. And by the term essence, we are referring to God's fundamental nature or the substance of which he consists.

Of course, the concept of the Trinity is very difficult for human beings to grasp. God’s existence and nature are so far beyond the realm of our experience that it is difficult for us to conceive of him. Even so, the Trinity is one of the most important distinctive beliefs of Christianity. But how did such a complex doctrine become such an important cornerstone in Christian theology?

Well, the Trinity is something you come to when you read the Bible in a holistic way. You come and you see that the Father is clearly God and the Son is clearly God and the Spirit is clearly God in their distinct persons. And so there’s a need to synthesize the teaching of Scripture with something like the doctrine of the Trinity.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

So the doctrine of the Trinity becomes a cornerstone of Christian theology, I take it primarily because it’s a biblical doctrine. Now we need to be careful how we understand that because the word t-r-i-n-i-

t-y is not in Scripture, but the concept is. So the sum total biblical teaching, what the Scriptures tell us about who God is — that's he's one, that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Spirit is God — when put together in their total, whole Bible package, derives or warrants the conclusion that God is a trinity of persons.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

So, when we say that God consists of one essence, we are defending the biblical truth that there is only one God. And we are trying to explain how three separate persons can all be that one God. We use the term essence to refer to that thing that each of these three persons shares entirely in common with the others, to the *stuff* or *being* that belongs as much to the Father as it does to the Son, and as it does to the Holy Spirit.

And when we say that God exists in three persons, we are defending the biblical truth that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct from one another. They are separate individuals who converse with one another, interact with one another, engage in relationships with one another.

In many ways, the concept of the Trinity is a great mystery. But it is also an accurate summary of the Bible's many teachings on the nature of our extraordinary God.

The idea of the Trinity is critical to Christian theology for many reasons. For example, it defends our belief that Jesus is God, and that Jesus is not simply the Father in disguise. It also explains why we affirm monotheism, worshiping only one God, even though we worship and pray to three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, it helps us to give proper honor to all God's persons. And it comforts us with the knowledge that the presence and help of any of God's persons is the presence and help of God himself. In fact, belief in the Trinity is so foundational to so many other Christian ideas that it is hard to imagine historic Christianity without it.

Having looked at the doctrine of God in the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of the Trinity, we are ready to consider the statements it makes about the different persons of God in distinction from each other.

Persons

With regard to the Father, the creed ascribes to him the attribute of being almighty, and mentions the historical fact that he is the maker of heaven and earth. Now, certainly God has far more attributes than his infinite power and sovereignty, and he has performed more astounding acts than making the world. And in some important senses, the creed's description of the Father doesn't even distinguish Christianity from other religions that might also express belief in a sovereign, divine creator. But the early church felt that these statements were sufficient to demonstrate that a person's beliefs about the Father were compatible with Christianity. And they relied on other statements in the creed to distinguish Christianity from the religions around it.

For instance, the creed has much more to say about the Son, Jesus Christ. Although it does not describe any of his attributes, it mentions several details of his earthly life and ministry — details that would be denied by those outside the church.

The creed mentions Jesus' incarnation, his coming to earth as a human baby, and living a genuinely human life. And it speaks of his suffering, death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Scripture tells us that unbelievers have denied these basic facts since they took place.

Even today, many liberal historians and theologians deny these facts, as do many Christian cults and false religions. For example, Islam affirms that Jesus was a true prophet of God. But it insists that he was never crucified or resurrected, and it denies his divinity.

Finally, the creed mentions Jesus' role as the one who will judge all humanity on the last day, condemning the wicked, but granting believers eternal, blessed life.

Of the Holy Spirit, the creed says that he caused the Virgin Mary to become pregnant with Jesus. Other than that, it merely affirms his existence as a distinct person of God. Implicitly, however, the creed associates the Holy Spirit with the church, and with our experience of salvation both now and in the future.

We will say much more about each of the persons of God in future lessons. So for now we will simply point out that the creed is concerned not only to affirm Trinitarianism, but also to speak of each person of the Trinity in ways that are central to the Christian faith. While its statements are not extensive, the creed says enough about God and his persons to distinguish those who affirm the historic Christian faith from those who do not.

Now that we have mentioned the doctrinal statements that refer to God himself, we are ready to point out the way the *Apostles' Creed* speaks of the church.

CHURCH

The *Apostles' Creed* describes the church in two different phrases. First, the church is called the holy catholic church. Second, the church is described as the communion of saints. These phrases have been interpreted in many different ways, and we will deal with them in greater detail in a future lesson.

For now, we will simply point out that the phrase the holy catholic church does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church but to the church in all its parts throughout the world.

Even so, it may seem strange to many Protestants to think about believing in the church in any form. So, it may help to explain that when the creed says "I believe in the ... church," it does not mean that we place our faith in the church. Rather, it means that we affirm the belief that the church is both holy, or sanctified, and catholic, meaning universal.

And we affirm our belief that there is a communion of saints, that is, a fellowship of believers. It is in these senses that historic Christianity has insisted on the importance of the church.

In this lesson, we will focus on just two aspects of the church that were central to the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. On the one hand, we will look at participation in the church. And on the other hand, we will consider doctrinal preservation by the church. Let's begin with participation in the church.

Participation

When the creed says, “I believe in the holy ... church,” it emphasizes the importance of participating in the church. Of course, in the history of the Christian church, there have been many people who wanted to have God as their Father, Jesus as their Lord, and the Holy Spirit as their advocate, but who did not want to be part of the visible church, the gathered people of God. As we read in Hebrews 10:25:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing (Hebrews 10:25).

Even in the first century, some professing believers wanted to avoid the gathered church as a place for worship, teaching and fellowship. But Scripture teaches that the church is important and necessary for Christians.

Of course, those who originally used the *Apostles' Creed* were not like this. On the contrary, the creed was used particularly in church services. And it was affirmed by those who came to the church for baptism. They came to be joined to its numbers, to be included in its gatherings. This is the model that the creed puts forth for us to follow.

Even so, in the modern world we still encounter Christians who avoid the church. Perhaps it is because they dislike organized religion. Or maybe they have been mistreated by other Christians. Or perhaps they think that it is sufficient to read Christian books, watch Christian television, and use Christian websites.

But the Bible teaches Christians to form an actual, physical community, and it insists that this community is extremely important to every believer. It is not to be limited to spiritual fellowship, although it is true that Christians have spiritual communion with each other through Christ and his Spirit. Rather, our community is to be like a family or neighborhood. It is to consist of people who interact with each other face to face.

With the importance of participation in the church in mind, we should move to doctrinal preservation by and within the church.

Preservation

From the earliest days, the regular recitation, confession and memorization of the creeds and confessions in the church served a very, very important role, especially in societies like the first century world and beyond in early Christianity where the literacy rates were very, very low. And so very few people could read and even among those who could read, very few would ever own a Bible. And so the regular confessions of these creeds publicly in the worship service served again a very important role in providing parameters or what we might call the rule of faith or a ruled reading for what is a proper understanding of how the Scriptures are to be put together.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

As we mentioned when we spoke of rules of faith, the church is not infallible. And the *Apostles' Creed* is not encouraging us to believe whatever our local church teaches. Rather, it is simply affirming the fact that Christ appointed his church in part to protect and to proclaim the gospel and other truths.

Listen to the way Jude, the brother of Jesus, wrote about the church's mission in verses 3-4 of his epistle:

Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men ... have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord (Jude verses 3-4).

According to Jude, part of the church's job is to contend for the faith, to protect the truths and beliefs that have been entrusted to it against those who promote false teachings and practices.

Now, it should be obvious to most of us that there are many false teachings in various parts of the church today. And there are many sinful practices as well. Nevertheless, God has never withdrawn the church's assignment, or declared that any other group or individual should take over the job of protecting true doctrine. It is still the job of the church to protect the truth.

And the church is still trying to do its job. Sometimes we do it better than others. Some of our theology is faithful to Scripture, but other parts of it need to be improved, or even changed altogether. And this will always be the case. But for our purposes in this lesson, the point we want to make is this: We can't give up. We have to keep trying to preserve doctrine in the church. And if we abandon this call, we are denying a central article of the historic Christian faith: I believe in the church.

Now that we have looked at the articles of faith related to God and the church, we are ready to turn to our third category: the statements about salvation that are presented in the *Apostles' Creed*.

SALVATION

The Apostles' Creed contains a lot about salvation near the end. Some people have wondered why they are at the end, rather than some other place. And of course the creed itself doesn't really tell us. But, if you look at it, the way that it looks to me, is that the creed wants to establish the Godhead — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — to be sure that the experience of salvation is flowing from that Godhead, and not from any kind of human construct or human system. To know who God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is leads to the invitation and the promise that we can be saved if we confess our sins. And so I think those statements are at the end to show that the fruit of

our relationship with God comes from the root of who God is in that Trinity.

— Dr. Steve Harper

The last three articles of faith in the creed deal with aspects of salvation. Specifically, they mention the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. In traditional systematic theology, resurrection and everlasting life are also treated under the heading of eschatology, the doctrine of last things. But for the sake of simplicity, we will only address them under the heading of salvation.

All Christians believe in the forgiveness of sins through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. We believe that if we confess and repent of our sins, God will not punish us in hell for them. And as the *Apostles' Creed* indicates, this has been the belief of the church from its earliest days. And we all know Scriptures that teach us that all those who are forgiven are blessed with eternal life through Jesus Christ. For instance, John 3:16-18 encourages us with these words:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life... Whoever believes in him is not condemned (John 3:16-18).

Eternal life belongs to every believer. In some respects, it begins the moment we come to faith, since our souls are given new life and will never die.

But the nature of the eternal life affirmed by the creed sometimes surprises modern Christians. Specifically, the creed speaks about the resurrection of the body. Sometimes, Christians make the mistake of thinking that the creed is referring to the resurrection of Jesus. But it is not. Jesus' resurrection is mentioned earlier in the creed, in the words "The third day he rose from the dead." This article of faith is not repeated. Rather, when the creed speaks of the resurrection of the dead, it is referring to the biblical teaching that all people will be resurrected on the Day of Judgment, and that they will go to their eternal fates, not as disembodied spirits, but as physical, bodily creatures. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture, and it has been an article of faith in the church for thousands of years.

As Jesus taught in John 5:28-29:

A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [the Son's] voice and come out — those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (John 5:28-29).

The creed's statements about salvation are taught clearly in Scripture and have always been embraced by biblical churches. Even so, many modern people who claim to follow Christ reject these basic, fundamental teachings. There are some who deny that God holds us accountable for our sin, and who insist that forgiveness is unnecessary. There are unbelievers in our churches who teach that this life is all there is, and that any so-called "eternal" life we possess is limited to our time on earth in our physical bodies. And there are many who wrongly believe that we will spend eternity as disembodied

spirits in heaven. For reasons like these, the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* are just as important and relevant for the church today as they were in the early centuries.

In summary, the *Apostles' Creed* focuses on doctrines related to God, the church, and salvation. In other lessons in this series, we will explore each of these concepts in much greater depth. But for now, we simply want to make sure that we understand the big picture: that this handful of doctrines is so central and fundamental that they have effectively defined the boundaries of Christianity for hundreds and hundreds of years.

So far in our discussion of the *Apostles' Creed* as the articles of faith, we have spoken of the history of the creed, and offered an overview of its theology. Now, we're ready to move to our third major topic: the continuing importance of the articles of faith listed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

IMPORTANCE

We will mention three aspects of the importance of the doctrinal statements in the *Apostles' Creed*. First, we will explain that these teachings are foundational to the rest of Christian theology. Second, we'll talk about the universal affirmation of these teachings throughout the church. And third, we'll speak of the unifying nature of these articles of faith. Let's begin by exploring the foundational qualities of the doctrines in the *Apostles' Creed*.

FOUNDATIONAL

Most people are familiar with the idea that large buildings need solid foundations. The foundation is the base on which the rest of the building is created. It is the anchor that holds the building firmly in place, and that provides strength and stability for the entire structure. In Ephesians 2:19-21, Paul spoke of the church as a building founded on the apostles and prophets. Listen to his words there:

You are ... members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:19-21).

Without a solid, true foundation, the church could not be built in a way that honored God.

And in a similar way, Christian theology must be founded on true doctrines and principles if it is to honor God and be useful to his people. Just as Jesus is the cornerstone of the church, his teachings are the cornerstone of theology. And just as the apostles and prophets became the church's foundation by introducing Christ to the world, the *Apostles' Creed* is foundational to theology because it introduces us to the teachings of the apostles recorded in Scripture.

The beautiful thing about the Apostles' Creed is that it summarizes so well basic essential Christian doctrines that every Christian, in all of the diverse denominations that we have today, must affirm. Who God is, who the Lord Jesus Christ is, the work of the Spirit and how that works itself out in the doctrine of salvation, the church, all the way to final judgment and then the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot really have the Christian faith without these key, essential Christian doctrines.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

We will consider the foundational nature of the *Apostles' Creed* in two parts. First, we will look at how it provides a standard against which other doctrines can be judged. And second, we will speak of the way that it serves as the logical basis on which other true doctrines are built. Let's begin with the *Apostles' Creed* as a theological standard.

Standard

The *Apostles' Creed* functions as a doctrinal standard because it presents several of the biggest, most important ideas of Christianity. These ideas are taught so clearly in Scripture that they should be recognized and embraced by everyone. As we said earlier in this lesson, these teachings are essential to Christianity. As a result, every other doctrine that we embrace must be compatible with these teachings. We cannot accept any idea that contradicts these essential teachings.

Have you ever seen a ventriloquist? A ventriloquist is a performer who can speak in a way that makes it look like he is not speaking. Ventriloquists often perform with puppets, making it look like the puppet is carrying on a conversation with the ventriloquist. A skilled performer can make the puppet seem almost as if it were alive. But no matter how convincing the performance is, we know that it is really the ventriloquist who is speaking and not the puppet. Why?

Well, the answer is simple. We know that puppets aren't alive, and that they can't really talk. So, when we observe a puppet that appears to talk, we judge our experience by the standard of what we know to be true. No matter how much it looks like the puppet is talking, our standard tells us that the appearance is deceptive. And so we refuse to believe it. We may not be able to explain how the puppet can appear to be alive and to speak its mind. But we know that there must be a logical explanation that is consistent with our standard.

In a similar way, the *Apostles' Creed* summarizes those central beliefs that we hold so strongly that we will never change them. We believe that the Bible is so clear on these points, and that they are so important, that we cannot compromise on them. So, no matter what other perspectives people present to us, we refuse to believe anything that conflicts with these central teachings of Scripture.

Using the creed as a standard helps us remain faithful to Scripture when convincing false teachers present us with bad theology. Many of us have met people who are so good with their arguments, and who are so compelling as individuals, that we are inclined to believe most things they say — even when they are mistaken or lying. So, it helps to have a short list of essential beliefs that can anchor us to the teachings of Scripture. And the *Apostles' Creed* provides such an anchor.

For example, there were several major heresies that the church responded to in the early centuries of its life. And one of these was Gnosticism. Among other things, Gnosticism taught that our physical bodies are evil, and that salvation involves freeing our souls from their imprisonment in our bodies. Now, not every Christian in the early church knew how to refute this error. But those who had been trained in the doctrines of the *Apostles' Creed* could confidently reject this heresy on the basis that Scripture teaches the resurrection of the body. That is, it teaches that Jesus came to redeem us as whole persons, including not only our souls, but also our bodies.

Many of us have been confused by a clever argument, or misled by mistaken or misrepresented data. Now, we can't always explain what is wrong with these arguments and findings. But even so, we can confidently reject those things that contradict the *Apostles' Creed*, because we know that the creed is faithful to Scripture.

Of course, we never want to raise the *Apostles' Creed* or any other statement of faith to the level of Scripture. The Bible alone is absolutely unquestionable. And even the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* should be rejected if they can be shown to contradict Scripture. But the *Apostles' Creed* has stood the test of time since the earliest centuries of the church. It has been shown repeatedly to be an accurate representation of the Bible. So, we should feel confident using it as a standard for judging the many doctrines we encounter in the modern world.

Having considered the way the *Apostles' Creed* can serve as a useful doctrinal standard, we are ready to talk about another of its foundational aspects: its use as the logical basis for other theological viewpoints.

Logical Basis

The logical relationship between ideas is similar to the relationship between a river and its headwater or source. Logically basic ideas are like the river's headwater. They are the source of other ideas. And logically dependent ideas are like the river that naturally flows from that headwater. So, when we say that one idea serves as the logical basis for another, we mean that we can create a reasonable argument that moves from the logically basic idea to the establishment of other ideas that are logically dependent. For instance, the *Apostles' Creed* says very few things explicitly about God the Father. All it says is:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

But these doctrines form the logical basis for many other things we believe about the Father. For instance, on the basis that God is the maker of heaven and earth, we also

rightly believe that he has authority over heaven and earth, and that the original creation was good, and that we can learn things about God by looking at the natural world.

We can illustrate the value of logically basic doctrines by looking at a tree. We might think of the ground itself as Scripture, with the tree of theology growing out of it. The trunk of the tree, and its major branches, represent the most basic doctrines. These are based on and dependent on Scripture alone. But as the major branches divide into more and smaller branches, they move to beliefs that logically flow from the larger branches. And as we look at the leaves on the tree, we are looking at ideas that depend on the smaller branches. When we picture it this way, the value of beginning with the *Apostles' Creed* becomes clear. We need to learn the big doctrines first, to get the shape of the tree in place, and firmly rooted in Scripture.

This does two things for us. First, it helps us see the relationship between the various different beliefs in our theological systems. And second, it helps us think about doctrines that are more remote from Scripture in ways that harmonize these less central ideas with our fundamental beliefs.

The doctrines in the Apostles' Creed crystallize the essence of Christian truth. The Apostles' Creed dates really from the second century; it took a number of forms in the second century, and finally took the form that we are used to. And there you have the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There you have the incarnation and the atoning death and the triumphant resurrection and forthcoming return of the Lord Jesus. There you have the forgiveness of sins. There you have the reality of the church as the fellowship of those who are born again in Christ. And I think that there could be nothing really healthier in any church than periodically to work over the Apostles' Creed and highlight those doctrines.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

Now that we have looked at the importance of the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of its foundational nature, we are ready to describe the universal affirmation of its teachings.

UNIVERSAL

One way that we judge the truth of facts is by looking at what different witnesses have to say. The more witnesses that point to the truth of an idea, the more likely we are to believe it. Well, the same thing is true in theology. As we try to determine what we should believe, it helps to know what other people throughout history have believed, as well as what people in the modern world believe. And when it comes to the *Apostles' Creed*, its doctrinal statements have always been affirmed by most Christians in most places.

We will explore the universal nature of the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* in three historical periods. First, we will see that these beliefs are grounded in the New Testament. Second, we will see that they have been affirmed by most Christians

throughout church history. And third, we will look at the ways they continue to characterize the church in the present. Let's begin with the New Testament, and its consistent affirmation of these doctrines.

New Testament

From the earliest days of the church, there have been disagreements over the teaching of Christ and of the apostles. Some of these disagreements have arisen outside the church, while others have come from within the church. For instance, Paul frequently wrote against the Jewish Christians who demanded that Gentile converts be circumcised, as in Galatians 5. And in 2 Peter 2, Peter warned that there would be false teachers in the church. The New Testament is full of examples of Jesus and the apostles correcting the mistaken ideas of various people.

And errors in the church are dangerous when critical beliefs are at stake. This is why Jesus and the authors of the New Testament were so concerned to correct errors on fundamental points of theology. And the remarkable thing is that as they offered their corrections, they agreed entirely with each other. Despite the many false teachings that existed in the church at this time, the New Testament exhibits unflinching doctrinal unity with itself.

The fact that the church established a canon made up of these books — which by the way took the church centuries actually to do, so it wasn't just a quick process — indicates that the considered judgment of the church is that there is a core of unity here. That's not a consideration that we can easily pass off, and as a matter of fact, that has been the judgment of scholars within the church over the last 2000 years. And yet, while we can talk about a core of unity between the New Testament documents, you do have to acknowledge that there are differences in perspective between them. I think the operative issue is that the differences of perspectives do not actually come down to a contradiction of doctrinal assertions. You get different perspectives, different emphasis, different ways of talking about the reality, different aspects of the reality. But, in my judgment at least, there is no blatant contradiction between the various books of the New Testament.

— Dr. David Bauer

In light of this unity, when the New Testament affirms the articles of faith listed in the *Apostles' Creed*, it is fair to say that it does so universally. It consistently argues for the divinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, while at the same time insisting that there is only one God. The Gospels present the creedal facts of Christ's conception, birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. And the books of the New Testament entirely support the creed's statements about the church and salvation.

Having looked at the New Testament, let's see how these beliefs have universally characterized Christianity throughout church history.

Church History

Just like the church in the New Testament, the church of later centuries exhibited a variety of theologies. On many minor issues, there was very little unity. But the more central doctrines, such as the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*, were received and affirmed almost universally. And in those cases where these fundamental beliefs were rejected, the church and history have largely counted the dissenters as schismatics and false teachers.

As just one example, consider the events of the fourth century A.D. The earliest versions of the *Apostles' Creed* were already in use at this time. At this point in history, several heresies arose that the church dealt with in its councils. Some of these were local councils, but others were considered to be ecumenical because they included bishops from most parts of the church throughout the world. For instance, the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 were ecumenical councils dealing with issues related to several of the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*.

The modern *Nicene Creed* was initially drafted at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and it reached its modern form at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. It is largely an expansion and explanation of the *Apostles' Creed*, intended to clarify several of its ideas for the sake of denying false interpretations of the creed.

For instance, the heresy known as Gnosticism taught that the God of the Bible that created the world had himself been created by another god. Heresies like Gnosticism were not explicitly condemned by the *Apostles' Creed*, so the *Nicene Creed* added language to make the intent of the *Apostles' Creed* more clear.

Specifically, where the *Apostles' Creed* merely said "I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," the *Nicene Creed* offered this expanded statement: We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. Notice four things here:

First, the *Nicene Creed* is based on the *Apostles' Creed*. By basing their own creed on the *Apostles' Creed*, the ecumenical Nicene Council demonstrated that the church universally affirmed the *Apostles' Creed*.

Second, the *Nicene Creed* began with the word "we" in place of the word "I." Whereas the *Apostles' Creed* had been intended as an individual's profession of faith at baptism, the *Nicene Creed* was a statement that the church universally and collectively endorsed these same doctrines.

Third, the *Nicene Creed* offered a clarification by adding the word "one" before the word "God." This made explicit what the *Apostles' Creed* had implied: that there is only one God.

And fourth, the *Nicene Creed* offered the clarification that God created everything, including invisible things such as spirits. This made it clear that God himself was not created. Again, this point was implicit in the *Apostles' Creed*, so that the *Nicene Creed* was simply clarifying the matter.

These types of affirmations and clarifications continued to be offered by other councils and theologians throughout the centuries. At times, the decisions of councils were not accepted by all churches. One council would condemn the views of some churches; another council would condemn the views of other churches. But in most cases, the churches on both sides of these controversies continued to affirm the basic principles of the *Apostles' Creed*.

For this reason, the *Apostles' Creed* has commonly been viewed as the most basic and most ecumenical statement of the Christian faith. Only the *Nicene Creed* has approached the *Apostles' Creed* in terms of ecumenical acceptance throughout history. But the *Nicene Creed* is not nearly as basic. It includes several theological statements that even theologians often misunderstand. This is why we have chosen the *Apostles' Creed* as the foundation for this study of the central tenets of the Christian faith.

So far we have indicated the New Testament's universal agreement with the *Apostles' Creed*, and mentioned the acceptance of its doctrines throughout church history. Now we are ready to speak of the present, noting that these same beliefs still characterize the Christian church.

Present

In every age, false teachers have denied basic beliefs that the church has held for centuries. In the modern world, cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons consider themselves to be Christians because they accept the Bible and attempt to follow Christ in some manner. But they are not truly Christian because they deny basic beliefs that have defined the boundaries of Christianity for two thousand years — beliefs that can be found in the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. Even some churches that are not recognized as cults deny similarly basic teachings, as do certain individual teachers within Christian churches.

But if so many people reject doctrines listed in the *Apostles' Creed*, how can we say that the creed universally characterizes the church today? Well, the answer is twofold. For one thing, the vast majority of churches that claim to be Christian affirm these doctrines. They are taught and believed by conservative Protestants of all types, including Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and so on. They are also affirmed by larger non-Protestant churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Besides this, churches that deny these doctrines probably shouldn't be called "Christian." While they may endorse the Bible and claim to follow Christ, they do not actually embrace the teachings of Scripture or of the historic church. And because of this, they are not genuinely Christian.

Well when you think about the importance of the doctrines that are expressed in the Apostles' Creed for instance, these things are utterly essential to the life of the church and our understanding of the nature of the gospel and our understanding of our own salvation in Christ. For instance, the creeds announce to us the Triune nature of God:

God is Father, God is Son, and God is Holy Spirit. So, if we're going to be Christian, we can't pretend as though the doctrine of the Trinity is some nice little extra coating on our faith, as though it gives it an extra little "zing" of some kind. Instead the doctrine of the Trinity is a statement about who our God, in his essence, truly is.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

I would say the doctrines in the Apostles' Creed are essential and basic to Christianity. And indeed, if you veer away from them, you're departing from the historic Christian faith. That's the experience of the early church, they discovered there were all kinds of different ways in which the Bible could be interpreted and they said, "this is the correct way." It's like a railway track: "This is the correct groove in which to interpret the Bible." Go this way and you're departing from the essential Christian faith. And so to this day the Apostles' Creed, I think, defines the essential nature of authentic Biblical faith.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Because the beliefs summarized in the *Apostles' Creed* are so foundational and universal, they exert a unifying influence among believers. This is particularly valuable today because there is so much division in the modern church.

UNIFYING

Maybe you have met sincere Christians who resist learning theology because they are convinced that doctrine only divides Christians against each other. They spread this resistance to formal theology with slogans like: "Jesus unites us, but doctrine divides us." And there is a measure of truth in this position. Christians throughout the ages have separated from each other, condemned each other, persecuted each other and even waged wars over doctrinal matters. Even so, the New Testament still encourages the church to strive for doctrinal unity. For instance, in Ephesians 4:11-13, we read these words:

[Jesus] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers ... so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

In this passage, Paul referred to the church as the body of Christ. And he indicated that the church cannot reach maturity in Christ until we are united in faith and in knowledge. For this reason, doctrinal unity should be the goal of every Christian.

Of course, many other aspects of our Christian life should influence our study of doctrine. We need to do things like love God and our neighbors, pursue holiness, rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, and meditate on God and his word. When we simply focus on doctrine and ignore other concerns, we often go badly astray. As the apostle Paul warned in 1 Corinthians 13:2:

If I ... can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

As this verse and many others indicate, gaining theological knowledge is important, but it is not the greatest good of Christian faith.

One of the most effective ways to avoid the destructive consequences of theological controversy is to delight in the doctrinal unity we share with all followers of Christ around the world. When we balance our concern for the details of theology with a proper concern for unity, doctrine can actually unite us rather than divide us.

The Church of Jesus Christ today is quite concerned about unity. We have so many denominations and different points of view on the Holy Spirit, on women, on baptism. Yet it seems that today in the twenty-first century we are more concerned about getting together on the basis of action, reaching the world, rather than on the basis of the truth. It is very interesting that our Lord Jesus and also the apostle Paul, when they think of unity — I'm thinking of the gospel of John 17 and Ephesians 4 — that they're thinking about the unity that we have because of our one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism. And so it is the truths, or the body of truth that we believe in, that needs to be the foundation of our unity in Christ.

— Dr. Samuel Ling

Throughout the world there are hundreds of millions of true followers of Christ who stand firmly committed to the central biblical teachings expressed in the *Apostles' Creed*. In fact, at this very moment countless Christians suffer persecution and even martyrdom for these commitments. They may disagree with us about a number of other theological issues. In fact, they may object strongly to viewpoints that you and I hold dear. But despite our differences, we stand together in what the creed says about God, the church, and salvation. Remember what Jesus prayed for the church in John 17:23:

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:23).

Notice that Jesus said that unity in the church was proof that he had been sent by the Father. When we stand shoulder to shoulder with other followers of Christ, stressing what we have in common theologically, we testify to the world that the gospel is true, and this empowers our evangelism.

Having defined the gospel and having agreed on the common ground of the gospel, I think one way that we can pursue unity and truth is to say that we are so committed to that unity that we have in the gospel, that we are going to pursue unity with one another, in life and ministry, in such a way that we do not ask one another to relinquish our convictions of truth. But we in fact celebrate even those areas in which we differ from one another. We differ from one another respectfully. We differ from one another intelligently. We differ from one another lovingly. But we look for things in one another that we have mutual joy in, at the truth and convictional level. And we celebrate those things to a certain extent, so that the unity is enjoyed and so that we can have legitimate, conscientious differences in other areas of our theological convictions.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The *Apostles' Creed* can help Christians everywhere to differentiate between essential beliefs and beliefs that are of secondary importance. As we stress this creed in our personal lives and in the corporate life of the church, we will find that theology doesn't necessarily divide us from each other. Instead, we will find ourselves uniting with other faithful servants of Christ, and thereby fulfilling Jesus' own vision for his church.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson introducing the articles of faith of the *Apostles' Creed*, we have spoken of the history of the creed in terms of its development and purpose. We have provided an overview of its doctrines in terms of God, the church, and salvation. And we have mentioned the importance of its articles of faith in terms of their foundational, universal, and unifying nature.

The *Apostles' Creed* is an extremely important historical document that has summarized central Christian beliefs for hundreds and hundreds of years. Even today, it continues to offer a unified starting point for Christian theologians in every denomination. In the lessons that follow in this series, we will explore the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* in greater detail, looking at how they represent the truths of Scripture that unify Christian teaching throughout the world.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
ONE

The Articles of Faith
Faculty Forum



THIRD MILLENNIUM

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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson One: The Articles of Faith

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Stephen Blakemore
Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III
Dr. Dennis Johnson
Dr. Keith Johnson
Dr. Peter Kuzmič
Dr. Samuel Ling

Dr. Robert Lister
Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.
Dr. John Oswalt
Dr. J. I. Packer
Dr. Jonathan Pennington
Dr. Robert Plummer

Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker

Question 1:

Why should we pay attention to a document like the Apostles' Creed?

One of the first questions that comes up in any study of the Apostles' Creed is, "Why should we study the Apostles' Creed?" Why should we be interested in what early Christians put in a few short lines that they memorized and occasionally recited? Many churches strongly resist using any traditional summary of Christian beliefs. They argue that all we need for a creed is the Bible. So, it is important to ask why we should pay attention to a document like the Apostles' Creed.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Although creeds and confessions have always been a part of the church's self-understanding and worship and theologizing, there is unfortunately a strain, especially within Protestantism, the Protestant version of Christianity, in which there is a rejection of the importance of creeds. Sometimes this is described under a banner such as "no creed but Jesus," and the idea here is that theology is a wrong addition to just believing the Bible and trusting in it. The problem with that — and this is why the Apostles' Creed is so important as a corrective to this — is that in reality we are all within a tradition, that it is impossible not to have a tradition that is influencing our understanding of how we read Scripture. Moreover, not only are we all in a tradition, there is a great tradition called Orthodoxy that has always been adhered to by God's faithful people throughout the ages. The Apostles' Creed and the particular doctrines that it lists are very crucial, foundational, orthodox understandings of the great tradition.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Apostles' Creed gives us fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. These are the things that define Christianity. Without these you don't have the essential teachings that give Christianity its very foundational identity.

Question 2:**Doesn't a focus on creeds somehow challenge our commitment to Scripture as our only absolute standard of truth?**

Nearly all Christian traditions are united in the idea that Christians, to the best of their ability, need to know and affirm the central tenets that the Bible teaches. We need to know who God is, what he has done, what he continues to do, what he will do in the future, and how he expects us to respond to him. And for almost 2,000 years, much of the church has used creeds to ensure that its members have this kind of basic knowledge of the Bible. But does this use of creeds somehow challenge our commitment to Scripture as our only absolute standard of truth?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Now part of the Protestant tradition is an emphasis on what we may call *sola Scriptura*, the Scriptures alone. And it's from this important reformational idea, the centrality of the Bible in our worship, theology, and practice, from this understanding, comes unfortunately this idea that we don't need the creeds, creeds such as the Apostles' Creed. But this is a misunderstanding of this Reformation principle. For the Reformers and for Christians throughout the ages, they have understood the Scriptures to be the source and witness to divine revelation. But this has never meant for Christians that we don't need traditions, nor that we aren't standing in a particular tradition ourselves. So this idea that *sola Scriptura* would mean a rejection of all creeds except for one's own reading the Bible, is simply not what the Reformers meant, nor is it a wise way forward.

Dr. Simon Vibert

Protestants traditionally have understood the relationship between the authority of the church and the authority of the Bible in a number of ways. I mean, firstly, in terms of its formation, it was the church that actually came up with the verification of what was thought to be the Canon, the authorized text, the Bible. But it is also true to say that the church should be submissive to the teaching of the Bible, so the interpreters of the Bible are the humble people who read it wisely, not a dictate from afar, and therefore, the church's relationship to the Bible is one in which it should see itself being guided and directed in all matters of life and doctrine and practice by the Bible.

Dr. Robert Plummer

Just as Christians today continue to write books whether they're doctrinal studies or personal testimonies or letters, early Christians, after the apostolic period, after the writing of the New Testament, continued to write additional documents, letters to churches, instructional manuals like the *Didache*. The Scripture is our authority and so in so far as those documents represent an attempt to faithfully live out the Scriptures, it's instructive to us to learn about how our brothers and sisters in ancient times sought to live and apply the gospel.

Question 3:**Why was only one creed called The Apostles' Creed?**

Creeds can be both biblical and useful for giving us access to the wisdom that the Holy Spirit has given his church, we have to remember that there are many creeds, catechisms and confessions that try to be true to the teachings of Jesus' apostles. So, why was only one creed called the Apostles' Creed?

Dr. Peter Walker

Well, despite its name, the Apostles Creed was not written by the apostles. The last apostle, John, probably died in about A.D. 90. And the Apostles Creed probably dates to about 180 A.D. the first time that we actually hear it being promoted. So, the important thing is, the early church was trying to reflect the faith of the apostles. It was apostolic in that sense. And it was very important to them, because of so many different challenges to the faith they needed something which summarized that apostolic faith as easily as possible.

Question 4:**Why was it important for the early church to summarize the teachings of the New Testament in a simple document like the Apostles' Creed?**

Of course, the apostles and their immediate disciples left us many writings, which we have in the New Testament. But since the early church had these authoritative writings, why did they think it was important to summarize the teachings of the New Testament in a simple document like the Apostles' Creed?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

From the earliest days Christians understood the Scriptures as the source of divine revelation, the unique source that God revealed to himself, now ultimately in Jesus Christ in the Scriptures as the witness to that. But the problem is that as soon as you start to ask, "What do the Scriptures teach?" you find that just having the Bible alone isn't sufficient because each of the heretical groups — say, the Gnostics and the Donatists and the Montanists — all also used Scripture and argued that their understanding was a function of what the Scriptures were teaching as well. And so, from the earliest days, the Christians began to say something more than what the Bible said, that is in these creeds and confessions — not to supplant the Bible as something that wasn't sufficient, but in realization that what the Bible says needs to be explained. And from the earliest days this was called, among many of the early church fathers, the *regula fide*, or the "rule of faith." And you can find this in many of the early authors, but one of the most famous ones is a man named Irenaeus. And he used this very striking and memorable illustration. He said that bits and pieces of the Bible are like tiles that make up a mosaic. And you can take tiles from a mosaic and put them together into many different pictures. But what you need to make the right picture is a key, or the Greek word, a "hypothesis," that shows you what is the correct way to put the tiles together to make the correct picture. What Irenaeus' argument

was, that the heretics of his own day, the ones who were also using the Scriptures and arguing from the Scriptures, what they meant but were understanding them incorrectly, what they did was they made a wrong picture. And he famously said they turned the picture of Jesus into that of a fox rather than that of a King. And so, again, the issue is that we need to not just have the Bible, even though that is the source of divine revelation, we need help to understand what is a proper reading of the Bible. And creeds and confessions, one of the earliest being the Apostles' Creed, are a great help to that end.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

In addition to responding to false teaching, the creed was used in worship contexts as people were baptized and people would recite the creed to solidify understanding people had of the Scriptures. Most people didn't have their own Bibles and so we needed to have a clear teaching of Christian teaching for people to reiterate when they would gather as the church to emphasize what we believe.

Question 5:

Why did the early church think it was valuable to provide a systematic way of thinking about doctrine?

As an organized collection of important doctrines that Christians should affirm, the Apostles' Creed is one of the early ways that the church systemized the teachings of the Scriptures. But why did the early church think it was valuable to provide a systematic way of thinking about doctrine?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, systematic theology is really important for the church because when we're doing systematic theology we're trying to gain the mind of God on a particular topic and issue, to bring together the breadth of what's said in a number of different places in the Bible. So if you're wanting to find out the nature of the person of Christ, then you don't just go to one text in the Bible in order to understand that, but you need a composite picture that's built up from the various truths that are put across the Bible. So we need that systematizing of our thought to give us a framework which will help us understand how the whole Bible fits together, and to be able to think clearly about particular issues.

Dr. Peter Kuzmič

Christians have to think "Christianly." Biblically. That is possible only if we have the renewed mind, and if we have a well-thought-out worldview. Germans have this wonderful word, "*weltanschauung*," the way we look at the world, at the mass of data that is so often contradictory. How do we interpret that? So, the question of truth, of course, is central to worldview. If we have not resolved the question of truth, if we are not able to see how God rules over everything because he is the source of truth, he is the truth — he is the source of all wisdom. If we don't have that epistemological base, if we have not resolved that as a fundamental issue, we have no base for ethics,

for morality, for value system. Values depend on truth. So, theology, philosophy becomes foundational for ethics — how we behave. It's the truth applied that is ethics. And because we live in our era of moral permissiveness, in our era of post-modernity and relativization of everything, it is extremely important that young Christians especially be provided with the kind of training, instruction, teaching, where pieces in their minds fit together. Where they don't live some kind of a schizophrenic existence where they don't have just a religion on a Sunday, and then unrelated to what happens on Monday. It's very important that we provide that kind of training and teaching that helps people build a comprehensive, biblical worldview, which then translates into a value system and consistent behavior.

Question 6:

Why should modern Christians use an ancient creed instead of writing their own?

The Apostles' Creed was a great help to the early church when it came to summarizing and explaining the truths of Scripture. But that may still leave some Christians wondering why we should value it today. Why should modern Christians use an ancient creed instead of writing their own? Well, for one thing, the Apostles' Creed is used widely throughout the church, making it a good way for us to affirm our unity as Christians. But this creed is especially valuable precisely because it is so ancient; it comes from the very early church.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

Well when you think about the relationship of the creeds, the Apostles' Creed for instance, and its relationship to the Scripture, one of the things that's very important to remember is that the Scriptures were written in the apostolic era. And before they were written, there was an oral tradition of teaching about the gospel. The teaching of the apostles was what formed the church. The Scriptures, you could say, grew out of the teaching of the apostles. And because they grew out of the teaching of the apostles, the Scriptures are a sort of occasional unpacking or statement about this apostolic teaching. Now of course the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are inerrant in what they teach us about the nature of God, the nature of Christ, the nature of our relationship to God, and the world. And so, thinking about this we need to understand that the creeds themselves are not just sort of shorthand summarizations of the New Testament, but instead are a part of the dynamic apostolic witness that was a part of the first century church's life. We know this to be the case from the statement of people like St. Irenaeus who, in one of his writings says, "even if the apostles had not left us their writings, we had the rule of faith which was handed down to us from them." And when you begin to examine what the rule of faith was, it is essentially the Apostles' Creed as we now have it.

Question 7:**Why does the creed place such a strong emphasis on the doctrine of God? What's so critical about this doctrine?**

As we look at the way the Apostles' Creed summarizes the apostolic teaching of Scripture, the first thing we notice is that it begins with the doctrine of God. And in fact, the entire creed is structured according to a Trinitarian model, beginning with the Father and his works, moving to the Son and his life and work, and ending with the Holy Spirit and his areas of ministry. But with so many things in the Bible that it could talk about, why does the creed place such a strong emphasis on the doctrine of God? What's so critical about this doctrine?

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Well, the doctrine of God is of vital importance to every Christian for a variety of reasons. One is that there are two types of people in this world. The world is not divided between believers and unbelievers. It's divided between worshippers of the true God and worshippers of gods of their own making. In other words, it's divided between true believers, those who know and love and serve and worship and delight in and treasure and follow the true God. And it's those who are idolaters. And therefore we need the correction of Scripture so that we'll understand the true God. So, theology and who God is, is vital for that reason. It's also vital because Protestants have stressed for five hundred years now that the doctrine of God is important not only in and of itself, but because all other doctrines have to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. The Protestant doctrine of God is not substantially different from the Eastern Orthodox or the Roman Catholic doctrine of God. And at the same time it's the most unique Protestant doctrine because Protestants believe that every other doctrine of the Bible has to be understood in light of the doctrine of God. So, "theology proper" — is what theologians call the doctrine of God — is vital for every believer, and every believer has a doctrine of God whether they think of themselves as theologians or not. And that doctrine of God is vital for the way they live the Christian life.

Question 8:**Does our doctrine of God really affect how we live? What practical differences do our beliefs about God actually make in our lives?**

Now, even though we recognize the centrality the doctrine of God plays in Christian theology, it can still be hard to imagine ways that it impacts our daily living. Does our doctrine of God really affect how we live? What practical differences do our beliefs about God actually make in our lives?

Dr. Samuel Ling

The Doctrine of God is so important for Christian faith, life and ministry. For example, in our evangelism, if we presuppose that God is all free and sovereign, he's

all-powerful and that he's ruling his own people to himself, then we're going to know that Christ's sheep is going to come into his fold in his good time. If we assume that God is limited in his power then we might rely a bit more on what human beings do or what Christians do in evangelism. It also is very important what we think about God in his justice, where people are suffering in pain. Is God fair? Is God going to straighten out the pain and suffering and injustices in this world? If God's justice is infinite and eternal, then we know that he is going to wipe away all tears as Revelation 21 tells us. So, it's very, very important to know that God is both all-powerful, he is sitting on his throne and yet, he is here present with us near everyone who trusts him and loves him.

Question 9:

Where does the Bible teach the doctrine of the Trinity?

Realizing that the doctrine of God is fundamental to all of Christian theology and life, we should pause to focus on one of the most distinctive aspects of the Christian doctrine of God: the idea that God exists in Trinity. Unbelievers have sometimes accused the church of inventing this doctrine, saying that it can't be found in the Bible. But Christians have always insisted that the doctrine of the Trinity is fully scriptural. So, where does the Bible teach this important doctrine?

Dr. J. I. Packer

Well, the truth of the Trinity, which is that God is as truly "they" — three persons — as he is "he." It's awkward to say it in terms of grammar, but that's how the New Testament puts it really. The truth of the Trinity is there in solution in the New Testament in the way that if I stir sugar into my cup of tea, the sugar is there in solution, in the liquid. And the truth of the Trinity was crystallized out of the New Testament through all sorts of queries and debates about it that occupied the church for the first four centuries after the Lord had risen and the Spirit had come. You can say it this way, you have the Lord Jesus as the focus of faith and discipleship, but the Lord Jesus distinguishes himself from his heavenly father at whose command he is on earth administering. He is himself, God to be worshipped. When finally after his resurrection Thomas says to him, "My Lord and My God," he doesn't say, "Now don't call me that." He accepts it. "My Lord and My God" is the right way to acknowledge who he is. But he is distinct from his heavenly Father. And then, before he left his disciples, he promised that he would send the Holy Spirit, as someone distinct from himself and from the Father. He says both that the Father sends the Spirit and that he himself sends the Spirit. So there you are. In the teaching of the Lord Jesus you've got the three persons. And in the teaching of the apostles, you've got the three persons. As I said, the doctrine is in solution throughout the whole New Testament. And when it has to be crystallized, well, out comes the formula, "he" is "they" — Father, Son, and Spirit — and "they" — Father, Son, and Spirit — are "he," the one God. It's mysterious; we don't know how it can be. But from biblical testimony, which is unambiguous; we know that it is. And there are lots of things in Christianity of which one has to say the same thing — truths about God — I don't

know how it can be, but I know that it is because the Bible tells me so.

Question 10:

Why did the early church concentrate so much attention on the doctrine of the Trinity?

There should be no question that the doctrine of the Trinity is true to Scripture. But there should also be no question that it's a difficult doctrine that took the church hundreds of years to define clearly. What was their motivation? Why did the early church concentrate so much attention on the doctrine of the Trinity?

Dr. Peter Walker

The Trinity does look a very complex doctrine, and people think, how could that possibly be true to the simple truths of the Bible? But in reality the New Testament Christians, they found almost immediately that they were worshipping God in three forms. They knew God as Father; they wanted to worship Jesus Christ as Son; they experienced the life changing power of the Spirit. And in the New Testament, without sort of theologizing about it too much, the apostles just naturally talk about God in three ways. You can find sentences which all refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. And what the doctrine of the Trinity is, its' just drawing out again what is there in the biblical Narrative. They're saying you can't speak about God truly, except doing so in three ways. Of course it's a little bit complicated. Philosophically they have to try and workout how to match out the concept of God, philosophically with this doctrine of the Trinity. But it's trying to reflect this natural experience of Christians of knowing God in three ways. And that's true to the New Testament.

Dr. Keith Johnson

We need to remember that the first Christians were Jews who inherited from the Old Testament a conviction that God is one. Yet, these very same Jews worshiped the risen Christ as God. How can this be? Well, a number of wrong answers were explored along the way and I'll briefly mention two. First, some Christians suggested that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are merely faces that God wears as he relates to humans. Yet, there's significant problems with this idea. If Father and Son are merely faces God wears, then to whom did Jesus pray? And to whom did Jesus offer his sacrifice on the cross? Christians recognize that the gospel narratives clearly suggest personal distinctions among the Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is distinct from the Son and the Son is distinct from the Father. Another wrong answer was simply to deny that Jesus is divine. A Christian leader named Arius proposed this and was condemned at the council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The Christian leaders at Nicaea recognized that the Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus is divine. They expressed this by saying that the Son is of the same nature as the Father. How then did Christians reconcile worship of Christ with the oneness of God? The key was a distinction between person and nature. Eventually Christians were led by Scripture to affirm that God the Father and God the Son are one in being, yet distinct in person. To summarize, one God eternally exists in a unity of being as three persons, Father, Son

and Holy Spirit.

Question 11:

What are the logical relationships among the various systematic teachings of the creed? How do they all fit together?

When we look at the Apostles' Creed, it is clear that it addresses more teachings than just the Trinity. What are the logical relationships among the various systematic teachings of the creed? How do they all fit together?

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The wonderful thing about the Apostles' Creed is that it gives us such a summary of Christian doctrine. We start with the fatherhood of God, and end up with the life everlasting. But between that there are all these points of doctrine that are so important to us. Everything from the virgin conception of Christ, to his atoning death, to the reality of the fellowship of the saints, it's all in there. But let's remember something; it's there in the form of a story. It's not just there as a group of, say, doctrines thrown into a bag, it's a story that we can remember at every point in our lives. We start out with the story of Jesus. "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord who..." and there follows the story of the gospel. It's just a reminder to us that the gospel itself is indeed truth, the most precious truth we could possibly know. But it too is a story about God's love for us; his love for us in Christ, and all that that brings to us. You know, these precious truths are so important to us, and thinking of the creed as a creed is very important, because I've find it so moving in my heart to realize I'm saying what Christians through the centuries have said. I'm believing what all true believers throughout all the generations have said. I am believing what men and women, eventually from every tongue and tribe and people and nation, will say. And you know, when we say these things, we're not only going to be saying just isolated points of doctrine we know to be true, we're going to be telling a story together. I think that's really important.

Question 12:

Why does the creed only mention personal salvation after going through so many other biblical teachings?

Early on, the Apostles' Creed was used in baptism ceremonies. Why then does the creed only mention personal salvation after going through so many other biblical teachings? Why is the salvation of individual people such a minor part of the creed?

Dr. Peter Walker

Yes, you have to wait a long time before you get to the forgiveness of sins, but it's such a key thing, but it's right at the end of the creed. I think it's the important thing to remember is that for the early church it was absolutely vital to get it on, to get it

clearly articulated who Jesus was. The creed actually goes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It starts to speak the truth about who God is and how he's known as Father, Son, and Spirit. And in particular, that Christ is not just a human being but is also divine. Now that was important because salvation, forgiveness it comes through the cross and it doesn't come to us if Jesus is just a human being. Therefore, it's very important to say, on the cross when Jesus dies he is the Son of God. Because he is that, he's able to bring us forgiveness of sins. And that's why the creed goes in the correct order. Work out who Jesus is, get the person of Christ sorted, and then the work of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, salvation, they will flow out from that. So the creed's right in its order, although we have to wait a little while before we get to that key point, forgiveness of sins.

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

I think that when western Christians look at the Apostles' Creed, a couple of things immediately come to mind. First of all they look at and it's very obviously shaped them around the persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the bulk of the questions of the creed focusing on the person of the Son and then with a series of affirmations that come at the very end about our belief in the forgiveness of sins and things of this nature. And we typically, as western evangelicals, associate those things listed at the very end of the creed with what theologians call "soteriology" or the doctrines of salvation. We are unique in that because the Christians that first utilized the creed — and the creed came together over the course of about four centuries growing out of what the early church theologians called the *regula*, or the rule of faith — those Christians that first utilized the creed would have viewed the whole of the creed as soteriological. They would have believed that what we think about God, what we think about Jesus, and what we think about the Holy Spirit are directly soteriological. Christology, especially for the early Christians, was soteriology. If we had been having a conversation with Athanasius in the early fourth century, and we had said to him, "Athanasius, I really love your Christology, especially the way you emphasize the deity of Christ and the full equality of Jesus, the *Logos*, with the eternal Father. But I'm really interested to know, tell me a little bit about your soteriology." Athanasius would have looked at us quizzically, because for Athanasius, Christology is soteriology.

And for the Eastern Church, it's still that way to this very day. The Eastern Church's theology developed until about the eighth century and focused on Christology and is very much still fixed in the same forms and categories that it existed in the eighth century. And so for them, Christology is soteriology. So I think one important thing for evangelicals to do, is recognize when you're making affirmations about the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is not only not irrelevant to soteriology or to the doctrines of salvation, it is actually integrally connected and absolutely essential to the doctrine of salvation. So, the creed actually is getting at questions of salvation from the very first clause, but especially when it gets into the doctrine of Jesus Christ. Because the battleground of salvation in the early church was not on what we would call today the *ordo salutis*, or justification and sanctification and adoption and these things, the battleground for the Christian doctrine of salvation in the early days of the

church, was on the person and work of Christ. So when Athanasius was responding to Arius, and Arius was denying the full equality of the Son with the Father, Athanasius saw that not as an abstract, theoretical, speculative, ontological discussion that has nothing to do of our salvation. He saw it as absolutely, inescapably connected to the doctrine of salvation and if Jesus is not fully divine and equal with the Father, ontologically, then he is not capable of being the Savior of the world. And so salvation and the doctrine of Christ were inseparably linked together. So I think that's one thing that we need to recognize when we ask questions about the creed and what it teaches about Christ and what it teaches about salvation. Christ and salvation go together.

Question 13:

How does the Apostles' Creed demonstrate that early Christians believed in the theological unity of the Scriptures?

One of the interesting things about the Apostles' Creed is that when it summarizes the teaching of the Scriptures, it seems to assume that the Bible as a whole supports its articles of faith. And this reflects a crucial outlook held by the early church, the belief that the Bible is unified in its teachings. How does the Apostles' Creed demonstrate that early Christians believed in the theological unity of the Scriptures?

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the very important issues for the church is the recognition that the Old Testament and the New Testament are in full agreement as regards doctrine. One of the things that I like to say to my students is that, in fact, the two testaments supplement each other. The Old Testament emphasizes certain things and treats other things as somewhat minor themes. In a real way, the New Testament reverses those and makes the Old Testament's minor themes the major themes. An example would be transcendence. The Old Testament is working very, very hard to say that God is not this world. He is *other* than this world; he transcends it. The New Testament writers, I think, are saying, okay, our readers have gotten that point; now, let's talk about the fact that this transcendent God is everywhere present in this world — the technical term being “immanence,” of course. But if you don't know your Old Testament and only know the New Testament, you may very easily reduce God to a friendly little God who is present with me to make my prayers come true. That can't happen if you know the Old Testament. If you know that God is truly other than this world, he is beyond anything that we can imagine, and then you're told that God has become one with us, that's wonderful good news. I think in many areas, you can see that kind of pairing where the emphases are different, but the fundamental understandings are the same. So you can talk about God's justice in the Old Testament. In a pagan world, there really is no clear line of cause and effect in this world. What you do here really is shaped by something that happened in the invisible world and who knows what the effects will be. The Old Testament is saying, no, God is a God of cause and effect and we have choices to make here in this world and there

are just effects of that. God is just. Then the New Testament can come along and say, yes, and this just God is incredibly merciful. If you know God's justice, then again, his mercy is great good news. But if you are not really steeped in a knowledge of his justice, then his mercy simply becomes sort of a candy from Grandpa — "Oh well, I deserve it anyhow; I'm a nice child." So, the two Testaments are essential to understanding each other. I think another point that needs to be made here is the Old Testament asks the questions and the New Testament provides the answers. Reading the New Testament alone is a little bit like doing Jeopardy. You know the answers, but what are the questions? And oftentimes, the church has fallen into a trap because it has gotten the answers and assumed it knew the question, but in fact did not.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The New Testament definitely demonstrates doctrinal unity with the Old Testament. We have to stress, first of all, there is great diversity within the New Testament and Old Testament themselves — diversity of authorship, diversity of genre, diversity of even of theological perspectives — but ultimately there is unity, an inherent unity, in the Bible from beginning to end. And that unity focuses very much on the story of redemption, how God created a perfect creation, yet human beings rebelled against him and the whole rest of the Bible, from beginning to end, is really the story of God's reconciliation, God's redemption of his people, how he brings them back to himself. And so, every diverse part comes together into this great unifying story. Within that diversity then there are certain unifying themes, themes like the kingdom of God, themes like covenant, themes like redemption and God's reconciliation of himself to his people.

Dr. Robert Lister

The New Testament exhibits doctrinal unity with the Old Testament in the way that promises are fulfilled. So the promise of salvation for example is offered in a nutshell form in Genesis three, fifteen, where God in the midst of cursing the serpent, the man, and the woman, says that I will raise up a seed from the woman that will one day crush the head of the seed of the serpent. Serpent will strike his heel; the seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the serpent. The gospel is announced as early as Genesis 3:15 and yet Adam and Eve don't have the specificity of understanding that promise that comes even in Isaiah 53. And those who are recipients of Isaiah 53, do not understand that promise with the specificity that believers in the first century would have or even in our day as well and yet there is a continuity to that one promise. What comes in more specific form later is not an abrogation of what was given earlier; it's an expansion or a fulfillment. Theologians refer to this as the doctrine of progressive revelation. So the Scriptures or the promises get fleshed out, they become more clear and there is a continuity by way of increasing specificity and fulfillment of promises that were initially made.

Dr. Simon Vibert

The unity of the Old and New Testament is a question that has vexed scholars over the years, but Christians have a conviction that God speaks with one message. The key to interpreting both the Old Testament and the New Testament is the coming of

Christ, so because of Christ's coming we can understand better all that was being pointed towards in the Old Testament, and that message has found fulfillment and shape in the coming of Christ. And, therefore, though it covers an enormous expanse of history and time and place, the Bible speaks with one voice because it has one author about the person of Christ.

Question 14:

How can Christians work toward the kind of doctrinal purity we find in the Apostles' Creed without sacrificing its level of doctrinal unity?

The Apostles' Creed reflects the early church's corporate belief in unity of the Bible's teachings. But in the modern church, it can sometimes be hard to get people to agree to these essential doctrines. How can Christians work toward the kind of doctrinal unity we find in the Apostles' Creed without sacrificing its level of doctrinal purity?

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The issue of the relationship between the pursuit of unity and the pursuit of truth is a very interesting and important question. I have come to be convicted myself over the last decade especially that in my younger days I was passionate about truth and wanted unity, but was ready to work for truth and let unity just naturally happen. And my conviction more and more is, unity does not just happen. Now, I need to back up and say there's a sense in which the Bible emphasizes — for instance the book of Ephesians — that it's God who creates our unity. There's a sense in which we don't create our unity; God has given us a unity that we sometimes fragment, and undermine, but he's the ultimate author of our unity, and so I don't want to take away from that at all. But at the human level, I think very often we assume that we can pursue the truth and that unity will just take care of itself. And I think that that's wrong. I think that it's a little bit like marriage. Marriage is not 50% on the part of the husband and 50% on the part of wife. It's 100% on the part of a husband and 100% on the part of a wife. And I think it's the same thing with God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Those who believe in the doctrines of grace and the sovereignty of God don't believe that it's 50% God and 50% man or 100% God and 0% man, we believe that it's 100% God and 100% man. And I think the truth/unity thing is very similar. I think we have to be 100% passionately committed to the truth and pursuing it, and I think we have to be 100% passionately committed to unity and pursuing it. And I think that means, one of the things that means at least is that the way that we pursue unity will never compromise the value of truth, and the way that we pursue truth will never compromise the value of unity. And I think typically, there are types of people in our world that fall off one of those ledges as they pursue truth and unity. They either decide that in order to have unity you must minimize the importance of truth, or that if you want to have truth, you really can't, in the end, be concerned for unity. And I don't think the Bible gives us that option. I think Jesus is very passionate about the unity of his followers, and I believe that Jesus is very passionate about the importance of truth for his followers and he doesn't ask us to choose between those.

So, I think part of the answer to the question of the relationship between the truth and unity is that we ought not seek a balance between those two at all, but that we ought to passionately pursue them both with all that we have and are.

Now, how do you do that? In practice, I would say that one way that we can pursue truth and unity together is to explore a gospel unity that we have with other believers that centers on a definite substance and content to the gospel. A lot of times people will talk about gospel unity but they don't want to define the gospel. I was talking to a president of a large evangelical institution just a few weeks ago who was at a meeting where all of the people said, we want to be unified on the gospel and he raised his hand and he said, well what do we mean by the gospel? And the response from several people in the room was we don't want to get into defining the gospel. Well, I don't think you can have gospel unity if you're not even willing to define the gospel. But having defined the gospel and having agreed on the common ground of the gospel, I think one way that we can pursue unity and truth is to say that we are so committed to that unity that we have in the gospel, that we are going to pursue unity with one another in life and ministry in such a way that we do not ask one another to relinquish our convictions of truth. But we in fact celebrate even those areas in which we differ from one another. We differ from one another respectfully. We differ from one another intelligently. We differ from one another lovingly. But we look for things in one another that we have mutual joy in at the truth and convictional level. And we celebrate those things to a certain extent, so that the unity is enjoyed and so that we can have legitimate, conscientious differences in other areas of our theological convictions. So I think that's one way you go about pursuing both unity and truth.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

Well, when it comes to the situation or the context of us thinking in the twenty-first century in the world in which we live about the purity of our doctrines but also what it means to be one in Christ, I think we discover that the creeds are a very good place for us to start. The creeds themselves articulate for us what is the very core, the heart of our faith. These creeds are an expression of what came out of the apostolic era and in the second century were known as the rule of faith. These creeds themselves were utilized as a way to identify those churches in the Mediterranean world, which were essentially a part of the Orthodox Church. Therefore, when we think about unity in Christ we have to realize that the thing that we have unity in is Christ and in the Triune God. Now, having said that, it's interesting to me that in the modern world the things that divide us most often are not doctrines about God so much as they are doctrines about how we relate to God or how we are saved by God. We argue over things like predestination, or if salvation can be lost, or who is a candidate for baptism. And the thing that strikes me is this, that in the midst of our disagreement we begin not with a disagreement about God, but we begin with a disagreement about salvation. It's telling to me in this sense, that perhaps what we are more concerned about is our salvation, rather than the nature of God, rather than the truth about God. What we are most obsessed with is ourselves. How can we be right with God? And while that is an absolutely natural and understandable interest that we have, it is not where we should start in our disagreements with one another. Disagreements over the

nature of salvation or over church polity or over what expression worship should take, those are all important things, but they're things that should only be discussed after we have come to realize whether or not we have a consensus among us about the nature of God as trinity, the nature of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Lord and Savior and the nature of the Holy Spirit as the one who comes to bring us regeneration and the new birth.

So, doctrinal purity really has to begin with God, not with a subsequent question about how we know God or how we are saved by God or how we should organize our life together as God's church. Instead our passion and our burning desire should be to be clear in our minds about who God is. That's where we can find much common ground and also where the dividing line will be between those who want to confess Jesus as a great example, but may not want to confess him as God incarnate. And all of those things are important when it comes to endeavoring to establish what it means to be able to be in conversation with someone about matters of faith and practice. So, starting with the creeds, starting with the nature of God, starting with the essence of the life of God and the nature of Jesus Christ — these are absolutely irreplaceable in the quest for Christian unity, but also irreplaceable in the quest for doctrinal purity.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

Well it is important, for Christians, for the church, to balance doctrinal purity along with our unity in Christ and the ways that we can do that I would say would be, among other things, to emphasize the unity that is ours in the gospel, in the key elements that are articulated in some of the classic confessions and creeds going all the way back to the time of the early church fathers. One of the great advantages of the creeds is that they really give us the distillation of those who have gone before us, and their thinking about what the Bible teaches in its core. And of course that's rooted in the message of the New Testament itself. You think about Matthew 16 when Jesus is meeting with his disciples, in Caesarea Philippi. First he quizzes them about what all the opinions are about who he is and then he says, "Now, who do you say that I am?" And of course Peter gets it right. He confesses that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God. And that confession sets followers of Christ, believers in Christ, sets the church apart from all the other complimentary opinions that are buzzing around about Jesus. And of course the apostle Paul in a doctoral passage, a doctoral epistle, that emphasizes unity above all, the letter to the Ephesians, emphasizes that our unity is based in the fact that we are founded on the foundation of the apostles and prophets as they have revealed, as they have received the revelation of the mystery of God in Christ. So it's crucial for us to see the confessions as articulating those core doctrines that unite us.

I think it's also important for us to recognize, and this also contributes to unity, that the great creeds and confessions don't attempt to say everything on which the Bible speaks. While we are united in our core faith and trust in Christ and in the triune God, we're all still in process and we don't all grow and the same pace and we don't all see all the details of Scripture in quite the same way. So again, the creeds and confessions in what they do not say call us to recognize that our unity is based in the core. And

while we may try and persuade one another on those other matters, we also don't let our differences on those other matters divide us or tempt us to exclude others who truly share with us in the core of the gospel. I think the church today is tempted to a couple of extremes, in some segments of the church, influenced by postmodernism, there's almost a question about whether anything is fixed or whether everything is up for grabs. The key doctrines — God is Creator and the distinction from the creation and the creatures, the deity of Christ and his humanity, the atonement — all of those things in some segments of the Western Church at least are being rethought, reexamined, doubted, questioned. There's also a temptation on the part of those who stand for Scripture to almost react in an opposite direction and emphasize that we need to agree on absolutely every detail at every point. And again, the importance is to emphasize the core of the gospel as it's articulated clearly in the New Testament and then summarized in the classic creeds and confessions and in our reformational confessions as well.

Since the second century, the Apostles' Creed has helped unify Christians in countless churches and denominations throughout the world. It affirms many beliefs that we all hold in common, including our beliefs about God; the gospel story of Christ's life, death, resurrection and ascension; and the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In every place and age, the Apostles' Creed helps Christians express our most fundamental beliefs together. It helps us hold firmly to the core of our faith, and promotes our unity as the body of Christ.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
TWO

GOD THE FATHER



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Two

God the Father

INTRODUCTION

Many religions worship a being they refer to as “God.” And this brings up an interesting question: Are they all worshipping the same being, just by different names? Or are they worshipping different gods altogether? Well, the Bible explains that although many different religions use the same word — “God” — they mean very different things by it. Scripture insists that there is only one true God — the one worshiped by Christians. And that means that the gods of the other religions are imposters, idols, false gods. This is why Christianity has always placed such a strong emphasis on knowing the God of the Bible. He is the only true God, the only one who has the power to create, to destroy, and to save.

This is the second lesson in our series *The Apostles' Creed*, and we have entitled it “God the Father.” In this lesson, we will focus on the first article of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* — the article that affirms belief in God the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the *Apostles' Creed* appeared in various forms during the early centuries of the church. But it was standardized by about A.D. 700 in Latin. A popular modern English translation reads as follows:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.**

You will recall that in these lessons we have divided the *Apostles' Creed* into five main sections: The first three sections deal with the three persons of God: the Father, the

Son and the Holy Spirit. These are followed by a section on the church, and then a section on salvation. In this lesson, we will focus on the first of these five sections, which consists of only one article of faith:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

There are many ways we might divide the topics mentioned in this article of faith. But in this lesson we will focus on three themes that have been central to Christian theology: the idea of God, the person of the Father Almighty, and his role as the Maker of all creation.

Following these three themes, our lesson on God the Father will divide into three parts. First we will address the basic idea of God, looking at some general things the Bible teaches about his existence and nature. Second, we will focus on the phrase “Father Almighty,” paying attention to some distinctive qualities of the first person of the Trinity. And third, we will explore the Father’s role as the Maker, or creator, of everything that exists. Let’s begin with the concept of God that the Bible presents to us.

GOD

Our belief in God is really fundamental to our belief about everything else. And so if you think in terms of the worldview, God is at the center, and everything else is as it is because of its relation to him. And that puts God-centered thinking on a different wavelength altogether from the way of thinking that’s usual in our culture, which is self-centered, me-centered, and then concerned with how everything else, including God himself, relates to me. And that is utterly contrary to the Bible way of looking at things, I think, I dare say, utterly contrary to God’s own way of looking at things, as Scripture reveals it. So, in ministry today, it’s very important to challenge me-centeredness, which is so natural to us, and to try and put God-centeredness and a God-centered worldview in place of the me-centered perspective.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

We will consider the basic idea of God as he is presented in Scripture by looking at two subjects. On the one hand, we will explore what theologians often call “the singularity of God,” the fact that he is the only God that exists. And on the other hand, we will focus on the simplicity of God, noting that he really is only one God, despite the fact that he has three persons. Let’s begin with God’s singularity, the doctrine that the God of the Bible is the one and only true God.

SINGULARITY

As we explore God's singularity, we will look first at the polytheism that was prevalent in the world during the early centuries of the church. Second, we will explore monotheism as the affirmation of a single god. And third, we will speak of Christianity and its conception of God. Let's turn first to the topic of polytheism.

Polytheism

Polytheism is belief in the existence of multiple gods — powerful supernatural beings that control the universe. Some such gods are thought to be eternal, uncreated beings, while others are thought to have been born or even created in some fashion. In polytheistic systems, the gods are often distinct from one another, and therefore unique in some sense, just as individual human beings are all unique. But in polytheism, no one god can claim to be the only supernatural being who exercises significant control over the universe.

One popular type of polytheism, known as henotheism, expressed primary dedication to one god without denying the existence of other gods. For example, some people in the Roman Empire honored Zeus as supreme while still acknowledging other gods.

In the world of the early church, most non-Christians were polytheists. Many believed in the false gods of the Greeks and Romans, while others worshipped the idols of the ancient Near East. There were also polytheists who believed in cosmic powers, and some who worshipped the elements or other aspects of creation. Atheism — the belief that no gods exist — was rare.

One reason that belief in various gods was so common was that polytheism was often required by law. For example, in the Roman Empire, the government enforced the worship of the Roman gods. The Romans required this worship in order to gain the gods' favor and protection for the Empire. But a more basic reason for the belief in various gods was the sinfulness of human beings.

The Bible indicates that humans are very prone to turn away from the true God to false gods. This has to do especially with the Bible's doctrine of sin. It doesn't have to do as much with the fact that we are creatures in relation to the great creator but rather that we are sinful creatures in relation to God. Sin acts in such a way as to actually blind us even with regard to the truth of God as God has revealed it to us in creation. And so, left to ourselves we will in fact identify as God or identify as divine qualities those things that are not true of God at all. In other words, we will create gods of our own imagination as substitutes for the true God.

— Dr. David Bauer

As Scripture teaches, all people know deep down in their hearts that the universe could not possibly have come about without the hand of a divine creator. But in our sin, human beings do not naturally acknowledge the true God and credit him for these things. Instead, we attribute his work to other sources. Listen to the way Paul talked about this in Romans 1:20-23:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened... [They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles (Romans 1:20-23).

According to Paul, the existence of the God of Scripture is obvious to everyone — it is clearly seen and understood. Paul even went so far as to say that human beings knew God through his self-revelation in creation. But we are so sinful that we refused to glorify him or to give him thanks. Instead, we exchanged his glory for false gods that we invented and worshiped in his place.

The Bible tells us that all men and women and children know God deep down in their hearts, in their minds, and in their consciences. But Romans 1 tells us that ever since Adam and Eve sinned, that we have turned in the depths of our hearts from worshiping the true God to worshiping idols or anything that's created by God. And so the human heart is practically a factory, a source, the root of all kinds of idols.

— Dr. Samuel Ling

With this picture of polytheism in mind, we are ready to explore monotheism, the belief that only one god exists.

Monotheism

Technically speaking, monotheism can refer to any religion that affirms belief in only one god. For example, in the modern world Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic religions because they all insist that there is one and only one divine being.

Many passages in Scripture assert God's singularity by explicitly stating that there is only one God. Listen to just a few examples. In 1 Kings 8:60, Solomon proclaimed:

The Lord is God ... there is no other (1 Kings 8:60).

In Psalm 86:10, David sang to the Lord:

You alone are God (Psalm 86:10).

In 2 Kings 19:19, Hezekiah prayed:

You alone, O Lord, are God (2 Kings 19:19).

In Romans 3:30, Paul insisted:

There is only one God (Romans 3:30.)

And in James 2:19, James said:

You believe that there is one God. Good! (James 2:19).

There is only one divine being. This was true in the days of the Old Testament. It was true in the days of the New Testament. It was true in the early centuries of the church. And it is still true today.

Now, we need to point out that not all monotheistic religions worship the same god. As we have said, Judaism, Christianity and Islam each worship only one god. And more than this, they all identify this one god as the God of Abraham, at least in name. But the concepts they attach to the name "God of Abraham" are very different. They disagree over his character, his divine actions, and even over his very nature.

Consider Judaism. Judaism bases its faith on the Old Testament, which Christians also do. But they deny the Trinitarian God that the Bible reveals. In fact, they deny each person of the Trinity. They reject Jesus as Lord and God incarnate. They deny that the Holy Spirit is a divine person. And by rejecting Jesus and the Holy Spirit, they deny the Father who sent them. As Jesus himself said in Luke 10:16:

He who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).

Judaism rejects Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and thereby also the Father.

Judaism believes that it worships God as he is revealed in the Old Testament. It points to the same Old Testament that Christians love and says, "We worship that God." So, superficially, there is a sense in which we can say that we worship the same God. But there is another sense in which their god is different from ours because they have rejected the fuller revelation of God in Jesus.

And when we consider Islam, it is even clearer that their concept of God contradicts the Bible.

An important question is: what does the Islamic faith claim regarding the concept of one God? I believe that Islam affirms a type of unity within God, but Christianity attributes different characteristics and attributes to the Lord than Islam does. We have the doctrines of redemption and incarnation, and those are important doctrines that highlight our Lord's character in a clear, fundamental way in

people's lives. Both redemption and incarnation are absent from the Muslims' understanding of God's unity.

— Dr. Riad Kassis, translation

Islam's conception of God does indeed contradict the Bible, and one of the most significant ways in which it contradicts the Bible is in the assertion that God is an undifferentiated monad. In Islam, if I can explain that technical term, God is absolutely one and there is no community of being within him. In Christian theology there is an absolute fidelity to monotheism, the belief that there is only one God. The very earliest creed of the Bible is, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one." So an emphatic assertion of monotheism has been a part of the Judeo-Christian theological tradition from its very fountainhead. And so Christians are monotheists. Now many of our Islamic friends don't think that we are. They will think that we're tri-theists. And they will actually think that you believe in the father, and the mother, and the son, because Mohammed was mistaken in this regard in his understanding of the Christian doctrine of God. But that Christian doctrine of the Trinity — that the one God eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are not simply different modes of expression of one deity nor are they simply three different metaphors for the one God, but that there is a real and substantial fellowship between persons in that one true God — that is a radically different conception of God than Islam has.

— Dr. J Ligon Duncan III

So, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic religions. They are all distinct from polytheism because they deny that multiple gods exist. But they are also clearly distinct from one another because of their very different doctrines of who God is.

Having looked at polytheism and monotheism, we are ready to describe the conception of God affirmed by Christianity and taught in the *Apostles' Creed*.

Christianity

The statement about God in the *Apostles' Creed* is fairly plain. It simply says:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

You'll notice that the creed does not explicitly say that there is only one God. If we did not know the origin of the creed, it might be possible to read these words as proclaiming faith in the god of Judaism, or the god of Islam. Or even as affirming one god among

many. So, how do we know that it is talking about the triune God of Christianity in contrast to non-Christian monotheism and polytheism?

On the one hand, the creed denies non-Christian monotheism through other things that it says plainly about God. As we saw in a prior lesson, the creed is organized around a Trinitarian formula. It reflects the belief that God the Father, Jesus Christ, his only Son and the Holy Spirit are three different persons in the Godhead, all sharing the same singular divine essence.

Again, recall that the creed was intended to be a summary of beliefs, not a comprehensive statement of faith. And when it was used in the church's liturgy, everyone in the church knew that to mention these three persons of God in this way was to imply the doctrine of the Trinity.

On the other hand, the creed denies polytheism by using the singular form of the generic word "god" as a divine name.

The word "god" can mean many things. Many religions refer to their deities as "gods." And the Bible itself sometimes uses the word "god" to refer to things like demons, idols, and perhaps even human leaders. But these so-called "gods" also tend to have actual names. For instance, in the religion of ancient Rome, Mars was the god of war, Neptune was the god of the sea, and Jupiter was the leader of the gods.

In the same way, the God of Scripture is known by actual names. Most of them are descriptive, such as *El Shaddai*, which is often translated "Almighty God," meaning the God who is all powerful; and *El Elyon*, which is usually translated "God Most High," meaning the God who rules over all; and *Adonai*, which is generally translated "Lord," and means master or ruler.

But the name that most closely approximates what we might think of as God's proper name is Yahweh. In older translations it appears as Jehovah. But in modern translations, it is generally rendered "Lord," though its meaning is quite different from *Adonai*.

God revealed himself by the name Yahweh extremely early in human history. For instance, human beings were using this name for God at least as early as the days of Seth, the son of Adam, as we learn in Genesis 4:26. Noah referred to God as Yahweh in Genesis 9:26. And Abraham called God by this name in Genesis 12:8.

Yahweh is also the name that God described to Moses in Exodus 3:13-14, where we read this account:

Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13-14).

The name Yahweh is related to the Hebrew word *'ehyeh*, which is here translated "I AM." It is the most intimate name that God revealed to his people, and the one that, more than any other name, distinguishes him from all the false gods.

In fact, of all the names by which the Lord is called in Scripture, "God" is the most generic. In our modern Old Testaments, the word God usually translates the Hebrew word *el* or *elohim*. And in the New Testament, it usually translates the Greek word *theos*.

But in the days of the Bible, other religions used these same words to refer to their own gods. So, why did the *Apostles' Creed* choose this generic name for God instead of a more distinctive name like Yahweh? Because by using the simple term “God” to identify the Lord, the *Apostles' Creed* indicates that the God of Christianity is the only one who deserves to be called “God.” As we read in 1 Kings 8:60:

The Lord (or in Hebrew *Yahweh*) is God ... there is no other (1 Kings 8:60).

Yes, other religions believe that they worship actual gods. But in reality, they worship imaginary beings, or even demons — inferior, created spirits who are ruled by the Christian God. Paul made this clear in 1 Corinthians 10:20, where he wrote these words:

The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God (1 Corinthians 10:20).

The pagans did not believe they offered their sacrifices to demons; they believed they offered them to various gods. But they were wrong.

There are many religions besides Christianity in the world today. There is Hinduism, Shinto, paganism, Wicca, Islam, Judaism, tribal religions, and so on. But their gods are false. Some worship demons. Some worship the creation. And some worship figments of their imagination. But the Bible insists that only the Christian God is truly divine; only the Christian God will judge the world; and only the Christian God has the power to save us.

In its first article of faith, the *Apostles' Creed* calls new Christians to abandon the false gods they used to worship, and to acknowledge the God of Scripture as the one true God. And this call reflects a teaching that is absolutely essential in Scripture. The Bible obligates every person in every age to acknowledge that the God of the Old and New Testaments is the only true God. And it demands that they worship only him.

Now that we have looked at God's singularity, we are ready to focus on his simplicity, the unity of his nature or essence.

SIMPLICITY

You will recall that when we defined the doctrine of the Trinity in a prior lesson, we stated it this way: God has three persons, but only one essence. We also said that the term “person” refers to a distinct, self-aware personality, and that the term “essence” refers to God's fundamental nature, or the substance of which he consists. Well, when we speak of God's simplicity, it is his essence that we have in mind — his fundamental nature, the substance that makes up his being.

Now, theologians use terms like “simple” and “simplicity” in a rather technical way. We are not saying that God is simple in the sense that he is easy to understand. Instead, we mean that his essence is not a composite of different substances but a unified whole consisting of only one substance.

We can illustrate this idea of simplicity by comparing pure water to mud. On the one hand, water may be viewed as a simple substance. It is composed entirely of water, and nothing else. But if we add dirt to our pure water, it turns into mud. Mud is a complex substance because it is composed of two distinct parts: water and dirt. God's essence is like absolutely pure water: it is composed of only one substance.

But why is this important? Why does Christianity emphasize that God is simple and not composed of different substances? To answer this question, let's look once more at the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity states that: God has three persons, but only one essence.

Central to the Doctrine of the Trinity is the distinction between person and essence. God is one with respect to essence and three with respect to person. In fact we might say that with God, there is one "what" and three "whos."

— Dr. Keith Johnson

As strongly as the Bible insists that God has *three* persons — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — it also insists that there is only *one* God. And very early in the life of the church, theologians determined that a useful way to talk about there being only one God was to speak in terms of his essence or substance. So, when they said that God has a simple, unified essence, they were denying that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were three separate Gods that somehow joined together in the Trinity. And instead, they were affirming that these three persons had always existed together as only one God.

In this way, the church made it absolutely clear that Christians do not believe in three Gods, as we are often accused by other religions. Instead, we believe in only one God — one divine being — who exists in three persons.

Often in speaking with Muslims they say, the Christian view of the Trinity is an affirmation of three Gods or tri-theism. Nobody in the history of the church has ever affirmed this because alongside the affirmation that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, is from Genesis to Revelation, the affirmation that God is one. There is one living and true God. So that the only way that we can make sense of the full revelation of God is to say, there is one God, there is no other; the Father, Son and Spirit share in that one Godhead. The language of the church has been they subsist in that one Godhead as three persons and that is why we do not affirm that there are three gods. One God, yet in three persons. That which is taught in Scripture, affirmed by the Church and distinguishes us really from all of our religious competitors in that fashion.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

This idea is stated explicitly in another ancient creed — the *Nicene Creed* — which says:

Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God ... [is] of one substance with the Father.

Because the *Apostles' Creed* is more basic than the *Nicene Creed*, it does not mention this detail explicitly. Nevertheless, it implies this idea by insisting that we believe in only one God who exists in three persons.

The fact that Christians believe in one God in three persons has countless implications for the Christian life. For example, traditional Christian worship has always been fully Trinitarian: we worship all three persons of the Trinity, and we offer songs of praise and prayers of petition to each one of them. To neglect any person of the Trinity in favor of another is to neglect God himself. We owe honor, service and love to the Father, to the Son and to the Holy Spirit because they are all one God.

Having addressed the basic Christian conception of God and the nature of his existence, we are ready to focus on the phrase Father Almighty, looking at the distinct things the Bible teaches us about God the Father, the first person of the Trinity.

FATHER ALMIGHTY

Our discussion of the Father Almighty will divide into four parts. First, we will look at the way the name “Father” is used of God in Scripture. Second, we will consider the person of God the Father in terms of the Trinity. Third, we will explore the nature of his fatherhood, the things he does in his role as father. And fourth, we will discuss his power. Consider first the name “Father” as it is used of God in Scripture.

NAME

The Bible uses the term “Father” in at least three distinct senses. First, it’s used of God as the creator of all things. An example of New Testament use of this sense would be 1 Corinthians 8:6 where Paul identifies the Father as the one from whom all things exist. Now, it’s important to recognize that not every Biblical reference to God as Father in this first sense is a reference to the first person of the Trinity. A second use of the term “Father” denotes the relationship that believers have with God as a result of their adoption as sons and daughters. When Paul says in Romans 8:15 that we have received the spirit of adoption by which we call God Abba, Father, he’s using “Father” in this second sense. Finally, the term ‘father’ is used to denote the unique relationship that exists between Jesus Christ and His Father. We might summarize these three uses by saying that the first speaks of God as creator, the second speaks of God as redeemer

and the third speaks specifically of the person of the Father in relation to the Son.

— Dr. Keith Johnson

Unfortunately, some Christians mistakenly think that every time the Bible uses the term “Father,” it is talking about the first person of the Trinity. But the doctrine of the Trinity is not clearly revealed until the New Testament. There are hints of it here and there in the Old Testament that may indicate some awareness of plurality in the Godhead. But the Old Testament overwhelmingly stresses the oneness of God.

So, when God is called “Father” in the Old Testament, the reference is to the entire Trinity, not just to one person. Now, in some sense, the use of the word “Father” does emphasize the person of the Father. But it’s important to remember that before the clear New Testament revelation of the three persons of God, all the terms used for God, including the name “Father,” applied in some measure to the entire Trinity. The term “Father” refers to the entire Godhead in passages like Deuteronomy 32:6, and Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8. For the sake of illustration, let’s look at just one example of this use of “Father” in the Old Testament. In Malachi 2:10, the prophet asked these questions:

Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? (Malachi 2:10).

Here, the entire Godhead — including the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — is spoken of as “Father” because the entire Godhead participated in the creation of humanity. The New Testament makes it clear that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit each played a somewhat different role. But this Old Testament passage does not make such distinctions between God’s persons. Instead, it ascribes the name “Father” to all three persons collectively because of their role in creation.

To complicate matters further, as New Testament writers drew from the Old Testament, there were times when they also referred to the entire Trinity as Father in a general sense. For example, it is likely that the entire Trinity is described as “Father” in Matthew 5:45 and 6:6-18, and in Acts 17:24-29. In these passages, the entire Trinity is called “Father” for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is because the whole Godhead participated in creating the world. At other times it is because all three persons of God are the ethical standard to which we must conform. Again, let’s consider just one verse for the sake of illustration. In James 1:17, we read these words:

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights (James 1:17).

Prior to this verse, James argued that God’s character is ethically pure. So, his point here was that everything that comes from God is good, and everything that is good comes from God. Since good things come from all the persons of our Triune God, Christian interpreters often see this as a reference to the whole Trinity. Again, as in the Old Testament, it is reasonable to see an emphasis on the person of the Father here. But it’s important to affirm that the Son and the Holy Spirit also provide good gifts for us.

Nevertheless, it is also clear that Scripture uses the word “Father” in another sense to refer to a person of the Trinity that is distinct from the Son and the Holy Spirit. We see this in John 1:14, 18; John 5:17-26; Galatians 4:6; 2 Peter 1:17. Once more, let’s look at just two examples to illustrate this point. In 2 John 9, the apostle distinguished between the Father and the Son when he wrote these words:

Anyone who ... does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son (2 John 9).

And in John 14:16-17, Jesus distinguished the Father from the Spirit when he gave this assurance to the apostles:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever — the Spirit of truth (John 14:16-17).

Now that we have seen how the name “Father” is used in Scripture to indicate the entire Godhead as well as the first person of the Trinity, we are ready to look at the person of God the Father in distinction from the other persons of the Trinity.

PERSON

The Father’s association with the Son and the Holy Spirit may be described in a number of ways. But in the history of theology, two particular perspectives on the Trinity have come to the foreground. Specifically, it has been common to speak in terms of the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. Both these approaches speak of the same Trinity — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — but they emphasize different aspects of the relationship between the three persons of the Godhead.

On the one hand, it has been common to speak of the ontological Trinity when we are focusing on God’s being. The word ontological means relating to being. So, when we speak of the ontological Trinity, we are looking at the Trinity in terms of being or essence. We are considering how the three persons of the Trinity are integrated with one another, and how they share a single essence.

From the perspective of ontology, all three of God’s persons are infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And each has the same essential divine attributes, such as wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

On the other hand, we normally say that we are speaking of the economic Trinity when we consider how God’s persons interact with each other, how they relate to one another as individual persons. The word “economic” means “relating to household management.” So, when we speak of the economic aspects of the Trinity, we are describing how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to one another as distinct individual personalities.

When we view the Trinity from an economic point of view, each person has different responsibilities, a different level of authority, and a different assigned role with different tasks to perform. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit engage in conversations with

each other. They make agreements with each other. They act upon each other. And they interact in many other ways.

From both the ontological and the economic perspectives, the Father is said to be the first person. The Father is called the first person of the ontological Trinity because the Son is said to be generated by the Father, and the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father.

Listen to the words of 1 John 4:9 regarding the generation of the Son:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him (1 John 4:9).

The phrase “one and only” comes from the Greek word *monogenes*, and is often translated “only begotten.” Unfortunately, some people in the early church thought that this meant that the Son was created and not fully divine. Even today some cults deny the divinity of the Son because he is called “begotten.”

To counter this false teaching, Christians have traditionally said that the Son is eternally generated or eternally begotten by the Father. These terms emphasize that there was no time when the Son did not exist. Listen to the way Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit's procession in John 15:26:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me (John 15:26).

The phrase “goes out” translates the Greek word *ekporeuomai*, and is often rendered “proceeds.” Traditionally, this verse has been understood as referring to the source of the Holy Spirit's existence.

Unfortunately, passages like this have led some people to conclude wrongly that the Holy Spirit is not eternal or fully divine. So, traditional Christian theology has been careful to insist that the Holy Spirit is a full member of the Trinity, and that he is fully divine, even though his personhood eternally proceeds from the Father.

Besides being the first person of the ontological Trinity, the Father is also called the first person of the economic Trinity. From the economic perspective, the Father is said to be the “first person” because he has authority over the other two persons, much like a human father has authority over his household.

We see the Father's authority over the Son in many ways. For instance, the Son does the Father's will, as we learn in John 6:40. And the Son gets his authority and kingdom from the Father, according to passages like Ephesians 1:20-22. In fact, Scripture repeatedly tells us that the Son's kingship is subordinate to the Father's kingship. We see this in the frequent idea that Jesus sits at God's right hand, that is, on the right side of God's throne, as in Psalm 110:1 and Hebrews 1:3. God's right hand is a place of honor and power, to be sure, but it is not the throne itself. And ultimately, the Son will hand over his kingdom to the Father, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15:24. In short, in the economic Trinity, the Father has authority over the Son.

The question of the relationship between the Father and the Son and the exercise of all authority is a complex one, but it really has to do with the distinction between the roles that the Father and the Son play within the Trinity, and the fact that, in his role, the Son voluntarily has a subservience to the Father. He came to earth to submit himself to the Father's will and the Father exercises all authority. But at the same time these are relationships of love in which the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, and they seek to please and honor one another within the Trinity. So, we need to sort of unpick a little bit, the difference between the roles in which they play and the relationships of love in which they enjoy.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Similarly, the Father has authority over the Spirit. For instance, we are often told that it is the Father that sends the Spirit, as in Luke 11:13 and Ephesians 1:17. We also learn that it was the Father that empowered the Son with the Spirit in Acts 10:38. Throughout Scripture, the Holy Spirit is the Father's agent in the world, being instructed by the Father to carry out his will. In the economic Trinity, the Father has authority over the Holy Spirit, just as he has authority over the Son.

The Father's authority is always an authority of love. The Father's authority is an authority that loves the Son, desires the Son to be glorified, just as the Son then desires the Father to be glorified. And finally, if they share a heart of love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the idea that there would be a disagreement of wills between the Father, Son and Spirit becomes kind of comical in one sense because if the Son eternally and the Spirit eternally long to do the will of the Father, and the Father eternally longs to glorify and honor the Son and the Spirit, then essentially in the life of God there is unanimity of will, a unanimity of love; because a unanimity of being in this fellowship of the Trinity.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

With this understanding of how the name "Father" is used in Scripture, and of the person of God the Father, we are ready to look at the nature of his fatherhood over creation and humanity.

FATHERHOOD

Before we describe God's fatherhood in detail, we should pause to point out that a large number of Scriptures that talk about God's fatherhood come from the Old Testament, prior to the time that God clearly revealed his triune nature. In these passages,

the word “Father” refers first and foremost to the entire Trinity, and not just to the person of the Father.

Nevertheless, the New Testament associates God’s fatherhood primarily with the person of the Father. So, it is legitimate to see in these Old Testament texts an emphasis on the person of the Father.

The fatherhood of God has many aspects that we could discuss. But we will focus on three of Scripture’s more prominent ideas. First, we will consider the Father’s role as creator. Second, we will look at his fatherhood in terms of his position as king over his creation and people. And third, we will focus on the idea that the Father is the family head over his people. We’ll begin by exploring his role as creator as an aspect of his fatherhood.

Creator

In the broadest sense, Scripture sometimes refers to God as being the father of everything he has created. For instance, we find this in passages like Deuteronomy 32:6, Isaiah 43:6-7, and 64:8, Malachi 2:10, and Luke 3:38.

As just one example, listen to Paul’s words to the Athenians in Acts 17:26-28:

From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live... As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” (Acts 17:26-28).

Here Paul quoted from pagan poets Cleanthes and Aratus, who had said that Zeus was the Father of human beings because he had created them. Of course, Paul insisted that the God of the Bible was the real creator, and not Zeus. But Paul also affirmed the idea that to create something is to become its Father.

The Bible was written in human language. Our human relationship to God as creator is often expressed in terms of the relationship between a father and his children. In this context, God’s fatherhood represents our origin and his authority.

— Dr. Paul Chang, translation

Just as human fathers are patient toward their children, God’s general fatherhood over creation motivates him to show great patience with our fallen world, and with sinful humanity in particular. This does not mean that he will always withhold judgment from the creation. But it helps explain why he is slow to anger and quick to show mercy. As we read in Psalm 145:8-9:

The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made (Psalm 145:8-9).

Having looked at God's role as creator, we are now ready to see how his role as king relates to his fatherhood.

King

In the ancient Near-East, it was common for people to refer to human kings as their fathers, and for kings to refer to their people as their children. This language is often reflected in Scripture, as well. For example, the Israelites referred to David as their father because he had been their king. Of course, some of the Israelites were direct descendants of David, so he was their forefather in a literal sense. But when the nation as a whole referred to David as their father, they meant that he was their king. Listen to Mark 11:10, where the crowds cried out in this way:

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! (Mark 11:10).

Here, David's fatherhood over Israel is explicitly connected to his kingship. Similarly, in Acts 4:25-26, the church praised God with these words:

You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." (Acts 4:25-26).

Once again, David was called the father of Israel because he was the Lord's Anointed One, the king who sat on the Lord's throne and led Israel in battle against enemy nations. But why did the ancients refer to kings as their fathers?

Kings in the ancient world called themselves "fathers" because they were portraying themselves as paternalistic, that is they were caring for their people, taking care of their needs, protecting them and those kinds of things. Now, in reality, most of that was just propaganda because kings in the ancient world, for the most part served themselves rather than serving their people. But at the same time, when God revealed himself to Israel, he used this common way of thinking about kings as fathers. And in the case of God being our father, our royal father, our imperial father, it's not propaganda, it's true. God takes care of us. He provides for us. He protects us like a father would. So he's the father of his entire empire, the father of his kingdom.

— Dr. Richard Pratt, Jr.

And just as human kings were called the fathers of their nations, God was called “Father” because he was the great king that ruled over all the kings of the world, and because he ruled directly over his chosen nation Israel.

Listen to the way Isaiah 63:15-16 talks about the Lord’s fatherhood:

Look down from heaven and see from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. But you are our Father ... you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name (Isaiah 63:15-16).

Here, God is referred to as Father because he sits on the heavenly throne, ruling over all creation in general, and over Israel and Judah in a special way. Specifically, the plea is for the divine king to lead his armies into battle, to redeem his people by defeating their enemies.

Knowing that our divine king cares for us in the same way that a father cares for his children should give us great confidence and comfort. On our own, we are incapable of standing against the evils of this world. But our divine king loves us like a father, and readily helps us.

In fact, this is one of the ideas Jesus taught in the Lord’s Prayer when he instructed his disciples to pray to “Our Father in heaven.” In this petition of the Lord’s Prayer, God is acknowledged as our Father in heaven. And throughout the Bible, the image of heaven is the same: it is God’s throne room, the place where he sits and rules as king. So, when Jesus told his disciples to pray, “Our Father in heaven,” he meant for them to pray to God as their royal father, the divine king enthroned in heaven. Our confidence that God will give us our daily bread, forgive our sins, keep us from temptation, and deliver us from the evil one is based on the fact that as our loving king, he has both the power and the desire to do these things.

With this understanding of God as creator and king in mind, we are ready to consider his role as family head as an aspect of his fatherhood.

Family Head

One of the interesting things for me is that theology always has pastoral implications. What we believe affects the kind of people that we become, and this is true with respect to God the Father. I think it works both ways — for those of us who have had good fathers, and for those who haven’t. I’m fortunate in having had a good father, so it has never been difficult for me to think of God as my Heavenly Father. All of the things that my dad said to me, and did for me, and the way that we related to each other — that was very, very important, and brings God the father into a very positive sense for me. But over the years I have met and worked with people for whom the language of fatherhood was very negative, very challenging, very difficult. But I remember it one day working with one of my students,

who framed it for me in a way that, she said that “God became for me the Father that I never had.” And, so I think that when we explore the fatherhood of God, even from the place of deficiency, we begin to learn that the heart of God is a heart that is disposed towards us, whether or not we have actually had that experience with our earthly fathers.

— Dr. Steve Harper

Everyone is familiar with the concept of a family head. Usually it is a parent, grandparent, or other relative who leads and makes decisions for the family or household. Well, Scripture often describes God's relationship to his people in these very same terms.

At times in the Old Testament, we catch glimpses of God as the head of the family of the human race. For example, in Genesis 5:1-3, Moses described God's relationship to Adam in the same way that he described Adam's relationship to his son, Seth.

More often in the Old Testament, though, God is portrayed as the family head of the nation Israel. We see this in the care he takes for his people in places like Deuteronomy 1:31, Psalm 103:13, and Proverbs 3:12. As just one example, consider the Lord's words in Hosea 11:1:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).

Here the Lord portrayed himself as a parent who had loved the nation of Israel since its childhood. We also find God described as Israel's family head in Numbers 12:7, where the Lord referred to Moses in this way:

My servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house (Numbers 12:7, NRSV).

The word translated “house” is the Hebrew term *bayit*. It is the normal word that referred not only to a domestic building, but also to the people who lived in the building. Here, Moses is described as a son or servant who rules over the people and possessions of the head of the household, implying that God is the family head of the nation of Israel.

Of course, the description of God as the family head of his people also continues in the New Testament. In Matthew 7:9-11, and Luke 11:11-13, Jesus taught that the Father answers our prayers in the same way that human fathers provide for their children. In John 1:12-13, as well as in 1 John 2:29 and 3:1, we learn that the Father loves us because we have been born into his family. And in Hebrews 12:5-10, we read that the Lord disciplines us for our own good in the same way that a human father disciplines his children. And in passages like 1 Timothy 3:15 and 1 Peter 4:17, the church is referred to as God's household and family.

I believe there are tremendous pastoral implications of the fatherhood of God. I think one of the things we see right off the bat is: God is

Father. I mean, it's a tremendous look at what the Father is like, what God is like in Scripture. So, we see right from the get-go that family must be very, very important to God. And I believe that right from Deuteronomy 6 when the Lord says, "Listen, this is how I'm going to perpetuate the law and the love of God; it's going to be through families." It's going to be as parents rub shoulders, rub their lives against the lives of the children; tremendous things are done there, obviously. Family is exceedingly important to God. I think also you look down and you see that Fathers are critical to the family. And the pastoral implications there, you can see it all around the world where Fathers are strong, you have strong cultures. Where Fathers become weak in cultures, weak within the cultures, you have a weakening dynamic there that simply cannot be replaced by motherhood. We need strong mothers, no question about it, but fathers are absolutely critical, and I think one of the things you see in the Fatherhood of God is that very dynamic. I see when you have a lack of fatherhood you have abuse that's on the rise, you have a lack of education, you have crime that's on the rise. So this whole thing of dysfunction across the culture happens when you have a weakening concept of fatherhood and that will happen when you have a weak concept of God as Father.

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

Now that we have explored the name, person and fatherhood of the Father Almighty, we are ready to investigate his unlimited power to accomplish his will.

POWER

Look once again at the first article of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. It says:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

When the *Apostles' Creed* says that God the Father is almighty, it means that he has unlimited, matchless power. In traditional theological terms, God's almighty power is referred to as his omnipotence, from the root *omni*, meaning all, and the word potency, meaning power.

The Father's power is unlimited because he has the strength and ability to accomplish whatever he chooses. And it is matchless because he is the only one that possesses this type of power.

We'll consider both aspects of the Father's power that we have just mentioned: the fact that it is unlimited, and the fact that it is matchless. Let's begin with the unlimited nature of his power.

Unlimited

Scripture describes the Father as having power to do anything he wills to do. And it demonstrates this unlimited power in many different ways. It speaks of him as having the power to create the universe and to destroy it. It says that he has power to control the weather, to defeat his enemies in battle, to rule and to control human governments, to perform mighty miracles, and to save his people. Listen to how the prophet Jeremiah described the Lord in Jeremiah 10:10-16:

The Lord is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath... God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar; he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth. He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses... He is the Maker of all things, including Israel, the tribe of his inheritance — the Lord Almighty is his name (Jeremiah 10:10-16).

God ultimately controls every aspect of the created world. He has the power to do whatever he pleases. In Isaiah 46:10-11, the Lord himself summarized his power this way:

My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please... What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do (Isaiah 46:10-11).

God's omnipotence is a good reminder to us as believers that when the world seems like it's spinning out of control, feels like it's descending into chaos, it's not. God cannot be bound by another source or power superior to his. The world, whatever else it may seem like, the world is not spinning out of control, God is sovereign, we may have confidence that he has not been overpowered, and it gives us strength to walk with faith in those times that appear mysterious to our limited perspective. When we don't see all that God sees, it is good to know that God has not had his control or his power wrested from him against his will. Whatever is coming to me, whatever is taking place in my life, is taking place under the authority of God's loving hand. And I can take confidence, even when I can't explain my circumstances that I know the God who sustains me and walks through this with me.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

Throughout the Bible, Scripture commonly points to God's redemption of his people as an ideal demonstration of his power. In the Old Testament, we frequently read that he proved his power in the Exodus when he smote the Egyptians with plagues, freed the Israelites from slavery, sustained them with food from heaven for forty years in the desert, and gave them conquest over the Promised Land. In the minds of ancient Israel, the Exodus was the greatest example of God's redemptive power they knew.

We find references to God's power in the Exodus throughout the books of the Law, in passages like Exodus 14:31; Numbers 14:13; and Deuteronomy 9:26-29. We also see this theme in every other part of the Old Testament. We find it in the historical books in 2 Kings 17:36; in the poetic books in places like Psalm 66:3-6; and in the prophetic books in places like Isaiah 63:12.

Now, this is not to say that the ancient Israelites ignored the surpassing greatness of the spiritual redemption they received by grace through faith in the Lord. It was perfectly valid for them to say things like, "I believe in God's power by faith." But many Old Testament authors found it more compelling to say things like, "God proved his power by single-handedly freeing our entire nation from slavery." And this should not be surprising. After all, the external demonstrations of God's might in the Exodus were so irrefutable that even the unbelieving Egyptians were convinced.

With this understanding of God's unlimited power in mind, we should pause to mention that there are certain things that God cannot or will not do, despite his unlimited power. Specifically, the Father's nature governs everything he does. As a result, he never does anything that is contrary to his nature.

Nature is a broad term that includes both essential and personal attributes. We might define it as one's fundamental character; or the central aspects of one's being. In the case of the Father, his nature includes not only his being and his character, but also his relationships with the other members of the Trinity. And the Father's nature is absolutely immutable and unchangeable, so that it will always lead him to exercise his power in similar ways. James 1:17 speaks of the unchangeable quality of God's nature in this way:

The Father of the heavenly lights ... does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17).

The Father's nature does not limit his ability to do things that are compatible with his nature. But it does guarantee that he will only exercise his almighty power in ways that are consistent with his attributes. For example, he will never cease to be eternal. He will never revoke his authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit. He will never do anything sinful. And he will always keep his promises.

It's very interesting to me that one of the factors in the rise of modern science was the recognition that God operates the same way today as he did yesterday. Whereas wherever animism obtains in this world — the belief that there are many gods and that gods reside in the elements of this world, beliefs that God is utterly unpredictable — and if God is utterly unpredictable, you're not able to study this world because you don't know if it'll act this way today and a different way

tomorrow. But if God is unchangeable then you can actually go out and study the world and understand how God made it and how it works. And so that very belief in the unchangeability of God enabled the rise of modern science. Well, in the same way that it enabled the rise of modern science, it enables the assurance and the comfort and the peace of a Christian in uncertain circumstances, because we don't have to figure it all out. We don't have to know what's coming around the corner. All we have to know is that our God is completely sufficient to meet any and every challenge that we encounter, and that he will predictably address that situation in the same way he promised to David, to Abraham and to Adam and to Jesus and to Paul — that he's dependable, that he's faithful, that he's not fickle, that he doesn't change from day to day, and he has every power within himself to address our every circumstance.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Now that we have discussed the unlimited nature of the Father's might, we should turn to its matchless qualities, noting that God alone is omnipotent.

Matchless

Listen to the way God's matchless power is described in Isaiah 14:24-27:

The Lord Almighty has sworn, "Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand. I will crush the Assyrian in my land; on my mountains I will trample him down. His yoke will be taken from my people, and his burden removed from their shoulders." This is the plan determined for the whole world; this is the hand stretched out over all nations. For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back? (Isaiah 14:24-27).

Notice that in this passage, the description of the Lord's unlimited power is followed by an assertion that he alone possesses omnipotence. There is no one who can thwart him, no one who can turn back his hand.

The fact that the Father's power is matchless flows naturally from the fact that there is only one true God. Certainly if there were another being of infinite power, God's status as the only God could be challenged. After all, a being of infinite power would either be divine, or could make himself divine by virtue of his own power.

This is essentially what God told Job in Job 38, when he said that Job would be able to justify himself if he could first do the same powerful acts that God had already done, such as creating, ordering and providentially controlling the universe.

But the reality is that only God is truly divine. And therefore only God has unlimited power.

Sadly, in our day many well-meaning Christians deny that God is all-powerful. They misunderstand the Scriptures to teach that God himself is doing all he can with his creation. But the omnipotence of God is a wonderfully practical teaching of Scripture. When the people of God are in trouble, they cry out for God's help because they know that he is able to save. When evil seems to be in control of the world, we can rest assured that God has total power over evil. Without faith in God's omnipotence, we have no basis for our confidence that God will defeat his enemies, and that his children will receive the eternal blessings he has promised.

It's amazing to think about all the rich theology that is rolled into the phrase Father Almighty. We serve a powerful, personal, fatherly God that loves us and cares for us in astounding ways. And we can be completely assured that his protection will never fail because we know that he himself will never fail. He will always be our creator, king and family head. He will always have unlimited, matchless power. And he will never change. He will always be there to save us, and the salvation he offers is just as everlasting as he is.

So far in this lesson we have explored the nature of our Trinitarian God, and the characteristics of the divine person known as the Father Almighty. At this point, we are ready to turn to our third topic: the role of the Father as the Maker of heaven and earth.

MAKER

Our discussion of the Father as the Maker of heaven and earth will focus on three facets of his creative work. First, we will consider the Father's work of creation. Second, we will focus on the goodness of creation. And third, we will mention the Father's authority over creation. Let's begin by thinking about the work of creation that the Father performed.

WORK OF CREATION

Creation is the one work that the *Apostles' Creed* specifically attributes to the Father. You will recall that its first article of faith states:

**I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.**

Of all the things that the Father is said to do in Scripture, this is the one work that historic Christianity has insisted that all Christians affirm.

Most Christians are familiar with the idea that God created and sustains the universe, largely because Scripture refers to it so often. In fact, if we open our Bibles to the first page and begin reading, the first thing we are told is that God is the maker of heaven and earth. As we learn in Genesis 1:1:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

After this introductory verse, the rest of Genesis 1 explains that God created and ordered the universe within the span of six days.

Now, throughout the history of the church, there have been many different theories about the interpretation of the creation account in Genesis 1. Nearly all theologians have agreed that God created the universe *ex nihilo* or out of nothing. That is to say, before God created the heavens and the earth, nothing existed except God himself. There was no preexistent matter from which God made the universe. And many have suggested that God created even time and space itself.

But theologians have often disagreed about the precise manner in which the Father created the universe, especially over the nature of the six days of creation. Several Church Fathers, such as Clement, Origen and Augustine, believed that the days were figurative representations of a creation that probably took place in a single moment. Others, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, saw them as normal 24-hour days. Later, when science began to suggest that the universe was very old, many theologians began to read the creation account in new ways. Some suggested that the days were normal 24-hour periods, but that large stretches of time intervened between the days on which God created. Others interpreted the days as figures of speech that represented eras or epochs.

Certainly the issue of the days of creation in Genesis 1 is a hot one that has been the source of a lot of arguments. I think one of the issues is: what kind of literature is this? Is this literature which is designed to give a sensuous fact, facts relating to the senses, or is it literature designed to teach spiritual fact. Now, we shouldn't drive a wedge between those two. God's the creator of this world and they should fit together. But if we read Genesis 1 as a science text, that will lead us to a different interpretation than if we read it as a discussion of the meaning and nature of creation.

— Dr. John Oswalt

For the early church and their use of the *Apostles' Creed*, what seems to have been most important was that believers acknowledge that God and God alone, led by the person of the Father, created and sustains the entire universe, including both the spiritual and material realms, with all their substances and creatures.

This is the same idea that the Levites emphasized in Nehemiah 9:6. Listen to their words:

You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you (Nehemiah 9:6).

As we read here, God alone made the universe. And God alone continues to give life to everything that exists, sustaining the universe he created.

Now, it's important to point out that even though the Father took a leading role in making and sustaining heaven and earth, these acts involve the entire Trinity in various ways. For example, the Son was the means or instrument that the Father used to make the world, and that he still uses to sustain it.

Listen to the way Paul described the work of creation in 1 Corinthians 8:6:

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Here, Paul explained that the Father is the source of creation. Creation comes *from* him. But it comes *through* the Son. We continue to live because the Father sustains our lives through his Son.

The Holy Spirit's involvement is mentioned less explicitly in Scripture. Primarily it is implied in Old Testament passages that refer to the work of the Spirit of God. During the days of the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit had not yet been clearly revealed as a distinct person of God. Nevertheless, the New Testament teaches that he was already active in the world carrying out God's will. We see this in passages like Mark 12:36 that speak of the Holy Spirit inspiring Old Testament authors, and Acts 2:2-17, where Peter taught that the Holy Spirit was the source of prophecy and spiritual gifting even during the Old Testament.

So, when we read Old Testament accounts of God's Spirit, it is reasonable to infer that they foreshadow the later, clearer revelation that the Holy Spirit is a distinct divine person. For instance, in Genesis 1:2-3, we read this account:

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:2-3).

The words "Spirit of God" literally refer to God in all his persons. But from our New Testament perspective, we can see in them an emphasis on the activity of the person of the Holy Spirit.

Having looked at the Father's role as Maker in the work of creation, we are ready to focus on the goodness of the creation the Father made.

GOODNESS OF CREATION

Many religions and philosophies teach that the material universe is amoral, that is, neither good nor evil. Others actually say that the world is evil. For example, many of the pagan philosophies the early church encountered taught that the material universe was corrupt, and that to be truly saved human beings had to escape the bondage of their bodies. This negative view of the world was one reason the *Apostles' Creed* emphasized that God made the heavens and the earth. In the Bible, the universe is God's good creation that reflects his good character.

In Genesis 1, we are reminded of the goodness of creation in verses 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31 — seven times in all. And in the last of these, Scripture records that the entire creation is not just “good” but “very good.” As Moses wrote in Genesis 1:31:

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good (Genesis 1:31).

Sadly, soon after God created the world, Adam and Eve sinned against God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And as a result of humanity's sin, God placed the entire creation under a curse. One text that speaks of this is Genesis 3:17-19, where God spoke this curse to Adam:

Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food (Genesis 3:17-19).

Because of Adam's sin, God cursed the ground so that gardening became difficult, forcing Adam and the rest of humanity to work hard for their food. And this curse on the ground was not limited to farming. It affected the whole world in all of its aspects. Paul wrote about this problem in Romans 8 when he argued that the redemption of believers through Jesus Christ would eventually lead to a restoration of the creation itself. Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 8:20-22:

For the creation was subjected to frustration ... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay ... [T]he whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time (Romans 8:20-22).

Paul taught that the curse on the ground affected every element of creation.

But despite God's curse, we should not make the mistake of thinking that the creation is no longer good. Yes, humanity's fall into sin damaged the creation. But it is still God's world, and it is still fundamentally good. Paul made this point when he was writing about the abiding validity of marriage, and the freedom Christians have to eat all sorts of food. Listen to his words in 1 Timothy 4:4:

Everything God created is good (1 Timothy 4:4).

Notice what Paul said here. He did not say that everything created “was” good, but that everything God created “is” good.

The fact that the physical world is good—that God declared it good—has lots of practical implications for us. For one thing, we need to protect the environment. We are stewards over this creation. For another thing, ultimately God is going to preserve this creation. He is going to recreate; there is going to be a restoration of creation, rather than destruction of creation. We are going to live forever in a new

heaven and a new earth. The physical world that God created is a good thing. Our physical bodies — our physical presence — is a good thing.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

So, whether we are talking about marriage or food or any other thing created by God, we can be confident that it is good because the Father that created it is good. This is why Paul could also say, in Romans 1, that the goodness of God himself is still visible to all humanity through the things he has made. It is why Psalm 19 can claim that the heavens declare the glory of God.

John Wesley described the goodness of creation in his eighteenth-century work *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation*, part 3, chapter 2. Listen to what he wrote there:

The whole universe is a picture, in which are displayed the perfections of the Deity. It shows not only his existence, but his unity, his power, his wisdom, his independence, his goodness.

The universe displays God's goodness through its own innate goodness — a goodness that it possesses because it was created by a good God.

God's creation reflects his goodness. It tells us first of all that creation isn't in itself evil, that evil doesn't exist inherently in matter. But it also tells us that when God created the world, he created it very good. That there is beauty in creation. Now that beauty is marred as a consequence of the fall. Thorns and thistles and the sweat of one's brow, have distorted God's creation, but as Christians, we have begun the process, or God has begun the process within us of recreating us. We are a new creation in Jesus Christ and as the hymn writer says, as Christians, we see something that Christless eyes have never seen. We begin to see creation as God's handiwork. Therefore as Christians we see art, beauty, structure, coherence, integration within creation itself. And this is what we anticipate in the new heavens and new earth, when God's creation will be made entirely new and we will be able to enjoy creation as God intended us to enjoy creation.

— Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

With this understanding of the work of creation and the goodness of creation in mind, we are ready to address the Father's authority over creation, which he possesses as its maker.

AUTHORITY OVER CREATION

There are many things we might say about the Father's authority as the creator. But we will focus on just three of its basic characteristics: His authority is absolute, exclusive and exhaustive. We'll take a closer look at each of these ideas, starting with the absolute nature of the Father's authority as creator.

Absolute

The Father's authority is absolute in the sense that he has complete freedom to do whatever he wants with his creation. Scripture often compares his absolute authority to a potter's authority over his clay. We find this description in places like Isaiah 29:16, Isaiah 45:9, Jeremiah 18:1-10, and Romans 9:18-24. Listen to the way Paul spoke of God's authority in Romans 9:20-21:

Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, "Why did you make me like this?" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:20-21).

Of course, the answers to Paul's rhetorical questions are obvious. Because God is the creator of all, he has the freedom and right to do whatever he wants with what he creates.

I think when some people hear that the Bible teaches that God has ultimate authority over everything that happens in the world, they feel maybe threatened by that; they feel resentful. But Christians, really when we think about who God is, should feel incredibly thankful. It means that our lives are in the hands of an all wise, all mighty, all loving Father who has given His own son for us on the cross. And that is such incredible, incredible comfort in times of suffering in particular, in times when we wonder what is happening in our lives.

— Dr. Dennis Johnson

Even if we don't understand all things that are happening, if you belong to Jesus Christ, God is your Father and he loves you. And he's protecting you, and he's watching over you no matter what you're going through. And some things we go through in this life are incredibly painful. But no matter what you're going through, he is in control. He has even — can you accept this at this point in your life? — he has even appointed this for your good, for your sanctification. God turns the enemies in our lives, he turns them into our friends so

that we more than conquer through him who loved us. We don't just conquer; it says that we *more than conquer* through him who loved us. So, God takes the trials and difficulties, and he uses them to sanctify us, to make us more like Jesus Christ. He brings the things he brings into our lives so that we will be like Christ. Hebrews 12: he disciplines us as a kind and wise and good father. I think the fight of faith is often fought exactly at this point. We have to say to ourselves over and over again, God, God cares for me and even if I don't understand it. He is bringing this into my life for my good, for my holiness, for my sanctification.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

Exclusive

Besides having absolute authority, the Father also has exclusive authority over everything he has created. The Father's authority as creator is exclusive in the sense that no creature possesses absolute authority. Absolute authority belongs only to the creator, and God is the only creator. And beyond this, when we view the Trinity economically, the Father also has authority over the other persons of the Trinity. For example, listen to Jesus' words in John 5:26-27:

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man (John 5:26-27).

Jesus taught that his authority to judge the world had been delegated to him by the Father. This authority ultimately resided in the Father, and was his exclusive prerogative. But the Father appointed the Son to judge on his behalf. We find a similar idea in 1 Corinthians 15:24, where Jesus' kingship over the universe is subordinate to the Father's greater kingship.

And something similar is true with the Holy Spirit as well. Passages like John 16:13, Romans 8:11, and 1 Peter 1:2 teach that the Holy Spirit also does the will of the Father.

And just as the Son's authority and the Spirit's authority are delegated from the Father, the authority of created beings is delegated as well. Angels, earthly rulers, and even average human beings have a measure of authority. But all these types of authority are delegated by God, so that the Father's authority is always superior to creaturely authority.

Exhaustive

In addition to having absolute and exclusive authority, the Father also has exhaustive authority over the universe. When we say that God's authority is exhaustive, we mean that it extends over everything he has created, in every detail. And there are at least two important implications of this fact. First, everyone is under God's authority. There is no person or other created thing that is free from the obligation to obey God.

Angels and human beings who are faithful to the Father recognize and submit willingly to him. But demons and unfaithful human beings rebel against him and refuse to submit to his commands. Even so, the Father's moral judgments apply to everyone. No matter where we live or who we are, and no matter what our culture or religion, we are all accountable to God.

Second, everything is under God's authority. His authority extends to every detail of what he has created. Because God has created all things, no aspect of creation is morally neutral. He has created everything for a purpose, and assigned it a moral character. And this means that no matter what the subject, no matter what aspect of creation is in view, there is no moral neutrality. Everything in creation either functions as God wants it to, and is therefore good, or rebels against him, and is therefore evil.

In the modern world many Christians are prone to divide life into things that are sacred and things that are secular. Most of us realize that "sacred" matters like church, worship, evangelism, and Bible study are under the authority of God. We also strive to acknowledge God's commands in our families and ethical choices, treating them as sacred as well. But many Christians tend to think that God's commands do not govern so-called "secular" matters like politics, education, and work. But this modern distinction between the sacred world and the secular world is not biblical. Passages like Proverbs 3:6, Ecclesiastes 12:14, and 2 Timothy 3:16-17 indicate that God has spoken about every area of human life, and that his authority extends to everything we do.

In a world where authority is often only thought in negative terms, the authority of God is a great thing for Christians to believe in because God still loves this world. God's still in control. God knows the end from the beginning. God is the one who will be the judge of all people. And that should make us feel good because we can be confident that somebody knows what he's doing and that is our trust and our confidence for the future.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on God the Father, we have looked closely at the first article of faith in the *Apostles' Creed*. We have discussed the concept of God that is implied in this

article. We have spoken of the Father Almighty as the first person of the Godhead. And we have explored the Father's role as the Maker of heaven and earth.

Understanding the person of God the Father is foundational to all Christian theology. Unless we know and worship the true Triune God of Scripture, we are worshiping a false God. And recognizing and honoring the person Scripture calls the Father is a critical part of true worship. The Father is the one that the Son and the Holy Spirit obey and honor — the one whose glory they work to increase. And so he should be the focus of our obedience, honor and glory as well.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
TWO

God the Father
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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Two: God the Father

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David Baer

Dr. David Bauer

Dr. Steve Blakemore

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Dr. John Frame

Dr. Matt Friedeman

Dr. Dennis Johnson

Dr. Keith Johnson

Dr. Samuel Ling

Dr. Robert Lister

Dr. Rebecca Luman

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Dr. Thomas Nettles

Dr. John Oswalt

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

Dr. Glen Scorgie

Dr. Mark Strauss

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Dr. Derek Thomas

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Question 1:

Can Scripture teach us reliable truths about God, or is its human language insufficient for this task?

As Evangelicals, we do our best to base our beliefs about God on the Bible. But the Bible challenges the limitations of our abilities so much that we sometimes disagree about its teachings. Some interpreters have blamed these disagreements on the human languages that the Bible uses to communicate. They think that human language is so inadequate that it's incapable of revealing God to us in meaningful ways. So, if Christians are going base our understanding of God on the Bible, it's important for us to ask this question: Can Scripture teach us reliable truths about God, or is its human language insufficient for this task?

Dr. John Frame

In the Bible, we know God but we don't know him exhaustively, and of course there's a lot of mystery in our understanding of God. There are lots of times where our minds fail us and where our language fails us. We try to formulate the truth and our language kind of escapes us. But in the Bible we have truth. In the Bible, Jesus says to God, "Your Word is truth." And so we can say for sure, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." We can say for sure, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And we don't claim any great intellectual powers in saying this. We're just reading what God has given to us and trusting him that those things are true. And so, human language does fail at times in speaking about God, but we can be sure that Scripture speaks truth. And it doesn't speak truth exhaustively, but it tells us about God as far as it's possible for us to know him as creatures.

Question 2:**Do our beliefs about God have any practical relevance for followers of Christ?**

It's one thing to say that the Bible communicates understandable truths about God, and another to say that these truths are worth studying. Many Christians who are unfamiliar with formal theology wonder if the doctrine of God is too abstract to have much bearing on anything in life. They think that our concepts of God's persons, nature, attributes, and so on are very theoretical and disconnected from the practical matters of daily life. But are they right? Do our beliefs about God have any practical relevance for followers of Christ?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

It's been said that there's only one question that really matters and that is the person of God. "Who is God" is the most important question we could ever ask because on that question every other question is answered. And so we understand who God is and then we're able to understand who we are, what it means to relate to our creator, what it means to be faithful to him and fulfill our intended destinies as people made in his image.

Dr. Matt Friedeman

Our belief about God absolutely influences everything else about us. If we believe God is holy, then we believe that there's a holy vision of God for our money, for instance. That we believe that there's a holy vision of God for our sexuality. If God is love and righteousness, then we believe, perhaps, those things belong in the family, in the things that we do and how we treat our kids, and the way we love our wife will be absolutely reflective of our belief in God and what we believe he is all about. We look down and we see things like the love and discipline of our kids, but also of our classroom and how we believe in God, what we believe about him, is absolutely going to be impacting everything about our lives.

Question 3:**Do all people have some beliefs about God that are so important that they influence nearly everything else they believe?**

It should be apparent that what Christians believe about God touches everything else we believe. But is this unique to Christianity? Or do all people have some beliefs about God that are so important that they influence nearly everything else they believe?

Dr. Robert Lister

The belief about God, again, is of central import to belief about everything else, and that's true whether you're a Christian or a non-Christian. Non-Christians, atheists, perhaps may not call it God but everyone has something that is uppermost in their

value system. So from whatever worldview you come, you have something that is at the center of your personal solar system, so to speak. And that shapes the orbit of everything around it in the rest of our lives, again whether Christian or non-Christian. So, for the Christian, our belief about God shapes our belief about who we are, how we may rightly understand ourselves, what it means to be made in the image of God, what it means to be corrupted and affected by sin, how we may be redeemed from that sin. And similarly, for a non-theist, whatever it is that's uppermost in their hearts' desires and their personal affections and their worldview structure, that is going to shape the orbit of their lives, their lives will revolve around whatever it is they esteem most highly.

Question 4:

Why are human beings prone to turn away from God?

All human beings tend to make some beliefs more central in their lives. And this is especially true when it comes to beliefs about God. But this fact raises an important issue that often perplexes followers of Christ: If what we believe about God is so central to all human thought, why are human beings prone to turn away from God?

Dr. Samuel Ling

The Bible tells us that all men and women and children know God deep down in their hearts, in their minds, and in their consciences. But Romans 1 tells us that ever since Adam and Eve sinned, that we have turned in the depths of our hearts from worshiping the true God to worshiping idols or anything that's created by God. And so the human heart is practically a factory, a source, the root of all kinds of idols. Well, in North America, in the West, we think of money perhaps as one of the great idols that we worship, but there are more subtle idols such as recreation, and leisure, and a sense of privacy — that I want to be left alone and not to be really well known by my friends — in perhaps non-western cultures as well as western. Perhaps our children and their education, their future, their comfort, might be so important that it's more important than Jesus Christ, and therefore, it is an idol. So, you know, anything that God has given to us, if we place it as more important than the Lord Jesus Christ, can become an idol.

Dr. David Bauer

The Bible indicates that humans are very prone to turn away from the true God, to false gods. This has to do especially with the Bible's doctrine of sin. It doesn't have to do as much with the fact that we are creatures in relation to the great Creator, but rather that we are sinful creatures in relation to God. Paul talks about this, of course, in Romans 1:18-32. Where he indicates that God has actually revealed at least certain things about himself: his transcendence, his godhood, his immortality, and his goodness through what he has made. So, you do have what scholars refer to as "natural revelation." But Paul, in that same chapter, makes it clear that although God has given revelation of himself through what he has made, and therefore, on that basis, we as creatures should be able to recognize God truly, on the basis of looking

around at creation — that, in fact, sin has come into the picture, and sin acts in such a way as to actually blind us, even with regard to the truth of God, as God has revealed it to us in creation. And so, left to ourselves, we will in fact identify as God, or identify as divine qualities, those things that are not true of God at all. In other words, we will create gods of our own imagination as substitutes for the true God. The only way in which human beings can actually find God and know God, truly as far as the Scriptures are concerned, is in so far as God reveals himself to them, as God takes the initiative in revealing himself. And so, the Bible teaches that the only way that human beings can know God truly is — to use a theological expression — by “special revelation.” His dealings with his people, Israel, beginning with Abraham on, of course, to culmination in Jesus Christ, and especially as God has revealed himself in Christ.

Question 5:

Do people of other religions actually worship the same God that Christians worship?

It's obvious that countless people around the world reject Christ and his teachings about God, and instead embrace other religions. But how far does their rejection really go? Some Christians say that many different religions throughout the world actually worship the true God of Scripture. It's just that they do it under different names and in different ways. But is this really true? Do people of other religions actually worship the same God that Christians worship?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

One of the key areas that we wrestle with today is a world of religious pluralism. And we are faced on every hand with people that try to say that our Christian view of God is very similar to other, particularly monotheistic, conceptions. Islam is often the one that comes to the forefront of discussion. We must be very clear as Christians that who we say God is, is not the same as what Islam means by when they speak of Allah and how they understand who God is. It's important to realize that Islam post-dates Christianity. Islam is that which cannot exist apart from, we like to say, the borrowed capital of Christianity. It builds off of the fact that Muhammad thinks that God has revealed himself to Old Testament prophets, to Jesus as a prophet, and then himself as the last and final prophet. And Islam, in their presentation of God, has certain similarities to Christianity: one god, one creator, one lord, a judge, the one who rules over history. But beyond that, it denies the doctrine of the Trinity, it denies — tied to the doctrine of the Trinity — the deity of Christ, the deity of the Holy Spirit, in being Unitarian and not Trinitarian. The personal emphasis, that God is personal — the tri-personal — is lost. And so, in Islam, there is a strong emphasis on what we call the “Creator-creature distinction.” He is transcendent, distinct, separate from this world, but almost deistic, so separate that he is almost not involved in this world; he doesn't enter into covenant relationship; there's no notion of that in Islam; there's no notion of God who makes promises — the promise maker, the promise keeper. And I think it's tied back to the fact that they deny the doctrine of the Trinity; they deny the great

truths of the Old and New Testament. So, to say that Islam has a similar view of God — as popular as that is in our day — is just inaccurate from a Christian viewpoint, and indeed from a Muslim viewpoint as well. And it's important to show the differences. It's important to show that the Christian view of God is utterly unique, that there is only one God, one Lord, one Savior. And the Muslim view is — as much as it borrows from Christianity — is a distortion of it. And it needs to be seen as such, and the Muslim people need to hear the good news of who the true and living God is.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

When you think about the nature of Christianity in comparison to a great religion such as Islam, one of the questions that people often ask is whether or not Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Or people might want to ask, "Does Islam contradict the teachings of the Bible about God?" Well, that's a very complicated subject to deal with historically, of course, since I think it can be proven that Mohammed was greatly influenced both by Judaism and Christianity. However, the vision of God that one finds in Islam, is decidedly different than the vision of God that one has in Christian faith. For instance, we believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Well, for the Muslim that is absolute blasphemy. Almighty Allah, who is utterly transcendent and beyond all things, not only could not manifest himself in the world through an incarnation, but he would not deign to do so. It would be beneath his dignity. And therefore that is a very different understanding of not only the nature of God's relationship to creation, but it is also a statement about how Islam understands the character of God's love for creation. Christianity, on the other hand, believes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" — the logos who was God and was with God, as the first chapter of the Gospel of John says, to the world for salvation. Therefore, yes, there's a great contradiction in that sense.

Now, the incarnation of Jesus Christ also means that we have a different understanding about the essence of God. Christians say God is three persons — one God, three persons — a great mystery, not a mathematical problem, a mystery to be adored, to be contemplated, and to be worshipped. That is who God is. But for Islam, you don't have a view of God as three persons. You have Allah: one mind, one will, one sovereign power at work. Whereas in the doctrine of the Trinity, we're able to say, "God is a fellowship of love." The Father, the Son, the Spirit eternally love one another. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit eternally honor one another. That changes the whole context of our discussion about who God is and what God is like. And in the final analysis, we could say this: Islam also, since it doesn't begin with the essence of God as love, has no possible way of talking about why God would love the world. So Islam has an almighty creator and a sovereign lord over the affairs of man, but there is no loving Father. There is no God who gives himself for the sake of his broken creation. And those are two very different visions of God.

Question 6:**What are some of the common ways the doctrine of the Trinity has been misunderstood?**

Our theology about God doesn't have to be perfect in order for us to be Christians. We might even go so far as to say that all true believers have at least some mistaken beliefs about God. But when those mistaken beliefs touch on the heart of God's proclamation about himself, they can be sufficient to place those beliefs outside the bounds of Christianity. One doctrine that has often been the center of controversy is the Trinity. In general, Christians are quick to say that we believe in the Trinity. But we often disagree when it comes to defining and explaining it. And non-Christians frequently misunderstand this doctrine, too. So, what mistakes do we tend to make? What are some of the common ways the doctrine of the Trinity has been misunderstood?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Christians have always believed that one God has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There are two ways to get that wrong. One is to think that God is so "one" that we don't have distinct persons anymore, which is called "modalism." Another way to get that wrong is to so emphasize the distinction of the persons that you end up really with three gods. And Christians believe neither in Tritheism or modalism. Christians believe this one God has eternally existed in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Dr. Keith Johnson

Christians are sometimes accused of worshiping three gods. Muslims frequently raise this objection. It's important to recognize that this criticism arises from a misunderstanding of what Christians actually believe. The Bible doesn't teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three gods. On the contrary, the Scriptures clearly teach that there is one God and that this one God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the first Christians were Jews who inherited from the Old Testament a conviction that God is one. This conviction is clearly expressed in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." How then should we think about Father, Son and Holy Spirit? As these early Christians read their Bibles, they recognized that they needed to provide account for several kinds of data they found in Scripture. First, there are some Scriptures that clearly affirm that God is one, like Deuteronomy 6:4. Second, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each God. One example would be John 1:1 that affirms that the Son is God. Third, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are in some way distinct. The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. John 1:1 affirms this distinction when it says that "the Word was with God." Finally, there are Scriptures that teach that Father, Son and Holy Spirit share one nature and act with one will. In John 10:30, Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." Thus, Christian doctrine of the Trinity attempts to account for these Scriptures by affirming that one God — eternally exists in a unity of being — is three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Central to the doctrine of the Trinity is the distinction between person and

essence. God is one with respect to essence and three with respect to person. In fact we might say that with God, there is one “what” and three “whos”. If Christians said that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three essences, they would be worshiping three gods. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity however, affirms that God has one essence or nature. How can one God eternally exist in a unity of being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit? Ultimately, this is a mystery. Christians, however, do not worship three gods.

Question 7:

Does the Father’s authority mean that he forces his will on the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Because the doctrine of the Trinity is mysterious, it sometimes causes unbelievers, and even some Christians, to be confused about how the persons of the Trinity relate to each other. For instance, it’s clear in many parts of Scripture that the Father has authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit. Does this mean that sometimes there have been disagreements among the persons of the Trinity? And does the Father’s authority mean that he forces his will on the Son and the Holy Spirit?

Dr. Mark Strauss

We sometimes talk about the Father’s authority over the Son and whether he always gets his way in terms of that authority. I think when we try to impose the idea of human authority on the trinity it just doesn’t work. Because simply, the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, never disagree with each other. They are all in perfect unity. So the idea that one is telling the other what to do just doesn’t make sense.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

We understand that in groups there are differences of opinion at the human level, and, on occasion, like in the military or in an important decision making situation, somebody has to be the final authority. That’s usually the way it works, and so we are tempted to think that’s the way it is with God. And here’s Jesus in the Garden saying, “Not my will but yours be done Father.” So, it might look as though there is a disagreement of wills within the Trinity. But it’s so helpful to understand that the difference in relative authority between the Father and the Son is not the way it was and is in eternity, but that this differential of authority and deference toward the authority of the Father in the case of Gethsemane is a function of Christ’s assumption of our humanity. When he says, “Not my will but thine be done,” he is surrendering his human, fearful, relatively weak, relatively less informed will to that of the Father. But when we think of the eternal Trinity, of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the only way there would ever... There couldn’t be a difference of opinion because each is infinite and infinitely equal in love and intelligence and motivation. There is no conflict of wills. How could there be? There is no compromise of the ultimate perfection of each one. They are in absolute harmony as, indeed, I think even Jesus was at that level where he says, my food, the thing that sustains me, is to do the will of the Father —

not as an alien will to which I submit, but something that expresses the deepest desires of my heart as well. And so in the dynamics of mutual perfection and love and glory, there is no need for a hierarchy of decision-making, because there is no gradation of competency to make decisions. It's a beautiful mutuality of three persons of absolute perfection.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

Well often when people discuss the nature of the Trinity and the nature of the relationships that exist between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we often will point to Jesus' statements that he came to do the will of the Father and that the Father is the Father and he is the Son, and he is the Son from the Father. And, therefore, we often tend to think about the relationships of God within the Godhead — amongst the persons of the Trinity — as though we're talking about some sort of power hierarchy. I think that's fundamentally the wrong way for us to think about the nature of the Trinity. God the Father and God the Son apparently, according to Jesus' prayer in John 17, shared a glory together. Jesus calls upon the Father to say, "Father, I want you to glorify me now as I have glorified you." There is some sort of mutuality that exists between the persons of the Godhead. Now, having said that, the Father is still, as the ancient theologians of the church said, the fountainhead of all divinity. And therefore the Father's priority and precedence is significant. Paul says about Jesus, that at the end of all things, the Son will present all the kingdoms of the earth to his Father, that the Son came to make us children of the Father. But the Father came to bear, sent his Son to exalt the name of his Son, and give him a name, which is above every name. Even when you think about the Holy Spirit, it's telling to me that Jesus would say to his disciples, "If you sin against the Father it can be forgiven. If you sin against the Son it can be forgiven. But if you sin against the Holy Spirit, it cannot be forgiven." So there is some sort of true and deep mutuality, which does not do away with the distinctions or the notion of the Father's authority. But we could say it, perhaps finally, wrap it up in this sense: The Father's authority is always an authority of love. The Father's authority is an authority that loves the Son, desires the Son to be glorified, just as the Son then desires the Father to be glorified. And finally, if they share a heart of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the idea that there would be a disagreement of wills between the Father, Son, and Spirit becomes kind of comical in one sense because if the Son eternally and the Spirit eternally long to do the will of the Father, and the Father eternally longs to glorify and honor the Son and the Spirit, then essentially, in the life of God there is unanimity of will, a unanimity of love, because a unanimity of being in this fellowship of the Trinity.

Question 8:

In what ways is God similar to and different from our earthly, human fathers?

In addition to having implications for our doctrine of the Trinity, God's fatherhood also has important things to teach us about our relationship with God. The Bible teaches that God is the Father of believers in ways that are similar to earthly

fathers. But our concepts of human fatherhood have changed throughout history, and we all have very different experiences of earthly fathers. So, in what ways is God similar to and different from our earthly, human fathers?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

And it is important that we understand what our own culture thinks about what a father is so that we don't necessarily confuse it with what the biblical notion of God as Father is. In modern western culture, for example, a father, that image is usually one of personal intimacy, and maybe the idea of a papa that one might climb up on his lap. In other cultures, the emphasis of what a father is is different. In ancient near eastern culture, such as the time of the Bible and the first century Christianity, the idea of fatherhood was primarily one of protection and provision and one of identity. One's own identity was found by what one's father did at the basic level of occupation, but also one's honor in society, one's role and status in society, was a function of one's own family relationships headed by the father. And so, for Jesus to emphasize — and you see the rest of the New Testament unpack this as well — that God is our Father is language, yes, of “familiality,” that God — we are part of his family, his children — and that God does love us intimately, that is true, but more weighty and more central to the idea of God as Father is that our identity, our very nature, our understanding of who we are as people is now wrapped up in God as revealed through Christ Jesus. Our identity is one of God's. Our nature even is one that comes from God, not from whatever our past is, so that the Corinthian prostitute and the godly Jewish rabbi are now in Christ as one identity because they are called into this one God, and by this one God, who is now called our Father.

Question 9:

What are some practical applications that human fathers can draw from God's fatherhood?

In the Scriptures, God's identity as Father is often raised as a model for what human fathers should be and do. What are some practical applications that human fathers can draw from God's fatherhood?

Dr. Robert Lister

I take it that God's fatherhood has a special responsibility as well as privileges that go with that for human fathers. I take it that because of the eternal fatherhood of God, and the eternal sonship of Jesus that the pattern of influence is from the top down, rather than from the bottom up. In other words, human fatherhood is to mirror and be judged by the standard of God's fatherhood and not the other way around. Which means that those who are, or would be at some point in the future, human fathers, have a remarkable responsibility to bear that name by analogy, and with imperfection to be sure, in a way that their children can look at their daddy's fatherhood and say of God's fatherhood, when they're able to connect the dots in Scripture, that it's good news for God to be a father to me because my dad, however imperfect he was, he loved me, he cared for me, he sacrificed for me, he gave himself for me, he served me

with his, not with perfection but with his all, and can say that that is an indication of the goodness of God's fatherhood. So, I take it that those of us who are fathers have the capacity to wreck for our children the name "father" and raise obstacles to their coming to love God's fatherhood, and thereby to love the gospel. Or, by God's grace, have the capacity to put a connection into the fabric of their own relationships — these most close family relationships — whereby they will one day say, "That's good news. I identify with that. God is a father to me." And that is a part of the gospel.

Question 10:

How can we encourage Christians that have had poor fathers to view God's fatherhood in a positive light?

There are many valuable insights human fathers can learn about their roles by observing God's character and actions as Father. But the sad truth is that no human father can ever be perfect like God is, and some of them are actually terribly unloving and even abusive. Not surprisingly, this sometimes causes their children to recoil from the idea that God is the Father of believers. So, how can the church deal with this? How can we encourage Christians that have had poor fathers to view God's fatherhood in a positive light?

Dr. Peter Walker

I think the idea that God is our Father is one of the most powerful things in pastoral work. When I was in parish ministry, people would come through my door, and I'd almost think, here goes yet another person, someone who's going to come and they're going to say, "I've got a problem understanding how God is my Father." And I can see it in so many people. The New Testament is full of this rich idea of God as Father. Ephesians 3 talks about God being the Father from whom every family is named. And in John 14, there's one of the most important prayers I think of the New Testament, where someone says to Jesus, "Show us the Father." I think that's something which we can echo in our own hearts — "Show us the Father." That's what we need to see, each one of us. And the glorious message of the New Testament is precisely that God is this gracious warm-hearted Father. And I think many people find that difficult because they come from family backgrounds, perhaps, where they have a distorted view of Fatherhood. It's authoritarian; it's repressive in some kind of way, perhaps even abusive. And that's really a very difficult thing for people to come to terms with. In the contrast with that, the New Testament gives us this great view of God as Father, and if people can walk into that, and God can reveal his Fatherhood to them then that's a way to pastoral wholeness, personal wholeness, and to walking in freedom of life.

Dr. Rebecca Luman

The aspects of God's Fatherhood that we can and should emphasize, beyond fatherhood as power and authority, is fatherhood as unconditional love, fatherhood as active protection, fatherhood as vigilant provision. And these have wonderful teaching aspects for how fathers should be in their families. But I think a caution we

need to observe is that we should be careful not to project normal fatherhood back onto the fatherhood of God. But instead, let the fatherhood of people, our human fatherhood, be defined by the fatherhood of God. I say this because many people throughout history, Martin Luther for one, were very much afraid of God, because they pictured him in terms of their earthly father and, therefore, thought him rigid, harsh, abusive. And today, and of course just obviously we ought to think of the fatherhood of God as defined by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. And as we look back from Jesus into the fatherhood of God we have a fatherhood that's tender and protective as well as strong and defensive. And so, many women I talk to, women students who have been abused — a surprising number of women who come here for training for ministry have been abused, and therefore stand back somewhat of the idea of the fatherhood of God but as we talk of who Jesus was, and Jesus shows us who the Father is, then that aspect of fatherhood redeems a destructive thought or a destructive concept of the fatherhood of God.

Dr. David Bauer

The issue of the relationship between God as Father and human fathers is very important in our culture, especially because we of course so often experience in the brokenness of — especially modern American families — father models who are problematic. And many people, as a matter of fact, will actually say that, “I don't like to talk about God as Father or think about God as Father because my own relationship with my father was so hurtful, so damaging, and that will actually bring in unhealthy sorts of images or constructions of how I think about God.” It seems to me, though, that we have to consider that the Bible, of course, acknowledges the fallenness of the human family and of human relationships and acknowledges all of that. The way in which the Bible handles this is quite the opposite. It is not a matter of “God as Father” meaning that I take my relationship with my own father, as broken and as hurtful and unhealthy as it might have been, and somehow project that back upon God. But rather, it's the other way around. And that is that God as Father becomes a paradigm, a model, for how we ought to order our relationships, how we ought to order our families, and the like. And actually, I do believe that pastorally, people can experience healing from the damage that they've experienced in broken relationships with their own fathers as they actually live into the biblical understanding of God as Father and God being our Father.

Question 11:

What kinds of implications does God's fatherhood have for pastoral ministry?

God's role as Father can also have important implications for the ways many different kinds of leaders treat those under their authority. This should be particularly true in the church, which the Bible calls God's family. In fact, in some theological traditions, pastors are actually referred to by the title “Father.” What kinds of implications does God's fatherhood have for pastoral ministry?

Dr. Dennis Johnson

I think for pastors it's crucial to see that as Scripture speaks of God as Father to his children in particular — not uniquely to Christ the eternal Son, but to us as children by adoption through his grace in Christ — the emphasis is on the Father's compassion, on the Father's loving discipline, and on the Father's wisdom. In compassion, I think of Psalm 103, which speaks of the fact that as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust. Not every father is always compassionate when we think of human fathers, but that is the model that, as human fathers, we are to look to, to understand our children and to be patient with them in their weakness. And certainly if we are thinking about pastors reflecting in some respect the fatherly care of God the Father for his children in the church, pastors need to come to members of the congregation with a gentle compassion, with an empathy, with an understanding of their weakness. Now, that doesn't mean that pastors are just supposed to hold hands and make everybody feel good, because another crucial dimension of a father's care — that is, when a father's caring for his children as the Father, God the Father, cares for us — is loving discipline. I think of Hebrews 12, for example, where the writer to the Hebrews, quoting from Proverbs 3, calls us to be patient in enduring the discipline of the Lord and then really unpacks that analogy, talks about the way that our human fathers disciplined us by their best lights, didn't always know fully how to do it, but they did their best, for a time. But our heavenly Father always is disciplining us for our good, and that, though discipline in the present may be painful, afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

So again, thinking about pastor's roles — surrogates for the Father — in caring for the members of the congregation, compassion absolutely, but not a compassion that leaves people where they are. The Father loves us too much to leave us in our childish selfishness. It's a discipline. It's a calling of us to live out the life of faith and to grow in our faith. And, of course, the Bible also speaks of fathers as having wisdom. Proverbs, of course, constantly is calling the son to listen to the wisdom of the father. And pastors need a lot of wisdom to help God's people to understand how to apply the word in the particular issues that we face in the nitty-gritty of everyday life. And so, we should be seeking wisdom and seeking to help God's people grow in wisdom and knowing how to apply the principles of the Word to the particulars of their own situation, whether it's suffering, or whether it's a decision about the future, or whether it's dealing with sin in their lives. They need wisdom. And the Father provides that wisdom in the Word and then brings that wisdom, we pray, through us as pastors to God's people.

Question 12:

How can we be sure that God's purposes for us will actually be fulfilled?

God's fatherly care and provision are sources of tremendous confidence for Christians. They remind us that God loves us, and always has our best interests at

heart. But how can we be sure that God's good purposes for us will actually be fulfilled?

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

I think that the Christian's confidence in God is enormously helped by understanding what the Bible teaches about God's all-powerfulness and his unchangeability. There are many today who say that they want a deity that faces the same kinds of risks and possibilities that we face as human beings. Because we as human beings face things coming around the corner that we don't know are coming, and aren't prepared for, and are caught surprised by, and they want a deity who's caught by surprise just like we are, and at risk just like we are, and faced with possibilities just like we are, or else how can that God really help us? Well, I think that that thinking is exactly upside-down. If that's the kind of deity that exists — a God who doesn't know what's coming, a God whose mind changes all the time, his strategies change all the time, and that he doesn't have the power within himself, or he's not willing to exercise the power that does reside within himself in order to address a particular situation — well then, that deity is not going to be very helpful when I come into the crises of my life. And I think the Christian doctrine of the all-powerfulness of God and the unchangeableness of God tells me two things. One, that there is never a circumstance in my life to which God is not only equal but superior. That is there is no problem that I can face that is larger than the truth of my God, there is no mountain that is not a molehill in comparison with the power of my God, and that I can expect the way that God will address that situation will not change from day to day. I can depend upon him to act in a certain way.

Dr. Samuel Ling

God wants his children to completely trust in him as an all-powerful God, and yet a God who never changes. The Bible clearly teaches us that God doesn't change in his character. He never changes in his holiness and justice. God never changes in his promises that he has made to us in the Bible, in the relationship he has established with us, called a "covenant." God never changes his person. Jesus Christ never changes. And his standards and expectations for us never change. This means that when we pray, and we put our trust in God and commit a certain thing in our lives to God, then we can know that God doesn't change. Now, we change; we are prone to leave the Lord that we love and go away and commit some sin. But God never changes. And so the relationship between God and his children, the relationship between you and Jesus Christ, is a relationship between an unchanging God and human beings who are fleeting and change and wander all the time. And yet, God is powerful enough to preserve this relationship that he has established between him and you. His unchanging grace and justice provided for us by Lord Jesus Christ guarantees that your relationship with Jesus Christ is secure and yet never compromises his standards.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know the Lord himself tells us that our confidence in his character is rooted in the fact that he doesn't change. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. There is

no shadow of turning in him — as he says. And why is that so important? Today we can trust that he is just and merciful and righteous and gracious. What if tomorrow we were to understand that he is vengeful and unforgiving? We'll this would not be the God we know in the Bible. It's so important that we know that he doesn't change. If he did change, if he was subject to change, he wouldn't be God. Why is it so important that we understand that he is omnipotent? Well first of all, if God is anything less than omnipotent then he's something less than the full perfection that we know him to be. For as God is the one who is powerful, he is not only powerful, he is all-powerful. Now, that is also the root of our assurance, because how do we know that he actually accomplishes his purposes? The Bible gives us all kinds of promises — a new heaven and a new earth, a perfect consummation to history, the creation of a people saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, kept to the power of God to the end. We are told about promises in eternity. It takes an omnipotent God to be able to fulfill those promises. And of this we are sure: he is able. You know, the best testimony in the Bible sometimes comes from people who are surprised when they discover just who the real God is. In Daniel 4, the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, learns about the omnipotence of God. And when he finds out who really is God he says, "No one can stay his hand. He is the one true omnipotent God."

Question 13:

How can an unchangeable God change his mind?

God's "unchangeableness" or "immutability" should be a great source of confidence for all believers. But sometimes the Scriptures say that God regretted what he had done. Sometimes they even say that he changed his mind. How can both of these teachings be true? How can an unchangeable God change his mind?

Dr. John Frame

God rules the earth by an eternal decree that he has devised before the creation, going back into eternity past, timelessly, and so everything that happens is something that God has planned for eternity. But the other side of that truth is that God enters into history. He enters into transactions with people. He talks with people. He acts in history. And most important for us, he redeems human beings from sin by sending his Son to die on the cross. So, God, as he enters into history, he takes a changing role in history. He does one thing on Monday; he does another thing on Tuesday. He is angry with somebody on Monday, pleased with that person on Tuesday. And as we look at that, it certainly looks like change. Our words fail us sometimes in knowing what to say, but we look at that and we say, yes, God has shown mercy. God has restrained his wrath. God has told us that we were under judgment and yet he has brought repentance on us, and so now he's going to be merciful to us. We can get into difficulties in language and knowing how to describe that. It's certainly tempting to say that God changes at those points, but that would mislead people perhaps into forgetting about the eternal decree which never changes. So as long as you know what the facts are, you can speak of this in various ways. But God's eternal decree

never changes. His relationships to human beings in history do change, but those changes are eternally preordained.

Question 14:

What is the ultimate goal of humanity's redemption?

Because God is both omnipotent and immutable, the redemption he has promised us will certainly come to pass. But as wonderful as our redemption is, is it the ultimate goal of human history? Or is it part of something even bigger? What is the ultimate goal of humanity's redemption?

Dr. Thomas Nettles

We learn that God is working in his triune being for the salvation of sinners, but then we learn also in Scripture that he has done this in such a way as to display his glory. So I think that the triune God, because of the working for our redemption in eternity, will receive glory. God has done this for his glory, to manifest not only his justice and his righteousness and the immutability and perfect holiness of his law, but to show that he is wise. And he can maintain all of those attributes about himself, and yet be merciful and be forgiving and justify sinners. The prophet asked, "Who is a pardoning God like thee and who has grace like this?" So it is for the glory of God. It is for the salvation of sinners, but the ultimate result of this and the intended result of it is that God's glory might be manifest in ever increasing measures throughout all eternity.

Question 15:

What are the main Evangelical interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis chapter 1?

One very important way God is glorified is through his works of creation. The Bible makes it clear that God created all things. But Evangelical Christians sometimes interpret the creation accounts in different ways, especially when it comes to things like the days of creation. Which types of interpretations are acceptable? And what are the main Evangelical interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis chapter 1?

Dr. Mark Strauss

There are various different interpretations of the days of creation in Genesis 1. I think there are basically three different views. One view would see the days as very short periods. We could say 24-hour days. Of course, the sun and the moon weren't created until the fourth day, so it's hard to refer to 24-hour days, but days in what people would say is the natural, normal sense of today — so six or seven periods in that sense. The second perspective could be called a "day-age theory" or a "day-age view," in the sense that the days were long periods or geological ages, and that God was gradually creating through natural processes that took billions of years —

certainly millions, probably billions of years. The third view is that, really, Genesis 1 is a poetic description of creation and that the days are meant to symbolize, in some sense, the nature or manner in which God created, in which he first of all formed things and then he filled those things he had formed with his creation. So, those are the three main interpretations of the days of Genesis 1.

Dr. David Bauer

On the one hand, of course, you have evangelicals who want to adopt a literal — one might say — a literal reading of the seven days. So, they talk about seven literal days and the like. Sometimes this is even understood as seven literal 24-hour days and this kind of thing. The alternative is obvious, and that is a figurative way of talking, and that the writer of Genesis did not intend to say that the world was created in seven days, or maybe not even in the order — if one talks about days in terms of epochs or ages — in the order in which they are presented. Many evangelicals have problems with the seven literal days of creation in Genesis 1 for two or three reasons. For one thing, actually, you do not have just one creation account at the beginning of Genesis, but two, as I think almost everyone would recognize. The first creation account there in Genesis 1, extending into the very beginning of chapter 2, and then the second account of creation from about 2:4, 2:5 to the end of chapter 3. And there are some differences, many evangelicals would say, between them, as they read the passage, Genesis 1-3, itself. For example, although Genesis 1:1 and following up through the beginning of chapter 2, talks about seven days of creation, the second account there talks about one day of creation on the day when Lord God made the heavens and the earth. So, actually, you don't have just in Genesis talk of seven days of creation, you also have an account of creation, which takes place on one day. Of course, there are differences in order as well between the two accounts. In the first account of creation, humans are created after the animals; whereas, in the second account of creation, humans are created before the animals, this kind of thing.

Beyond that, in Genesis 1, there seems to be a kind of symmetry. So that, in other words, the first three days actually correspond to the second set of three days, with the seventh day of creation being, of course, at the end. I might say, incidentally, in Jewish thought — and you find this actually suggested, alluded to implicitly and assumed in Hebrews 4 — the seventh day was not considered to have ended at all. The seventh day of creation was, by the Jews, and apparently the Jewish Christians also, was considered to extend as long as creation itself understood to be coterminous with creation itself. That's why Hebrews 4 can talk about entering God's rest while the promise of entering his rest remains and while there remains a Sabbath rest — that God's rest of the seventh day continues as long as creation does. So, certainly, you do not have this even in Jewish thinking, the seventh day being a closed day of creation.

Question 16:**How can people with the same basic commitments to the authority and infallibility of Scripture read Genesis chapter 1 in such different ways?**

This disagreement over the days of creation can be confusing not just because the views are so different, but also for a more fundamental reason. How can people with the same basic commitments to the authority and infallibility of Scripture read Genesis 1 in such different ways?

Dr. John Oswalt

Certainly the issue of the days of creation in Genesis 1 is a hot one that has been the source of a lot of arguments. I think one of the issues is what kind of literature is this? Is this literature which is designed to give sensuous fact — facts relating to the senses — or is it literature designed to teach a spiritual fact? Now, we shouldn't drive a wedge between those two. God's the creator of this world and they should fit together. But if we read Genesis 1 as a science text that will lead us to a different interpretation than if we read it as a discussion of the meaning and nature of creation. So, typically, the Protestant Church has tended to read it as a science text, and this has gotten us into a lot of difficulties because if you take Bishop Ussher's dating from the seventeen hundreds, you simply add up the figures of the Bible, and we know that the world was created on October 12th, 4004 BC. Well, that has run us into a lot of difficulties with people who have indeed attempted to read the text of nature from a scientific point of view. And the history of the Church on these kinds of issues has not been very encouraging. We have said the world is flat. Anybody who says it's round doesn't believe the Bible, because the Bible says the winds come from the four corners of the earth. Well, you and I will say, oh, that's poetry. Yes, but those people, five and six hundred years ago, didn't read it as poetry. They read it as science. In the same way, clearly, the sun revolves around the earth. Joshua doesn't say that the earth stood still, it says the sun stood still. Again, we can say, oh, yes, that's simply looking at the data from our perspective; it looks as though the sun is moving but we have other reasons to say no.

Well, I think the same is true with regards to Genesis 1. Obviously, you have the possibility that it is literal, twenty-four hour days, seven of them, that's that. But you also have the possibility that God is trying to make a larger point. And I want to be very careful here. There are those who would say, "Oh well, it's a theological statement; therefore, none of this factual basis really matters. It's just a parable like Jesus told parables." I think there's a problem with that. The problem being that throughout the Old Testament, revelation comes to us in space and time. And so, our default position ought to be that this material is indeed based in actual historic fact. And so I think the reference to the seven days is God's way of saying creation took place in time, not in "Never-never-land" as the myths would say. The myths would say, creation is continually occurring in the invisible realm, and we've got to try to plug our world into that. The Bible is saying, not at all. Creation occurred in time. I think the same thing is going on then in Genesis 2 with the attempt to locate Eden. It took place in our space. So, you have the position that the information is literal. You

have the opposing position that it is merely a parable teaching theological truth. In between those two is, yes, God did create this world in time and space, he created it in that order, moving from the creation of heaven and earth to the creation of humanity. And so you have, I think, those three approaches — it's literal; it has no basis in fact whatsoever; and between those, it is a poetic account of historic activity.

Question 17:

What practical implications can we draw from the fact that the creation reflects God's goodness?

As much as Christians might disagree about the meaning of the word “day” in Genesis 1, we should all be in full agreement that the creation God made is good. On each of the first five days of creation, God looked at what he had made and saw that it was good. And on the sixth day he looked at everything he had made and concluded that it was very good. After all, how could a perfectly good God create anything other than a good universe? But while all Christians should be able to affirm the basic fact of creation's goodness, it's not always clear to us how we should respond to that fact. So, what practical implications can we draw from the fact that the creation reflects God's goodness?

Dr. Simon Vibert

There are very practical implications from our belief that the creation reflects God's goodness. I mean, not least in the fact that God is to be relied upon and trusted. God brings about the seasons, the rain, the refreshment of the earth. And I think also it means that we can be confident that God is to be trusted, and so, when we go into all the world to tell them about Jesus Christ, then we can know that actually God is as good as his Word. He upholds his Word, and we can indeed, with confidence, tell them Jesus will save those who believe in him. And also, we should have a degree of respect and care for God's world because God made it, and God expects us to treat it well. We should care about the environment. We should celebrate the use of the world and all its resources in such a way that glorify God, so that people can see that there is a good God behind it and that the Maker continues to look after his creation.

Dr. K Erik Thoennes

One of the most important things Christians believe about creation is that it's created by God who's wise and good and declared creation very good. And even though we recognize a fallenness to creation — that everything's been distorted and perverted because of human rebellion against the Creator — we still, nevertheless, recognize an enduring, very goodness in creation that should have a pervasive effect on how we view everything in life, including eating and drinking and the pleasures of the world that God has given us. So, we have a positive view of the world around us that gives us a reason to study the liberal arts and to enjoy a good cup of coffee.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

As we look at the creation account, what's staggering, that we notice before sin enters the world, is this constant affirmation that after each day it is pronounced as "good". After the sixth day it is pronounced as "very good," so that we can say that the entire created order reflects nothing less than God's goodness and his creation and who he is in that way. Those have very practical implications for us. The doctrine of creation, and particularly the affirmation that it's good, reminds us that this world that he has made is that which we should enjoy, that which we shouldn't treat as sort of second class. Sometimes, in the history of the church, unfortunately as it tied itself to some Greek thought, particularly some Platonic thought often emphasized the spiritual realm as being higher or better than the physical realm. This showed up in early church heresies — Gnosticism, Docetism — that was ultimately a Christological heresy that affirmed that Christ only appeared to be a man because you couldn't have God the Son taking upon a human nature, human flesh, because it was inferior.

You go back to the doctrine of creation. God in making it good — reflecting his goodness — means that this whole world material, as well as spiritual, is that which God has made; it is that which reflects who he is. Yes, sin has distorted it; it's distorted both the physical and the spiritual. It will be redeemed. And, in fact, our redemption is not just a spiritual redemption; it is a physical redemption as well, so that we will have glorified bodies, patterned after Christ. We will have a new heavens and a new earth. Not a new heavens and new earth that means that we'll be up on clouds in terms of that kind of spiritual notion of heaven but a whole new universe that reflects the original purpose of creation as being good, reflecting God's purposes and plan, so that all of this means that we are to enjoy this world. We are to care for this world. We are to be stewards of it, even in spite of the Fall. And we look forward to the future when Christ comes again and we live in a new heaven, new earth, new creation, as the Scripture speaks of it, and enjoy all of its resources, I'm convinced, carry out a science, do so for God's glory, work — not something that is certainly affected by the Fall, but part of the original world. So that we will do all of that as God originally made us for his glory. All of that is some of the practical implications of viewing creation as created by God as good.

Question 18:

How should Christians feel about the fact that God has ultimate authority over everything?

One of the implications of the fact that God created the universe is that he has continuing authority over it. In fact, he has unlimited and final authority over everything he has made — over everything that exists. Admittedly, this can be an unsettling thought because so many terrible things happen in the world. Should God's authority and power frighten us? Should they comfort us? Should they anger us? And how should Christians feel about the fact that God has ultimate authority over everything?

Dr. Dennis Johnson

I think when some people hear that the Bible teaches that God has ultimate authority over everything that happens in the world, they feel maybe threatened by that; they feel resentful. But Christians, really when we think about who God is, should feel incredibly thankful. It means that our lives are in the hands of an all-wise, all-mighty, all-loving Father who has given his own Son for us on the cross. And that is such incredible, incredible comfort in times of suffering in particular, in times of when we wonder what is happening in our lives. Consider the alternatives. What if what happens in our lives, and everything that happens with history, were not in the control of a personal, just, merciful, loving, wise God? Of course, many people in the world think that it's not in anybody's control — that it's random, chaotic, perhaps driven by impersonal, naturalistic forces. That gives no hope. That gives no reason for comfort. That certainly gives no meaning to suffering. If it were true, we'd have to live with it. But happily it's not true. Or consider the view that history and our own experience, everything that happens is in the hand of an unpredictable tyrant, and we never can guess what he's going to do next or what he expects or what he demands. That would be terrifying. Or even consider if everything were in the control of a deity who was just, but who has no mercy whatsoever, who would deal with us fairly in terms of our behavior, but from whom we could never expect any forgiveness, any kindness, if we failed to hit the mark, if we missed the mark, as we all do. Again, that would be a very bleak prospect. We couldn't complain that we were getting injustice, but at the same time there would be no hope.

But we actually live in the universe that is ruled by a personal, sovereign God who is never unjust, but who is better than just in Christ. He satisfies his justice, his just indictment against us through the death of his own beloved Son and grants to us grace. And we can have assurance that he has control of all the details of our lives, so that when we are going through suffering, intense suffering, and we don't understand the reason for it, we don't despair. We have reason to hope that it is meaningful, that it is part of his good plan to conform us to the image of his Son, as Paul says in Romans 8, no matter what happens, that is the plan that he is working out and will accomplish. And that we can have that assurance that suffering is not only meaningful, but it is ultimately temporary. That the day is coming that God will wipe every tear away from the eyes of those whom he's given to Jesus and who now have entrusted our lives to Jesus by the work of the Holy Spirit. That that day is coming when all the things that confuse us and distress us and cause us such pain will come to a close. And not just in a cessation, but in a crescendo of joy being replaced by the joy of celebrating Christ's victory with him forever.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

I think the Bible is very clear that God is sovereign over all that occurs. That he is the Lord. The Bible says that God moves the king's heart in whichever way he wishes. I think at the end of the day virtually all Christians agree that there's a mystery there. God is sovereign over all that occurs, but human evil is real; it is not a charade. Human beings are not puppets at the end of the day. So we're not minimizing human evil and saying that God is sovereign, because people find it very disturbing that God

rules over all things, and then to think of the horrific things that occur in life. But we rely on the Scriptures themselves for our understanding of reality, and the Scriptures tell us the Judge of all the earth always does right, that God does not sin; that God does not tempt people to sin. So those are some false paths that we need to watch out for when we speak of God being sovereign over all things. That doesn't mean that God tempts us to sin. That doesn't mean that God is the author of evil. That doesn't mean that God himself is evil in any way.

If someone were to say, well, I don't fully comprehend it. My response would be, well, I don't think anyone fully comprehends how all of these things can be so. I would actually argue that God being sovereign over all things is actually a great comfort. The world is not spinning out of his control. Even if we don't understand all things that are happening, if you belong to Jesus Christ, God is your Father and he loves you. And he loves you and he's protecting you no matter what you're going through. And some things we go through in this life are incredibly painful. But no matter what you're going through, he is in control. He has even — can you accept this at this point in your life — for your good, for your sanctification. God turns the enemies in our lives; he turns them into our friends, so that we more than conquer through him who loved us. We don't just conquer; it says that we more than conquer through Christ who loved us. So God takes the trials and difficulties, and he uses them to sanctify us, to make us more like Jesus Christ. He brings the things that he brings into our lives so that we will be like Christ. Hebrews 12, he disciplines us as a kind and wise and good Father. I think the fight of faith is often fought at exactly this point. We have to say to ourselves over and over again, God cares for me, and even if I don't understand it, he is bringing this into my life for my good, for my holiness, for my sanctification. He is the king of the universe. The alternative vision, I think, is actually quite discouraging. The things that come into our life, God is up in heaven saying, I wish I could help you but there is nothing I can do. These events that are striking you are beyond my control. We are then at the whim of other human beings and demons and impersonal forces. I don't think that's comforting at all.

Dr. Derek Thomas

As Christians, we acknowledge the lordship of God, the lordship of Christ, the lordship of God the holy Trinity. God is King. He rules over everything. He is the Creator. He predestines. All things happen because he wills them to happen. We acknowledge the sovereignty of God. It underlines for us the distinction between God and the rest of creation, including ourselves. We are not gods. We were created to serve him, to give him glory, to worship him, to obey him, to live as disciples for him. It's what being a Christian means. It's one of the first things we say when we become a Christian; we call Jesus, Lord. We refer to him as *Kurios* in the Greek New Testament which was the word they translated in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It was the word they used to translate the divine name of God. "Jesus is Lord" is the ultimate profession that a Christian makes.

Dr. David Baer

The Old Testament, as the New, resists any inclination to restrict God's rule, his mastery, his sovereignty, to any particular facet or corner of creation. The abiding testimony of the Bible is that God rules over all because he made all and has never finally ceded authority or ownership of his all to anybody or to anything. And so we can say that he is King — to use an ancient political metaphor, very unfamiliar to us in democratic, modern societies but nonetheless we can grapple with it. He is King over all creation and over all people in that he does exercise final rule.

But having said that, we have to reckon with the reality of a broken, rebellious world and broken, rebellious people who resist being subject to any king, any ruler, no matter how benign and well-intentioned and full of blessing that that ruler is. And so people do resist God's kingship all the time and declare themselves not to be subjects of the living Lord. But he still is King, he still is Lord, and, in time, the prophets teach us to expect and to pray, as do the Psalms. The heavens and earth themselves will clap their hands, and the whole earth will be full of his glory, and those who fear the Lord and know him will cover this earth as the waters cover the sea. And so, I rest, we rest, in God's kingship, even as we wait for it to appear in an unquestionable way in his own time.

Our understanding of who God is affects everything we think and believe. God, the creator and sustainer of the universe, is sovereign over everything. And everything he made reflects his goodness. He's the first person of the Trinity, our Father, and his power and provision will never fail us. As limited human beings, we can't know everything there is to know about God. But we can rest in his compassion and grace, knowing that he doesn't change, and that his purposes for us will certainly be fulfilled.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
THREE

JESUS CHRIST



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Three

Jesus Christ

INTRODUCTION

For the past two millennia, billions of people have worshipped, followed and proclaimed the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth. No other figure in history has been as widely admired or had as much impact on society. Artists, musicians and authors have made him the subject of their art. Whole nations and cultures have been built around his teachings. In many parts of the world, even the calendar is counted from the time of his birth.

But as well-known as Jesus is, he is still the subject of intense scrutiny. Scholars of every kind research him. Skeptics try to discredit him. And his followers study him in every way imaginable.

And the fact is that learning about Jesus is important for everyone, because one day we will all have to answer the question “Who is Jesus Christ?” For Christians, the answer should be familiar, because we have been reciting it for centuries in the *Apostles' Creed*.

This is the third lesson in our series *The Apostles' Creed*, and we have entitled it “Jesus Christ.” In this lesson, we will turn our attention to the articles of faith that affirm belief in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. These articles read as follows:

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

While there are many ways to summarize what the creed says about Jesus, we will focus on three themes that have been common focal points throughout the history of theology. First, we will speak of the divinity of Jesus Christ, looking at things like the nature of his divinity, and his relationship to the other members of the Trinity. Second, we will look at his humanity, and discuss the relationship between his divine and human natures. And third, we will talk about his work, not only during his earthly ministry, but also after it. Let's start with the way the divinity of Jesus Christ is addressed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

DIVINITY

When we talk about the divinity of Christ, or even more properly, the deity of Christ — the fact that he is fully God — we are talking about the central claim of the New Testament concerning who Christ is. What we are told is that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The moment we back off of either of those, we no longer have Jesus. The only way we can explain Jesus in terms of his deity is exactly as the Bible declares him. We are told that he is the Son of the living God. This is the most fundamental fact preached by the early church. And what we have, for instance, from the Apostle Paul — what he writes in Colossians — our assurance is that actually he (Jesus) is the great power over all things. In him all things are created. He has all powers under his feet. That can be said only of God. You take that out, we have no gospel, we have no Jesus, and we have no Christianity.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

The *Apostles' Creed* mentions the divinity of Jesus in these words:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.

Christians have always intended words like “Christ,” “Son of God,” and “Lord” to indicate Jesus’ divinity.

For our purposes, we will focus on just two of the terms the *Apostles' Creed* uses to point to Jesus’ divinity. On the one hand, we will look at the fact that Jesus is the Son of God. And on the other hand, we will investigate what it means for Jesus to be Lord. Let’s begin with the meaning of the term “Son of God” that Scripture applies to Jesus.

SON OF GOD

The first thing we should note about the language “Son of God” is that Scripture often uses it to talk about beings that are not divine in any way. For example, the angels are referred to as sons of God in passages like Job 1:6 and 2:1. In some modern versions of the Bible, these verses are translated to say “angels” rather than sons of God. But in the passages from Job, the Hebrew actually says, “*benay haelohim*,” which literally means “sons of God.” And we find similar language in other passages.

The nation of Israel is also called God’s son in verses like Exodus 4:22, and Hosea 11:1. The human kings of Israel were also referred to as God’s sons in places like 2 Samuel 7:14, and Psalm 2:7. Adam, the first human being, is called the son of God in Luke 3:38.

And as all Christians know, in many passages in Scripture God's faithful believers are called his sons. We see this in places like Matthew 5:9, 45, Luke 20:36, and Romans 8:14, 19. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26).

But if the title "son of God" does not in and of itself mean that Jesus is divine, why has the church made such a big deal about it?

When we look at how the New Testament talks about Jesus, it becomes clear that he is God's son in a unique way.

In fact, one of the most emphatic things that we find in the New Testament is that Jesus is the unique Son of God. That he shares in the very essence of who God is. Or another way of putting that is that Jesus is very God of very God. And we are the children of God by relationship, by adoption, but not by essence. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He has always been the Son of God.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

Jesus' unique sonship is especially clear in the Gospel of John. For instance, in 1:1-18, we are told that Jesus is the eternal word of God, meaning that he is both God himself, and the only begotten of the Father. We also see it in John 8:18-23, where Jesus said that as the Father's Son, he had come from above, that he had not originated in this world. And we find it in John 10:30 where Jesus insisted that he and the Father are one.

But perhaps the most obvious place where John made this clear was in John 5:18. Listen to what he wrote there:

[Jesus] was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18).

This passage makes it clear that when Jesus spoke of himself as God's Son, he meant that he was equal with God the Father. For this reason, Christians have rightly understood that when the Bible says that *Jesus* is the Son of God, it means that he is both unique and *divine*.

Jesus' divine sonship is also mentioned in many other New Testament passages. We find it in Romans 1:3-4, and 8:3 where Paul taught that Jesus was God's divine Son even before the incarnation. We see in Hebrews 1:1-3 where we are told that as the Son of God, Jesus created the universe and is the exact representation of the Father's being. In these and many other places, Jesus is identified as God's Son in a special way that indicates his eternal, divine nature.

This emphasis on Jesus as the divine and eternal Son of God is reflected in the doctrine of the Trinity, which states that:

God has three persons, but only one essence.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus is God the Son, one of the three persons of the Trinity. But what is his relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit?

As we have discussed in prior lessons, the ontological perspective on the Trinity focuses on God's being and existence. As the Son of God, Christ is equal in power and glory to the Father and the Holy Spirit. All three of God's persons — including the Son — are infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And each has the same essential divine attributes, such as wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

By contrast, the economic perspective on the Trinity describes how God's persons interact with each other. From this view, each one has different responsibilities, different levels of authority, and different assigned roles. For example, Christ has always been the Father's Son, subordinate to the Father's authority. Listen to what Jesus said in John 6:38, where he described his submission to the Father:

I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me (John 6:38).

And he made a similar claim in John 8:28-29, where we read these words:

Jesus said ... "I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (John 8:28-29).

Throughout the New Testament the Son is subordinate to the Father's authority. There is no conflict between them, because the Son and the Father always agree. But the higher rank belongs to the Father.

In a similar way, within the economy of the Trinity, the Son has authority over the Holy Spirit. For example, listen to Jesus' words in John 15:26:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father ... he will testify about me (John 15:26).

In other passages, such as Romans 8:9 and 1 Peter 1:11, the Holy Spirit is actually called the "Spirit of Christ," again indicating that the Spirit is sent by Christ.

These relationships are summarized in the identification of the Son as the second person of the Trinity. He is the second person of the ontological Trinity because he is generated by the first person, namely the Father, and he breathes out the third person, namely the Holy Spirit. And he is the second person of the economic Trinity because he holds the middle rank. He is subordinate to the Father, but he has authority over the Holy Spirit.

In the early church, the confession that Jesus Christ was fully divine was a critical aspect of the Christian faith. Those who confessed the *Apostles' Creed* at their baptisms were not required to affirm all the finer points of theology with regard to the inner workings of the Trinity. But they were expected to proclaim the deity of Christ without hesitation. Even today, affirming that Jesus is truly and fully God is a hallmark of biblical Christianity.

Now that we have looked at the significance of the term “Son of God,” we are ready to see how the title “Lord” points to Jesus’ divinity.

LORD

When the New Testament calls Jesus Lord, it is translating the Greek word *kurios*. *Kurios* was a rather common word meaning ruler or master, and it was even used as a polite form of address, like the English word “sir.” As such, *kurios* was frequently applied to mere human beings, as in Matthew 10:24, Luke 12:36-47, Ephesians 6:5-9, and many other places.

At the same time, the New Testament also used the word *kurios* as a name for God, as in Matthew 11:25, Luke 1:16, Acts 2:39, and many other passages. Given this range of meaning, why should we think that the use of the word *kurios* in the New Testament implies that Jesus is divine? Why shouldn’t we think that it simply refers to his earthly authority or honor?

The key to Christian use of the word *kurios* is the Old Testament. The Old Testament Scriptures were written in Hebrew. Yet, a couple centuries before Christ was born, the Hebrew text was translated into Greek. This translation is called the Septuagint. When Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek, they used the Greek term *kurios* 6,700 times to translate the sacred name by which God revealed himself to his people: Yahweh. This backdrop is absolutely crucial for understanding the New Testament confession of Jesus’ *kurios*. Although the term *kurios* by itself does not necessarily imply Jesus is divine, the use of this term against its Old Testament backdrop clearly implies Jesus’ divinity in a number of texts.

— Dr. Keith Johnson

One of the most amazing passages in the New Testament is where it talks about “every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” [Philippians 2]. And actually, Paul, at that moment is quoting from Isaiah, where it was a hymn of praise that everyone would confess that Yahweh was the Lord. Now, he’s deliberately taking that Old Testament passage and saying that instead Jesus Christ is the Lord. And at that moment it’s quite clear the New Testament is saying Jesus Christ is not just a master, he is to be identified with the Lord God of Israel.

— Dr. Peter Walker

Listen to what Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, 13:

If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... [F]or, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:9, 13).

In verse 13 of this passage Paul quoted Joel 2:32 in order to prove that everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved. But in this verse from Joel in the Hebrew Old Testament, the name of the Lord was Yahweh, the proper name of God. Put simply, when Paul said that Jesus is Lord, he meant that Jesus is Yahweh, the Lord and God of the Old Testament.

Other New Testament passages that equate Jesus with God in the Old Testament include Matthew 3, Mark 1, Luke 3 and John 1, where Jesus is the Lord from Isaiah 40 whose path John the Baptist has prepared. We see the same dynamic in Hebrews 1:10, where the Lord Jesus is the God that Psalm 102:24-25 credit with creating the world. The list could go on and on.

Now, this is not to say that every time people in the New Testament called Jesus "Lord," they recognized his divinity. Sometimes they simply intended to show him human respect. But when the church formally confesses that Jesus is Lord, as we do in the *Apostles' Creed*, we are affirming the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is God, and that as God he is a full member of the Trinity, with the same divine attributes as the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The divinity of Christ has all kinds of implications for the Christian life. For instance, it means that we should acknowledge and worship Jesus as God in our prayers and songs. It means that we should pray to him, just as we do to the Father and the Spirit. And it means that we can take great comfort in the security of our salvation, knowing that God himself has redeemed us from sin. These and many other practical concerns in the Christian life rest on the belief that Jesus is divine.

With this understanding of the divinity of Jesus in mind, we are ready to turn our attention to the way his humanity is reflected in the *Apostles' Creed*.

HUMANITY

In the last couple centuries, many theologians have readily accepted that Jesus was human, but they have questioned his *divinity*. But in the early centuries of the church, it was at least as common for people to question the *humanity* of Jesus. Influential philosophies of that day made it relatively easy for people to accept that a god could *disguise* himself as a human being. But it was very hard for them to accept the idea that a god could actually *become* a human being. Human beings were physical and emotional beings. In their estimation, God would not compromise his own glory and dignity by taking on a lowly, creaturely, human nature. Sadly, many modern Christians also have trouble believing that God the Son could come to earth and take on full humanity, with all its weaknesses, limitations, and frailties.

To demonstrate that Jesus was a full human being, we will speak of three broad features of his humanity. First, we will talk about his human experiences. Second, we will discuss his human office. And third, we will say a few words about his human nature and its relationship to his divine nature. Let's begin by looking at his human experiences that are listed in the *Apostles' Creed*.

EXPERIENCES

Several of Jesus' experiences prove that he was truly human because only human beings have such experiences. Listen to following assertions from the creed:

**[Jesus] was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.**

These experiences affirm at least four aspects of Jesus' humanity: his generation, his body, his soul, and his resurrection. We'll start by looking at his generation, which included his conception and birth.

Generation

The *Apostles' Creed* speaks of Jesus' generation with these words:

**[He] was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.**

Admittedly, there were some very unusual details related to Jesus' conception and birth. First, he was conceived by the Holy Spirit rather than by a human father. He was also conceived in a way that did not violate his mother's virginity. We will speak of these details at greater length later in this lesson. For now, though, we want to focus on the basic ideas of conception and birth as essentially human experiences.

When the *Apostles' Creed* says that Jesus "was conceived", it has in mind that Jesus began in the same way that all human beings after Adam and Eve have begun: as a tiny baby in his mother's womb. Passages like Matthew 1:18, Luke 2:5-6; Galatians 4:4 and Hebrews 10:5 indicate that God formed Jesus in Mary's womb in the same way that he molds every human baby.

Luke 1:34-37 records this conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel regarding Mary's pregnancy:

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.... For nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:34-37).

Mary herself recognized that to conceive a child in this way would take a miracle. And a miracle is exactly what she got.

What Jesus' miraculous conception does is to ensure that he's fully divine as well as fully human, but it does not make him less than fully human. It is true that the conception is a miracle, perhaps one of the greatest miracles that redemptive history has ever known. And yet, from the point of Jesus' conception forward, his gestation and development in the womb is like any other human being. His passing through the birth canal: normal human birthing process. His being dependent on his mother for his nourishment and his feeding, and everything from having runny noses to having to have his diapers changed is ordinary, normal human experience. He is more than just human, but not less than fully human.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

It is sometimes argued that Jesus could not have been truly human because he did not have a human father. But the very first humans didn't have fathers either, or mothers for that matter. As Genesis 2 tells us, Adam was molded from the dust of the earth, and Eve was created from Adam's rib. Neither of them had parents. Neither of them was born from a woman. But they were both fully and truly human. In the same way, Jesus was also fully human even though his conception was far beyond ordinary.

And from all that we know from Scripture, Jesus' growth in Mary's womb was also a perfectly natural event, culminating in his birth. He did not appear magically, or descend from heaven at the moment he was born. On the contrary, Matthew 1 and Luke 2 indicate that Mary's pregnancy was at first undetected, but then became obvious. It even caused her fiancé Joseph to question her fidelity, until God told him the truth in a dream. And the final result was that Jesus was born as a real human baby.

Jesus is fully and completely human. The miraculous conception of Christ in no way minimizes his true humanity. Jesus actually shows us humanity as it's intended to be in the miraculous conception because we see in Christ that we are able to be fully human without being sinful, which is how we'll be in heaven.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Having considered Jesus' generation, we are ready to discuss how his body affirms his full humanity.

Body

Here we have in mind the *Apostles' Creed's* claim that:

**[Jesus] suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried.**

In these words, the creed attributes certain experiences to Jesus that would only have been possible if he was truly a physical human being.

According to accounts of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion in Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, and John 18–19, Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate in a variety of ways. He was flogged, forced to wear a crown of thorns, spit on, mocked, repeatedly struck in the head with a staff, and forced to carry his own cross part of the way to the place of execution.

Jesus' sufferings, crucifixion, death and burial demonstrated that he was a real man with a physical human body — one that could be beaten, one that could bleed, one that could be abused by soldiers, one that could collapse under exhaustion, one that could be killed, and one that could be buried in a tomb when his soul had left it.

And having a real human body was critical because the justice of God required that a genuine human being suffer physical divine judgment to atone for the sins of humanity. We find this emphasis in places like Romans 7:4, Colossians 1:21-22, and Hebrews 10:10.

As just one example, listen to these words from Hebrews 2:14-17:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might ... make atonement for the sins of the people (Hebrews 2:14-17).

As this passage makes clear, Jesus had to be flesh and blood, a physical human being, in order to make atonement for us.

With this understanding of Jesus' generation and body in mind, let's look at the fact that Jesus' soul completed his human nature.

Soul

Scripture regularly says that human beings consist of a mortal body that houses an immortal soul. It speaks of our souls by many different terms, but the most common are "soul" and "spirit." Based on Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23, some traditions have maintained that "soul" and "spirit" are different parts of our being. But there are approximately 200 verses in which one or the other of these terms is used to refer to all the inner, non-physical aspects of our being as a whole. So, it is best to conclude that the words "soul" and "spirit" both refer to the same underlying reality that man consists of only two main parts: body and soul.

In Luke 23:46, Jesus spoke of his own “soul” or “spirit” as he was dying. Listen to his words there:

Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Luke 23:46).

When Jesus died on the cross, he indicated that while his body would be placed in the grave, his human spirit or soul would be in the hands of God the Father.

As the spiritual side of our being, our soul is the seat of our consciousness. When our bodies die, our souls are separated from our bodies and continue in a conscious state. And the *Apostles' Creed* explains that the same thing happened to Jesus when he died. Specifically, it says:

He descended into hell.

Here, the creed states that when Jesus died, his conscious, rational soul was separated from his body. And while his body remained in the tomb, his soul descended into hell. Later in this lesson we will investigate the meaning of this line in more depth. But for now, we simply want to point out that by mentioning Jesus' descent into hell, the *Apostles' Creed* affirms that Jesus had a real human soul.

Finally, in addition to affirming Jesus' humanity through references to his generation, his body, and his soul, the *Apostles' Creed* also speaks of Jesus' resurrection, in which his soul was reunited with his body.

Resurrection

The resurrection proves that Jesus was a real human being because it reaffirms that his full, glorified human existence included the reunion of his real human body with his real human soul. The resurrection of his body occurred when his human soul was introduced into his perfected human body. Yes, his resurrected body was different in some ways because it had been glorified and was no longer mortal. But this did not make it any less physical or any less human. On the contrary, as we see throughout 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus' resurrected body is the firstfruits of the bodily resurrections of all believers. As such, it shows us what our own human bodies will be like in the future.

Listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23:

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man... But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Just as Adam was the first human being to be created, Jesus was the first human being to be resurrected with a glorified body. Others before him had been brought back to life, some of them raised by Jesus himself. And Enoch and Elijah had even been taken

bodily into heaven without dying. But none of these had received glorified, immortal bodies.

But even though Jesus' body is now glorified, it is still fully human — just as we will still be fully human after God has renewed our bodies at the great resurrection of the dead.

He was an infant baby. He was absolutely dependent upon his mother in his infancy. He grew — Luke tells us that he grew in wisdom, and in stature, and in favor with God and man. We are told that he experienced the same hunger we experience, the same thirst we experience, and on Calvary's cross he experienced death as a human being experiences death. Now, it was far more. He was not only fully human, he was also fully God, but the reality is that Jesus is not only authentic humanity; he is perfected humanity.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Now that we have looked at Jesus' humanity in terms of his experiences, let's turn our attention to his human office mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*, namely the office of Christ.

OFFICE

Jesus' office is mentioned in these words from the *Apostles' Creed*:

I believe in Jesus Christ.

In modern Christianity, many believers are unaware that the word "Christ" is actually the title of Jesus' office rather than part of his personal name. In this regard, the word "Christ" is very similar to words like "king" or "judge."

We will speak of Jesus' human office in two parts. First, we will survey the Old Testament background to the office known as "Christ." And second, we will explain how the fulfillment of this office in Jesus points to our Lord's humanity. Let's begin with the Old Testament background to the office known as "Christ."

Old Testament Background

The English word "Christ" is a translation of the Greek *christos*, which in turn is a translation of the Old Testament Hebrew word *mashiach* or "messiah," meaning "anointed one."

In the days of the Old Testament, the term "anointed one" was a broad term that could be applied to anyone whom God appointed to serve him in a special capacity. For instance, 1 Chronicles 16:22 identifies the prophets as anointed ones. Leviticus 4:3, 5, 16

speaks of anointed priests. And in 1 Samuel 26:9, 11, 16, David referred to Saul as the Lord's anointed because he was the king of Israel.

Listen to the way Leviticus 21:10-12 describes the anointing of the high priest:

The high priest, the one among his brothers who has had the anointing oil poured on his head and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments ... has been dedicated by the anointing oil of his God (Leviticus 21:10-12).

As we see here, the anointing ceremony dedicated people to God's service.

One of the most important uses of the term "anointed one" in the Old Testament applied to the descendants of David that served as kings over Israel and Judah. We see this in places like Psalm 89:38, 51, Psalm 132:10, 17, and 2 Chronicles 6:42. During David's life, God made a covenant with David, promising to establish an unfailing kingdom on earth under the kingship of one of David's descendants. Psalm 89:3-4 summarizes the Lord's covenant with David in this way:

I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, "I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations." (Psalm 89:3-4).

Now, it's natural to wonder why the sons of David eventually lost control of the throne, if God had promised it to them. The answer is that the blessings God promised in this covenant were conditioned upon the obedience of each of David's descendants. This conditionality is mentioned explicitly in 2 Chronicles 6:16, Psalm 89:30-32, and Psalm 132:12. So, when David's descendants rebelled against the Lord, they lost their thrones.

For instance, in 922 B.C., during the days of David's grandson Rehoboam, ten tribes were stripped from David's dynasty and given to Jeroboam. We read about this event in 1 Kings 11-12. The tribes that followed Jeroboam came to be known as the kingdom of Israel, and the remnant that followed Rehoboam came to be known as the kingdom of Judah.

Later, in 587 B.C., even the kingdom of Judah was stripped from David's house, when his descendant Jeconiah was dethroned and his kingdom utterly fell to the Babylonians.

Around this time, many prophets foretold that God would send a great "messiah" or "anointed one" in the future. He would be a great king, descended from David, who would restore and reunite the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

In the Old Testament, the figure who became known as the Messiah was the king — was the king from David's line. David was given a covenant by God, and in that covenant he was promised that one day God would raise up a king who would have a special, unique "son of God" relationship — relationship with God, as his Son, who would reign forever on the throne of David, who would establish justice and righteousness. So really, when we refer to the Old Testament Messiah,

we're referring to a king — the ultimate king, the king who would bring God's salvation and deliverance.

— **Dr. Mark Strauss**

Many Old Testament prophets talked about the Messiah or Christ as a descendant of David who would return the exiles to the Promised Land and bring God's greatest blessings to the restored nation. For example, we find these types of prophecies in Jeremiah 23:5-8, 30:8-9, and 33:14-17. We see them in Ezekiel 34:20-31, and 37:21-28. And we read them in Zechariah 12–13. As just one example, listen to Jeremiah 23:5-6:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety" (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

Through prophecies like this, the Old Testament encouraged God's people to long for the Messiah — an anointed king in David's line who would rescue them from their suffering and bring them into God's glorious blessings.

With this understanding of the Old Testament background to the office of Messiah in mind, we are ready to explore how the fulfillment of this office in Jesus points to his humanity.

Fulfillment in Jesus

The New Testament speaks of Jesus as the Christ in over 500 places. So, it almost goes without saying that from a Christian point of view, he is the great Messiah that the Old Testament anticipated. But to remove all doubt, there are two passages in John's gospel where Jesus is called "Messiah," and where John explains that "Messiah" means the same thing as "Christ." These passages are John 1:41, and John 4:25-26. Let's look at just one of these to prove the point.

Listen to these words from Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well in John 4:25-26:

The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he" (John 4:25-26).

Here Jesus explicitly admitted to being the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament. And John explained that the normal word for "messiah" in Greek was *christos*, here translated "Christ." This tells us that whenever we see Jesus referred to as "Christ," we should understand him to be the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament.

But how does Jesus' role as the Messiah, or Christ, prove that he is truly human? Why couldn't God simply come to earth in his divine glory and save his people? Or why couldn't he send an angel to lead his favored nation?

Well, according to the prophecies of the Old Testament, the Messiah had to be human because he had to be a son of David. As we have seen, God had made a covenant with David specifying that one of his descendants would rule Israel forever. And of course, all of David's descendants were human.

God forms relationships with sinners through covenant. He does that voluntarily. He is not under any obligation to do so. The initiative is his. It's a sovereign choice of God to enter into covenant with us through the mediation of his own Son. Once God enters into a covenant, he is then, of course, obligated to fulfill the terms of that covenant, whether those terms be for blessing or for cursing. He is not at liberty to break that covenant.

— Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

As surprising as it may sound, God truly obligated himself according to his decree. Whenever he makes a covenant, he is bound to keep its terms. He chooses to obligate himself in this way as a means to accomplish his eternal will for his covenant people. But even though the covenant binds him, it's still an expression of his free will.

— Dr. Paul Chang, translation

In the case of the covenant with David, God obligated himself to send a human Messiah to save his people. And that Messiah was Jesus.

A second reason is that only a human son of David could be an atoning sacrifice for his people. As we have seen, Hebrews 2:14-17 indicates that the Messiah had to be human. And beyond this, Isaiah 53 adds the requirement that atonement be made by a human son of David.

A third reason the Messiah had to be human was that he had to be the second Adam. That is, he had to succeed where Adam had failed.

When God created humanity, he set up Adam as the head of the entire race, and he appointed humanity to transform the world into God's kingdom. But Adam sinned, plunging humanity into sin and rendering us incapable of performing our appointed task. Genesis 1-3 records this story, and Romans 5:12-19 explains its deep significance. The historical books of the Old Testament, in turn, record how fallen humanity continually tried and failed to build God's kingdom throughout the centuries.

Still, the Father's requirements had not changed — human beings were still responsible to build the kingdom of God. So, eventually the Father sent his own Son to fix the problem. The Son came to build the kingdom for us. But in order to build it on our behalf — in order to take our place — he had to be human himself. Through his righteous life, atoning death, empowered resurrection and heavenly enthronement, Jesus succeeded where Adam and the rest of us had failed. He became humanity's second Adam. And when we are united to Jesus by faith, his success becomes our success, and his power

becomes our empowerment. We are restored to the dignified, important role of building God's kingdom.

So far in our discussion of Jesus' humanity, we have spoken of his various human experiences, as well as of the human office of Messiah or Christ. At this point, we are ready to talk about Jesus' human nature and its relationship to his divine nature.

NATURE

When we say that Jesus has a human nature, we mean that he possesses all the attributes and traits that are essential to being human — things like a physical human body and a rational human soul.

Throughout church history, many theological battles have been fought over the nature of Christ's humanity. Was he fully human in all respects? Did he have a real flesh and blood body, or did he just appear to be human? Did he have a real human soul, or did his divine person inhabit an empty body? Questions like these may seem rather technical and mysterious, and perhaps even unimportant. But at times arguments over Christ's human nature have threatened to divide the church. They have been the subject of many theological councils, and the stumbling block of numerous heretical sects. Even today false understandings of Christ's humanity can undermine the gospel. So, it's important for every Christian to understand at least the rudimentary aspects of Jesus' human nature.

Faithful Christian theology has consistently maintained that Jesus is fully human in every respect: he has a body and a soul; he was subject to sickness, injury and death; he had normal physical limitations; and so on.

But when we talk about Jesus in this way, the picture quickly becomes complicated because Jesus differs from other human beings in some important ways. For one thing, Jesus is a perfect human being, whereas the rest of us are flawed. And this results in some significant differences between us. For example, every other human being has sinned. We see this theme in 1 Kings 8:46, Psalm 130:3, Psalm 143:2, Romans 5:12, Galatians 3:22, and many other passages. As just one example, consider these words from Romans 3:10-12:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one (Romans 3:10-12).

But Jesus is different. He was born without sin, and lived a perfectly sinless life. The Bible specifically speaks of his sinlessness in passages like Hebrews 4:14-15, and 9:14. So, how do we reconcile this idea with the assertion that Jesus had a true and complete human nature? Well, the simple answer is that the commission of sin, and even the ability to sin, are not *essential* to being human.

It's true that in the very beginning God created humanity with the ability to sin. Adam and Eve proved this in Genesis 3 when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But we have to admit that even before they sinned, they were still human. So, it is possible to have a human being that *does not* sin.

And in fact, when we die and go to heaven, we will actually lose the *ability* to sin, as Hebrews 12:23 teaches. But we will still be entirely human. So, while sin characterizes us in this fallen world, it will not characterize us in the next. And therefore, sinfulness is not an essential attribute of humanity. This is why we say that Jesus' human nature includes all the attributes and traits that are *essential* to being human.

Another thing that makes Jesus different is the fact that he is the only person that possesses two natures: a human nature and a divine nature. Every other human being has only one nature: a human nature. But Jesus is both God and man, being both fully human and fully divine at the same time.

Now, the Bible does not explicitly say how Christ's two natures are united in his person. And the difficulties involved in explaining this union led to many controversies in the early church. But eventually the church settled on language that affirmed both Christ's one person and his two natures, without going beyond Scripture in its description of the details.

The technical term we use to describe the existence of both a human and a divine nature in the person of Christ is "hypostatic union." Although this may sound like a strange term to our modern ears, we can understand it when we think of how it was used in the early church. In the early church, "hypostasis" was one of the words that was commonly used to refer to what we call a person, especially a person of the Trinity.

For instance, in chapter 18 of his work *On the Holy Spirit*, the fourth-century church father Basil used the word hypostasis in this way:

**There is one God and Father, one Only-begotten, and one Holy Ghost.
We proclaim each of the hypostases singly.**

Here, Basil meant the same thing that we would mean if we said "We proclaim each of the persons singly." The doctrine of the hypostatic union then, deals with the union of a divine nature and a human nature within the one hypostasis or person of God the Son. Stated precisely, it says that:

Jesus is one person with two distinct natures (a divine nature and a human nature) with each nature retaining its own attributes.

God the Son has always possessed full divinity with all its attributes. And when he was conceived and born as a human being, he added to his person all the essential attributes of a human being, such as a body and soul.

One place the New Testament talks about the hypostatic union is Philippians 2:5-7, where Paul wrote these words:

**Christ Jesus ... being in very nature God ... made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness
(Philippians 2:5-7).**

Here Paul made it clear that Jesus existed as God and had a fully divine nature. Then, he became incarnate, adding a human nature to the divine nature he already possessed. Now,

Paul's statement that Jesus "made himself nothing," or more literally "emptied himself," has sometimes confused Christians.

Some have mistakenly thought that Jesus actually *put aside* his glory, or even his divine nature. But as we have seen in prior lessons, this is impossible. God's nature is immutable. God can't put aside any of his essential attributes, much less his entire nature.

Fortunately, Paul made the meaning of this phrase very clear by explaining it with two participial phrases: taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness. These phrases tell us *how* Jesus "became nothing" or "emptied himself." Specifically, Jesus emptied himself not by *losing* his divine nature, but by taking on an *additional* nature — a human nature that did not *replace* but merely *veiled* his divine glory.

Perhaps the most famous statement explaining the hypostatic union was the creed of the ecumenical council that met in A.D. 451 in the city of Chalcedon, in northern Asia Minor. The Council of Chalcedon met to defend the traditional doctrines of the person and natures of Christ, and to deny several different heresies regarding these matters.

The statement the council produced is known by several names, including the *Chalcedonian Creed* or "Symbol," and the *Definition of Chalcedon*. Listen to this excerpt from it:

Our Lord Jesus Christ [is] perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body ... in all things like unto us, without sin ... to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one subsistence.

Much of the language of the *Chalcedonian Creed* is very technical. But we might summarize it in two points. On the one hand, Jesus has only one person. He does not have two persons or two minds, as if a human person hosted a divine person in his body. And he is not one person that is somehow a combination or hybrid of two distinct persons or minds, as if a divine person merged with a human person. He is and always has been the same eternal person known as the Son of God.

At the same time, Jesus has two distinct natures: a human nature and a divine nature. Both these natures are entire and whole, just as the nature of the Father is entirely divine, and the nature of human beings is entirely human. Jesus possesses every attribute that is essential to divinity *and* every attribute that is essential to humanity.

Moreover, Jesus' two natures are distinct from each other. He does not have a hybrid nature that combines both divine and human attributes. Nor do his human attributes hinder his divine attributes, or his divine attributes enhance his human attributes. Each nature remains entirely unchanged.

What I think is so intriguing is the way the epistle to the Hebrews emphasizes how crucial it is that the mediator between God and man, the great high priest, be fully God and fully man. He's eternally God, the Creator who sustains all things by the word of his power. He's

fully God. And then, Hebrews says, for our sake, because we need a high priest who is fully human, he takes to himself flesh and blood, just as we have. He is our brother. He can intercede for us from the standpoint of one who shares our human nature, who has endured every trial and temptation with absolute obedience, and who knows what it's like to undergo human testing. So we need a human high priest, a brother. We also need a divine high priest who lives forever to intercede for us. And we have that in the one person of Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Dennis Johnson

Christ's humanity has many implications for the way we live as his followers. As Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 2:5, it means that we have an effective human mediator between us and God, so that through his death we can be forgiven and live as those fully reconciled to the Father. And as Paul taught in Romans 5:12-19, it means that as the second Adam, Jesus has constituted a new human race out of those who trust in him, restoring us to a position of honor and dignity within creation. Because of this, we now have the power to live in ways that please God, and to change the world to make it more like his heavenly kingdom. And on an individual basis, as we struggle with sin and suffering in our lives, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that our fully human savior understands and sympathizes with our pains and weaknesses, making him eager to respond to us in ways that ease our suffering, build our character, and increase our eternal rewards. These are just a few of the countless ways that Christ's full humanity impacts our lives.

So far in our lesson, we have explored both the divinity of Jesus Christ, and his humanity. At this point, we are ready to focus on the work of Christ mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*.

WORK

For the last few hundred years, it has been common for theologians to talk about the work of Jesus in terms of two ideas. First, there is his humiliation, in which he humbled himself by condescending to take on a frail human nature, and to suffer on earth in order to redeem fallen humanity. And second, there is his exaltation, in which God the Father unveiled Christ's hidden divine glory, and heaped additional honor and praise on him. These categories are not explicitly mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*, but they are very helpful ways for us to think about the work of Jesus.

As we consider Jesus' work in this lesson, we will turn first to his humiliation, those things that hid or veiled his glory. And second, we will consider his exaltation, the work that revealed his glory and that will result in further glory in the future. Let's begin with Christ's humiliation during his earthly ministry.

HUMILIATION

Jesus' work of humiliation is mentioned in the following lines from the *Apostles' Creed*:

**[He] was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
And born of the Virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.**

In each of these works, the Son of God caused his glory to be veiled and hidden from sight, and subjected himself to suffering and indignity. Because the Son's divine nature is immutable, it could not be humiliated. So, his humiliation was limited to his human nature. Nevertheless, because his human nature is perfectly united to his person, his divine *person* fully experienced the humiliation.

In this lesson, we will summarize Jesus' works of humiliation under two headings: his incarnation and his passion. Let's begin by looking at his incarnation, when he came to earth as a human being.

Incarnation

The theological term "incarnation" refers to Jesus permanently taking on a human nature. Literally, the word "incarnation" refers to "taking on flesh," that is, a human body. But as we have seen, Christian theology has regularly maintained that Jesus also took on a human soul. So, when we speak of the incarnation in theology, we are generally referring to Jesus' entire human nature. Scripture speaks of the incarnation of Christ in many places, such as John 1:1, 14; Philippians 2:6-7; and Hebrews 2:14-17.

John 1:1, 14 is probably the source of the technical term "incarnation." Listen to what John wrote there:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (John 1:1, 14).

Notice that John said the Son of God "became flesh" — the literal meaning of incarnation. His point was that Jesus took a real human nature, including a real human body.

In the *Apostles' Creed*, the works associated with Jesus' incarnation are his conception and birth. We previously spoke of these events in terms of Jesus' generation, and demonstrated that they prove his humanity. At this point, we want to consider these same events again, but from the perspective of Jesus' work as Messiah. Why was the incarnation necessary? What did Jesus accomplish by it?

Scripture teaches that Jesus' work of incarnation accomplished at least three things: First, it gave God the Son the legal right to be the Davidic king. Second, it gave him the mercy and sympathy he needed in order to be an effective high priest. And third, the incarnation was necessary in order for Jesus to become an atoning sacrifice for sin. Let's briefly consider each of these points, beginning with the fact that the Davidic king had to be a human being.

We have already mentioned that the messiah had to be human in order for God to keep the promises he made to David. So at this point, we want to consider how Jesus' work of incarnation gave him the right to David's throne. The problem before us is that the legal right to inherit David's throne could only be inherited by sons. So, Jesus could only claim David's throne if he had a human father who descended from David.

To solve this problem, Jesus became incarnate through the Virgin Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph. And as we see in Jesus genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, Joseph was a direct legal descendant of David. So, when Joseph married Mary and adopted Jesus, Jesus obtained the legal genealogy of Joseph, and with it the right to be the messianic king.

Besides giving God the Son the legal right to be the Davidic king, the incarnation gave the him the mercy and sympathy he needed in order to be an effective high priest on behalf of his people.

The Bible tells us that Jesus' incarnation made him a high priest who is able to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. And that means that he is a more effective high priest than he would have been or could have been had he not known the fullness of what it is to be human and experience that with and for us. There are a variety of ways that that's manifested. One is that Jesus in his own life and experience dealt with and encountered the same range of human problems in the fallen world that we do, that God in the flesh knows the same kind of heartaches and sorrows and disappointments and betrayals and wounds that anyone who lives in this fallen world experiences. This is not something theoretical to him, this is not something that he stood off in the deep bowels of space, in the dusty past of eternity and speculated about. It's something that he came into the world in our poor flesh, in our poor blood and experienced himself.

— Dr. J Ligon Duncan III

The author of Hebrews discussed this aspect of the incarnation in Hebrews 2:17-18. Listen to what he wrote there:

[Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God ... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:17-18).

In addition to giving Jesus the right to be the Davidic king and the experience to be an effective high priest, the incarnation enabled Jesus to become an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people.

As we saw earlier in this lesson, Jesus had to be human in order to die in place of his people. But why was his humanity so essential to the atonement? The answer is that God had imposed human death as the penalty for human sin. Scripture teaches this in Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12 and 6:23, James 1:15, and many other places. Beginning with Adam, sin spread to the entire human race, and it brought the legal penalty of human death. This is why only a real, flesh-and-blood human death could satisfy God's requirement.

Listen to the way Paul explained the connection between Jesus' humanity and our salvation in Romans 5:15-19:

If the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! ... For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ... For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:15-19).

Over and over again, Paul emphasized that Jesus' human righteousness was the counterpart and cure to Adam's human sin. Paul made it abundantly clear that Jesus had to be human in order to fix what Adam had broken. He had to be human in order to take the penalty that God imposed on humanity, and in order to spread his righteousness to other human beings.

Sometimes we as conservative, as evangelical Christians, so emphasize the deity of Christ that we forget that it's really his humanity that saves us. Because Jesus became a true human being, he could suffer and die for us, for our sins. So, Jesus' humanity is essential to our salvation.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

With this understanding of Jesus' incarnation in mind, let's explore his passion, the second aspect of his work of humiliation mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*.

Passion

The theological term “passion” comes from the Greek verb *pascho*, meaning “suffer.” It refers to Jesus’ suffering and death, beginning the night of his arrest. Jesus’ passion is mentioned in these lines of the *Apostles’ Creed*.

**He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, died, and was buried;
He descended into hell.**

Most Christians are familiar with the story of Jesus arrest, suffering and crucifixion. So rather than explore those details here, we’ll focus on the reason that Jesus subjected himself to these events.

With regard to Jesus’ suffering, Scripture explains that it was necessary to teach Jesus obedience, and to commend him to God the Father. As we read in Hebrews 5:8:

[Jesus] learned obedience from what he suffered (Hebrews 5:8).

And as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:20-21:

If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:20-21).

Through his suffering, Christ fulfilled the Father’s will, and thereby commended himself to the Father. By perfectly obeying the Father, he earned an eternal reward — a reward that he now graciously shares with us.

But Christ’s treatment under Pilate did not end with suffering; it carried through to his death by crucifixion. This is perhaps the best known aspect of Christ’s work of humiliation, and for good reason: it was his death that atoned for our sin and accomplished our salvation.

The death of the Lord Jesus for sin (that’s how it’s presented all the way through the New Testament) worked, if one can put it this way, because he became our penal substitute. “Substitute” means he took our place, and “penal” points to the fact that he took our place in enduring the judgment, the penalty, which all of us had merited by our own transgressions of God’s law — the penalty, that is, with which God had threatened us for breaking his law. God’s nature is such, I mean this is his holiness in reality, his nature is such that where there has been sin, there has to be retribution. And the wonderful, wise, loving way of salvation that God planned was to divert the penalty from our guilty shoulders, if I can put it that way, onto the innocent, flawless shoulders of his incarnate Son, who thus

fulfills the pattern of the flawless animal sacrifice that was demanded all through the Old Testament.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

The apostle Paul often described the crucifixion as the very heart of the gospel. We see this in places like Romans 6:6, 1 Corinthians 1:17-18, Galatians 6:14, and Colossians 1:20. As just one example, listen to his words in Galatians 2:20-21:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:20-21).

Christ's death was the central work that accomplished our salvation. And for this reason, it has been the central fact of gospel presentations throughout history.

After Jesus' crucifixion, his body was buried in a tomb, where it remained lifeless for three days. Being fully human, Jesus underwent the normal human experience of death. The *Apostles' Creed* records this fact in the words he descended into hell. At this time, Jesus' body remained in the tomb while his soul descended to the place of the dead.

Now, we should mention that modern theologians are not entirely agreed over the meaning of the phrase "he descended into hell." Many churches today interpret this line to mean only that Jesus was buried. But it seems clear that this is not the meaning the *Apostles' Creed* itself intended.

For one thing, the creed mentions *both* that Jesus was buried, *and* that he descended into hell. To all appearances, these phrases are separate and consecutive items in the historical record.

For another thing, while it is true that the phrase "hell" can simply mean "under the ground," its use in Scripture and in the writings of the early church almost always refers to the underworld that contains the souls of the dead. We might think of this as its default meaning in the early church — the meaning ancient Christians usually had in mind when they used the word "hell."

For these reasons, it's best to conclude that the *Apostles' Creed* intended to teach that Jesus' soul really descended into the underworld between the time of his death and resurrection. But what was the *nature* of this hell?

In the ancient world, the universe was often described in the language of a vertical structure. The earth, where human beings lived, was in the middle. Heaven, the realm of God and his angels, was spoken of as being in the sky. And beneath the earth was a shadowy underworld where all the souls of the dead resided. In the Hebrew Old Testament, it was most commonly called *sheol*; in the Greek New Testament and in Greek translations of the Old Testament, it was normally called *hades*.

In the Old Testament, the souls of both the good and the wicked were said to reside there as they awaited the final judgment. In the New Testament, however, *hades* usually refers to the abode of the wicked souls, as in Luke 10:15. Nevertheless, at least before Jesus' resurrection, the New Testament also confirms that the souls of the

righteous were in *hades*. Most notably, Acts 2:27-29 speaks of the righteous man king David as being in *hades*.

Now, this does not mean that everyone in *hades* or hell was treated equally. Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, found in Luke 16:19-31, indicates that a great gulf divided the souls of the wicked from the souls of the righteous. And while the wicked suffered in torment, the righteous were comforted. In this parable, Abraham resided in the place of comfort. For this reason, theologians have often called this part of *hades* "Abraham's Side" or more literally "Abraham's Bosom."

The church father Tertullian, who wrote in the early third century, expressed the common belief in this division of *hades*. Listen to what he wrote in chapter 17 of his work *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*:

That souls are even now susceptible of torment and of blessing in Hades ... is proved by the case of Lazarus.

And the church father Ignatius, writing in A.D. 107, had this to say in his *Epistle to the Trallians*:

By those under the earth, [I mean] the multitude that arose along with the Lord. For says the Scripture, "Many bodies of the saints that slept arose," their graves being opened. He descended, indeed, into Hades alone, but He arose accompanied by a multitude; and rent asunder that means of separation which had existed from the beginning of the world.

So, when the creed says that Jesus descended into hell, the most likely meaning is that his human soul descended to the place of the departed spirits. Specifically, he descended to the region reserved for the souls of the righteous, and not to the region where the wicked are tormented. Jesus' stay in this part of hell was a necessary part of his work because it subjected his soul to the judicial punishment of true human death.

Jesus' passion shows us what it means to be truly human in a fallen world. If even our perfect Lord had to suffer as he opposed and remedied sin, then surely we who are imperfect will also suffer. In fact, as Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12, suffering is guaranteed for everyone who seeks to live a godly life. But Scripture also teaches that when we suffer, Christ suffers. This means that he is sympathetic to our pain, and eager to comfort us. And as Paul taught in Colossians 1:24, eventually Christ's suffering through us will be complete. And when that happens, he will return in glory and we will receive our eternal inheritances. Our suffering is not without purpose; it is a means God is using to bring about the full restoration of all creation.

Now that we have looked at Jesus' work of humiliation, we should consider his work of exaltation, when his divine glory was revealed once again.

EXALTATION

When we talk about Christ's exaltation, it's important to remember that it was more than an unveiling of his veiled glory. By his humiliation, the Son earned even greater glory than he originally possessed. He performed works that the Father blessed, and his sacrifice purchased a people for his own inheritance, as well as the right to sit on the throne of the kingdom of God. By these works, the Son's merit, worthiness and glory actually increased as a result of his humiliation.

The *Apostles' Creed* mentions Christ's exaltation in the following articles:

The third day he rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven

And is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Christ's divine nature was always immutably exalted. It had not been subjected to death, or removed from his throne in heaven. So, the exaltation of the Son of God was limited to his human nature. Still, like every other experiences of Christ in his human nature, his divine *person* fully experienced the exaltation.

Our discussion of Christ's exaltation will divide into four parts. First, we will speak of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Second, we will talk about his ascension into heaven. Third, we will explore the meaning of his enthronement at the Father's right hand. And fourth, we will mention the future judgment he will render. Let's begin with Christ's resurrection from the dead three days after his crucifixion.

Resurrection

Many Christians don't realize this, but Christ's resurrection was just as important to our salvation as his death was. This is why 1 Peter 3:21 talks about being saved by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You see, our salvation is not merely something that Christ purchased on our behalf, and then gave to us as a gift, even though we often describe it that way. Rather, it is a gift that Jesus gives to us *by means of* our union with him — this is the idea of being “in Christ” that we hear so much about in the letters of the New Testament.

We are forgiven through his death because, through our union with him, we died with him on the cross. And we gain eternal life because we were also raised in new life through his resurrection. Scripture speaks about this in Romans 6:3-11, and 8:10-11, 2 Corinthians 5:14 and 13:4, Colossians 2:11–3:3, and many other places. As just one example, Paul wrote these words in Romans 6:4-5:

We were ... buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him

like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:4-5).

In short, the work that Christ did by rising from the dead ensured that we too would have new spiritual life when we come to faith, and that in the future we will receive our own resurrected and glorified bodies, just like his. In this sense, his exaltation is also our exaltation, bringing us dignity, glory and honor.

In dying Jesus is placed beyond the power of sin. You cannot tempt a dead man. He's placed beyond their demonic powers. But sin turns Jesus over to death, his mightiest ally. So he allows Jesus to meet death, and in meeting death, Jesus conquers death. And the implications of that for his people are stupendous. So, in Revelation 1:18, Jesus the risen glorious Christ declares, I am the living one, I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and hell. He used them to free himself, but he still retains them because one day he will use those keys to liberate his people from bondage to death.

— Dr. Knox Chamblin

Not only is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins, atonement for our sins, but as important and maybe even more importantly, the resurrection begins the new and final age of the world. The new creation (as the scriptures call it) begins at that tomb, that empty tomb. It is the new epicenter/ the new focal point, the new hinge of history itself. We are now all living in the end times, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has inaugurated this beginning of the end, and the hope for the Christian is that that beginning will now find its consummation at the second coming of Christ, which is called, according to the Scriptures, a new creation itself.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

In addition to the work of resurrection, Jesus' exaltation also included his ascension from earth into heaven.

Ascension

The ascension was the event where Jesus was taken bodily into heaven. Forty days after his resurrection, Jesus rose on the clouds into heaven. Luke described the ascension in both Luke 24:50-51, and Acts 1:6-11.

Jesus' work of ascension accomplished many things that he could not do while he was still on earth. For example, in John 14:2-3, Jesus told the apostles that he was ascending to prepare places for them in heaven. And in John 16:7, he said that he could not send the Holy Spirit to empower the church for ministry unless he first ascended to heaven.

Beyond this, Jesus actually had to ascend to heaven in order to complete the work of atonement that he began on the cross. The author of Hebrews argued this point in chapters 8–9 of his book. In summary, he said that the earthly temple was a copy of the temple in heaven. And he compared Christ's atonement to the work that earthly high priests performed on the annual Day of Atonement, when they would take the blood of the sacrifice into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it on the altar, thereby obtaining forgiveness for the people's sins. In the same way, Jesus entered the Most Holy Place of the true temple in heaven, and sprinkled his own blood on the altar. And this completed the ceremony of the sacrifice that Jesus had begun on the cross.

Listen to the way Hebrews 9:11-12 describes Christ's atoning work in heaven:

When Christ came as high priest ... he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation... [H]e entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-12).

Moreover, as our high priest in heaven, Christ continues to intercede for us, continually pleading the benefits of his atonement on our behalf when we sin. Theologians commonly refer to Christ's ongoing work in the heavenly temple as his session. And it is this session that makes our salvation secure. Hebrews 7:24-25 describes his session in this way:

Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:24-25).

As we see here, Jesus' ascension into heaven was a critical aspect of his redemptive work. Without it, we could not be saved.

Having spoken of Christ's resurrection and ascension, we are ready to address his enthronement in heaven at the right hand of God.

Enthronement

The New Testament mentions Jesus' enthronement at the right hand of God the Father in many, many places. The basic idea is that Jesus is our great human king, and that he has a throne in heaven that sits to the right of the Father's great throne. In this scenario, the Father is the great high king or suzerain, and the Son is the lesser king or vassal that serves him. This follows the model of kingdoms in the ancient world, whereby

lesser kings would rule over various portions of a great empire, and pay tribute and render service to the emperor.

Normally when we think about the kingship of Christ, we think of that as something very exalted, high up there, and because Jesus is now at the right hand of God the Father, and he is the King. But we must remember that Jesus was exalted in his kingship in his human nature. That's to say, in his divine nature, Jesus was always the King. He was always ruling as the sovereign over all things, but Jesus was given authority in heaven and earth in his human nature. And Jesus is the Son of David, and therefore the one who represents the nation of Israel, and the people of God. And the Son of David, like David himself, was a vassal king; he was a servant of the greater king, God the Father in heaven.

— Dr. Richard Pratt, Jr.

In passages that mention Jesus in his role as king, he is also spoken of as a priest who intercedes for his people. This follows the model of the ancient world in which kings commonly served as priests. For example, Melchizedek was both priest and king in Genesis 14.

When Scripture speaks of Jesus' position at the Father's right hand, it sometimes emphasizes his role as our messianic king, as in Acts 2:30-36, Ephesians 1:18-23, Hebrews 1:3-9 and 1 Peter 3:21-22.

At other times, though, the Bible highlights Jesus' role as our high priest who intercedes for us. We find this emphasis in passages like Romans 8:34 and Hebrews 8:1.

In both cases, though, the meaning is the same: Jesus has authority and power over all creation, which he rules over on behalf of the Father. And in that position, he brings salvation to his people, and ensures that the Father looks on them favorably.

After Jesus' resurrection from the dead, ascension into heaven, and enthronement at the Father's right hand, the *Apostles' Creed* mentions the judgment Christ will render on the last day.

Judgment

When the creed says that Jesus will return in judgment, it states that he will come from there, that is, from his throne at the right hand of God. The idea is that Jesus is the human king over all creation, and that he will render royal judgment against those who have violated his laws and not respected his kingship and kingdom. We see this in Scriptures such as Luke 22:30, Acts 17:31, and 2 Thessalonians 1:5 and 4:1.

The final judgment will include both the living and the dead, that is, everyone who has ever lived, including all those who are alive when Jesus returns. Every word, thought and action of every person will be judged on the basis of God's character. And the horrible truth is that every human being will be found guilty of sin and condemned to death.

The good news is that those who are united to Christ by faith will already have undergone judgment through Christ's death, and will already have been vindicated by Christ's resurrection. So, at the judgment, they will receive an eternal blessing and inheritance.

But the bad news is that those who are not found in Christ will have to bear the full brunt of God's wrath in their own persons. They will be cast into hell for all eternity.

In our day today the doctrine of the last judgment is not very popular. I suppose, though, things haven't changed very much, for I don't think judgment was ever attractive to human beings. I would argue that it is absolutely vital to proclaim the judgment — that we ought to proclaim that there is eternal hell for those who do not put their trust in Christ.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

One of the reasons that we talk about hell is because it's the truth. And we dare not escape the truth. And there's a lot of half truth and sometimes even ninety percent truth, but if you're going to evangelize well, and you're going to evangelize with the truth, you've got to talk about ultimate judgment. So we talk about hell and need to. One of the things we recognize about hell is it reminds us who is the judge. We are not; he is. It reminds us about personal responsibility. It reminds us about urgency. It reminds us about eternity. Lots of things that hell can come to us with that, simply, it's going to be very difficult to approach evangelism minus hell. So we talk about it. But remember, we talk about it most of all because it's the truth and we do not want to escape the truth.

— Dr. Matt Friedeman

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we have explored the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* that speak of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have considered his full divinity, including his divine nature and his relationship to the other members of the Trinity. We have also explored his full humanity, including the relationship between his divine and human natures. And we have summarized his work, from the beginning of his humiliation to his ultimate exaltation.

For those of us who call ourselves Christians, and for all those who want to understand Christianity, it is critical to have a solid grasp of the person and the work of Christ. Jesus is the centerpiece of our religion — the person that sets us apart from all

other systems of belief. He is the ruler of the universe, and the fulcrum on which all of history turns. He is our God, our high priest, and our king. And salvation is nothing less than knowing him, loving him, and finding life in union with him.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
THREE

Jesus Christ
Faculty Forum



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Three: Jesus Christ

Faculty Forum

With

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Dr. Mark Strauss

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Dr. Derek Thomas

Dr. Carl Trueman

Dr. Bill Ury

Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Rev. Valery Zadorozhny

Question 1:

How important is the doctrine of Christ's divinity?

From the earliest days of Christianity, followers of Christ have insisted that Jesus is fully divine — that he is God incarnate. The Apostles' Creed summarizes this belief by identifying Jesus as God's only Son. Today, many people are willing to accept that Jesus was a wise human teacher or even a prophet. But they struggle with the idea that Jesus is also God. Is this a matter on which Christians can reasonably disagree? How important is the doctrine of Christ's divinity?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The deity of Christ is absolutely essential for us. Without it, we don't have the revelation of God that we have in Christ. We have in Christ, God revealing himself to us in a way that we can understand as God takes on human flesh. We also, in Christ, have a God who's able to take on the sins of the world. He's human, fully and completely human, but he also is fully and completely divine and therefore able to show us who God is and redeem us.

Dr. Rebecca Luman

The doctrine of Christ's divinity is central to even our definition of who Christians are. Christians are "Christ ones," and without the central declarations of Christianity, which are, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again" — these are the central foundational things that we believe about who we are — and without that, we are people who follow a great teacher who had some individual and unique things to say, but to whom we can compare other teachers and maybe synthesize a philosophy of our own. But the divinity of Christ says, because he is Lord, because he is God, what he says about himself and about who we are and what the way of salvation is, is authoritative and final. And so he defines who we are in ourselves as Christians. And Christianity is definitely Jesus. Without Jesus it would not exist, and apart from his

divinity and lordship, it has no reason to exist except as a historical philosophy that's interesting.

Dr. Peter Walker

The doctrine of Christ's divinity, I would say, is essential to all Christian faith. I remember when I was younger, I walked past a church and it said, "We believe in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ." And I thought that sounded really quite strong, and I wasn't too sure that matched up with my vision of the Jesus I loved and knew. And I suppose it's easier sometimes to have more of a sentimental view of Jesus and perhaps just the human Jesus. Let's not deny the humanity of Jesus, he was a real human being, and we can relate to him as human beings to another human being. But the New Testament is quite clear that he's more than just a human being. And so it could be the epistles of the New Testament, the earliest parts of the New Testament, they all describe Jesus as divine. And in the Gospels too, there is a clear teaching that he is authoritative and has the identity with God. And so quite clearly, at several places in the New Testament, to actually believe in Jesus Christ is to believe in him as Lord, and therefore as defined, essential, I would say, to Christian faith.

Dr. Knox Chamblin

There's many an affirmation of the deity of Christ in the New Testament. For example, John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then an inclusio with that in John 20:28, where Thomas says of Jesus, "My Lord and my God." And Paul, in Titus 2:13, talks about the glory of "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." Going back to Romans 10:9, Paul says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you shall be saved." And then in verse 13 he says, "Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." And there he's quoting from the prophecy of Joel, and "Lord" there is Yahweh, the God of Israel. So you confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and he's there given the sacred name of the God of Israel. I think another reason it's crucial is that it's vital for atonement. In his classic work, *Cur Deus Homo: Why Did God Become a Man*, Anselm says that the, the one who atones for sin must be both God and man, because only God can atone for sin, and only a human being ought to. So Jesus is the God-man. And then, I think another reason is that only God can fully reveal God. So, going back to John 1, "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory." So he was God and he became flesh, but he didn't cease to be God when he became flesh.

Question 2:

Is Jesus' sonship different from ours as children of God?

The Apostles' Creed states that Jesus is God's only Son. But the Bible clearly teaches that all believers are God's children — that we're his sons and daughters. We see this in places like John 1:12, Romans 8:14, Galatians 3:26, and 1 John 3:1-2.

How can both these ideas be true? Is Jesus really just one of many sons and daughters? Or is Jesus' sonship different from ours as children of God?**Dr. Peter Walker**

The Bible is quite clear that Jesus is uniquely the Son of God in a way which is different from anyone else. So, in the Gospels we hear that phrase from God speaking, "You're my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Now that's spoken uniquely to Jesus, and it doesn't apply initially to anyone else. But the good news that the New Testament then unpacks is that as we believe in Christ, as we have faith in him, we're brought into exactly the same relationship with God as Father that, in a sense, Jesus enjoys. We come to enjoy something of that same relationship. The New Testament word for this is "adoption." So, we're not naturally children of God. In fact we're naturally children of the evil one. But, we're brought in from there, to a place of adopted grace and it's not by nature, it is by grace.

Dr. Mark Strauss

Jesus' sonship is similar to ours in some ways, but it's also unique in other ways. It's unique in the sense that Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Eternally with the Father, always present. Both our sonship and Jesus' sonship are really metaphors and we have to recognize that. A metaphor is a picture of something, of a reality. And both refer to a special relationship. But of course Jesus' relationship to the Father as the second person of the Trinity is unique and unprecedented. Our sonship is also an adopted sonship, whereas Jesus' sonship is what we could call "ontological" or essential to his nature. We are adopted as God's children on the basis of Jesus' sonship. Because Jesus has accomplished our salvation, we are adopted into a relationship with God as children of God. So we could say that our sonship is dependent on Jesus' sonship to the Father.

Dr. David Bauer

Sonship sometimes carries with it the notion of likeness; a son is like his father. Sometimes it carries with it a notion of inheritance. Sometimes it carries with it the notion of obedience. Sometimes it carries with it the notion of discipline, as it does, for example, in Hebrews 12. And there are others as well, other aspects of sonship imagery that are used in various passages of the Bible. In most of these there is application both to Jesus as Son of God and to us as son of God, but with some difference. Take the notion of obedience. In the Synoptic Gospels — the first three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke — Jesus' divine sonship is for the most part understood primarily, not exclusively, but primarily in terms of his perfect obedience to the will of the Father. And clearly when the New Testament talks about us being sons of God the notion is — often and in a number of passages — that we are sons of God as those who obey the will of our Father. It was assumed in ancient times that a son would obey his father and the like. But Jesus' obedience clearly goes beyond our own because the New Testament teaches that he was perfectly obedient to the will of his Father from beginning to end, and obviously none of us measure up in that way.

Also, of course, because Jesus was perfectly obedient to the will of his Father, his life is a perfect sacrifice to God. He is able to give his life over to God. He was able to, and did, surrender his life to God in a way that God requires of us, of all of us human beings, in a way that is required really for the God-human relationship. We don't do that. We haven't done that, and therefore, our sonship to God means that we participate in Christ's sacrifice of himself. So, by being, as Paul puts it, in Christ, or as Jesus puts it, following Christ, being with Christ, joining in Christ in a profound spiritual union with Christ we actually participate in Christ's obedience as Son, and almost by proxy, satisfy the demands of the God-human relationship of obedience through Jesus' perfect sonship to God.

The notion of likeness is of course another aspect of sonship. When Christians become disciples, become sons of God in that sense there is, of course, a kind of transformation a kind of likeness with God that happens to us, but that of course is true with Christ in his capacity as Son in ways that go far beyond what any disciple of Christ can claim. So that Jesus can say in John's gospel — and this of course, this aspect of sonship is emphasized especially in John's gospel — “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” This emphasizes this notion of likeness there. So, those kinds of things of course are all bound up. Sonship also involves inheritance, and Jesus, of course, is seen as Son of God, presented Son of God, as one who inherits from God. Actually drawing upon the notion of Davidic kings from Psalm 2, Jesus is presented in the New Testament, in his capacity as Son of God, as one who is inheritor of all things. We also are presented in our capacity as sons of God, as those who inherit from God, but he inherits the cosmos, the whole universe from God, so that, in a sense, God gives the whole of reality, God the Father gives the whole of reality over to his Son as an inheritance. And of course that goes far beyond what is the case with us. So, each one of these cases of sonship there are aspects of Jesus' sonship that pertain to us, but only so far. There are some aspects of sonship that don't have anything to do with us really, and that has to do especially with Jesus being Son of God as one whose origin is in God, who has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. That also is part of the New Testament's presentation of Jesus as Son, and obviously we are not “son of God” in that aspect at all.

Question 3:

How can Jesus be God and still subject to the Father's authority?

The Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — is a beautiful picture of the oneness of God. But it's also one of the most difficult Christian doctrines to understand. On the one hand, it says that all three persons of the Trinity are equally God. On the other hand, it also says that the Son came to do the Father's will. How can Jesus be God and still be subject to the Father's authority?

Rev. Valery Zadorozhny (translation)

The doctrine of the Trinity represents the explanation of God's revelation of himself that he gave in the Scriptures. And as we study what God says about himself, what

the Bible says about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we see that there is a certain “ontology.” That is, we see that — as theologians put it — the Son is eternally generated by the Father and the Father sends the Spirit. That is, there is a certain relationship between them. On the other hand, if we speak about the “economy,” we see that the Son submits to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, so we may say that there is a certain subordination. But it does not mean that one of them is lower or higher. The relations within the Trinity are such that they have one plan, one desire, and there is a communication with each other in which the Son is glad carrying out the Father’s will. It brings him joy. The Father is happy with his Son, and the Holy Spirit glorifies them both. That is, in the Trinity there is communication, but where the Bible is speaking about the works of God we may say that God the Father created, the Son goes and fulfills a mission, the Holy Spirit applies redemption. But when we read the same texts we see that it’s the whole Trinity that takes part.

Question 4:

Why should we think that the New Testament Greek word *kurios* refers to anything more than earthly human authority and honor, even when it is applied to Jesus?

One of the ways the Apostles’ Creed affirms Jesus’ divinity or deity is by calling him “Lord.” But when Jesus was called “Lord” during his earthly ministry, this was usually just a polite form of address. The Greek word *kurios*, which we translate as “lord,” was a common term used to address any person of authority. In and of itself, it didn’t imply any sort of deity or divinity. So, why should we think that the New Testament Greek word *kurios* refers to anything more than earthly human authority and honor, even when it is applied to Jesus?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

One of the great titles of the New Testament that’s applied to the Lord Jesus Christ is that he is Lord. The title “Lord” comes from the Greek *kurios*. Some who do not want to affirm the full deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and see this title as reflecting the fact that he is the Lord, try to say that, well, *kurios* can be used of kings and earthly rulers, and thus this doesn’t at all prove that Christ is the Lord. Yet, when we have the affirmations repeatedly in the New Testament, where he takes on the very name of the Lord, *kurios*, from the Old Testament, which picks up the covenant name of God from the Old Testament Israel. Particularly you think of, say, Philippians 2, where he goes to the cross; he humbles himself, even to death on the cross. The Father is the one who then exalts him by resurrection, then gives him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and tongue confess, and that name that is given to him is Lord, *kurios*. That comes right out of Isaiah 45, where that name is applied to Jehovah or Yahweh from the Old Testament, and that now comes over into its application to Christ where you have a clear affirmation that the New Testament is saying that the Lord Jesus Christ is nothing less than the one who takes on the very identity, role, aims of the Lord of the Old Testament. In fact, we can see this change

of lordship — Lord, the name Lord from the Old Testament — applied to Christ many, many different places. The book of Hebrews does it repeatedly. Paul's letters do it. In fact, "God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" speaks of Christ as one who has the very identity of God of the Old Testament. So that it's not enough just to say, oh, this is just a human title. No, in the New Testament it is referring to the unique fact that the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is indeed the Lord.

Dr. Mark Strauss

When *kurios* is used of Jesus in the New Testament, it could simply be someone referring to him as sir or master, but in certain cases it's clear that the reference is actually to the Old Testament covenant name of God. For example, in Hebrews 1, the author quotes the Old Testament, Psalm 102, "... In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundation of the earth..." If you go back to Psalm 102 you see that this is a reference to Yahweh, to the Lord God. And so, Jesus is identified specifically with the Lord God. In that case there is no doubt that *kurios* refers to Jesus as the God of the Old Testament, the Lord God.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

When we look at the New Testament, writers and speakers address Jesus as Lord. Now, sometimes in that culture the word "lord" did mean "sir." We can read examples of that in the New Testament where someone is addressed as "lord." Probably when the Samaritan woman is first speaking to Jesus and she addresses him as Lord, she didn't mean that "You are the Lord of the universe," but it was a title of respect. But what is important to see is that when we read the New Testament, often, the New Testament writers are quoting the Old Testament passages where Yahweh is described as Lord, as *kurios*, therefore as divine. And those passages are applied to Jesus Christ himself. One of the most striking is found in Philippians 2. The author of Philippians says there that Jesus has been exalted as Lord. That every knee will bow, every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. When we read the Old Testament, when we read Isaiah 45:20, there the author of Isaiah emphasizes that there is only one God, that there is none other. In that very passage Isaiah goes on to say that every knee will bow, and that every tongue will confess that Yahweh is Lord. Paul who was very familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, nurtured in those Scriptures, educated as a Pharisee, Paul alludes to that very passage in Philippians 2 and applies that passage where Yahweh is identified as Lord; he applies that to Jesus Christ. It is very clear, therefore, that in that passage, Jesus Christ is seen as the *kurios* in terms of divinity, not simply in the terms of a title of respect. There are many other places in the New Testament where the Old Testament term Lord is applied so it's quite clear that the New Testament writers believe that Jesus Christ was the Lord, Son of God and fully divine.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

One of the significant backgrounds that we need to always take account of in the New Testament's usage is the fact that *kurios* was the preferred equivalent used by the Greek translators of the Old Testament — from Hebrew into Greek, the Septuagint — for, as the equivalent for the term "Yahweh," the covenant name of God. And so

typically, those reading their Greek Old Testament, their Greek Scriptures, when they came across the word *kurios* would recognize this covenant name. And clearly that's in the background in many of the places where that term is applied to Jesus. In the Church's confession, Jesus is *kurios*. And I think one place that is so obvious that that's what is intended is in that great hymn about Christ in Philippians 2, Paul's great exaltation of who Jesus is in his divine glory and in his condescension and his humiliation. He is in very nature God, Paul begins by saying. Equality with God is not something he needs to snatch at or grasp. He humbles himself, takes the nature of a servant, and then is highly exalted so that every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is *kurios*. Now that conclusion, Paul is echoing from Isaiah 45 where the Lord, *kurios*, announces that he alone is God, that every knee will bow to him and every tongue will confess allegiance to him. And Paul in unquestionably echoing that language, at the end of Isaiah 45 and saying Jesus is the one to whom every knee will bow. Jesus is the one to whom every tongue will confess. Jesus is *kurios*. Echoing a text in the Old Testament in which Israel's covenant God says, "I and I alone am God." Paul could not make the point in a stronger way in the use of *kurios* than to say, Jesus is the covenant God of Israel, come into human flesh for the sake of our redemption.

Question 5:

Does Jesus' miraculous conception make him less human?

Jesus is fully God. Even the way he came into the world testifies to this fact. As the Apostles' Creed states, he was "conceived by the Holy Spirit." No other human being in the history of the world was ever created in this extraordinary way. Sadly, Jesus' unusual conception has caused some scholars to conclude that Jesus was more God than he was man, that his divinity somehow overshadowed his humanity. But the Bible tells us that Jesus was fully God and fully man. But is this right? Does Jesus' miraculous conception make him less human?

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

The great mystery of the Christian faith is the great mystery of the incarnation, that the man Jesus of Nazareth could be God incarnate. Now the Scriptures teach us that his birth is one of miraculous conception, that the normal mechanisms of human procreation were not involved, that Joseph is not the earthly father of Jesus, but instead the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin Mary and she conceived by the Holy Spirit. Often people might wonder, well, does that mean that Jesus really is not like us in all ways? I think the answer to that question is no, because being born of the virgin Mary, whatever Jesus gets of his humanity, he gets it from Mary who was just as fully human as you and I are. So the mechanics of the normal method of human procreation are not what is totally necessary to create a human being. But Jesus is indeed as fully human as you and I are. The miraculous conception is really a statement about his divinity and ultimately a statement that in Jesus Christ we have the most unique person, the only unique person, who has ever lived; the only person who is God and man, man and God, and therefore the only one who is a bridge for us between God and our humanity.

Question 6:

What did the Old Testament say about who the Messiah would be?

Many people in Jesus' day had trouble believing that he was the Messiah foretold by the Old Testament prophets. They envisioned a king who came in power and glory. They weren't prepared for the Messiah to be the son of a carpenter, or to be born to a young woman in a stable. But where did the first-century Jews get their expectations for the Messiah? Was it from Hebrew Scriptures? What did the Old Testament say about who the Messiah would be?

Dr. Mark Strauss

The Messiah had to be a descendant of David because of prophetic revelation basically; because it was predicted so, and that goes all the way back to Genesis where the tribe of Judah is prophesied to be the one through whom the kingship would come. That prophecy was of course, fulfilled in David, King David himself, who was the greatest king of Israel. Every king that followed David was compared to him either favorably or unfavorably. Then of course, we have the covenant made with David, himself. When David proposed to Nathan, the prophet, to build a house for the Lord, to build the temple, Nathan came back and said, "You're not going to build a house for the Lord, the Lord is going to build a house for you". And by house, he meant dynasty. It's in 2 Samuel 7 and that prophecy that God would build a house for him, would establish his kingdom forever, that his descendant would reign forever on David's throne, became the foundation for the messianic prophecies that followed. And so when the prophets referred back after the collapse, especially, of the Davidic dynasty, the Davidic kingdom, when they referred back and looked forward to the hope that God would restore the glories of the Davidic dynasty; it was through the line of David that God would raise up a King. In Israel, the priesthood resided in the line of the Levites, through Aaron; and the kingship resided in throne of David, in the Davidic dynasty. And so the King, the Messiah had to come through the line of David.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Why did the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah have to be a descendant of David? The answer to that is rooted in God's plan in terms of what he has promised. Ultimately, he has to be human — the last Adam. The New Testament picks that up. But in the plan of God, that humanity comes through a specific family, a specific nation, a specific tribe. Particularly what I'm thinking of there is Abraham's family, the nation of Israel, the tribe of Judah, and particularly David's line. That is where we have in terms of the Davidic covenant. 2 Samuel 7 makes promises to David as the representative of Israel, that it's through his offspring, through his lineage, that God's rule will come to this world. The Davidic King is presented as the one who will fulfill ultimately the Adamic role of ruling over the nations, carrying out the creation mandate that was given to each one of us. So, the Messiah, in order to fulfill God's plan, has to be a descendant of David, has to fulfill God's promises through the Davidic covenant to the nation of Israel, ultimately, in terms of God's promise, all the way back to Genesis 3:15.

Question 7:

According to the Old Testament, what was the Messiah expected to do?

Many first-century Jews accepted that Jesus was descended from David. But they still had a hard time believing that he was the Christ or Messiah because he didn't do many of the things they expected him to do. They thought he should free Israel from Roman rule and oppression, and that he should immediately establish an earthly kingdom. They had trouble believing that the Christ could be crucified as a criminal by the Romans, and that he could return to heaven without setting up an earthly political empire. But according to the Old Testament, what was the Messiah expected to do?

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

When we look at the Old Testament, the Old Testament especially emphasizes that the Messiah is, first of all, a son of David. Of course David was that great king of Israel who trusted in the Lord so significantly, won powerful victories; in many, many ways obeyed the Lord. Of course, he had some significant failings as well, but David becomes the paradigm of what the Messiah will be. He will be a ruler who brings peace to the nation. And so we see in the latter part of the Old Testament, after David has died, there is an expectation that a son of David will come, and that's especially aligned with the idea that there will be peace and righteousness and joy. Of course, this plays right into the New Testament doesn't it? When we read, even before the New Testament, there's a little book called the Psalms of Solomon. And there's this strong expectation of a son of David who would come. He would rescue the nation from their oppressors. He would roust out the Romans and defeat them. There would be peace with this ruler upon the throne. And of course that's a central part of what we find in the Old Testament expectation. But mixed in with this is this expectation as well, in Isaiah 53 and some other passages that the Messiah would suffer.

Now interestingly enough, from all the evidence we have, the Jews, the Jewish people, did not understand that as well. We even see that in the New Testament when Jesus begins to explain to his disciples that he is the son of David and he's the Messiah, they agree and they confess him as such, but their expectation is that he would bring in an age of peace and righteousness. He would destroy their enemies. But then Jesus shifts gears on them a little bit, helping them understand the fullness of what the Old Testament teaches about the Messiah, indeed, in terms of the suffering servant. And immediately the disciples are quite perplexed. That strand of the Old Testament teaching they hadn't integrated well into their thinking. Indeed, we don't know what they thought exactly about Isaiah 53 at all, but apparently they didn't clearly understand that to refer to the Messiah. So it was quite an education for the disciples to begin to understand that the Messiah would suffer, and he would die, and he would be crucified. Their notion was the Messiah was pleasing to God and anyone who was pleasing to God would not end up being crucified.

So we have to take these two strands together and what we actually see in the Scriptures is that the victory predicted for the son of David would not come by him destroying his enemies, but by taking suffering upon himself, by absorbing the sins of humankind upon himself. So it was quite a radical idea, which virtually no one understood. So the pathway to victory is through suffering and defeat. And of course, God raised him from the dead to vindicate him and to show that he was indeed his Son, that he had fulfilled the messianic prophecies in terms of the son of David and the suffering servant, and that the victory had come through suffering and not through just destroying his enemies.

Dr. Peter Walker

One of the best texts in the Old Testament to discover the role of the Messiah is Psalm 2, which speaks about the way in which God has established this particular King, this Anointed One, this Messiah, on his holy hill, in Zion, in Jerusalem, and how he's going to be the one who's going to, well, he's going to be Lord over the whole world. The ends of the earth are going to be his possession. The obedience of the nations is going to be his. And that Psalm ends with the rulers of the earth being called to kiss the Son, or to bow down and to worship him. This sets up an incredible picture of what the role of the Messiah is. And over the centuries, as the Jewish people reflect on that, they're expecting someone to come who's going to be like David was, who was the king before, but who's going to be a ruler. Now, the New Testament claims that that is actually what Jesus is, and one of the key points to notice is that it's because he is Israel's Messiah, precisely because he's the Messiah of Israel, that he is therefore, in the same breath, the Lord over the whole world, because that's exactly what the Messiah was expected to be, not just the Messiah of Israel, but the Lord over the whole world. Now, in Jesus' day, there were other expectations as well, that the Messiah would come and restore the temple, and that the Messiah would redeem Israel. And they began to understand this in a more political sense, that surely if the kingdom was going to be restored to Israel, then we're going to be Lord over the whole world. But that wasn't the way it was going to be. Actually, it was the Messiah that was going to be the Lord over the whole world. And that's then what we see in Acts 1 and also in Matthew 28 as Jesus commissions his disciples. Effectively he says, "You're going to go into the whole world bringing the news that I am the King; I am the Messiah; I am the Lord of the world." And that's the way through which the kingdom of God is going to be established around the whole world. If you understand what the Messiah was from Psalm 2, then you'll understand Jesus' ministry and the gospel in a whole new way.

Question 8:

How can God be both free in his sovereignty and bound by his covenants?

The Old Testament promise that God would send the Messiah or Christ to save his people is rooted in agreements that the Bible calls "covenants." In his covenants with his people, God voluntarily obligated himself to act in certain ways, such as

redeeming and blessing his people and cursing their enemies. But how can God be both free in his sovereignty and bound in his covenants?

Dr. Samuel Ling

Covenant is the name of God's relationship with you. He has chosen that name. Now, God is free and sovereign. Now, sometimes we like to think about freewill as, well, I can choose to do anything I want to do. Now, nobody actually is free to do just about anything one wants to do. We never chose where and when we were born, our blood type, our genes, and so on. Lots of things we never chose. We have a limited kind of a freedom, a freedom of a creature. God's freedom is not like that. God, I suppose in a theoretical sense, could do anything he wanted to do. He is free. He is Lord. But as a matter of fact, as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternity planned out how they were going to create and rule the world and redeem his people, God did not just randomly and arbitrarily, you might say in a temperament tantrum, God didn't just choose to do anything he wanted to do. He decided to design a relationship with the world and with his people in particular. And at the end of the day, in the Bible we see that that relationship, that plan, is called the covenant. And so God has chosen a plan. He doesn't have a backup plan. He doesn't have an emergency plan, plan number two. God has chosen this plan. He created a world, the Bible talks about a covenant he has made even with the day and the night, the creation and particularly God has made a covenant with his people. This means that God expresses his freedom and his sovereignty no more and no less than those conditions, those details that he has laid down in the covenant. So we know that we don't have a kind of emotional, moody changing kind of God. God has promised us certain blessings, certain warnings as well, and he never departs from what he has promised. We can depend on God. Great is his faithfulness. He doesn't change. He is completely Lord over our lives. He is sovereign. He is free. Yet he loves us, and his love never changes.

Dr. Derek Thomas

God enters into covenant with man. You see it in Abraham, in Moses, in David. You see it in the great prophets, Jeremiah 31:34, Ezekiel, the promise of a new covenant. Jesus appears on the stage of history and he announces, this is the blood of the everlasting covenant. God forms relationships with sinners through covenant. He does that voluntarily. He is not under any obligation to do so. The initiative is his. It's a sovereign choice of God to enter into covenant with us through the mediation of his own Son. And some of us think that in the Bible there are hints even of a covenant between God the Father and God the Son before the creation of the world, a pre-temporal covenant. Once God enters into a covenant, he is then, of course, obligated to fulfill the terms of that covenant, whether those terms be for blessing or for cursing. He is not at liberty to break that covenant. It's part of the truth that we maintain with regard to God, that God is faithful, that God doesn't change his mind. It's a great comfort to those of us who are Christians and in covenant with God that he will complete that which he begins unto the day of Jesus Christ.

Question 9:**How is Jesus' role as Christ similar to Adam's role as the first human being?**

Through his role as Christ or Messiah, Jesus fulfills God's covenant promises to his people. One way that the Bible calls attention to this is by comparing Jesus to Adam, the first man. How is Jesus' role as Christ similar to Adam's role as the first human being?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Adam as our head, our representative of the entire human race is, as all of God's creatures, to be obedient, to be faithful. We are the creatures. We are the ones who are to obey our creator, to serve him and to obey him and love him in every area of our life. In his disobedience, he brought with it sin and death and judgment. The only way for that to be reversed is we need God to do the remedy for us and to do so through another Adam, through another human. And so we have the strong emphasis on "God will provide one like an Adam" through these various prophets, priests, and kings, ultimately culminating in our Lord Jesus Christ who — and you think of in the Gospels — he has come to do the will of God; he has come to obey. Galatians 4 says that he was born of a woman, born under the Law, to obey all of the Law. Well, why is that necessary? Because he has to undo what Adam did. By his obedience — and we think of this not just in terms of his life, but his life is important here too — by his obedience, sometimes we call this his "active obedience," he fulfills all the requirements of the Law for us. By his obedience, supremely in his death, Philippians 2, he obeys even unto death on the cross. He is then by virtue of that work, by virtue of that obedience as our King, as our Priest, he is exalted at God's right hand. It's not as if he wasn't King before and Lord before; he's always been that as God the Son. Yet, he is God the Son incarnate by his work, and he has to, through his humanity, be obedient, to be faithful, to do that on our behalf, so that he can win for us our salvation.

Dr. Derek Thomas

Jesus is our representative, he is our substitute, he is the last Adam, the second man, and therefore, as Adam was tempted in the Garden, so the last Adam, too, must be tempted by the serpent. If he is to represent us, he must be tempted in every way like we are tempted. Otherwise, he is not our substitute. Scripture is very clear that at no point in the course of his ministry did Jesus fall into sin. He was sinless. He was without sin in thought, in word, in deed.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

The Scriptures profile the Lord Jesus Christ as fully human and in every way just like us except that he was sinless. It's very important for us to appreciate the significance of that singular distinction. Adam had failed to provide a life of perfect obedience; Jesus Christ fulfilled that. And so it was in his ability to lead a sinless life that he became the second Adam, the paradigmatic new opportunity for a fresh start for humanity. So whether you look at it in terms of him becoming the second Adam or

becoming the perfect and adequate sacrifice for sin, the sinlessness of Christ is critically important and a very important element of the good news about the Messiah.

Question 10:

How could Jesus be both fully human and fully divine?

In order for God the Son to fulfill the role of Christ, he had to become a man. So, he became incarnate as Jesus. As a result, Jesus was both man and God — one person with two natures in hypostatic union. He had all the essential attributes of a human being, and all the essential attributes of deity. But these realities can seem hard to reconcile. Is it really possible for God to take on a complete human nature? How could Jesus be both fully human and fully divine?

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

When we speak about Jesus as the God-man, the term that the church coined to discuss that was “hypostatic union,” meaning that there is a coming together of natures, the divine nature and the human nature, that in Jesus Christ we have one person, God the Son, the second person of the Trinity. One person, who, not has two natures, but brings two natures together, and makes them united, doesn't make a third nature out of them. Instead he unites the divine and the human. Now, while that is a very difficult concept for us to wrap our minds around, it is utterly essential for our faith — understanding the absolute uniqueness of Jesus. He is the God-man. He's not just a great, exalted, enlightened teacher, such as the prophet Buddha or the prophet Mohammed. No, Jesus is the God-man. So his identity is caught up in this notion of the hypostatic union. But beyond that, there is also something crucial for us in understanding our salvation in Christ. Christ does not come simply to pay a debt that we owe to God, so that God can write our debt off of the books. No, Christ comes to bring us back to the Father. Christ comes to unite the divine life that is lost in the fall of Adam, back to our humanity. Only if Christ is the one who can bring God and man together can we really say that we have been saved. Not just forgiven of our sins, but saved, made again what God intended us to be all along, those who bear his image, those who live in the fullness of his presence, and those whose lives are united to him in love and faith and obedience. So, the doctrine of the hypostatic union, as hard as it is, is absolutely essential for us to keep in mind, and always thinking about because of the identity of Jesus on the one hand, and on the other hand his identity as the one and the only one who can bring us back to God. Not by what he did on the cross, but because of who he is in his very nature, the God-man.

Dr. Jeffrey Lowman

The question of what is the nature or the natures of Christ in the hypostatic union is one of the more difficult questions in theology, and the reason for this is we're seeking to understand a mystery. The nature has to do with Christ's humanity and his deity, and he had both a human nature and a divine nature. And what is interesting in the way the Scripture presents that is that these are not blends; he is fully human and

he is fully divine, and they do not come together in a confused manner, but Christ at the same time was both human and divine.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

The term “hypostatic union” itself often sounds confusing, and then when you hear it explained that we’re talking about divine nature of the second person of the Trinity, united with a full and complete human nature, sinless human nature, but full and complete — body, soul, mind the whole works — in one person, that concept in itself, as well as the term, is amazing, especially in the light of the fact that Scripture so often emphasizes in the Old Testament that we should not confuse God and man. Yes, man is made in God’s image and God’s likeness, but we shouldn’t confuse the Creator and the creature. And here in the New Testament we find this very clear announcement that in Jesus Christ we need one who is obviously fully human, exhausted to the point of sleep in the midst of a storm on the Sea of Galilee and at the same time fully God, so that when roused from that sleep, as the Creator of the universe, he ushers the word “silence,” and the whole storm stops in obedience to its Creator. So there’s a text right there that puts the hypostatic union right before us and demands that we, if we hear the Word of God, that we accept it.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The hypostatic union, this idea that in Christ we have a fully divine nature and a fully human nature coming together in one person, this is what enables God to show himself to us and to redeem us as only Christ is able to do. We have one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, and it’s essential that he’s both God and man to be this mediator.

Question 11:

How did the incarnation make the Son of God a more effective high priest?

One of the reasons that God the Son became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth was to save his people from their sins. Theologians often categorize this aspect of the incarnation under Jesus’ role as priest. So, how did the incarnation make the Son of God a more effective high priest?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Jesus’ incarnation made him a more effective high priest because he could sympathize; he could empathize; he could understand exactly what we are going through. Hebrews 4:15 says that, “We do not have a high priest who cannot empathize with us, but one who has been tested, one who has been tempted in every way as we have been tempted” and tested as human beings. Sometimes we, as conservative, as evangelical Christians, so emphasize the deity of Christ that we forget that it’s really his humanity that saves us. Because Jesus became a true human being he could suffer and die for us, for our sins. So, Jesus’ humanity is essential to

our salvation, it's essential to this high priesthood because only as a human being could Jesus pay the penalty for our sins.

Dr. Robert Lister

Jesus had to become like his brethren in all things with the exception of sin only, so that he might become our faithful high priest. So that when we are tempted, we have one who was tempted like us in every respect apart from sin. And so, Jesus' high priesthood is one of a dual purpose. He is able to identify with our suffering, with our experience of temptation and we can look to him as the one who has gone before us and can show us the way of escape. And at the same time his priesthood in Hebrews 2 also shows the way that he dispenses with death and the power of sin by obeying on our behalf and conquering that foe. So his priesthood is one that both effectively puts away sin, and shows us how to deal with the temptations that we face on a daily basis.

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The Bible tells us that Jesus' incarnation made him a high priest who is able to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. And that means that he is a more effective high priest than he would have been or could have been had he not known the fullness of what it is to be human and experience that with and for us. He's not as C.H. Spurgeon would have said, "a dry land sailor." He's not someone who's an expert on sailing who's never been in a boat. He himself has been in our own flesh and blood and has experienced this whole same range of problems in a fallen world that we experience. But, it's even better than that, I think. It's better than that because the Lord Jesus not only experienced that common range of human problems in a fallen world, but he experienced them in an extreme degree. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus' humiliation is not something that was confined to the cross. Nor was it something that was confined to the opposition that he experienced in his earthly ministry, but that it was something that he began to experience from the moment that he was born. His humiliation, for instance, begins in his birth in that he's born to a very common family without substantial political power or financial means. He's laid in the feeding trough of animals for his manger. I don't think there is a mother in the world who would want to put her newborn child in a feeding trough for animals. And his whole course of life, he tells us himself, is operated in the extremes of lack. He tells us that the foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. So, the Lord Jesus is saying that, to those who are the most deprived of material comforts in this life, I am able to relate to you, because I was not born in a palace. I did not grow up in a family that afforded me fine clothes and the best of worldly enjoyments. I experienced the same kind of lack that about 80% of the world's population has over the duration of the time that there have been human beings on this planet. And so, the Lord Jesus is able, as a high priest, to sympathize with those who endure those kinds of lacks and wants.

But I think even more than that, the Lord Jesus' sympathy for us as high priest is found at a point, not of commonality with us in our human nature, but a point of difference. I think a lot of people think that Jesus can't relate to them because he was sinless and they're sinners. The idea is, unless you've been down in my sin, you

really don't understand me. And I think the opposite is actually true. He not only lived in a world filled with sin and was perfect, but he had to live his entire life in consciousness that he himself was going to bear that sin which he had not committed. Now, none of us know what the future holds for us. Jesus did. Every conscious moment of his ministry he knew that he had come to die and to bear sins that he had not himself committed. The idea of contracting sin and bearing sin and bearing shame and scoffing rude is something that weighed on him. The Gospels record these events in the final week of Jesus' life. John tells us that his heart was deeply troubled and he cried out for God and begged God to be glorified in him because he was so overwhelmed at the prospect of what was going to happen at the end of Passover week. Well, Jesus as our high priest lived sinlessly in a world surrounded by sinners, which must have been a vexation to his soul. If you've ever been in a situation where you're one person trying to resist the predominant sin in a community around you while loving those sinners and not engaging in the same kind of activity that they engage in? This is how Jesus lived every conscious moment of his life. It must have been enormously, psychologically burdensome. And then to know that he was going to die the death that they deserved, bearing their sin in their place. This he did for us.

So when you look at Jesus, you can't say "Jesus you just don't understand me." Because it's not only that Jesus made you, and he knows what's in you. It's not only that Jesus, because he is the God-man, in his divinity knows every thought of what we are. John can put it this way, "He himself knew what was in them," speaking of Jesus knowing the hearts of men. But it is that Jesus, in our flesh, has lived sinlessly in the midst of sinners knowing that he was going to bear the penalty due to sinners though in him there was no sin. And that built in the Lord Jesus Christ a sympathy whereby he is able to be down in the dust with us. And I think that that truth ought to be enormously encouraging to all Christians, that we don't have a high priest that doesn't understand what it's like to be human. And even in those sins, which we have committed, that he has not, he knows things about the psychological burden of that sin that we ourselves do not know.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

It's a great question to ask how the incarnation made the Son of God a more effective high priest for us. We know that as the Son of God he has divine omniscience; he knows everything. And yet, again, the writer to the Hebrews emphasizes that this God who knows all things, who sustains all things, who is eternal, became in the Son a human being, so that we would have a brother who was a high priest. Hebrews begins to pick up that theme at the end of chapter 2 when it quotes from Psalm 22 — he is not ashamed to call us his brothers; he will confess the Father's name before his brothers. And immediately moves on into that reality that Jesus comes to share our human nature, become our brother, to be a merciful and faithful high priest. He picks that up and the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5 talking about the fact that our high priest is one who can be touched by the feeling of our weakness. And then connects in to Aaron, the Old Testament high priest, and Aaron's sons. Aaron was taken from among the brothers, that is, the Israelites, and therefore could represent them before God and his holiness. Now Aaron and his sons were all sinners

and so Hebrews also points out that Aaron and his sons needed to offer an atoning sacrifice for their own sins first of all before they offered atoning sacrifices for the sins of Israel. Jesus, of course, doesn't need an atoning sacrifice for his own sins; he has none. But he can intercede for us from the perspective of one who as a human being has endured all the tests and the trials that are lodged against our faith and our faithfulness by the evil one. And, of course, Jesus endured them all with perfection.

So his incarnation qualifies him in a particular way that perhaps we can't fully grasp because we are dealing with mystery here, to intercede for us, to pray for us. But, of course, the other crucial thing is we need not only a priest that knows us we also need a sacrifice that is sinless. And Hebrews also speaks of that, especially Hebrews 10. The preacher to the Hebrews quotes from Psalm 40 and references the fact that in Psalm 40 the speaker there, who is the psalmist — but the psalmist speaking for Christ as he enters the world — is coming to take up the body prepared for him to offer that body as the final sacrifice. Jesus became a human being in order to offer that sacrifice we needed. The blood of bulls and goats, Hebrews said, testified to our need for cleansing but could only clean externally and not get to the conscience. But the blood of Christ shed for us in his humanity, in his perfect humanity, atones for our sin and cleanses our conscience so that we can draw near to God in confidence.

Question 12:

How did Christ's death atone for sin?

One of the most important things Jesus did as our high priest was to atone for our sins. Scripture tells us that without Jesus' atoning sacrifice we would still be dead in our sins and without hope in the world. But exactly how did his death work to our benefit? How did Christ's death atone for sin?

Dr. Knox Chamblin

Jesus Christ atoned for sin in his saving death, and this truth is manifold and extraordinarily rich. There are two passages in Romans where several ingredients of the atonement are brought together. First in Romans 3:23-25, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith." And then in Romans 5:9-10, "Since we have now been justified by Christ's blood, much more shall we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For, if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by his life." One of the themes of the atonement there is redemption. That means liberation from bondage by the payment of a price. We are freed from bondage to sin and death by the precious blood of Christ, that's the cost of our redemption. The second truth is in the word "propitiation" which is a complex truth. The blood of Jesus covers our sins, and so when the wrath of God that's revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, sees the blood of Christ covering our sin, it is averted; it is turned away. But Jesus Christ himself bears the weight of that wrath; he experiences the judgment of God. So in the

language of Isaiah 53:5, “He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement that brought us peace was upon him and by his stripes, we are healed.” And then justification, which stands at the very heart of Paul’s gospel, the language of the law court, the righteous Judge declares the sinner not guilty. Paul says in Romans 4, God justifies the ungodly, and he does that because the righteous one has stood in our place. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” And then reconciliation, the language of the battlefield. We had rebelled against God, we were his enemies, and consequently we were under his wrath. Reconciliation establishes peace where there was conflict. And the extraordinary thing about this is that the offended party and the mightier party is the one who takes the initiative to be reconciled with his sinful and rebellious creatures.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

One of the crucial issues that we wrestle with in terms of the cross is trying to have what we call a “theology of the cross,” and a theology of the cross seeks to answer the question, how does this work? What does this work achieve? What is it about? What is it accomplishing for us? How does the atonement work in that way? And that’s a crucial question that needs to be addressed. The Scripture provides an answer to that in a whole set of ways, and at the heart of its answer — in terms of Christ’s work on the cross is our redemption, and it’s our reconciliation, and it’s our justification, and it’s the victory over the powers — at the heart of it is that Christ’s work on the cross provides substitution for us as our representative. So that Christ comes as the God-man. He is the one who, in his man-ness represents us, is the last Adam in that way who comes to undo the work of the first man. He comes as a covenant head; he comes as the head of his people who then as our representative goes to the cross for us. He does so as our substitute, by standing in our place. We deserve nothing less than God’s wrath upon us — “The wages of sin is death.” Christ then goes and takes our, what we say, our penalty. Often we speak of that in terms of penal substitution where he goes, takes our penalty to himself, lives our life, dies our death, is raised for our justification, and, as our substitute, he then, because he is the God-man, takes God’s very requirements to himself. In fact at the heart of the problem of forgiveness is how can we be reconciled, declared just, before a holy God? In Christ, he is not just a third party; he is not just another man. He is the God-man, the second person of the Godhead who takes God’s own righteous requirements to himself, who stands in our place, who goes as our representative, who dies on our behalf, so that in him bearing our sin, in him satisfying his own righteous requirements, we who then believe in him are then forgiven because he stands for us; he stands as our covenant head. All that he has achieved in his death, his resurrection, that gloriously demonstrates that, then is applied to us. So that we die with him, we’re raised with him, our debt has been removed, and we then can stand by faith, justified before the Father.

Dr. Samuel Ling

Now this salvation, Jesus Christ saving us from our sin, is expressed in the Bible with different terms. For example, the Bible tells us that God has designed Jesus to be a “propitiation” for our sins. This means that a righteous God, a holy God is angry at us

and our sins. And what Jesus did on the cross, by dying, by shedding his blood for us, is that he laid aside, he set aside God the Father's anger, and thus God's problem, which he should have a problem of anger with us, is now solved. And so the Bible talks about the propitiation that Jesus Christ is for us. The Bible also talks about the "atonement" or the "expiation." You and I have a sin problem. The sin problem we have is that we have a bad record; we've done bad things. We have a bad heart. We have a bad master, which is either ourselves or the Devil. What Jesus did was to set things right between us and God. He solved our sin problem, so now God receives us, he's at peace with us, and we are at peace with God. Which leads us to another word that the Bible uses, and that's the word "peace" or "reconciliation." God is now at peace with us, and secondarily we are at peace with God because of the Lord Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection. Finally, the Bible uses the word "ransom." We are like slaves in a market where Jesus came, or God came, and paid the price, which is the blood of Jesus, to set us free so that we no longer belong to the slave master, but we now belong to God. So Jesus is our propitiation; he set aside the Father's anger. Jesus is our atonement; he solved our sin problem. Jesus is our reconciliation; he brought us peace with God, or rather he brought God to be at peace with us. And that Jesus is that ransom price paid for our sin.

Question 13:

What is the relationship between Jesus' atonement and the Old Testament sacrifices?

In the Old Testament, God applied salvation to his people through an elaborate system of sacrifices. But in the New Testament, Jesus' death replaced that system. So, why does the New Testament also teach that Jesus' death on the cross was consistent with the prior sacrifices? What is the relationship between Jesus' atonement and the Old Testament sacrifices?

Dr. Frank Barker

The Old Testament sacrificial system demonstrated God's mercy, but one of the classic ways was on the Day of Atonement. You had your tabernacle or temple, and the innermost part of that was called the holiest of all, and in there you had the Ark of the Covenant with the Ten Commandments in it, and the top of that box was called the mercy seat. And on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would take the blood of the lamb and offer the lamb at the altar outside the temple or tabernacle, then come through the veil into that holiest of all part and sprinkle the blood on the top of the box. The idea was that God would be merciful when the blood of the lamb covered the law that was broken. Of course, that pointed to the fact of Jesus Christ was going to be the true Lamb whose blood would cover our having broken the Law. But, notice, God's mercy founded on that blood covering our having broken the Law.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

The relationship between Jesus' death and Old Testament sacrifices could be developed in a whole host of ways. At the heart, the Old Testament sacrifices must be

placed within the old covenant that God gave to the nation of Israel. The sacrificial system was the means by which the people's sin was removed, God's wrath was turned back; there was relationship between God and his people. Those sacrifices, we say, are types, they're patterns. They point forward to something greater. Even in the Old Testament there's plenty of hints that just by the offering of an animal will never be enough to take away sin. It was never intended to be ultimately in terms of that which would remove sin. They were patterns of something greater, but they point forward to the sacrifice of Christ in that he is the one who, like that sacrifice, is our substitute. He is the one who takes our place. He is one who does so in a far greater way because he is human. He takes on our humanity. Those animal sacrifices didn't. Yet, he is also God the Son, God the Son incarnate, so that he now fulfills his own righteous requirements putting away our sin, standing as our representative, as our substitute, as our priest. And fulfills all of what those sacrifices pointed forward to, restores us to relationship with God, and brings us back to what God made us to be in the first place — his people, living for him, serving him, carrying out our role and duty as his image bearers in this world.

Question 14:

Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?

Jesus' suffering and death atoned for our sins. And because of this, Christians often view the crucifixion as Jesus most important act — his crowning victory. But the Bible also teaches that without Jesus' resurrection, his death would have been meaningless. Why is the resurrection of Jesus an indispensable part of the gospel message?

Dr. Peter Walker

The resurrection of Jesus is basic to the gospel because without the resurrection, with a dead Jesus, we have nothing. I mean, what help is there in a dead Jesus — crucified, failed? So, the resurrection in the New Testament is a sign that Jesus has been vindicated, and if we talk about the forgiveness of sins coming about through his death, well, if Jesus had died and not been raised again, we don't know that we're forgiven. The whole doctrine of salvation falls apart without the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. But it's more than that, I mean, it means that Jesus Christ is alive today. And an essential part of the good news is that here is a living person that we can know and have our lives transformed by. We're not following just a dead hero; we're following a living person. But it's more than that, it's that there's actual new life beyond the grave for those who believe in Christ. So, death is not the end. The resurrection is a sign that there is a new kingdom established and that we have hope beyond the grave. And it is even more than that. It's that God has got a purpose for his whole world. This creation, which is subjected to frustration, finds through the resurrection that there's a hope of new creation. And so the resurrection turns out to be absolutely key, not just for individuals, but for the whole world.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

Paul says in Romans 4 at the very end that Christ was raised for our justification. And in fact he says in 1 Corinthians 15 as well that if Jesus is not raised our faith is futile, meaningless, and we are still in our sins. So the resurrection is integral to our confidence that our sins have been forgiven. That what Jesus did on the cross was not for his own sins but for our sins. The resurrection is God's declaration that that wrath and judgment that Jesus received on the cross was not what he deserved, but what we deserve. It's God's demonstration that what Jesus deserves for lifelong, start to finish, inside and out, perfect obedience through the Father's will, is eternal life, the life of the age to come. And Jesus endured the cross for us. Paul says in Galatians 3, Christ endured the curse, becoming a curse for us as he was hanged in a tree. But now Jesus has entered into the new life that is rightfully his. And amazingly by grace, because we are united to Christ, that new life, the life of the age to come, is ours as well. His death to our sins guilt and penalty is our death. His resurrection to his rightly deserved reward by God's mercy is our reward. We haven't tasted it all yet, but we've tasted the firstfruits of it and the work of the Holy Spirit applying the resurrection already to our hearts and lives, drawing us out of death and into life as Paul says at the beginning of Ephesians 2. And that firstfruits of resurrection life through the work of the Spirit guarantees to us and assures us that the full harvest of resurrection, our own bodily resurrection to see and to be with Jesus and to be like him is certainly coming. The resurrection is crucial to the gospel because it speaks of Christ's victory over sin and over death, which is ours by God's grace.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, together of course with his atoning death on the cross is indispensable to the Christian life. And I think two main reasons it's indispensable. For one thing, the resurrection was Jesus' vindication. Vindication in the sense that it proved, it confirmed that he was who he claimed to be. That he did accomplish what he claimed he would accomplish. So we know that Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for our sins because he rose victorious from the grave. So vindication is the first key reason. But the second is that he rose to a new life, a new glorified existence. When Jesus rose from the dead he entered into a different kind of existence, the kind of existence we were meant to have. Because Adam and Eve rejected God, they didn't enter into this glorified existence, but Jesus did at his resurrection, and by dying with Christ, by being risen with him, we know that we too will enter into our glorified bodies, and we will come into a unique and eternal relationship with God through that resurrection. So the key is both vindication, but also the newness of life into a glorified body, into a glorified existence that we will have with God forever.

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

The life and suffering and death of Jesus would ultimately be meaningless if it were not for the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus rose from the dead it was God's vindicating that Jesus was right. You may remember that many of his enemies accused him of being satanic or foolish or a crazy revolutionary, but instead he spoke truth and wisdom and healed and lived in humility and lived with sinners and was

accused being a sinner himself for living with them. Yet, God vindicated, by raising him from the dead, that he was the true Son of God. Another reason why Jesus' resurrection is so essential, and why his life and death and suffering are not sufficient in and of themselves, is because in the resurrection Jesus not only provides an example, but he also conquers death itself. In his rising, death is put to death. Death itself is killed. And so, if we only had his suffering and his death he would serve a great example, but it would not deal with our sin problem. We would still face our deaths, only with an example of someone who also faced death with nobility. But the resurrection of Jesus provides an assurance that not only Jesus was truly from God, but that death itself is now conquered.

Another reason the resurrection is so important is because it affirms the value of God's created order. It affirms that our bodies, as made by God, and all matter do matter. That it affirms that God cares about creation and that our hope is a resurrection body ourselves, in physical bodies, because all God has made is good, even though creation itself is marred, what God has made is good, and the creation itself, the Scriptures say, is longing for its redemption, the adoption of the sons of God. The resurrection not only inaugurates this but shows that God cares about our physical bodies and the physical world that he has made. Another reason that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so important — and this is one that I am afraid we often don't speak of, but it's in the Scriptures — and that is that the resurrection of Jesus inaugurates and initiates the new and final age of the world itself. Not only is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus the means by which we can receive forgiveness of sins, atonement for our sins, but as important, and maybe even more importantly, the resurrection begins the new and final age of the world. The new creation, as the scriptures call it, begins at that tomb that empty tomb. It is the new epicenter/ the new focal point/ the new hinge of history itself. It is not just another event, it becomes the focal point by which all of history is now understood, because all that Adam did and failed to do and that death reigned from the time of Adam's fall up to Christ, now life reigns because a new second Adam has come, and the resurrection is this turning point in history. This is why the rest of the New Testament authors regularly look back to the centrality of Jesus being raised from the dead, and speak of us now living in the end times. We are now all living in the end times, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has inaugurated this beginning of the end, and the hope for the Christian is that that beginning will now find its consummation at the second coming of Christ which is called, according to the Scriptures, a new creation itself

Question 15:

What work is Jesus doing in heaven right now?

After mentioning Jesus' death and resurrection, the Apostles' Creed tells us, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty." This sometimes gives Christians the impression that Jesus isn't doing anything right now, other than waiting for his return. But nothing could be further from the truth. So, what work is Jesus doing in heaven right now?

Rev. Jim Maples

The Scripture tells us that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. This is an anthropomorphic expression that shows that Christ received the reins of government, of the church, and of the universe. At his ascension, he is made to share in the corresponding glory that goes with this. But this reference to being seated, however, does not imply that Jesus ascended to a place of rest. He continues in his work as our king and prophet and priest, and in his mediatorial work as priest, he continues to intercede for his people. As priest, he is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. He is constantly interceding on behalf of his people. When he cried out from the cross, "It is finished," he did not mean that his mediatorial priestly work was finished; he meant that his act of suffering was finished at that time. He continually offers up his sacrifice, his completed sacrifice, to the Father as the sufficient basis for the bestowal of God's pardoning grace. He is constantly applying the work he did on the cross and making it effective for the justification and the sanctification of sinners. He always lives to intercede for those that are his, pleading for their acceptance before God on the basis of his completed work.

Dr. Carl Trueman

Jesus Christ is our priest. He performs that function in his life, his death, his resurrection and now in his ascension to the right hand of the Father. He performs the function of a priest by interceding on behalf of his people and making a sacrificial offering for them. On earth, of course, he was interceding for his people in the high priestly prayer in John where he talks to the Father about the people that the Father has given him. He offers himself as a sacrifice upon the cross at Calvary. And now, ascended to the right hand of the Father, he offers himself continually in intercession to the Father on our behalf, fulfilling the great Old Testament role of the priest.

Dr. Bill Ury

The fact that he is at the right hand of the Father on a throne, spiritually speaking, is a great affirmation to us that there is victory at the end of all human history for us. He is the King who has won every battle. We don't sense it now, but in reality he has. That's the cosmic concept. The transformation of all the universe, his total lordship, that is all pictured for us as his reigning lordship on a throne. But the great thing about remembering who Jesus is is that the one that reigns is a glorified man, the Son of God who became the Son of Man so that his incarnation never ceases. He didn't become some spirit alone. He has taken humanity into heaven, and the one who is at the right hand of God the Father is a Jewish carpenter who is the Son of God. So that, as Hebrews says — I think it's six times — he ever lives to intercede for us. There is this marvelous mix of his lordship, his sovereignty, his dominion, his absolute victory over all that has occurred but also this incredible intimacy, this taking us into himself, that his intercessory life, this powerful prayer and concern for our lives continues.

Question 16:
How important is the doctrine of the last judgment?

After mentioning that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, the last thing the Apostles' Creed says about Jesus is that he will return to judge the living and the dead. Today, Christians are often uncomfortable with the idea of judgment. We generally prefer to focus on forgiveness and mercy rather than on judgment, especially when we proclaim the gospel. How important is the doctrine of the last judgment?

Dr. Mark Strauss

Jesus talked about judgment quite a lot. We sometimes think of the Old Testament as a stern and angry God and the New Testament as a good and loving God and Jesus always talking about goodness and love for one another. That's certainly true that he talked about goodness and love for one another. But he also, more than anyone else in the New Testament, certainly, talked about God's judgment, that ultimately God would right every wrong, that he would separate the sheep from the goats and would send the goats — that is the wicked — into eternal judgment. So we know that a good God, a loving God, is also a just God who must punish sin.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

This last judgment isn't only for Hitler or Stalin or other people that we view to be particularly evil. We all deserve that final judgment, and the Christian Scriptures teach us that that judgment will come, either when Christ comes again, or also when we immediately die, I think there is a sort of judgment as well. That judgment will be based on whether we have confessed Jesus to be Savior and Lord, whether we have put our trust in him to forgive us of our sins. Another thing I'd like to say is that judgment has a function in the life of believers. Again and again we see in the Scriptures that the judgment to come is used as an argument as why Christians ought to persevere to the end. We see this in Revelation. Revelation is very strong on the last judgment. And the author says that this is a motivation for believers to endure and to persevere, knowing that the judgment is coming, knowing that those that have not followed Christ will face an eternity of punishment and even torment.

Dr. David Garner

You know, the question of final judgment, hell, the wrath of God, those are not topics that we eagerly discuss often in the church. And part of the reason for that is it's just difficult for us to get our minds around that degree of fury and wrath associated with the God that we envision in our minds. And I think that's precisely the problem. I think the problem that people have with final judgment and condemnation of the wicked is actually a problem that they have an invalid view of who God is. The fact of the matter is that, according to Scripture, it is within God's full right as the one who is completely other than we are, who has made us for the purpose of giving him glory, that is with his full right and full righteousness to condemn all who violate the covenant that he made. And to say anything less than that is to not do justice to the God who has revealed himself in Scripture as absolutely holy, perfect, pure, spotless.

He is a God that demands perfect justice, perfect allegiance, perfect commitment. And when those made in his image have shaken their fists in his face, he would be unjust not to carry out a full wrath upon those who have violated his law, his covenant, and his character.

The gospel is actually centered right there. None of us deserve anything less than that fury. We need to recognize that. It is the grace of God that is extended to some of us that he draws us to himself. How does he do that? How does he become just and the justifier of the wicked in history as we see Paul describe in Romans 3:21 and following? How does that happen? It happens because instead of God unleashing his fury on us, he has actually done so on his very own Son in our place. If you want to see a picture of the wrath of God, the place in which it comes to boldest view is none less than the cross itself when Jesus himself cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Why had he been forsaken? Because of your sin and my sin. And he held his wrath against his Son in our place that we might be received into his blessed company. So, as we think about the question why does God judge his enemies, the better question is why does God receive me into his presence? I am worthy of his wrath, but instead, he has granted me mercy, he has granted me forgiveness because he has held his wrath against his Son. I think about this when a very familiar text oft quoted comes from 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Isn't it stunning that he would use the term "just" there; that our forgiveness is actually grounded in God's justice instead of his mercy? I think the reason that that is true is because for him to now hold his wrath against us would be — to use what in common parlance in the legal field, would be double jeopardy — that he has held our sin against Jesus, and he's held it against us, too? No. He's held our sin against Jesus Christ.

The Apostles' Creed is a powerful declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, who is both fully God and fully man. He came to earth to atone for our sins and to offer us an abundant life. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice, God's faithful children have no fear of judgment. And even now, Jesus sits at the right hand of God and lives to intercede for us. So, how should we respond to the grace we've received in him? By living every day in thankful obedience, by relying on his strength and intercession, and by giving glory to God for and through our Savior Jesus Christ.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
FOUR

THE HOLY SPIRIT



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Four

The Holy Spirit

INTRODUCTION

Every Christian tradition has an emphasis. Some traditions emphasize worship. Some emphasize doctrine and truth. Some emphasize social involvement and good works. Some emphasize unity among believers. Some emphasize vibrant Christian living. And these are all good emphases.

But there is one underlying reality, often overlooked by many Christians, that unites all of our emphases. He is the one from whom all these good things in the body of Christ flow. He is the person that encourages and empowers us in these and all other areas of the Christian faith. He is always with us, laboring to apply salvation to us. He is the very life within us. He is none other than the Holy Spirit of God.

This is the fourth lesson in our series on *The Apostles' Creed*. And we have entitled this lesson "The Holy Spirit" because we'll be focusing on the article of faith in the creed that affirms belief in the Holy Spirit, the third person of our Triune God.

The Apostles' Creed directly addresses the subject of the Holy Spirit in the single line:

I believe in the Holy Spirit.

The only other statement about him in the creed is that the Holy Spirit conceived Jesus in Mary's womb. As you can see, the creed says relatively little about the Holy Spirit, at least explicitly. But it implies many important truths about him that have been crucial to believers throughout history.

Our discussion of the Holy Spirit will divide into three parts. First, we will talk about his divinity, his full membership in the Godhead. Second, we will consider his personhood, noting that the Holy Spirit is a true person, and not simply a divine force. And third, we will explore the work that he did in the past, and that he continues to do today. Let's begin with the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

DIVINITY

To explore the Holy Spirit's divinity, we'll look in two directions. On the one hand, we'll see that the *Apostles' Creed* affirms belief in the Spirit's divinity. And on the other hand, we'll look at the biblical basis for the creed's teaching. Let's start with the way the *Apostles' Creed* affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

APOSTLES' CREED

When it comes to talking about the person of the Holy Spirit, one of the questions that people often ask is whether or not the church always affirmed or professed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. And certainly we have in the historical record that the Nicene Creed and the Council of Nicea did not clarify that completely about the person of the Spirit, and so there was another council called, I believe, the council of Chalcedon, in which the council of Chalcedon affirms that the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped as fully divine along with the Son. That has caused some people to say, "Well the church didn't always confess the divinity of the Holy Spirit." I think that's wrong. The councils were never called to articulate a new doctrine. The councils were always called to clarify what the understanding of the church's historical and traditional teaching had been in the face of heresy. And therefore you can say that because of the declaration of the council we have very good reason to believe that from the apostolic era onward, and through the proclamation of the apostolic fathers and the early theologians of the church, that we can trace a teaching of the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

From the outset, we should admit that the *Apostles' Creed* does not explicitly state that the Holy Spirit is divine. But it implicitly affirms the Spirit's divinity in at least two ways. First, its Trinitarian structure equates the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son in important ways. And second, the creed's description of Jesus' conception indicates that the Holy Spirit is divine. Let's look at both of these issues, beginning with the structure of the creed itself.

Structure

You'll recall that in an earlier lesson, when we approached the creed from the perspective of the doctrine of God, we mentioned that the *Apostles' Creed* can be viewed as consisting of three main sections, each beginning with the statement "I believe." The first section speaks of belief in God the Father. The second section is about belief in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. And the third section summarizes belief in the Holy Spirit, and lists his active ministries.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the *Apostles' Creed* developed over time, and its earliest versions were local baptismal creeds. Some of these early creeds included the words "I believe" before the articles concerning Jesus. But others simply used the word "and," like the version of the creed that was standardized around A.D. 700. But regardless of their specific wording, the idea was the same: the creed was divided according to the three persons of God. And this division has been universally recognized

by the church. This Trinitarian formula expresses the belief that there is only one God, and that he exists in three persons, namely the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The early church father Hippolytus, who lived from A.D. 170 to 236, explained that the baptismal creed in use in his day made the Trinitarian structure very explicit. This creed probably began as a local creed, but it appears to have grown into fairly widespread use. Its language is very similar to the modern *Apostles' Creed*, and the way it was used in baptismal ceremonies highlights its strong Trinitarian emphasis.

Hippolytus explained that baptism was performed by immersing a person three times. At each immersion, the person being baptized was to affirm the section of the baptismal creed pertaining to one of the persons of the Trinity. First the person confessed belief in the articles of faith relating to the Father; then the person was immersed. Then came affirmation of the articles of faith pertaining to the Son, followed by a second immersion. And finally, the affirmation of the articles related to the Holy Spirit, and the third and final immersion. Through this and similar practices in the early church, we can see that the structure of the creed itself was intentionally designed to highlight the divinity and work of each person of the Trinity, including the Holy Spirit.

The second way that the *Apostles' Creed* affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit is through its description of Jesus' conception.

Jesus' Conception

The *Apostles' Creed* says that Jesus Christ, the Son of God,

Was conceived by the Holy Spirit.

This statement does not explicitly declare that the Holy Spirit is fully divine, but it strongly implies this belief. When speaking of Jesus' conception, the creed alludes to Luke 1:35, where the angel spoke these words to Mary:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

In this verse, the Holy Spirit is equated to the power of the Most High. As we will see later in this lesson, only God can have the power of the Most High. So, by alluding to this verse as an example of the Holy Spirit's work, the *Apostles' Creed* affirms the Spirit's full divinity. This conclusion is confirmed by Hebrews 10:5-7, which says:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God'" (Hebrews 10:5-7).

Here, we are told that creating Jesus' human body was specifically the work of God. In light of verses like these, it is safe to say that when the *Apostles' Creed* attributes Jesus' conception to the Holy Spirit, it intends to affirm the Spirit's divinity.

Now that we've seen how the *Apostles' Creed* expresses belief in the divinity of the Holy Spirit, let's look the biblical basis for what it says.

BIBLICAL BASIS

There is great value in recognizing that the faith we affirm today has been consistently affirmed throughout the centuries. This is one reason that it is so helpful to understand what the *Apostles' Creed* teaches about the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Even so, our greatest confidence is drawn from Scripture itself. We value the creed as a summary of Scripture, not as a replacement for Scripture. And for this reason, it's always important for us to make sure that what the creed says is biblical.

I think we see at least four senses in which Scripture points us to affirm the deity of the Holy Spirit. First, the fact that the Holy Spirit is used interchangeably with God in certain texts. A second line of evidence for the Holy Spirit's deity is the fact that certain attributes that only God possesses are attributed to the Spirit. Third, the Holy Spirit also performs works that only God can perform. And finally, we notice that the Holy Spirit is included in the single name — Matthew 28 — in which Christians are baptized.

— Dr. Keith Johnson

The biblical basis for believing in the divinity of the Holy Spirit can be demonstrated in many ways. But for our purposes, we will focus on the names he is called, the attributes he possesses, the work he performs, and the Trinitarian formulas that refer to him. Let's begin with the different names attributed to the Holy Spirit in Scripture.

Names

The Holy Spirit is called by a host of names in the Bible. Some of these names suggest his divinity in a very implicit manner. Others are very explicit in calling him divine. And still others fall on a continuum between these two extremes.

Perhaps the name that implies his divinity in the most implicit way is the name "Holy Spirit." The term "holy" can be used of aspects of creation that are not divine in any way. The word "holy" generally refers to things that are distinct from their common counterparts because they are special to God in some way. So, the word "holy" does not by itself indicate that the Holy Spirit is divine.

Even so, it is important to note that throughout the Old Testament, it is God who is repeatedly referred to as “the Holy One.” We see this in dozens of passages, such as 2 Kings 19:22, Isaiah 30:11-15, and Hosea 11:9-12. And there are other passages that seem to refer to God himself by the name Holy Spirit, such as Isaiah 63:10-11. We also see this type of naming in ancient but uninspired Jewish literature, such as in the *Book of Wisdom*, 9:17. Against this Old Testament backdrop, it is legitimate to see in the name “Holy Spirit” an implication of divinity.

With these very implicit names in mind, let’s look at some names that indicate the Holy Spirit’s divinity in a way that lies between very implicit and very explicit. These names include “the Spirit of the Lord,” “the Spirit of God,” and “the Spirit of the Living God.” Also, “the Spirit of Jesus,” “the Spirit of Christ,” “the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” And “the Spirit of your Father,” “the Spirit of his Son,” and “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead.” All these names suggest that the Holy Spirit is divine by indicating that God is united to the Holy Spirit in the same way that a human being is united to his own spirit. Paul explicitly made this connection in 1 Corinthians 2:11, where he wrote these words:

Who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Our spirits are part of what makes us human. And there is nothing inhuman about them. They are entirely human. In the same way, the Holy Spirit is entirely divine. And this is what enables him to know the mind of the Father. So, by his work of revealing God’s mind to Christians, the Holy Spirit demonstrates himself to be God.

Finally, there are some passages that very explicitly refer to the Holy Spirit by the name “God.” Listen to Peter’s words to Ananias in Acts 5:3-4:

Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ... You have not lied to men but to God (Acts 5:3-4).

In this passage, Peter first said that Ananias had lied to the Holy Spirit. And then Peter explained what he meant by saying Ananias had lied to God. Here the apostle Peter plainly called the Holy Spirit “God.”

So, as we consider the names by which the Holy Spirit is called in Scripture, we can see that many of them indicate his divinity in ways that range from very implicit to very explicit.

A second way the Bible demonstrates the divinity of the Holy Spirit is by ascribing divine attributes to him.

Attributes

Christian theologians have traditionally spoken of God as having two distinct types of attributes: communicable attributes and incommunicable attributes. On the one hand, he has communicable attributes, which can be “communicated” or “shared” in some way with his creatures.

For instance, God possesses the attribute of reason, which he communicates or shares with human beings. As finite creatures, human beings do not comprehend God’s reasoning perfectly. But we still have the capacity to think in reasonable ways. Of course, this doesn’t mean that we are divine. It simply proves that we were created by a rational God who communicated a measure of his attribute of reason to us. Our reason is derived from his; we reflect his attribute of reason because we are his creatures.

Another communicable attribute of God is his love. And many places in Scripture teach that our love for other people, and even for God, derives directly from God’s attribute of love. We see this in places like Galatians 5:22, Ephesians 5:1, 2 Timothy 1:7, and 1 John 4:7-21.

But God also possesses incommunicable attributes — attributes that by their very nature cannot be shared with his creatures. The most familiar incommunicable attributes of God are things like his omniscience, which is his infinite intelligence, knowledge and wisdom; his omnipotence, which is his infinite power; his omnipresence, which is his existence in all places at the same time; and his eternity, which is his everlasting and unbreakable self-existence. Because God’s incommunicable attributes can only belong to him, we can prove that the Holy Spirit is God by showing that he possesses one or more of these attributes. And as we survey Scripture we find that, in fact, he possesses them all. Consider first the Holy Spirit’s omniscience.

Scripture says that the Spirit perfectly knows the mind of God. We see this idea in Ephesians 1:17 and 1 Corinthians 2:10-11. Of course, God’s mind is infinite, requiring an equally infinite mind to know it perfectly. By the Holy Spirit’s ability to comprehend God’s omniscient mind, the Holy Spirit himself is proven to be omniscient. And because he is omniscient, he must also be God.

The Holy Spirit is also proven to be God by his omnipotence. His power is the unlimited power of God. Many passages in Scripture speak of the power of the Holy Spirit, such as 1 Samuel 10:6, Romans 15:19, 1 Corinthians 12:11, and 1 Thessalonians 1:5. Consider the Holy Spirit’s association with God’s power in Genesis 1:1-3:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light (Genesis 1:1-3).

As we have mentioned before, Old Testament references to God generally refer to the entire Trinity. But it is also legitimate to see an emphasis on one person or another, according to the language and context. In this case, the emphasis is on the person of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of God. So, the work of creating the light was done by the Holy Spirit. The same is true of everything else that God created in this chapter. But in order

for the Holy Spirit to have had such omnipotence, in order for him to have created something out of nothing, he must have been fully divine.

Another incommunicable attribute the Holy Spirit possesses is omnipresence. Passages like Psalm 139:7-10 teach us that the Spirit is present throughout every part of creation, from the heights of heaven to the depths of the sea.

And the Holy Spirit also has the attribute of eternality. Hebrews 9:14 refers to the Holy Spirit as the “eternal Spirit,” meaning that he has always existed, and will continue to exist forever.

Through these incommunicable attributes, and others like them, the Bible clearly indicates that the Holy Spirit is God.

Work

A third evidence in Scripture for the divinity of the Holy Spirit is the type of work he does. We will investigate the Holy Spirit’s work in much greater depth later in this lesson. At this point, we simply want to take a quick look at a few of his works in order to see how they demonstrate his divinity.

Part of the proof for that in Scripture is looking at his works. The Spirit of God is the one who bears witness of Christ, joins us to Christ, brings about new life, brings about resurrection, is involved in creation. All of these works are nothing less than the works of God. They are not applied to humans; they are not applied to angelic figures or any other created thing. They are only that which God himself does. And on that basis then, we see that the Holy Spirit does the very works of God, and thus is not only personal, but also deity.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

The Holy Spirit performs many works that the Bible indicates are appropriate to God alone, and that exhibit divine power and attributes. For example, he creates new life when he regenerates our spirits, as we read in Romans 8:11. He is our access to the Father, as we are taught in Ephesians 2:18. He applies salvation to us, as we learn in Romans 5–8. His is the power behind the miracles of the prophets, and even of our Lord Jesus, as we see in passages like Romans 15:4,19. Although the list of the divine works of the Holy Spirit is nearly endless, let’s focus our attention on just a couple prominent examples for the sake of illustration.

In the first place, the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture, which is the very word of God. And in recognizing that the Word of the Holy Spirit is the Word of God, we acknowledge that the Holy Spirit *is* God himself. We find this idea in Matthew 10:20, John 3:34, Acts 1:16 and 4:31, and Ephesians 6:17.

As just one example, listen to Peter’s words in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man,

but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

In this passage, Peter taught that to be carried along by the Holy Spirit is to speak from God. Scripture is the word of God because it is inspired and spoken by God, specifically, the Holy Spirit, who is the third person of God.

As another example, the Holy Spirit's work as Counselor shows that he is divine. In John 14–16, Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the counselor who does things like reveal truth, convict the world of sin, and testify to Jesus. And as odd as it may sound at first, this ministry makes the Holy Spirit even more valuable than the immediate earthly presence of Jesus himself. As Jesus said in John 16:7:

I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).

Think about this for a moment. According to Jesus himself, the church is better off with the presence of the Holy Spirit than we would be with the immediate bodily presence of Jesus. But a created, finite being could never outmatch the blessing of the earthly presence of Christ. No, in order for the Holy Spirit to be more beneficial to us than God the Son, the Spirit must himself be God.

Formulas

A fourth way Scripture asserts the divinity of the Holy Spirit is through Trinitarian formulas that include his name alongside those of the Father and the Son.

A Trinitarian formula is a passage in Scripture that explicitly mentions all three persons of the Trinity on a relatively equal basis, typically by demonstrating their cooperation. By mentioning the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as equal partners, the Bible indicates that the Holy Spirit is just as divine as the Father and Son. We find these formulas in Romans 15:30, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, and several other places. Let's look at just two examples of these formulas.

The first one can be found in Matthew 28:19, where Jesus gave this command:

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

In this formula, Jesus indicated that baptism was to be performed in the name or authority of all three persons of the Trinity. This command makes no distinction between the relative honor of the persons of God. Instead, it presents all three as equals.

A second clear example appears in 2 Corinthians 13:14, where Paul wrote these words:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Corinthians 13:14).

In this closing benediction to his letter, Paul grouped together: the Son, namely the Lord Jesus Christ; the Father, whom he simply referred to as God; and the Holy Spirit. In doing so, he presented all three persons as equal partners in providing the blessings of salvation.

Formulas like these indicate that the Holy Spirit is an equal person in the Godhead. They demonstrate that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal to each other in matters that involve essential divine attributes and activities, such as providing grace and salvation to sinners, and receiving honor and worship as God.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches that one God eternally exists in a unity of being as three persons. Because the Holy Spirit is God, it's right and appropriate that we not only pray to him, but honor him as God

— Dr. Keith Johnson

Now that we have considered the divinity of the Holy Spirit, we are ready to turn to our second topic: his personhood. In this section, we will look at the fact that we have to deal with the Holy Spirit as a true person and not simply as a divine force or power.

PERSONHOOD

Throughout the history of the church, many groups have denied that the Holy Spirit is a person that has a distinct self-awareness and divine personal attributes. Some have believed that he is simply the Father in another form. Others have argued that the name "Holy Spirit" is just a name that ancient writers used to describe God's power. But from the structure of the *Apostles' Creed*, we can see that it affirms the biblical position that Holy Spirit is a real and distinct person within the Godhead. This is the clear teaching of Scripture, and it has been the position of every branch of the Christian church throughout the ages.

The Holy Spirit is described in personal terms in the New Testament, not just an impersonal force. And the rest of the church has gathered around that witness and said this is what we also believe. It's true that in terms of articulating it in the later creed, it took three or four hundred years before there was a real debate about this. But when Basil of Caesarea discusses it in the fourth century, he's not articulating a new doctrine, he's just bringing to the table what people have already been believing for three hundred years.

— Dr. Peter Walker

From the outset we need to admit that the *Apostles' Creed* does not spell these matters out explicitly. But when we consider the important theological debates about the Holy Spirit in the first few centuries of Christianity, we can see that the creed's affirmation of the Holy Spirit as a member of the Trinity is also an implied affirmation of his personhood. Along with the rest of biblical Christianity, the *Apostles' Creed* rejects de-personalizing the Spirit of God into a mere force or divine power.

As we consider the biblical basis of the creed's affirmation of the Holy Spirit's personhood, our discussion will divide into three parts. First, we'll look at the personal attributes that the Holy Spirit possesses. Second, we will focus on his personal distinction from the Father and the Son. And third, we will describe his personal relationship to the other members of the Trinity. We'll begin with the attributes that prove the Holy Spirit is a full person.

ATTRIBUTES

When we speak of the personal attributes of the Holy Spirit, we have in mind those qualities he possesses that are unique to persons — things that can only be true about him if he's a real person and not simply an impersonal force.

I find it very instructive that in the New Testament, that not only does the New Testament talk about the names and titles of God the Father, the works of God the Father, the attributes of God the Father, the actions of God the Father, but it talks about the same of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In other words, all the personal properties that are attributed to God the Father in the Bible are attributed to God the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. And this, yet again, emphasizes to us that the Holy Spirit is a person, not a force or a power.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The Holy Spirit has far too many personal attributes for us to catalog them all in this lesson, so we will simply provide four examples to demonstrate his personhood. We'll begin by saying that the Holy Spirit has a will. This is the faculty he uses to plan, to desire and to choose. Clearly, any being that can do these things cannot be a mere force or power. As one example of his will, consider 1 Corinthians 12:11, where Paul talked about the distribution of spiritual gifts. Listen to what he wrote:

One and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:11, NASB).

The Holy Spirit wants certain people to have certain gifts, and others to have other gifts. Impersonal forces do not have plans and desires. Only persons do. Therefore, the Holy Spirit must be a person.

The Holy Spirit also has the attribute of intelligence, through which he possesses knowledge and the ability to teach others. He expresses this intelligence in many ways,

such as by searching and knowing the mind of God, as we read in 1 Corinthians 2:10-12, and by having his own mind as we read in Romans 8:27. He also gives wisdom and knowledge, as in 1 Corinthians 12:8. And he teaches in Luke 12:12.

Jesus himself talked about the Spirit's intelligence in John 14:26. Listen to what he told the apostles there:

The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).

Impersonal forces do not think, know and teach. So, the attribute of intelligence proves that the Spirit is a person.

The Holy Spirit also has emotions, internal feelings and affections that he expresses in response to other persons and events. Like his other personal attributes, his emotions prove that he is a person, and not simply a power. For example, the Holy Spirit's love is mentioned in Romans 15:30. His joy is spoken of in 1 Thessalonians 1:6. And listen to the way his grief is talked about in Ephesians 4:30:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Ephesians 4:30).

The fact that the Holy Spirit has emotions like grief indicates that he is a true person.

Moreover, the Spirit possesses what we might call the attribute of agency. He has a will, the ability to intend things and to act on his own accord. And this enables him to perform many actions that can only be done by persons. For instance, the Holy Spirit offers testimony in John 15:26 and Romans 8:16. He fellowships with us in Philippians 2:1. And he speaks and commands in Acts 8:29 and 13:2. As just one example, listen to the words of Romans 8:26-27:

The Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express... the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:26-27).

The fact that the Holy Spirit prays for believers is another proof of his personhood. Impersonal powers and forces do not pray and intercede, groaning in sincerity. Only persons can do these things.

Charles Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher who lived from 1834 to 1892, spoke this way in his sermon *The Holy Spirit's Intercession*, based on Romans 8:26-27. Listen to what he said:

The Holy Spirit helps us to bear the infirmity of our body and of our mind; he helps us to bear our cross, whether it be physical pain, or mental depression, or spiritual conflict, or slander, or poverty, or persecution. He helps our infirmity; and with a helper so divinely strong we need not fear for the result. God's grace will be sufficient for us; his strength will be made perfect in weakness.

It's encouraging to know that there's something at work within me, someone at work within me, that is far more powerful than I. And even though I may sometimes feel helpless, enslaved, whatever it might be, that's only the feelings talking; that's not the reality. The almighty Holy Spirit of God is at work relentlessly conforming me to the image of Christ — great encouragement! It's also sobering because that means that I'm always in the presence of a living God, always living before the face of God. That although I may hide my falls from other people, there is no such thing as secret sin because I live in the very presence of God. And the Holy Spirit is a holy spirit; the Spirit of God is pure. Certainly as a pastor I want to hit that balance as I'm counseling people struggling with sin. Don't be hopeless. The Holy Spirit is at work in your heart and in your life and trust and rest in Christ to give you victory in your struggles with sin. And don't be complacent because the same Holy Spirit is always at work and present in and with you.

— Dr. Dennis Johnson

Now that we have seen how the Holy Spirit's personal attributes demonstrate his personhood, we are ready to consider his distinction from the Father and Son as a separate person within the Trinity.

DISTINCTION

We should begin by admitting that there are several passages in the Bible where the distinction between the Spirit and the other persons of the Trinity is not entirely clear. For example, the Holy Spirit is identified as the Spirit of God's Son in Galatians 4:6, and as the Spirit of the Father in Matthew 10:20. And he has several other names that highlight the relational connections between the members of the Trinity, rather than their distinctiveness.

Although these kinds of passages were the sources of much debate in the early church, these close associations should not surprise us. After all, the three persons of the Trinity are only one God. So, it makes perfect sense to think of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, and at the same time to insist that he is an entirely distinct person from them.

One way to highlight the distinctions between the Spirit and the other persons of the Trinity is to look at passages in Scripture that show them interacting with one another in ways that emphasize their differences. There are many passages that show these distinctions, but two passages will suffice to show that the Spirit is distinct from the Son and from the Father. First, consider Jesus' words in John 16:7:

I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (John 16:7).

Jesus said in this instance that the Holy Spirit would not come unless the Son first went away. Clearly, he distinguished himself from the Spirit by saying that one goes before the other comes. Each one had an appointed role, and the role of the Spirit would not begin until the Son had completed his earthly work and ascended into heaven. This makes it clear that the Spirit is distinct from the Son.

In a similar way, the Spirit also does things that distinguish him from the Father. For example, as part of his role as our Counselor, the Holy Spirit is our defense attorney, assisting our prayers by pleading our case before God.

In general, the work of the Spirit is to apply the work of Christ. Christ has given his life, a sacrifice for us. It's the work of the Spirit to take that work and apply it to our hearts, and so we need both. I mean if we didn't have the Spirit to apply it to our hearts we would not be in very good shape because the work of Christ — God intends for it to change us from within. And so the Spirit comes and the Spirit regenerates, gives us new birth. The Spirit makes us holy — sanctification — and the Spirit is constantly giving us gifts and blessings and fruits in our lives, and all of that, so the work of the Spirit is quite indispensable.

— Dr. John Frame

For example, in Romans 8:26-27, Paul wrote these words:

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:26-27).

When Paul taught that the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf with the Father, he demonstrated that they are distinct persons — one interceding, and the other hearing the intercession.

He intercedes with the Father. He speaks within our hearts when we don't know what to pray for and he groans within us, as Paul says, so that we say those things to God that we don't even know to say.

— Dr. John Frame

We can say that the normative pattern for prayer is to pray to the Father, in the name of the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet we are members of a religion of such grace and freedom that the Holy Spirit can also be directly addressed without any compromising of the integrity of God or any rejection of the trajectory of our prayers.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

This prayer to the Holy Spirit, often attributed to the church father Augustine, who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, provides a wonderful model for our own prayers:

**Breathe in me, O *Holy Spirit*,
that my thoughts may all be holy;
Act in me, O *Holy Spirit*,
that my work, too, may be holy;
Draw my heart, O *Holy Spirit*,
that I love but what is holy;
Strengthen me, O *Holy Spirit*,
to defend all that is holy;
Guard me, then, O *Holy Spirit*,
that I always may be holy.**

Having talked about the Holy Spirit's personhood in terms of his personal attributes and his distinction from the Father and Son, let's now look at his relationship to the other persons of the Trinity.

RELATIONSHIP

As we have mentioned throughout these lessons, the relationships between the persons of the Trinity have traditionally been described from two different perspectives. Specifically, theologians have spoken of the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. Both of these are perspectives on the same Trinity — the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But they emphasize different aspects of the relationships between these three divine persons.

When we talk about the ontological Trinity, we are focusing on God's being and existence. From this perspective, the Holy Spirit is equal in power and glory to the Father and the Son. All three of God's persons are infinite, eternal and unchangeable. And each has the same essential divine attributes, such as wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

And when we talk about the economic Trinity, we are considering how God's persons interact with each other. From this perspective, each person of the Godhead has different responsibilities, different authority, and a different assigned role. The Spirit's

authority is subject to the higher authority of the Father and the Son. And the Spirit's role is largely to carry out their instructions and to bring them glory.

Wherever God is, his Spirit is there. His Spirit not only refers to his presence, but also to his action. And so, as you follow through as God relates to his creation, it's impossible to describe that without the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is right now guiding human history. The Holy Spirit is indeed the agent of the very providential care and love of God.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

In Christian theology, in both the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity, the Holy Spirit is called the third person.

He is the third person of the ontological Trinity because he is breathed out by the Father, who is the first person, and by the Son, who is the second person.

Now, we should pause to say that the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy teach that the Holy Spirit is breathed out by the Father alone, and not by the Son. This difference in teaching was part of the reason for the schism between the Eastern and Western churches that began in A.D. 1054 and continues to this day. Of course, because the *Apostles' Creed* was created before this controversy, it did not address this disagreement between the East and the West. And both branches of the church affirm all the statements of the *Apostles' Creed*.

With regard to the economic Trinity, the Holy Spirit is said to be the third person because he holds the third rank, being subordinate both to the Father and to the Son. The Scriptures indicate his subordination in a number of ways. For instance, he is sent or given by the Father and the Son. Scripture teaches this in passages like Luke 11:13, John 14:26 and 15:26, and Acts 2:33. And when he comes, the Spirit obeys the Father and the Son by doing the work they've sent him to do. We learn of this in places like John 16:13, Romans 8:11, and 1 Peter 1:2.

Of course, even when we say that the Holy Spirit holds the lowest rank from the perspective of the economic Trinity, it is important to emphasize that he is still fully God, and has absolutely sovereign authority over every aspect of creation. Moreover, within the Trinity, there is a sense of mutual deference, since what one person does, they all do. So, the Holy Spirit's subordination to the Father and the Son does not mean that he is somehow inherently inferior to them — he is not. He is fully equal to them in their essential divinity.

The Holy Spirit's personhood is an indispensable part of Christian theology. And as we have seen, we have many reasons to affirm it. The Holy Spirit possesses attributes that clearly mark him as a distinct, self-aware personality. And his relationships and interactions with the Father and the Son leave no doubt that he is a vibrant person and not simply a mindless force or power. We can and should have great confidence in this traditional doctrine.

So far in this lesson on the Holy Spirit, we have looked at the *Apostles' Creeds'* affirmation of the Spirit's divinity, and of his full personhood. At this point, we are ready

to address our third major topic: the work that the Holy Spirit has done throughout history and continues to do today.

WORK

One benefit of having a rich understanding of the Spirit's work is just to know that God works with us in a very personal way. He doesn't press buttons. He comes to us and he interacts with us in a very personal way. So the Spirit actually dwells in our hearts. He prays with us and for us. He gives us gifts of holiness, and he just gets involved with us in so many ways. In fact, in every phase of our life, he gives us the fruits of Christian virtues, as Paul says in Galatians. He gives us many gifts for service in the church, and all of this is God's work with us through the Spirit.

— Dr. John Frame

Although the *Apostles' Creed* does not explicitly describe much about the Spirit's work, by affirming "I believe in the Holy Spirit," the creed originally implied a number of beliefs about the work of the Spirit.

There are many ways to describe the Spirit's work, but we will explore just four of its aspects. First, we'll look first at his creative power. Second, we'll focus on his work of sanctification. Third, we'll talk about his administration of grace. And fourth, we'll describe the revelation he provides. Let's begin with his creative power.

CREATIVE POWER

By the term "creative power," we mean both the Holy Spirit's ability to create new things, and his ability to govern and to alter what has been created.

When you read the opening chapter of the Bible, Genesis 1, the Spirit is hovering above the waters, the Holy Spirit. When you turn to Colossians 1, we read that Christ is the creator, and he creates by means of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is also involved in re-creation. Recreation in terms of what we might think of in conversion. It is the Spirit who regenerates. Unless a man is born of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. But the Spirit is not only at work in regenerating us individually, but in regenerating the cosmos. So Paul speaks in Romans 8 that the creation itself groans and travails in birth, waiting for the regeneration of all things, a work of the Holy Spirit.

— Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

Our discussion of the Holy Spirit's creative power will focus on three different levels of his activity. First, we'll talk about his creative works in the natural world. Second, we'll focus on the spiritual gifts he provides to the church. And third, we will consider his role in the personal renewal of our human spirits and hearts. Let's begin with the way his creative power is demonstrated in the natural world.

Natural World

The Holy Spirit's creative power in the natural world is first seen in the opening verses of the Bible. Earlier in this lesson, we looked at the Spirit's role in the creation account of Genesis 1, noting that he exercised divine omnipotence to create the world from nothing. We find a similar idea in Psalm 104:30, where the psalmist praised God for sending his Spirit to create the earth and all of its creatures, not only in the original creation week, but also on a daily basis. Psalm 33:6 echoes this idea, and Job 33:4 extends it specifically to human beings.

As just one example, listen to the words of Psalm 104:30:

When you send your Spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth (Psalm 104:30).

In this verse, the psalmist expressed his understanding of the way everything in creation comes to exist. And he attributed everything to the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit's creative power in the natural world can also be seen through the many miracles he empowered in Scripture. For example, in the Old Testament, he enabled Moses to get water from a rock in Exodus 17:6. And he multiplied the widow's flour and oil in 1 Kings 17.

In the New Testament, he enabled Jesus to multiply food to feed five thousand people in Matthew 14, and four thousand people in Matthew 15. He raised Jesus from the dead, as we read in Romans 8:11. And he also empowered all of Paul's miracles and ministry, as we learn in Romans 15:18-19.

Of course, one of his greatest miracles was the incarnation, causing the Virgin Mary to become pregnant with Jesus. This particular miracle, recorded in Luke 1:35, is the only work of the Holy Spirit explicitly mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*.

Even today, the Holy Spirit has dramatic power to create, to renew, and to bring all of creation to the final state God intended for it.

In fact, his renewal of the world won't be finished until he completely reverses all the effects of humanity's fall into sin. Genesis 3 tells us that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God cursed them. And because humanity had been given authority as God's vice-regents or representatives over the whole earth, God's curse on Adam and Eve impacted the whole creation, including even the ground itself.

Since that time, the Holy Spirit has been working in the world to restore it and to bring it to its final state. And the result will be the new heavens and new earth that we read about in places like Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1.

Now that we have looked at the Holy Spirit's creative power in the natural world, we are ready to see how he uses his creative power to provide spiritual gifts to the church.

Spiritual Gifts

When we speak of spiritual gifts we have in mind:

Abilities of supernatural origin that the Holy Spirit gives to individuals for the purpose of building up the church.

The Spirit creates these gifts by granting new abilities to people who previously lacked them, or by enhancing existing abilities beyond the natural talents or experience of the person who receives them.

Spiritual gifts in the New Testament are special, unique abilities, supernaturally given. I think it's important to emphasize they are more than just talents. They are supernaturally given to every believer. Every believer has a spiritual gift or possibly spiritual gifts.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

Lists of the types of gifts the Holy Spirit gave to the early church appear in places like Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. Some of these gifts resemble natural talents or universal human abilities. These are abilities that even people outside the church possess in some measure, simply because they are created in God's image — things like wisdom, knowledge, serving, teaching, encouraging, generosity, leadership, and mercy. But other spiritual gifts obviously have direct supernatural origins, such as healing and miraculous powers. And still others lie somewhere on a continuum between the natural and the supernatural, such as prophecy, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, and discerning spirits.

Now, all Christians agree that the Holy Spirit gives supernatural gifts to his church. But within this general agreement, there are a variety of nuanced views that fall somewhere along a scale. Some churches hold a cessationist position, believing that in the modern age the Holy Spirit only gives gifts that resemble natural talents. The more spectacular gifts are thought to have died out, perhaps after the apostolic age, or with the closing of the canon of Scripture.

Other churches hold to a continuationist position. They believe that the Spirit still gives all the same gifts that we find manifested in the New Testament. Within this position, there are many different viewpoints regarding which gifts any individual Christian can be expected to receive.

Between these two extremes, there are a variety of moderate views. Moderate churches tend to believe that the Holy Spirit can still give spectacular gifts when he wants to. But they do not insist that the Holy Spirit must always give every type of gift to his church. These churches emphasize the freedom of the Holy Spirit to act in any way at any time.

But one thing that all these positions have in common is the belief that the Holy Spirit continues to give at least some gifts to his people for the benefit of his church. Spiritual gifts are the power of God, and they are to be used for his people as a whole. They are not given to indulge the desires of individuals, or even to enhance the spiritual life of individuals. Rather, they are given to empower the church for ministry and to help it grow to maturity in Christ. We see this in Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:7, and Ephesians 4:7-16. As just one example, listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:7:

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7).

As Paul indicated here, spiritual gifts are given for the sake of the church. Gifted individuals may also benefit from their own gifts. But the primary goal and focus of gifting is the benefit of the church. They are creative works of power that the Holy Spirit uses to build up his church as a whole.

One of the most important things we know about spiritual gifts is that they should develop, be discovered and be used within the church, which is the body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are not given to an individual so that he or she may enjoy and benefit from them alone. They are given to build up groups of people, groups of believers, namely, the church of Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Riad Kassis, translation

Spiritual gifts given to us by the Spirit are for the edification of the church, the building up of the church, for the doing of Christian ministry, for the encouragement of one another and carrying out the Great Commission. The primary focus that we have in our day, particularly with charismatic issues on tongues and prophecies, is really a secondary emphasis that we see in Scripture. We want to focus on spiritual gifts the way the New Testament does — that which gives us comfort, that which shows that the new covenant age has dawned, the personal work of the Spirit within us and corporately within its community, that which then carries out the work of ministry, individually, corporately, in the world. That emphasis is what we need to really be focusing on and seeing worked out in our own individual lives as well as the corporate life of the church as we live in the world.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

With this understanding of how the Holy Spirit uses his creative power in the natural world and in providing spiritual gifts to the church, let's look at how his power is manifested in the personal renewal of each believer's spirit and heart.

Personal Renewal

Scripture teaches that human beings are born in a state of spiritual death. As Romans 5:12-19 indicate, we are guilty of Adam's sin, and liable unto death as a result. So, in order to save us from this predicament, the Holy Spirit creates new life in us by making our spirits live before God. The Bible talks about this new life in terms of regeneration and being born again. We read about this rebirth in John 3:3-8, Titus 3:5, 1 John 5:1-18, and several other places. As just one example, listen to Paul's words in Titus 3:5:

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

After we are regenerated, the Holy Spirit continues to work in us to change our thoughts, feelings and actions, in order to make us the kind of people that love and obey the Lord. The New Testament speaks of this in passages like Romans 8:1-16, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Galatians 5:16-25, and Philippians 2:13. Perhaps the most well-known discussion of the Holy Spirit's transformative power is Paul's description of the fruit that the Holy Spirit creates in the lives of believers. Listen to what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:22-23:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

All these changes in our character result from the active, creative power of the Holy Spirit as he conforms us to the image of Jesus Christ.

And of course, on the last day, the Holy Spirit will use his creative power to resurrect the physical bodies of all faithful Christians, giving us perfect, incorruptible bodies like the one Jesus already has. Listen to what Paul said about this in Romans 8:23:

We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

When Paul said that followers of Christ have the firstfruits of the Spirit, he drew his language from the Old Testament practice of bringing offerings from the first harvest as representative of the entire harvest of that year. In much the same way, the Holy Spirit's current work in believers is just the firstfruits of something much greater to come. The Holy Spirit's work won't be finished until he completely re-creates us, removing our curse and corruption, and restoring us to a pristine, sinless state. So far, the Spirit has given our spirit's new life. But he will eventually re-create our bodies, too.

Now that we have looked at the Holy Spirit's works of creative power, we should turn our attention to his work of sanctification.

SANCTIFICATION

When we speak of the Spirit's work of sanctification, we are talking about the act of making people and things holy. This is the work the Spirit does to set people and things apart for God's use, to purify them, and to make them fit to be near his unveiled glory. In many ways, this idea is closely related to the concept of renewal that we looked at in the last section of this lesson.

The Bible often says that the church is holy or sanctified by the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. We see this idea in places like Romans 15:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11, 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and 1 Peter 1:1-2. Listen to the way Paul talked about the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17:

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? ... [T]he temple of God is holy, and that is what you are (1 Corinthians 3:16-17, NASB).

In the Old Testament, the Jewish temple was God's earthly palace where his special presence used to dwell. It was his house on earth, as Solomon proclaimed in 2 Chronicles 6:1. But in the New Testament, God no longer dwelled in the temple. Instead, the Holy Spirit sanctified the church as the new temple. This same idea is mentioned explicitly in Ephesians 2:22, and is echoed in other parts of Scripture.

The Holy Spirit is also said to sanctify individual believers by indwelling them. This is the idea that the Holy Spirit actually lives within the hearts of believers. This indwelling is mentioned in many places in Scripture, such as Romans 8:9-16, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Timothy 1:14, and James 4:5.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is an essential reality for the believer. When God moves in and makes Christians new creatures in Christ, the Holy Spirit takes over in their lives. And it's absolutely essential that we depend on him, rely on his indwelling power, or else we're just living in the flesh. We've got to be able to tell the difference between living in the Spirit and living in the flesh because living in the Spirit is what enables us to glorify Christ in the way he wants us to.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

This indwelling has several results. To list just a few, it purifies us from sin, it sets us apart for God, and we enjoy and benefit from the Spirit's influence in our hearts and minds. Listen to the way Paul talked about these things in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11:

The wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God ... And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, believers have been purified and set apart for God, so that they are no longer counted among the wicked.

Have you ever stopped to think about how special it is that God himself lives inside you? The creator of the universe loves you so much that he has united you to himself for the rest of eternity. You do not teeter on the edge of his approval. You are hidden deep within his heart. And this relationship strengthens you against sin. It gives you the power to resist temptation, and to live in ways that please God. And when you do sin — no matter how bad it is — you are still acceptable in God's sight. You are still fit to enter his presence to fellowship with him, to worship him, and of course, to ask for and to receive his forgiveness.

So far, we've considered the Holy Spirit's creative power and his work of sanctification. At this point, we're ready to talk about the various ways that he administers divine grace.

GRACE

We'll talk about the Holy Spirit's administration of three types of grace: common grace, covenant grace, and saving grace. Let's begin with common grace.

Common Grace

Common grace is the forbearance that God shows and the benefits that he gives to all humanity, regardless of their faith. The Holy Spirit does not give common grace to all people equally. Rather, he works here and there, according to his plans and desires.

For example, common grace is seen in the way that the Holy Spirit restrains sin in the world. Fallen unbelievers are controlled by sin, as Paul taught in Romans 8:1-8. They are hostile to God by nature, and they love sin. But as Paul taught throughout Romans 7-8, the Holy Spirit combats sin in the world. This is similar to the way he works in believers after he regenerates them. Although he does not grant a blessing this great to unbelievers, it is still true that he often restrains them so that they do not sin as greatly as they are able.

Another aspect of common grace that is frequently seen in the world is the knowledge that unbelievers acquire, and the good things they are able to do with that knowledge. Unbelievers can learn many valuable truths that they use to benefit the church and its believers, along with the rest of humanity. And whenever anyone discovers something useful, that knowledge is a gracious gift from the Holy Spirit.

John Calvin, the famous Protestant Reformer who lived from A.D. 1509 to 1564, described the Holy Spirit's common gifts of knowledge in his work the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, chapter 2, sections 15 and 16. Listen to what he wrote there:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless

clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we will neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God ... But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use their assistance.

Covenant Grace

In many places in Scripture, we can see a second type of grace administered by the Holy Spirit that is sometimes called covenant grace.

Covenant grace consists of the forbearance and benefits that God gives to everyone that is part of his covenant people, even if they are not true believers. In the Old Testament, Israel was God's covenant people because the whole nation was under God's special covenants with Abraham, Moses and David. In the New Testament, God's covenant people are the visible church which consists of people associated with the church even if they are not true believers. God's covenant grace is even more abundant and forbearing than his common grace.

For example, God was very patient and merciful toward ancient Israel, even though Israel was often unfaithful to him, and sinned greatly against him. Because of God's covenant with Israel, he did not destroy them as a nation, but always preserved a faithful remnant. Paul talked about this explicitly in Romans 11:1-5. Moreover, because of God's covenant, even the unbelievers in ancient Israel received his blessings. Perhaps the greatest example of this is the Exodus from Egypt. Listen to what Moses wrote in Exodus 2:23-25:

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (Exodus 2:23-25).

Notice why God was concerned about Israel and rescued them. It was not because they were faithful to him, but because they were included in the covenant he had made with their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

And the same thing is true in the church today. For example, everyone that is part of the church is regularly presented with the gospel and the opportunity to repent and be saved. And they share in those blessings that God grants to the church as a whole. In fact, unbelievers in the church even benefit from the spiritual gifts of the church, as we learn in Hebrews 6:4-6. This is why Hebrews 10:29 says that unbelievers in the church insult the Spirit of grace through their unfaithfulness.

When we attend church, there are people there who are both saved and unsaved. Unsaved people benefit from what I would simply say is just being in the presence of Christians. That's a good thing. What

God makes of that, we can't always tell. But just to be there is a good thing. John Calvin, talked about common grace; John Wesley, talked about the prevenient grace of God — that's the way grace works in the life of a person before they consciously profess faith in Jesus Christ. So, that grace is at work, and I think probably in two major ways. One is, we become convicted of our sins. We come to see that sin is real, that sin damages us, but it also breaks the heart of God. You have to be in a place of grace to see that. And then, when that conviction of sin begins to operate in us, then we begin to be convinced, as some theologians have put it, that there is another way to live, that there is a better way to live. And so I guess, for the unsaved person in particular, it's just having the opportunity to see life from those vantage points, trusting that when they do God will work in their lives.

— Dr. Steve Harper

It truly places them by God's providence in the context in which they can hear the gospel, in which they may see the gospel lived, in which they may encounter what Jesus Christ, alive in the fellowship of a group of people, looks like. And therefore, in the sovereignty of God, perhaps that is his mechanism to bring someone before they are saved into the life of the church so that they can respond to the gospel.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

Saving Grace

Finally, the third type of grace administered by the Holy Spirit is what many theologians call saving grace.

Saving grace is the application of the eternal benefits of Christ's perfect life, death, resurrection, ascension and glorious return to those who receive him as Lord and Savior. Every believer receives saving grace from the Holy Spirit.

The blessings we receive as a result of the Holy Spirit's administration of saving grace are already reserved for us on the basis of Jesus' work. But we do not begin to receive their benefits until the Holy Spirit applies them to us. The most obvious of these blessings are things like regeneration, by which the Holy Spirit gives new life to our spirits, so that we are born again. We read about this in passages like John 3:5-8, Romans 8:2-11, and Titus 3:5. Repentance, forgiveness of sins and justification are also saving graces the Holy Spirit applies to us, as we see in Zechariah 2:10, 1 Corinthians 6:11, and Titus 3:5-8. The New Testament also speaks of salvation as a whole being applied to us by the Holy Spirit, as in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 and Titus 3:5.

When Christians talk about individual salvation, we tend to focus on Jesus Christ and his work. And of course this is a fine thing to do. But it's also important to recognize the role the Holy Spirit plays.

Understanding what the Holy Spirit does in the believer makes for the fullest possible Christian life. The Holy Spirit motivates us, and that's a key understanding, to realize that both the desire and the power to live for Christ comes from the Holy Spirit. This is part of that rich understanding of what the Holy Spirit does for us, that he's the one who illumines us to understand the word of God. He is the one who gives us the spiritual appetites for the things of God, that we hunger for God, for the things of God, that we love the people of God, that we want to serve God. That takes a lot of the pressure off the individual. It takes a lot of pressure off the person of thinking: "It's all up on my shoulders, God has told me what to do, now it's up to me to do it, it's up to me to obey." Well, we do have the responsibility. God doesn't obey for us, but we acknowledge that he does give us the desire and the power, the insight. It's all to His glory.

— Dr. Donald Whitney

More than any other person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is active in our lives, making sure that we receive forgiveness, and joy, and goodness, and strength, and peace, and all the other blessings of salvation. So, if we want to receive these things in abundance, we should appeal to him for his saving grace. And beyond this, we need to honor the Spirit for his faithfulness and mercy. The saving grace he grants us makes him more than worthy of our thanks, our adoration, our worship, and our love.

Now that we have explored the Holy Spirit's works of creative power, sanctification and grace, we are ready to look at his works of revelation.

REVELATION

The Holy Spirit is generally identified as the person of the Trinity who is the agent of revelation, testimony and understanding. We see this in John 14:26, 1 Corinthians 2:4,10, Ephesians 3:5, and many other places. In fact, the association between the Spirit and revelation is so close that the Holy Spirit is actually called the Spirit of truth in passages like John 14:17, 15:26, and 16:13. And in 1 John 5:6, John went so far as to say that:

The Spirit is the truth (1 John 5:6).

In a similar way, Paul summed up the Spirit's role in Ephesians 1:17 by calling him:

The Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Ephesians 1:17).

We'll speak of three aspects of the Spirit's work of revelation. First, we'll talk about general revelation. Second, we'll look at special revelation. And third, we'll focus on illumination and inward leading. Let's look first at general revelation.

General Revelation

General revelation is: God's use of the natural world and its workings to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to all humanity.

Scripture speaks of general revelation in many places, such as Psalms 8 and 19, and Romans 1–2. For example, Romans 1:20 speaks of general revelation in this way:

Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Scripture often says that general revelation is delivered through the Holy Spirit's works of creative power in nature — both in the act of creation itself, and in sustaining what has been created. All these works flow from the Spirit's will and character. So, as we recognize his hand in them, they teach us about his nature and intentions.

The Holy Spirit's role in general revelation is quite significant and important because, of course, he is the agent of creation. He is the one who is still involved in upholding God's laws — “natural laws” we sometimes say. And this is a revelation that the Holy Spirit gives to all people without distinction, which is different, of course, to what we sometimes call the “special revelation,” whereby we come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior because of his internal work in our heart. But general revelation is something that is available to all of God's creatures.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

God tells us that the heavens declare the glory of God. So everywhere we turn our eye we can see a demonstration of God's power, his wisdom, his goodness, all around us in creation. The Holy Spirit takes these revelations of God and brings them home to us in powerful ways, so we have to come to terms with our creator.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Special Revelation

In addition to providing general revelation to the world, the Holy Spirit provides special revelation, primarily to the church.

Special revelation is: God's direct involvement, or his use of messengers, to make his existence, nature, presence, actions and will known to limited portions of humanity.

The Holy Spirit has provided special revelation in the form of Scripture, prophecies, dreams, visions, angelic visitations, and other unusual media. Special revelation is given primarily to special people or groups, particularly those who receive God's offer of salvation. In the Old Testament, special revelation was given mostly to Abraham and his descendants. And in the New Testament, it was given to the church. Like spiritual gifts, special revelation is for the benefit of all God's people, in order to convert and build up everyone in the faith.

The greatest special revelation the Holy Spirit ever gave us was the incarnation of Jesus Christ himself. Hebrews 1 praises our Lord as the pinnacle of all God's revelation. And even now, the Holy Spirit continues to point us to Christ through the inspired Scriptures, which contain the words of Christ from all ages, relayed to us through his authoritative prophets and apostles.

The Holy Spirit's authorship of Scripture is mentioned in passages like Matthew 22:43, Mark 12:36, Acts 1:16, 4:25, and 2 Timothy 3:16-17. As just one example, listen to what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Since the apostolic age, the Spirit no longer inspires new Scripture. But the special revelation he has provided in the Old and New Testaments continues to reveal his will to Christians in every age.

Third, in addition to providing general revelation and special revelation, the Holy Spirit also works through the illumination and inward leading of individuals.

Illumination and Inward Leading

We read in 2 Peter 1:21 that Old Testament prophets spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, which implies that the Holy Spirit, given to the church, will enlighten us to understand what he inspired in the prophets. There's no new revelation, but if we're to understand existing revelation we must be enlightened and empowered by the Spirit of God.

— Dr. Knox Chamblin

Illumination is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily cognitive, such as the knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah, which Peter received in Matthew 16:17.

And inward leading is a divine gift of knowledge or understanding that is primarily emotive or intuitive. It includes things such as our conscience, and the sense that God would have us take a particular course of action.

Illumination and inward leading are not always clearly distinguished from each other in the Bible. Often, Scripture speaks in ways that apply equally to both. We find passages like this in 1 Corinthians 2:9-16, Ephesians 1:17, Colossians 1:9, and 1 John 2:27. For example in Ephesians 1:17, Paul spoke this way:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better (Ephesians 1:17).

Here, Paul called the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.” In terms of the categories of illumination and inward leading, we might be tempted to see wisdom as inward leading and revelation as illumination. And this may be what Paul had in mind. On the other hand, he may simply have been referring to both works of the Spirit collectively, without drawing a clear distinction between them.

We, all of us, need the illumination of the Spirit because we, all of us, are spiritually blind without it. We are blind spiritually in the way that bats are blind physically, I mean, they can't look at the sun. So, when the sun is shining, they simply hang by their feet from the roof of the cave where they hide out during the day. They can only see when they come out at night. Well, we are in the position of bats during the day. God's light is shining, but because of what sin has done in messing up our spiritual faculties, we are not able to discern the reality of God and his word. We may have a smudgy awareness that God is there somehow, but we don't appreciate that Scripture commands are for us; Scripture promises are for us. The scriptural presentation of the Lord Jesus is setting in before us for us to trust him and enter into the new life. The New Testament says, picturesquely, we are blind at that point, we are deaf at that point, our hearts are hard at that point, so that the Word of God makes no impression on us at all. And then, the New Testament says, that God, I'm quoting now from 2 Corinthians 4, “God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness,” that's back in creation of course, “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” That's the illumination of the Spirit, and when that illumination is given to us, we see Christ spiritually, we discern his reality, we hear and realize that he is calling us to himself.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

Illumination and inward leading are normal means the Holy Spirit uses to teach his people the truths he has revealed. Accordingly, there are at least three things we can do to benefit from this ministry in our lives. First, we can commit ourselves to studying the Bible, knowing that when we do, the Holy Spirit will often guide our understanding. Second, we can dedicate ourselves to prayer, continually asking the Holy Spirit for guidance, wisdom, understanding, and the will to obey. And third, we can devote ourselves to righteous and holy living, being determined to live according to the truths the Spirit teaches us.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the *Apostles' Creed*, we have looked at the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We have considered the Spirit's divinity in terms of the creed and its biblical basis. We have explored his personhood according to his attributes, and in light of his relationship to the Father and the Son. And we have spoken of his works of creative power, sanctification, grace and revelation.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is a rich wellspring for Christians. It teaches us about the third person of the Trinity, who is our closest source of help at all times. It points us to the one who is most responsible for motivating and empowering us to live in ways that please God. And it gives us great confidence that God is deeply and personally involved in the world at all times, always working for the benefit of everyone who puts their faith in him.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
FOUR

The Holy Spirit
Faculty Forum



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Four: The Holy Spirit

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. Stephen Blakemore
Dr. Knox Chamblin
Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III
Dr. Steve Harper
Dr. Dennis Johnson
Dr. Keith Johnson

Dr. Samuel Ling
Dr. Rebecca Luman
Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.
Dr. Thomas Schreiner
Dr. Glen Scorgie
Dr. Mark Strauss

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Dr. Derek Thomas
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum
Dr. Donald Whitney

Question 1:

Has the church always affirmed that the Holy Spirit is an equal member of the Trinity?

The Apostles' Creed mentions the Holy Spirit by name in two places. First, it says that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and second it affirms belief in the Holy Spirit at the beginning of its third major section. Belief in the personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit is a critical part of Christian theology. But did this belief develop over time, or has the church always affirmed that the Holy Spirit is an equal member of the Trinity?

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Well, the believing church has always affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. It certainly shows up in the early Christian creeds. When you look at the Holy Spirit as presented in the New Testament, the reality is that it is impossible to understand the Holy Spirit as anything other than divine, and you understand the Holy Spirit is a person. It's not merely a vague spiritual force. This is a person, and when we talk about the Trinity and we come to an understanding of how the Bible explains the Trinity, what we really find in the biblical narrative is that the Holy Spirit is there, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "He sends the Spirit." And so what we have is a very clear understanding that wherever God is, the Spirit is present. And there is a very special sense in which the Spirit, as person, is the presence of both the Father and the Son for us today in the church.

Dr. Derek Thomas

Has the church always affirmed the divinity or deity of the Holy Spirit? And one could answer that by saying, yes, because the Bible affirms the deity of the Holy Spirit and the Bible is part, of course, of the church. The data of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit is spoken of in terms that require us to believe that he has divine properties. And not only that, but Jesus himself in almost his farewell statement said, "Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," putting the Holy Spirit and the Son on a par with the

Father. That's the data that the church takes several centuries to get right and some would argue that it took even until the time of the Reformation and some contributions even of the Reformer John Calvin to get the doctrine of the Holy Spirit perfectly right, if I can put it that way. But certainly by the third or fourth centuries doctrinally and "creedally," the church affirmed the deity of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

My understanding is that there has never been any doubt that the Spirit of God is from God. And the Holy Spirit is divine. I think the thing that took a little longer for some believers to figure out, was that the Holy Spirit was not just an emanating influence from God, wasn't just a force coming outward from God, but was actually a personal essence, a person distinct from God the Father. And the personhood of the Holy Spirit that makes the Holy Spirit interactive and differentiated from, though not severed from the Father, was a breakthrough understanding that had tremendous ramifications for how we understood God himself and our relationship to the Holy Spirit as well.

Question 2:

Does Scripture demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is fully God?

It's clear that the early church believed in the divinity of the Holy Spirit, and even affirmed it in the Apostles' Creed. But were they right in this belief? Does Scripture demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is fully God?

Dr. Keith Johnson

At least four factors point to the deity of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. First, the fact that the name "Holy Spirit" is used interchangeably with God. We see that in Acts 5. Second, the fact that attributes of God are attributed to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's omniscience is attributed to the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2, omnipotence in Luke 1:35, eternity in Hebrews 9:14. Third is the fact that the Holy Spirit is included in the single name in which followers of Christ are baptized. And finally, there are certain works that demonstrate the deity of the Holy Spirit, and I'll briefly mention four. First, in John 16 we're told that the Spirit judges. Yet, we know that judgment is a prerogative that belongs only to God. Second, we note in Psalm 33:6 that the Spirit is involved in creation. And yet the act of creating is something only God can do. In John 3 we see that the Spirit regenerates, that he brings about the new birth, and yet this is something that only God can do. And finally we know from 2 Timothy 3:16 that the Spirit inspires the Scriptures. And yet only God can reveal himself to us. Together all of these factors point to the deity of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Rebecca Luman

The Holy Spirit's divinity can be shown and demonstrated through his work in creation, through his work in Scriptures, through his work in salvation. In creation the Spirit is mentioned alongside God — who we would say, "God the Father" — as one who is present and participating in creation. And only God creates. And so the Spirit's presence and participation helps us understand that he is divine. And then in

the inspiration of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the Spirit's book, but we speak of it as God's Word. And yet it is inspired and providentially superintended, put together, by the Holy Spirit. And then in salvation, divinity is implied or demonstrated by God's participation in salvation and the way the Holy Spirit participates, he was active in the conception of Christ, he empowered Christ's ministry, he raised Christ from the dead, he made Christ's atoning sacrifice powerful and possible. So that amplifies our understanding of his divinity. So, not only in providing salvation, but in producing the church. The Holy Spirit birthed the church. The Spirit empowers the church. The Spirit makes the church into the body of Christ. Individually in our salvation, the Holy Spirit is active. The active regeneration is spoken of as being "born of the Spirit." The Spirit empowers us. The Spirit produces the character of Christ in us. The Spirit raises us on the last day. So, corporately and individually, salvation is very much the work of the Spirit amplifying and demonstrating his divinity.

Dr. Samuel Ling

It is very important for us to believe that Holy Spirit is God; the Holy Spirit is God the third person. And we can see that through the works, the mighty works that he does in the world and in our lives. First of all, the Bible tells us very clearly in Romans 8:28 that "all things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose." So everything that happens in our lives and in the world is sovereignly designed, ruled over, by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit rules over everything that happens in our lives. He is God. He is not some liquid, some gas. He's not just a wind, even though that is his name. The Holy Spirit is a person who is involved in everything that happens in the world. A bird falls to the ground; one of our hairs falls off our head; the Holy Spirit is there. God, in his eternal plan, had planned that event, and God is there when it happens to rule over it.

The fact that some of us trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, repent of our sins and receive baptism and join the church, for example, that's the work of the Holy Spirit. That's the result of the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. He turns that stony, that hard hardened heart of ours, and gives us a new one so that we are now enabled to repent of our sins and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, repentance and faith are gifts, they are the results of the work of the Holy Spirit. Again, the Holy Spirit is God. He is the one who changes our nature, our minds, our wills, our hearts from deep within. The Holy Spirit not only begins that work in us — in the fact that we are born again, in regeneration — the Holy Spirit not only gives us a new heart, he continues to change us as we live out of that new heart.

Someone has described this process, sanctification, this way: it's a little bit like an old house. There is a TV program in the west called "This Old House" where you change a little bit of the kitchen today and the roof tomorrow, the living room the third day and eventually at the end of the process we have a new house. The Holy Spirit renovates. He renews our hearts that way. That we are already new, now that's where the example falls down. We are already a new person, and yet the Holy Spirit continues to make that person new. He gives us the strength to say "no" to sin, and so,

“yes” to God — say “yes” to God — and to say “yes” to obedience. And only God can do that. The Holy Spirit is God, and he does those mighty works in our lives and in our world. He rules over every event. He saves us, literally. He brings salvation that Jesus Christ earned into our lives and makes it ours. And he continues to change us until we meet Jesus someday.

Question 3:

What are some aspects of the Holy Spirit’s divine work that are most beneficial to believers?

A rich understanding of the Holy Spirit’s divine work can benefit us in many ways. It helps us appreciate the grace he has shown to us. It encourages us to love and trust him. It teaches us many of the ways he can and will bless us. So, what are some aspects of the Holy Spirit’s divine work that are most beneficial to believers?

Dr. Steve Harper

When we think about the person and work of the Holy Spirit, we think about the full range of who God is and what God does. But I think as far as our human experience is concerned, there are several key things. The first is that the Spirit brings God here and now to us. To think of our heavenly Father can sometimes make God distant — where is that heavenly Father? Where is heaven? — But the Holy Spirit says, God is here, not there. But it is also now. If we think of God the Son, we can think of a historical figure two thousand years ago. But, the Holy Spirit comes and says, that’s true, but I’m also with you always, even to the end of the age. So, the here-and-nowness of God comes to us through the Holy Spirit. I think another thing is that the Holy Spirit brings all the things of Jesus, and instructs us in those things so that we can grow in Christ’s likeness. We can begin to have the mind of Christ. We can see the world with the eyes of Christ and hear it through the ears of Christ. That instruction in Christ’s likeness is very important as I attempt to follow Christ and to be his witness in the world. And that leads, I think, to the understanding that through the Spirit I am part of this enterprise, and so, I don’t live as a careerist, I live with a call. I live in response to grace and the response to invitation. And it is that Holy Spirit that keeps wooing me to think of my life vocationally. And that is an exciting thing.

Dr. Donald Whitney

Both the desire and the power to live for Christ comes from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the “want to,” the desire to obey God. The fact that we would ever want to follow Christ, to get into the Word of God, to pray, to witness — all those things — we give the credit to the Holy Spirit who gives us the desire, but also the power, to do so and to understand that he is the motivator. He is the one who strengthens us. There is an interesting passage in the last verse of Colossians 1:29 where the apostle says, “For I labor, striving according to his power which works mightily within me.” So, Paul was the one laboring — “For I labor.” In the morning, Paul was the one who felt like he was going to the Word of God. Paul was the one

who ended the day, who was tired, and yet he was doing so according to God's power so that he recognized at the end of the day the fact that I wanted to do this was from the Holy Spirit. The fact that I had the strength to do this was from the Holy Spirit, and all the glory was to him. So, Paul was the one who felt like he was doing all the laboring. Paul was the one who was tired, but he acknowledged at the end of it all that motivation, that the power and all the glory was from God.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

The Holy Spirit's role in our everyday lives as Christians, I think, is fundamental for what it means to be a believer in Jesus Christ. When we look at the New Testament, the New Testament particularly emphasizes that the Holy Spirit strengthens us in our everyday lives to please Jesus Christ and God the Father. In other words, where does the strength come from day by day to put our trust in God and to obey him? What the Scripture teaches is that that strength does not come from ourselves. We must be filled with the Spirit. We must call upon the Holy Spirit to strengthen us. I think this is enormously practical because we sense as believers that in and of ourselves we have no strength. In and of ourselves we cannot please God. We face each day recognizing, I have no strength from the day before. I need a fresh empowering for the doing of God. I need a fresh endowment from on high. And the Scriptures teach us we receive that from the Holy Spirit. He gifts us. He sanctifies us. He strengthens us. He helps us put our trust in Christ every day.

Dr. Knox Chamblin

The work of the Holy Spirit is a rich truth indeed, and I'm only going to select certain things from a host of other things. The first is that the Holy Spirit gives us life. Jesus says in John 3:5, "...unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." In John 6:63, Jesus says that it is the Spirit that gives life. And in Titus 3:5 are the same references in John 3:5. Paul says, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit." So he enables us to live, but he also enables us to see. We read in 2 Peter 1:21, the Old Testament prophets spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit, which implies that the Holy Spirit given to the church will enlighten us to understand what he inspired in the prophets. There's no new revelation, but if we're to understand existing revelation we must be enlightened and empowered by the Spirit of God. So Jesus in John 14:26 says, "Helper, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things." And in 1 Corinthians 2, the apostle Paul says, "The Spirit searches the depths of God... and we have received the Spirit who is from God that we may understand the things that are freely given to us by God." So he enables us to live and to see, but also he enables us to pray. There in Galatians 4 Paul says, "God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father.'" The Spirit cries there on our behalf. And so when we come to Romans 8:15 Paul says, "...you have received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" If the Spirit doesn't cry "Abba, Father" on our behalf, we cannot do so. And later in Romans 8, Paul says, "We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with

unutterable groanings.” I find that extraordinarily reassuring that the Spirit prays on my behalf and also prompts my own prayer.

Question 4:

Do Christians benefit from the fact that the Holy Spirit is a person?

The Holy Spirit is one of the divine persons of the Trinity, a full member of the Godhead. And it's clear that his divine work benefits us in many ways. But what difference does it make that he's a distinct person from the Father and the Son? Do Christians benefit from the fact that the Holy Spirit is a person?

Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The fact that the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a distinct, divine person and not just a mode of expression of the one God or a phase of his manifestation is very, very significant for the Christian life. For one thing it means that we are indwelt by a person not by an impersonal force. There is a person who is indwelling us, to whom we may relate, and who is in an everlasting relationship with the Father and the Son. I'm struck, for instance, by the Gospel of Luke in its account of Jesus' baptism. Luke goes out of his way to tell us that when the Holy Spirit comes from heaven and descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove, Luke tells us that he came in bodily form. Now, just from reading the other gospel accounts, you could have maybe made the argument that this was a visible manifestation, maybe it was a vision, but maybe it wasn't actually something that had substantially happened there. Well, you can't say that after you've read the Gospel of Luke. And one of the great old 16th century commentators made the point that the reason that Luke draws attention to the fact that the Holy Spirit came in bodily form is to emphasize that all the persons of the Trinity are there present at the baptism of Jesus and that those persons are not forces or powers. They're persons. God the Father is speaking. God the Son is being baptized. God the Spirit is present in bodily form and manifestation. And the idea is that these three persons relate to one another personally and to us personally. It's all the difference in the world to have a relationship with another person than to feel the power of a force. And so in the Christian life, the Apostle Paul will tell us in Ephesians 3:14-19, that the person of the Holy Spirit is dwelling in our hearts by faith, in order to make our hearts to be a suitable habitation for Christ. So the picture is that the person of the Holy Spirit is making our hearts, our lives, the very inmost aspect of our being, to be a place where the Lord Jesus Christ would feel comfortable and at home.

Now, I think that many of us have had friends that were good at home remodeling, fixing up old clunky homes that were out of date in style, and pinching pennies and turning them into really lovely homes. I have a friend who's really good at that, she can go into a place, it can be outdated, it can be horrible, she's a penny pincher, she can save a little here, save a little there, put up some wallpaper here, fix this there, and after five or six years she can really turn a place into a different place. Well, I remember a home that she bought and it was horrible. It was absolutely the most ugly

thing I'd ever seen. And I went in after she'd been in that home for five years, and I walked into the house and the house looked like her. In other words, I could have predicted how she would have decorated the house because I've seen other houses that she's done, and it's the same way with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work redecorating our hearts, transforming us so that we have lives in which Jesus would be pleased to be at home and dwell. And that's the work of a person, not of a force.

Dr. Stephen Wellum

When we affirm the distinct personal nature of the Holy Spirit, we are affirming that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Each one of them are persons. This has very, very practical implications for our Christian lives, particularly in relation to the Holy Spirit. It shows that the work that he does in us — from regeneration to bringing us to Christ in terms of our union with him, from dwelling within us, transforming us, as Scripture speaks of him as the deposit, the guarantee of our inheritance, the precious gift of the Spirit — all of this is made important to us and practical to us in the fact that he is personal. He is not a force. He is not some impersonal means. He is the one who comes to us personally, who gives us new life, who dwells within us, who bears witness of Christ, who comforts us, who transforms us. And indeed, his work as a distinct person, and a personal work, is that which can give us comfort, hope, confidence in this life. All of those are very, very important practical implications of viewing his work and his person as that which is distinct from the Father and the Son, yet though related.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The Bible clearly teaches that the Holy Spirit is both divine and a distinct person from the Father and the Son. He's not just some force that emanates from the Father. He's a person, and as a matter of fact, the Holy Spirit is the essential person at work in the church today, applying the work of Christ in very real ways. Jesus said, it's to your advantage that I go so that the Comforter can come. And when he comes he brings a power to the lives of believers. And he brings regeneration. He's the one who inspired Scripture and illumines the minds of believers to understand Scripture. And without him nothing of lasting value happens. We can often be practical "binitarians" as Christians and not Trinitarians with a holistic, robust belief in the Trinity. And so it's essential that we depend on him and his work today.

Question 5:

What are some personal and pastoral implications of the Holy Spirit's indwelling?

One of the most amazing things the Bible teaches about the Holy Spirit is that he "indwells" us or lives in us. This is an astounding concept. But what does it mean for us? What are some personal and pastoral implications of the Holy Spirit's indwelling?

Dr. Mark Strauss

The indwelling presence of the Spirit has enormous pastoral and personal implications when we realize what that actually means, that God promised, that Jesus promised, to give us his Spirit, his presence within us. So everywhere we go we have God's presence within us, God's power to accomplish his purpose, God's words to share with others, to constantly be aware that we are Christ's representatives. When Jesus left this earth he told his disciples that it was good that he was leaving because they would not only do the works that he did; they would do greater works. That's an astonishing statement, to think that God's people can do greater works even than Jesus did. And the reason for that is that we have his presence within us. If we live in dependence on him, if we lived filled with the Holy Spirit, we can accomplish his purpose and honor it. That's an amazing thought.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

You know one of the miracles of being a Christian is that into our forgiven lives, God gives us the greatest gift of all. He gives us his own indwelling presence. And that indwelling presence of God is the indwelling Holy Spirit. And the question is, what difference, what practical difference does it make that a believer has within them the Holy Spirit? Well, one of the things that I would say to answer that is that is you have to think of what is the Holy Spirit's agenda, so to speak? Is he there just to comfort us and to assure us that we are the children of God? Certainly he has this testifying ministry that assures us that we belong to God, and this gives us tremendous confidence. Oh, it's a wonderful thing to know that you are connected with God for all time, that you belong to him body and in soul, in life and death, and all that stuff that the Heidelberg Catechism says so well.

But there's another thing that's on the Holy Spirit's agenda. He's not just an idle presence. He is a transforming presence. And he will not permit us to grow comfortable with sinful behaviors and immature dispositions and self-centeredness that is alien to his own holy nature. He is not called the Holy Spirit for nothing. And so where the Holy Spirit dwells is constantly in the improving and transformation business.

There's another thing the Holy Spirit's actively doing. He is actively empowering us to understand and find the courage and the skills to fulfill the will of God. So, if I could summarize it, the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit is partly a connecting ministry of uniting us with God and with others, a reconciling kind of dynamic. It's a transformational dynamic making us holy and whole. It's a vocational dynamic of calling us and empowering us and sending us, so that he is connecting, he is changing, and he is enabling us to do. Now why do I mention all of this work of the indwelling Holy Spirit? Because we are challenged in the inspired New Testament to keep in step with the Spirit. And how do we align ourselves with the work of the Holy Spirit? Partly by understanding what his agenda is. His agenda is a uniting ministry, a transformational ministry, a vocational ministry, and knowing what the Holy Spirit is up to, what his plans are, what his priorities are make it easier to keep in step with the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Peter Walker

It's one of the great truths of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit dwells in the life of the believer. I find one of the most fascinating passages where Paul talks about that the gospel is about "Christ in you," Christ living in you. And he speaks in other locations about the Spirit of Christ indwelling the believer. I used to think sometimes, well, maybe this is just a metaphor, but the more I thought about it, this is actually a spiritual reality. I and every believer on this planet is someone in whom the Spirit of Christ actually dwells. And my personality is something which is filled with the Spirit of Christ. This is not a metaphor; this is actually a reality. And the implication of that is, well, many things. We are never alone. We've always got someone with us, Christ living within us. We're never totally powerless. There is within us the power of the risen Christ, his Spirit. We are never without the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit grows out of us. And that transforming power is within us, and we don't have to rely on our own energies to try and live the Christian life. We can actually be resourced to do so in the strength that Christ supplies through the same Holy Spirit. So, the pastoral implications of the Holy Spirit? Everything. And the Christian life without the Holy Spirit? Impossible.

Question 6:**What are we supposed to do with our spiritual gifts?**

One of the signs of the Holy Spirit's indwelling is the evidence of spiritual gifts in a believer's life. The precise nature of some of these gifts is debated among Evangelical Christians, but it's generally agreed that all believers have at least one gift from the Spirit. But what's their purpose? What are we supposed to do with our spiritual gifts?

Dr. Dennis Johnson

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are, of course, a matter that Christians may disagree on in various respects as to which gifts are present now, but I think we can all agree on the purpose of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and how, therefore, we should be using those gifts. If we look just very carefully at 1 Corinthians 12–14, I see four things there that Paul emphasizes for the church at Corinth — an abundance of spiritual gifts, but is not always using them as God intended them to. The first one, obviously, is from the fact that Corinthians 13 is embedded right between chapters 12 and 14. Paul's point is, love is more important than the manifestations of the spiritual gifts. Love will last. The spiritual gifts will not last into eternity. Love is the thing that is at the very heart of what it means to be filled with and to be being filled with the Holy Spirit. Love is at the very apex of Paul's emphasis there. Now from that, of course, Paul has already anticipated what he's going to say about love when he goes in chapter 12 to emphasize the purpose of the gifts is always to build up others; it's to serve others in love. It's not my personal fame, it's not my personal gratification, it's not my personal glory. It's to be using the abilities that the Holy Spirit has given to me to serve others and to build them up in the faith. So that's a second crucial element that we need to remember.

Thirdly, and Paul makes this point very clear as well, the most visible gifts do not necessarily make the person who exhibits those gifts more valuable in the eyes of God. The high visibility gifts don't make that particular member of the body more essential, more crucial, more treasured by God, than those who have behind-the-scenes, low-visibility gifts. In fact, Paul argues, using the analogy of the body, sometimes actually the less visible gifts are really to be treated with greater honor. And so, again, to put people's personal value keyed into, monitored by the way in which their gifts are manifested, is a mistake. Paul says, no, all of the gifts are part of the body. Every member of the body is to be treasured and is to be used. The fourth thing that comes from that is Paul's word particularly to the less visible members of the body where Paul says, just because you don't have one of the gifts that everybody notices, that doesn't let you off the hook from serving others with whatever gift you do have. Be grateful whatever gift the Holy Spirit has given to you and recognize that other members of the body need you to be exercising that gift in service to them. So there's a warning to those with visible gifts — don't think you don't need others; don't think you're more valuable to others. Paul also gives a warning to those with less visible gifts — don't think you're not needed; don't think you can sort of just sit back and coast and let others do all the work. Your gift is needed for the health and the growth of the whole body of Christ.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know I think the most important thing to understand about the spiritual gifts is that they're not about ourselves. They're about the church, and these gifts are given to church. They're distributed among believers. But you know, given the way we think, we tend to think of the gift as ours — Her gift is hers. His gift is his — when in reality the church is given these gifts and they're distributed. It's like being in a family where we are all inheritors of the same wealth. We are all a part of the same family. We all eat at the same table. But somebody can bring this dish, and someone can bring something else. Someone will prepare the food, and someone will clean the table. The gifts are what we give to each other, and the real miracle of the church is where all these people who are so ungifted on their own — we would have nothing to offer except that God gives us these gifts — and we come and we offer them to each other. When the gifts become a divisive issue in the church, we can be absolutely certain that what is wrong in the first place is that we have forgotten that this all about what is given to the church. It's given to all of us. These gifts are given so that the church would more faithfully glorify God. When we understand that, we won't get in trouble over who has what gift. We will be, instead, rejoicing that the gifts are given to all of us through each other.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The spiritual gifts are meant to fill up the body of Christ, meant to edify God's people, to accomplish God's purpose on earth. So, even though spiritual gifts edify ourselves — they are self-edifying because we feel joy when we experience God's presence in our lives. When we accomplish God's purpose we are going to feel fulfilled. We are going to feel joy — so, they are self-edifying, but we have to realize

that's not their ultimate purpose. Their ultimate purpose is to build up the body of Christ, build up other believers, and then to ultimately accomplish God's purpose on earth.

Question 7:

Do unbelievers benefit from being involved in the life of the church?

Spiritual gifts are meant to build up the body of Christ so that the entire church can benefit from them. But what about the unbelievers in the church? Does the Holy Spirit intend his gifts to bless them, too? Do unbelievers benefit from being involved in the life of the church?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Well, Jesus tells us that in the church there will always be tares among the wheat, unbelievers present with believers. We can't always tell those apart, but we can assume that if someone's an unbeliever functioning in the context of the church, they will experience the common grace of God in powerful ways, and hopefully those common ways of seeing God will lead to saving grace in their lives.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

When you think about the life of the church as the people who are the people of the gospel, you could say, the people who live in the life of God in Christ, those who have heard the gospel, listened to the gospel, responded to the gospel. We have a context for thinking about the relationship of those who are unsaved in the life of the church, but participating. And the way we should think about that in terms of what it benefits them is this: It truly places them by God's providence in the context in which they can hear the gospel, in which they may see the gospel lived, in which they may encounter what Jesus Christ alive in the fellowship of a group of people looks like. And therefore, in the sovereignty of God, perhaps that is his mechanism to bring someone before they are saved into the life of the church so that they can respond to the gospel. So that is one way that a person who is unsaved benefits by being involved in the life of the church. But I think there are other ways that an unsaved person, whether or not he or she responds to the gospel, benefits at least in this life by being involved in the life of the church. And it is in this regard, if a church is truly living the love of Jesus Christ, if a church is truly teaching what it means to be alive in Christ, then in some way, those teaching themselves begin to inform some of the values that an unsaved person has. So it could end up having a great impact on the way that person treats his or her children, or the way that person relates to her husband or her friends. So, in the long run it is a tragedy that a person who sat in the hearing of the gospel did not respond to gospel. It's a great sadness. But by the same token there are even some benefits to the gospel being heard in a person's life that are not ultimate benefit, but in this life do provide an improvement for their lives.

Question 8:**What kinds of truth does the Holy Spirit reveal through general revelation?**

The Bible tells us that all people — whether they're part of the Christian community or not — all people are aware of God's power and divinity. And one of the main reasons for this is that one of the Holy Spirit's works is to reveal God to human beings. When he does this by inspiring Scripture, we call it "special revelation." But when he does it through various aspects of creation, we call it "general revelation." What kinds of truth does the Holy Spirit reveal through general revelation?

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, the world is filled with the revelation of God. As the Psalmist says, "The heavens are telling the glory of God." The reality is that every atom and molecule in the universe testifies to the glory of God. We refer to this as common revelation or general revelation. It also is a revelation that is itself a testimony to the fact that God, by his very nature, reveals himself. The Holy Spirit is present in creation. It's impossible to explain, I believe, why the atom and the molecule even hold together but by the power of the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, in terms of general revelation, convicts of sin. I mean this is just a very important issue here. And so, you take the Holy Spirit out of the equation, then there is no conviction of sin, there is no coming to Christ as persons, or drawn to Christ. Insofar as general revelation is used of God to prepare persons for the gospel, the Holy Spirit is active in that, but we need always to be reminded that special revelation is what is necessary for us to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. But let's also remember the general revelation that Paul tells us about in Romans 1 is sufficient to damn us. It is sufficient to condemn us, because no one is gonna be able to say, "I didn't know." It was written throughout every particle of creation.

Question 9:**How does illumination affect our understanding of God's revelation?**

In addition to revealing truths about God through special and general revelation, Christians also acknowledge that the Holy Spirit helps individuals understand God's revelation and will by providing illumination and inward leading. Illumination is essentially when the Spirit enlightens our intellect. But how does this work? How does illumination affect our understanding of God's revelation?

Dr. Glen Scorgie

One of the very precious and important ministries of the Holy Spirit is the ministry of illumination. The great theologian John Calvin described illumination in a way that I think has stood up very well over time. He said imagine that you have a book open before you and it's a dark room, and you're looking at the page and you cannot make out the print. But over your shoulder comes a spotlight and it shines on the page and

then it bounces back into your eyes, and so you can see and understand it clearly. That light over the shoulder, enlightening the text of Scripture so that your mind is opened, and to deeply understand, not just what it's saying, but how it may apply to your life today, this is the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. And it's a wonderful combination, you see. The Holy Spirit who inspired the original composition of the Scriptures is now actively present in the present tense enabling your mind to apprehend the meaning that was originally implanted there, just for you. If we approach the Scriptures without dependence upon this vital ministry of the Holy Spirit, there's a good chance our sinful minds will be blinded to its deep meaning. There's a good chance that our capacity for rationalization and bias and willful rejection of truth that might cost us something, will keep us from really seeing in that spiritual sense.

Dr. Thomas Schreiner

When we read the Scriptures, we can read them as secular people. We can study the Scriptures intensely, academically, using all of the scholarly tools. And all of that is enormously helpful and valuable. We should study the Scriptures with our minds. We should employ the scholarly tools that are out there, that assist us to understand the Scriptures. But every seminary student can tell you, or Bible school student, or ordinary Christian, that such study without the illumination of the Holy Spirit finally doesn't touch the soul. So we, as believers, we also need the Holy Spirit to take that Word and to seal it home to our hearts. I know I've had the experience of reading the Bible and coming away without having met God. I think that we meet God particularly when the Holy Spirit illuminates his Word to us so that we see Christ, so that we savor Christ, we sense our sin, we confess our sins before him. So, I think a very helpful thing to do as we read and study the Scriptures academically is to pray. We pray to God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to illumine us. We pray that the Word would be opened to us because we've all had the experience of reading and that doesn't happen. So we ask the Spirit to help us.

Question 10:

What role does inward leading play in a Christian's life?

The Holy Spirit illumines us when he enlightens our intellect. But sometimes he works in ways that influence our emotions and intuition. Theologians normally call this "inward leading." What role does inward leading play in a Christian's life?

Dr. Mark Strauss

I think illumination and the inward leading of the Holy Spirit are critical dimensions of a Christian life. And sometimes, particularly Christians in the West, I think, we become so scientifically minded, so objective, that we are afraid of the guidance and leading of the Holy Spirit yet the Bible makes it perfectly clear, the Spirit is God's presence in our lives, guiding us, directing us, instructing us. We need to be open to God's presence in our lives, to that guiding and direction from the Holy Spirit. He is a real presence within our lives. In 1 John, John says, you know the truth because you

have an anointing. And so that confirms the truth. That anointing is the presence of the Holy Spirit. So ultimately it's not the evidence that we muster, it's not the scientific data we collect. It's the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit that confirms the truth to us.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

You know, the Christian life is more than drawing logical inferences from the text of Scripture. We live in the present and we are deeply enriched by the text and the truths of inspired literature written to people who are now dead. But what the inner leading of the Holy Spirit will do is take the truth and the principles of God's holy Word and help us understand what they mean for us today. The dynamic of a living relationship with the Holy Spirit far transcends, though it includes, the disciplines of good, biblical exegesis. The Holy Spirit is, in a sense, Immanuel. He is "God with us," guiding us in this existential adventure of the journey of life. We are not alone; we are people of a book. But we are people who've been privileged to be the friends of God.

Dr. Rebecca Luman

The Holy Spirit, using the basis of his holy, inspired Word, does lead us in our daily activities to know what's the right thing to do in this action or that action, by his inward witness and his inward impressions that he gives us. But these are always based upon his Word. So, the Spirit's inspired Word leads us to be illumined for the activities and actions and directions of our daily life. And he speaks to us by assuring us with his peace that a certain action is consistent with his will. He often helps us to find other people, Christians who can confirm an interpretation of Scripture or through their experience can lead us. But I would like to emphasize that inward leadings and illumination are always consistent with the Scripture. They're not above and beyond or contrary to, but based on the written Word, he gives us individual leading and guiding by his Spirit.

Question 11:

How can we verify the illumination and inward leading we think we've received?

The Holy Spirit's illumination and inward leading are vital to our Christian lives. But isn't it possible for Christians to mistake the source of their ideas and feelings? How can we verify the illumination and inward leading we think we've received?

Dr. Steve Harper

I think in my prayer life, one of the biggest questions that I have is, when I receive an impression, an insight, a thought, some sense of guidance or counsel, how do I know it's from God? Oswald Chambers got me over the hump on this when he basically says that, if you are a devoted follower of Jesus Christ and if your heart is to do the will of God, so far as you understand it, then don't agonize over that feeling or question. Don't become scrupulous, is what he says. I think of it as taking your pulse, you know, always wanting to make sure that you are counting the heart, you know.

Your heart just beats. It just beats. And, you know, you don't count your respiration — how many times did I breathe in the last minute? You just breathe. And, so, Oswald Chambers, when it comes to, how do we know, really says, don't worry about that a lot. Don't become overly scrupulous in trying to figure it out, because God uses the natural processes of your thought life. God created us with brains, and minds, and hearts. And so, God uses those things. They're not antithetical. In fact, they may be the landing places for God's revelation. And that helps. But it doesn't completely solve the problem because we can presume. Some very tragic things have happened in the church, when people have said and done things, thinking they were doing them under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

So, when we do come to those points, ordinary things, routine things, say a good word, do a kind deed, we don't need to wonder whether God is inspiring us to do that very much. It is just what we know we should be doing. But, when it comes to more critical things, then I think it's very important that we take those things to Scripture. God is not going to ask us to say or do something that violates his written Word. Every now and then we read a tragic story in the newspaper about, "God told me to kill my family," or something, just these bazaar acts of deranged people. And, when I read those I think, you know, if that person had just squared that with Scripture, it would have never happened. In issues of my life where it is not so natural, not so routine, not so everyday, another thing is to submit it to the tradition. There is a treasure trove of wisdom in the tradition. Sometimes it's harder to find, because it's not always indexed, and there's not a concordance. But it's not that hard to find either. If you really want to find it, it's there. And I tell the students, we need to be surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses because they will speak words to us that not only encourage us, but they'll also create some limits and boundaries around our lives, and that is very important. Then the third thing I think is, just to sit down with another Christian friend, and say, "I have been thinking about this," or "I have been bothered by this," or "I have been wondering about... What do you think about this?"... "How does this feel to you?"... "Would you go in and talk to your boss about this if you were me? I mean, what would you do?" Because in some ways, those two minds are better than one. If you get two people who sincerely desire the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven, sometimes the best advice you get is just from another sister or brother who gives you a "yes" or a "no" or maybe a "not now." I think those are at least reasonable ways that we can receive impressions, and act on those impressions, with confidence.

Dr. Samuel Ling

It's quite natural and normal for every born-again Christian to feel that the Lord has touched me, prompted me, led me, urged me, to do something or to have a certain experience. You know every born-again Christian, ever since Adam to the end of the world, needs to feel that God is alive and that the Holy Spirit is alive in my heart and in my life. However, how do I know that this feeling, this urge, this prompting, is from the Holy Spirit? How do I know that it is not my own interpretation or even something that comes from the Devil? Well, the Bible provides us with an answer to that question. The Bible tells us that God's Word, you know, God's Word, the Bible,

is completely inspired by the Holy Spirit. God's Word, the Bible, is the only guide and rule and standard for our experiences, for our feelings, for these urges and promptings that we have. In fact this guide is infallible. It could not possibly be wrong. It cannot possibly mislead us or misguide us. And so, when we have a certain urge, or inner leading from the Holy Spirit, we need to check that to see whether that feeling, that urge, is in harmony with the complete body of truths that the Holy Spirit has taught us in the Bible.

Question 12:

How should we respond to the Holy Spirit in our worship and prayers?

Even though Christians insist that the Holy Spirit is fully divine, and that his works and personhood benefit us in many ways, we often don't praise him for these things in our worship, or even petition him in our prayers. In fact, some people even think it's inappropriate to pray to the Spirit. Are they right? How should we respond to the Holy Spirit in our worship and prayers?

Dr. Keith Johnson

Some Christians wonder if we should pray to and worship the Holy Spirit. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches that one God eternally exists in a unity of being as three persons. Because the Holy Spirit is God, it's right and appropriate that we not only pray to him, but honor him as God. Objections to worship the Holy Spirit sometimes arise from misunderstanding of his identity. There was an interesting dispute over worship of the Holy Spirit in the fourth century. In his book, *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil of Caesarea tells us that there were two liturgies that were used in his church. The first liturgy was praise to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. A second liturgy was praise to the Father, with the Son, together with the Spirit. Some who were Arian in orientation objected to this liturgy because they really didn't believe the Holy Spirit was divine. But if, as Scripture teaches, we have good reason to believe that the Holy Spirit is divine, then it's appropriate that we express to him in worship, doxology, and praise his true nature.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

If we believe that the Holy Spirit is divine, the third person of the Trinity, then acknowledging the divinity of the Holy Spirit is truly important in our worship. Now unfortunately, much of our worship is often directed solely toward Jesus. We praise Jesus for what he has done. We thank Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, and in doing that we forget that the one who brings the life of Christ to us is not the second person the Trinity. The One who brings the life of Christ to us, the benefits of his death, his passion, his resurrection, the reality of his ascended glory, is the Holy Spirit. In that regard then, our worship should be careful always to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is the one through whom the Father and the Son bring the church to life, through whom the Father and the Son carry us in the midst of history to the culmination of the new heaven and the new earth. Now, practically speaking I think it works out in this way as we're choosing songs. From time to time we need to have

songs that sing of the glory of the Holy Spirit. When we have affirmations or liturgies in which we have a litany of praise, we need to have portions of the litany, which lift the glory of the Holy Spirit along with that of the Father and the Son. When it comes to praying I think there's a certain formula that we could learn to employ, at the beginning or the ending of our prayers in which we would say, that we pray these things dear Father in the name of your Son Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit who makes us alive unto you. In doing that we form this Trinitarian focus in our worship, so that we continually are able to meditate on the mystery of God, but also acknowledge the true and rightful divinity and worthy-of-worship nature of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Rebecca Luman

The divinity of the Holy Spirit impacts our prayers in the sense that he is God, and since he is God he can be rightfully addressed in prayer. When we begin our prayers with praise, he should be acknowledged. We praise the Father, praise the Son, praise the Holy Spirit because he's the one who produces the character of Christ in us when we pray prayers of confession, confessing our weakness and inability to live up to who Christ is and what he wants of us. The Holy Spirit is the one who, by the fruits, reproduces who Christ is in us, and so we think of him and ask him to make us reflect more and more Christ. He is the tutor of the church and of each individual believer. He is the teacher, and so we call upon him and say, "Lord, teach me." And when we say, "Lord teach me," we are addressing the Holy Spirit. Christ's teaching is encoded in the Scriptures, but the Holy Spirit is the one who makes those teachings personal to us. So, in individual worship he is very much central, and in the worship of the church it is the Holy Spirit who incorporates individual believers collectively into the body of Christ. And so, he should be honored and extolled as we meet in local congregations since he is the one who bonds us together in unity as believers and makes us the church, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul said that the church is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So, he should be acknowledged and praised centrally as we worship individually and corporately.

The Holy Spirit is essential to the life of every Christian. Although the Apostles' Creed only mentions him briefly, the Creed still indicates the Holy Spirit's power and divinity. And as believers, we're free to acknowledge him in our worship and prayers. He lives in us, giving us comfort, support, and spiritual gifts. And he empowers us to serve God faithfully. We can be confident that through his illumination and inward leading, the Holy Spirit will guide us to live lives worthy of our calling.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
FIVE

THE CHURCH



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Lesson Five

The Church

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, when most people hear the word “church,” they think of a building where Christians meet to worship God. Sometimes these buildings are huge and ornate cathedrals, beautifully adorned with art. Sometimes they are small chapels with simple furnishings. Sometimes they are converted warehouses or storefronts. Sometimes they are homes, tiny shacks, or mud huts, or even caves, where worshippers hide from danger. But in the *Apostles' Creed*, just like in the Bible, the word “church” refers first and foremost to the people of God, the holy community formed by those who profess faith in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is the fifth lesson in our series on *The Apostles' Creed*. And we have entitled it “The Church.” In this lesson, we’ll look at the statements in the *Apostles' Creed* that confess belief in this sacred institution.

The *Apostles' Creed* explicitly speaks of the church with these words:

**I believe in ...
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints.**

These lines in the creed appear in the larger section dedicated to the Holy Spirit and his ministries. This is because the Spirit is the person of the Trinity most directly involved with the church on a daily basis. So, we could have discussed the church in our lesson on the Holy Spirit. But we have chosen to spend a full lesson on the church because it is so fundamental to Christianity and to our experience of life as followers of Christ.

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, many Protestants find it odd to confess belief in the church, as if our faith in the church were somehow similar to our faith in God. When the creed says that we believe *in* the church, it does not mean that we trust the church for salvation. Saving faith is in Christ and Christ alone. But we do believe *in* the church in the sense that we believe the Bible when it teaches us about the church, and when it tells us that the church is important to Christians. And the same thing is true about believing *in* the communion of saints. We don’t trust other believers for our salvation. But we do believe the biblical teaching that God uses other believers to evangelize us, to minister to us, and to strengthen our faith.

Our lesson on the church will be divided into four central teachings that are reflected in the creed. First, we’ll look at the divine sanction of the church. Second, we’ll discuss the fact that the church is holy. Third, we’ll speak of it as catholic or universal. And fourth, we’ll explore the idea that the church is a communion. Each of these sections will help us understand the identity and nature of the church as it’s affirmed in the *Apostles' Creed*. Let’s begin by looking at the church’s divine sanction.

SANCTION

In the modern world, there are many Christians who believe that the church is unnecessary — or at least they act as if it is. In many cases, sincere believers think that organizations like the church are human inventions that intrude into our personal relationship with God. But Scripture teaches a very different perspective. In the broadest sense, the church is God's kingdom on earth, the congregation of his special people, and a central means through which he dispenses grace to those who are faithful to him. According to the Scriptures, the church is critical to establishing and maintaining our relationship with God.

When we say that the church is sanctioned by God, we mean that he created it for a purpose, and that he vested it with authority. In general terms, the Scriptures teach that God approves of the church. It is the organization he ordained to carry out his mission in the world. As Jesus himself said in Matthew 16:18:

**I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it
(Matthew 16:18).**

The church is not the invention of fallen human beings. Jesus himself is the founder of the church.

So, even though we see flaws in the church throughout history, and sometimes churches turn so far away from the gospel that they are no longer the church of God, we must not conclude that the church is useless or unnecessary. The *Apostles' Creed* affirms this divine sanction for the church with these simple words:

I believe in ... the ... church.

As you will recall from prior lessons, the *Apostles' Creed* is a summary of the early churches' rules of faith. And those rules of faith were summaries of Scripture. So, when the creed professes belief in the church, it intends to affirm what the Bible teaches about the church. And the most basic aspect of the Bible's teaching about the church is that God appointed the church to fulfill his purposes in the world.

As we consider the church's divine sanction, we'll focus on three main ideas. First, we'll look at the Old Testament background of the church. Second, we'll focus on what Jesus did to establish the church during his earthly ministry. And third, we'll explore some implications of these biblical points of view. Let's begin with the Old Testament background to the church.

OLD TESTAMENT

The concept of the church in the New Testament actually finds its roots in the Old Testament.

Many would think that the church has started by the day of Pentecost when Jesus went up to heaven and he poured his Spirit on the disciples. But I think this is a misunderstanding of the nature of the church. I think the church is a continuity of the people of God in the Old Testament. God has called Abraham and the people of the Old Testament, and we can easily say that this is the church, the beginning of the church. So the church has started there, it continues in our age, and it will continue to the consummation, to the day when Jesus comes back from heaven.

— Dr. Riad Kassis

The New Testament speaks many times of the church using the Greek word *ekklesia*. But this term was derived from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, *ekklesia* and its Hebrew counterpart is frequently used to identify the gathered nation of Israel. We see this in Deuteronomy 9:10, 31:30; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:14; Psalm 22:22, 25; and many other places.

Even in the New Testament, where *ekklesia* has become a technical term referring to the church, the word is still used to refer to the assembly of Old Testament Israel. For instance, in Acts 7:38, we read these words in Stephen's speech to his murderers:

[Moses] was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us (Acts 7:38).

Here, the Greek word translated assembly is *ekklesia*, which is more commonly translated "church." This indicates that the assembly of Israel was the Old Testament equivalent and predecessor to the New Testament church.

And in 1 Peter 2:9, Peter also called the church by names that applied to Israel in the Old Testament. Listen to what he wrote:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

Here, Peter quoted from several Old Testament passages that spoke of the nation of Israel. And he applied Israel's special names to the New Testament church. In this way, he indicated that there are important continuities between these two groups.

If we think about a text such 1 Peter 2 where Peter applies a whole series of titles that were originally given to Israel in the Old Testament now to the church: "You are royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." We see that Peter is teaching a group of churches in a variety of regions who are predominantly Gentiles to see themselves as really the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and to recognize that that is their identity.

— Dr. Dennis Johnson

Of course, this is not to say that the New Testament church is precisely the same as Israel's Old Testament assemblies. They are connected, but they are different as well. In Romans 11, Paul used two metaphors to talk about the relationship between the Old Testament assembly of Israel and the Christian church. He spoke of them as a batch of dough, and an olive tree.

Listen to what he wrote in Romans 11:16:

If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches (Romans 11:16).

First, Paul said that the Old Testament assembly was the firstfruits of the same batch of dough from which the New Testament church had been made.

Leviticus 23:17 required Israel to bring a firstfruits offering of bread to the Lord. The firstfruits were not a separate harvest. They were part of the whole harvest, and representative of the whole harvest. So, when Paul said that Israel and the New Testament church came from the same batch of dough, he indicated that both Israel and the New Testament Christians were part of the same organization, the same people of God, the same church.

Second, Paul said that the Old Testament assembly was the root of a tree, and that the New Testament church was the branches of this same tree. Paul actually expanded on this illustration for several verses. He compared the church throughout all ages to a cultivated olive tree. The Old Testament church, consisting primarily of Jews, was the bulk of the tree: roots, trunk, and many branches. And Gentile Christians were wild olive branches that had been grafted onto the tree. Put simply, Gentile Christians were grafted into the Jewish church. So, even though the church in Paul's day consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, its trunk and roots were the same tree that stretched back in time throughout the Old Testament. Yes, this new tree is different in many respects. It has been improved and built up. But it is still the same tree. In the same way, the Old Testament church has been improved and built up into the New Testament church. They are different in important ways, and they represent different stages of growth. But they are still the same church.

Now that we have considered the sanction of the church from the perspective of Old Testament background, let's see how Jesus built his church in a way that relied on but also advanced the Old Testament church.

JESUS

There can be no denying that when Jesus came, his earthly ministry had a dramatic impact on the world and on the people of God. It is with good reason that many theologians have noted that Jesus did not simply perpetuate the old order, including its old church. At the same time, it's important to recognize that Jesus did not establish a church that was totally new. His church has great continuity with the Old Testament church.

Jesus only mentioned the church by the name *ekklesia* on three occasions recorded in the Gospels. In fact, these are the only times the word *ekklesia* appears anywhere in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. All three of these passages are in the Gospel of Matthew — one in 16:18, and two in 18:17. Let's look at both of these verses more closely.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus spoke these words:

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Matthew 16:18).

The word *oikodomeo*, translated here as “build,” can refer either to building something brand new, or to rebuilding and restoring what already exists. Although Jesus did not explicitly state which meaning he intended, what we have already seen from Paul's teaching in Romans 11 should incline us to favor the view that Jesus was rebuilding and restoring the Old Testament church.

Jesus' words in Matthew 18:17 are less ambiguous. Listen to what he said there:

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector (Matthew 18:17).

In this verse, Jesus was talking about church discipline. And his exhortation was that an unrepentant person should be brought before the church or assembly. In the original context of Jesus ministry, the only church that existed was Jewish synagogues scattered throughout the region and the temple in Jerusalem. These were distinctively Old Testament forms of Israel's assemblies, but Jesus still called them “the church.”

The Old Testament required that disputes normally be handled by the elders, priests and judges — the representatives of the assembly that had been appointed the task of rendering judgment. We see this in places like Exodus 18, and Deuteronomy 1 and 19. Jesus affirmed this principle in his day, reminding his audience that they were still obligated to resolve their disputes within the assembly of Israel. But Jesus also intended his words to apply to his own church, the one he had mentioned earlier in Matthew 16. This is why Matthew recorded Jesus' words for us. You see, in the minds of Jesus and Matthew, just like in the mind of Paul, the church of the New Testament was a development of Israel's Old Testament assemblies. Jesus did not come to replace Israel with the church; he came to rescue and restore Israel in the form of the New Testament church.

As we look at the continuity between the Old and New Testament churches, it's important to recognize the central role that Jesus plays in tying these two churches together.

First, broadly speaking, the New Testament presents Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. As we see in Romans 8:1-4 and Galatians 3:16-29, Jesus is the faithful Israelite who keeps God's covenant and inherits all the blessings God promised to Abraham and Moses. And as we learn in Luke 1:32 and Acts 2:31-33, he is the son of David who restores David's throne and rules over Israel and Judah. Jesus did not break

with the past. He is the culmination of the Old Testament church, its most perfect member and minister.

And second, Jesus is the founder of the New Testament church, the one who brought the restoration and renewal that transformed the failing Old Testament church into the New Testament church. Scripture calls him the head of the church in Ephesians 5:23 and Colossians 1:18. He is the church's husband in Ephesians 5:22-33 and Revelation 19:1-10. And it's Jesus himself who appoints the church to receive his delegated authority in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus loves, approves of and authorizes the church.

The Old Testament church's relationship to Jesus Christ is at its essence, at the heart, exactly the same as the New Testament church's relationship to Jesus Christ. For some Christians, the term Old Testament church would sound rather strange. We might think that the church was born on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But, if we think of the Church as the people of God with whom He has established a Covenant, the people of God that God has redeemed through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, then the Old Testament church is simply the body of believers who look forward to God accomplishing salvation one day when the Messiah would come. And so the Old Testament church trusted in God's grace, God's shed blood, the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. Old Testament Christians, Old Testament believers, Old Testament Church members look forward to the accomplished work of our Lord Jesus Christ. They trusted in the all-powerful, undeserved grace and mercy of God that would forgive their sins and set them right with God. So, at the heart of the matter, the relationship of the Old Testament believer and the Old Testament church, their relationship with God is exactly the same as our relationship with God, as New Testament believers and a New Testament church.

— Dr. Samuel Ling

So far, we've looked at the sanction of the church from the perspective of its Old Testament background and the earthly ministry of Jesus. At this point, we're ready to consider some implications of these points.

IMPLICATIONS

When we realize that Jesus ordained the New Testament church as the restoration and development of Old Testament Israel, one important implication is that there is fundamental continuity between Israel in the Old Testament and the Christian church in the New Testament. On a practical level, we should expect the community of God's people in the New Testament to reflect its Old Testament roots. Of course, some things

are different, and the New Testament takes care to point out these changes. But the New Testament also teaches that the church is very much like Israel.

There are too many points of continuity for us to mention them all. But it is worth taking the time to list three of them explicitly. First, there is great continuity of purpose between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church.

Purpose

Theologians often summarize the history of the world in terms of three stages: creation, fall and redemption. In the stage of creation, which is described in Genesis 1–2, God created the world, the plants, the animals, and humanity. And in one special part of the world, he formed the Garden of Eden. And following God's mandate, it was humanity's responsibility to fill and subdue the earth, making it like the Garden of Eden, a place fit for God's holy, manifest presence.

In the stage of the fall, which is recorded in Genesis 3, humanity rebelled against God and was cast out of the Garden of Eden. And in humanity's fall into sin, the entire creation was corrupted. Paul explained this in Romans 8:20-22.

The rest of history makes up the stage of redemption, in which God is working to restore humanity to a perfect condition, and through humanity to restore creation to its pristine state. The final state of the period of redemption will be the new heavens and new earth that we read about in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1. And this redemption of humanity and creation has always been the purpose for God's church in both Testaments.

In the modern world, the church is still striving toward this goal of restoring creation. Following the priorities of New Testament teaching, we do this primarily by preaching the gospel, knowing that every person that comes to Christ represents a step toward the final state of redemption. We also do it by living as Christians in the world, showing Christ's love to our neighbors, and changing the cultures around us to reflect the glory, honor and character of God. And we do it by hoping and praying for the day when Jesus will return to complete his work of redemption.

A second point of continuity between the Old Testament church and New Testament church in the present age is that both assemblies of God's people include believers and unbelievers.

Believers and Unbelievers

Remember that in the Old and New Testaments, the church of God was never perfect. In the Old Testament, some ancient Israelites were faithful to God and received God's blessings. But many others rebelled against God in unbelief and fell under his divine curses. We see this throughout the Old Testament, but it is perhaps most clear in the summaries of God's covenant blessings and curses, like the ones we find in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 27–30.

And the same kind of thing is true of the assembly of the followers of Jesus, the New Testament church. There are always unbelievers mixed among the believers in our

churches. For instance, Judas was unfaithful among the apostles. We are specifically told this in John 6:70-71, and we also see it in his betrayal of Christ. The mixed nature of the church is also evident in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3. These chapters of Revelation expect true believers in the church to overcome. But they also warn that those who do not overcome will demonstrate their unfaithful hearts. And much of the letter of 1 John is dedicated to distinguishing between true and false believers in the church. Beyond this, many other passages warn of false teachers in the church, or encourage those who profess belief to persevere until the end in order to prove their faith.

In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul also recognized this truth, and encouraged people to reflect on it. Listen to what he wrote there:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you — unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Paul wanted everyone to recognize that things like church membership, and baptism, and a credible profession of faith are not sure signs of saving faith in Jesus Christ. People who have never truly come to Christ in faith also do these things. So, Paul encouraged people in the church to examine themselves, to make sure that they were truly trusting in Christ for salvation.

Of course, as human beings we can't know the condition of another person's heart. We can only see their actions and hear their words. So, it's often impossible for us to tell who the true believers are. But the knowledge that there may be unbelievers in our congregations should still affect the way we view ourselves and others in the church. We should remember to keep teaching and preaching the gospel to the whole church in order to save those who have not yet come to faith — even though we might not know who they are. We should be receptive to those in the church that are seeking God, not discouraging them from coming to church even though they may not yet have trusted in Christ yet. And we should be inclined to be patient with others, knowing that there is a wide diversity in faith and maturity, even among people who have been in the church for a long time.

A third point of continuity between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church is that they had similar obligations before God.

Obligations

The people of God in both Testaments were given the responsibility of loving God, spreading his kingdom throughout the world, and bringing him glory. With regard to love for God, Deuteronomy 6:5-6 taught the Old Testament church to love God from heart, to obey his law from the heart.

In the same way, the New Testament church is called to love God and to obey his law. As Jesus taught in Matthew 22:37, heartfelt love for God is the greatest commandment of the law. And as John taught in 1 John 5:3, heartfelt love for God results in heartfelt obedience to his commands.

One of the questions that people often ask is whether the New Testament church is required to keep the Old Testament law. And the answer is an unequivocal yes and no. No in the sense that those specific prescriptions that are found in the Old Testament Torah are in fact removed for us. We are not required to circumcise our boys. We are not required to go to the Temple three times a year. We are not required... and you can go down the list. In fact, this was the discussion of the council in Jerusalem that's recorded in Acts 15. However, what is the intent of the Old Testament Torah? In the sense that the Torah reveals to us the character and nature of God and the character and nature which we are expected to share, in that sense, yes, the Torah still applies. And I think you see this in Paul's letters. Paul can say to his readers, "No, you are free. You do not have to do all those things. And since you're free, of course, you're not going to steal, you're not going to lie, you're not going to covet, you're not going to commit adultery." So that, is it necessary for Christians to keep the Torah for our salvation? Absolutely not. But as those who have been freely saved, are we expected to share and exhibit the life of God? Yes.

— Dr. John Oswalt

Notice that God's people in both the Old and New Testaments were to spread God's kingdom. The Old Testament church knew that in Genesis 17:4-5, God had promised that Abraham would be a father of many nations. And as Paul taught in Romans 4:13, the Old Testament church knew that this promise obligated them to spread God's kingdom to the whole world by faith. In the same way, the New Testament church is still carrying out this plan by carrying the gospel to every nation. As Jesus commanded his church in Matthew 28:19:

Go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

A third obligation shared by Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church was to glorify God. For the Old Testament church, we see this in Psalm 86:12, Psalm 115:18, and even in New Testament descriptions of the Old Testament world, like Acts 17:24-28. It is also implied by the very fact that we are created in God's image, as Genesis 1:27 teaches. In the Old Testament world, images were statues of kings that reminded people to love, obey and glorify the kings. As images of God, human beings are designed to bring him glory.

And in the same way, the New Testament church is also to glorify God. This is taught in 1 Corinthians 10:31, 1 Peter 4:11, Revelation 4:11, and many other places.

The responsibilities God lays on the church are not burdensome — not when we are in Christ. If we had to stand before God on our own merit, we would be crushed under the weight of our obligations. But in Christ, true believers in the church are free from condemnation, able to work toward spreading the Lord's kingdom, keeping his law, and bringing him glory, without fear of failure. In fact, success is ultimately guaranteed.

Though we may encounter temporary setbacks, history is moving toward God's unstoppable victory. And it is advancing through the church. So, the more obedient we are — the more we keep our obligations — the sooner God will bring his kingdom to its glorious fulfillment.

By looking at the way the church developed through its initial stages in the Old Testament into the body that Jesus endorsed in the New Testament, it is clear that the church is fully sanctioned by God. The church exists because God wants it to exist, and because it serves his purpose. It is not a mere human invention. And it is not a corruption of biblical religion. It is the very bride and body of Christ, loved by God, and dedicated to his service and glory.

With this understanding of the church's divine sanction in mind, we are ready to turn to our second major topic: the fact that the church is holy.

HOLY

Throughout the Bible, many different words are used to refer to the idea of holiness. In the New Testament, the church is described as holy or sanctified. And people who are part of the church are called saints. All three of these words — holy, sanctified and saints — come from the same word group in Greek. “Holy” translates the adjective *hagios*. “Sanctified” is from the verb *hagiazō*, which means make holy. And “saints” is from the noun *hagios*, meaning one who is holy.

In the Old Testament, the same concepts are represented by Hebrew words like the adjective *qadosh*, meaning holy; the verb *qadash*, meaning make holy; and noun *qodesh*, meaning one who is holy.

Now, when we talk about holiness, many Christians are used to thinking that holiness is what distinguishes God from his creatures. It is often said that God's holiness is his quality of being entirely other, or entirely different from his creatures. But this is not the only way the word “holy” is used in Scripture. The Bible also refers to creatures and objects as holy when they have special qualities that reflect God's own holiness. And it is in this sense that the *Apostles' Creed* says that the church is holy.

We'll consider the idea that the church is holy in two parts. First, we'll explore the definition of the word “holy.” And second, we'll use this definition to identify the people that are holy. Let's begin with the biblical definition of holiness.

DEFINITION

In Scripture, the concept of holiness is complex. But it is fair to say that when the Bible refers to someone or something as holy, the most basic idea is that the subject is morally pure, and in a related sense, “holy” can also describe people and things that are set apart for use in special service to God.

Let's look at both aspects of this definition, beginning with being morally pure. When we say that someone or something is morally pure, we mean that it is free from sin and corruption. In the sense of moral purity, holiness is rooted in God's character.

Scripture describes God as the Holy One in many places, such as in 2 Kings 19:22, Proverbs 9:10, Isaiah 30:11-15, and 1 John 2:20.

It's not just that God is bigger than we are; it's not just that God is infinite and we are finite, but that he is morally *other* than we are. In him there is no darkness or shifting shadow. In him there is no evil impulse or inclination to do what is wrong. In him is not the slightest hint or desire to do evil.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Because God is utterly holy, anything sinful that enters his immediate presence is subject to his judgment and wrath. We see this in places like 1 Samuel 6:20, 2 Kings 24:3, and Hebrews 12:14. Although God may withhold judgment for a while, his holy presence will ultimately destroy those whose sin is not covered. As a result, anyone or anything that is to enter his presence must first be made holy. For instance, consider Isaiah's words in Isaiah 6:3-7:

[The seraphim] were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty" ... "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said ... "[Y]our guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." (Isaiah 6:3-7).

In this passage, Isaiah feared that he would be destroyed in the special presence of the Holy Lord because of his guilt or sin. So, the seraph, one of God's attending angels, cleansed Isaiah's sin with a hot coal taken from God's holy altar. By this cleansing, Isaiah was purified from sin — he was made holy. And because of his new holiness, he was able to stand in the Lord's presence without falling under judgment.

As we see in Isaiah 6, God's holiness is one of his communicable attributes — an attribute that characterizes him perfectly and completely, but that can also characterize his creatures in finite ways. The communicable nature of holiness lies behind the many biblical commands for believers to be holy, as in Ephesians 1:4, Hebrews 12:14, and 1 Peter 1:15-16. We are to strive to be as morally pure as God is. Of course, in our own strength we can never succeed in this attempt. But Christ himself has perfect moral purity. And when we are in him, his righteousness is credited to us, and we are counted as being absolutely pure, completely free from sin and corruption.

The second aspect of our definition of the word holy is that it describes people and things that are set apart for use in special service to God. In this sense, things can be holy even if they are not morally pure. As just one example, listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:14:

The unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband (1 Corinthians 7:14, NRSV).

Here, Paul said that when a believer is married to an unbeliever, the unbeliever is made holy, or as other translations put it, the unbeliever is “sanctified.” The idea is that the unbeliever is identified with God and made useful for his service — even though the unbeliever has not been morally purified by God in Christ.

Some Christians find it strange to think that God sets apart imperfect and impure people for his service. But if we think about it, the Bible provides many examples of unbelievers that God set apart to accomplish his will. Probably the greatest example of this is the fact the apostle Judas betrayed our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself taught, Judas was chosen for that very purpose. And his betrayal resulted in the purest, most holy offering ever rendered to God — the precious death of his Son. And if God is able to use even wicked unbelievers in his service, how much more can he be glorified by the special service of the holy ones that love him?

Now, as we have seen, the concept of holiness has many dimensions in the Bible. So we must be careful to understand what the Scriptures mean when they use words like “holy,” or “sanctified” or even “saints” as descriptions of the church. Sometimes, the Bible is calling attention to the fact that true believers in the church are morally pure because of the holiness of Christ given to them. At other times, it refers to people who are set apart from the world for special service to God, even if they are not true believers. And in some cases, it refers to the idea that true believers have been set apart for special service to God.

Whatever the case, one thing we know is that everything and everyone that is holy is special to God. We revere God’s name, refusing to take it in vain, because it is holy. We submit to the Bible because it is the holy word of our holy God. We respect and strive for moral purity in every aspect of life, knowing that the Lord calls us to holy lives. And we participate in and submit to his holy church. Wherever we find holiness, we recognize God’s hand, and we take special care to treat it with godly respect.

With this definition of “holy” in mind, let’s use it to explore the identity of the people that are holy.

PEOPLE

Most broadly speaking, the Bible refers to people as “holy” when they are set apart from the rest of the world in order to be useful in special service to God. For example, the entire nation of Old Testament Israel was regularly called “holy” because God was in covenant with the nation. We see this in places like Exodus 19:5-6, Deuteronomy 7:6-9 and 28:9, and Ezekiel 37:26-28.

And this theme is also continued in the New Testament church. For example, Luke 1:72 speaks of Jesus as coming to fulfill God’s holy covenant. And because the church is understood to be the renewed and restored Israel of the new covenant, it is also called holy. We see this in Colossians 3:12, Hebrews 10:29, and several other places. As one example, listen again to Peter’s words to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9).

Here, Peter quoted from several Old Testament passages that spoke of the holiness of Israel, but he applied them to the church. His point was that the church in both the Old and the New Testaments was one and the same holy group.

As we have seen, though, not everyone in Israel or the New Testament church was a true believer. Even so, they were all considered holy because they were part of God's covenant community, that is, the people who were in covenant with God.

For the believers in the covenant community, their holiness exceeded the holiness of the unbelievers. Unbelievers were holy only because they were set apart for God. But believers were holy, not only because they were set apart, but also because in Christ they were morally pure and obedient to God. Of course, the goal was always for the entire covenant community to believe — for everyone to be faithful to God and to live morally pure lives.

One helpful way to think about holy people can be found in the traditional distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. Let's look at each of these categories, beginning with the visible church.

Visible Church

The visible church refers to the church we can see, obviously visible in that sense. The visible church, then, would be those who claim to be the church around the world. All of the denominations that claim to follow a Jesus Christ, claim to follow God's purpose and Word in the world today. That would include multiple denominations, it would include those who would not identify with any specific denomination but would consider themselves to be Christ's followers.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

At any given moment, the visible church includes everyone who is regularly part of the gathered church, regardless of the condition of their hearts. There are several different ways people can be counted as part of the visible church. They can be confirmed in God's covenant, such as by baptism in the New Testament, or circumcision in the Old Testament. Or they can have or profess faith in Christ. In churches that don't maintain official membership, or that don't practice covenant confirming rites like baptism, they might be counted as covenant members simply because they regularly submit to the teaching of the church. Or, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 7:14, they can simply have a believing parent or spouse.

For example, in the Old Testament, the entire nation of Israel was part of the church, even though not everyone had saving faith. At the very least, they were all present within the nation. Beyond this, as God instructed in Genesis 17, they had all been confirmed in God's covenant through the circumcision of the males.

In the New Testament, we see something similar. Everyone who was part of the church gatherings was counted as part of the church. This included everyone who professed faith, everyone who was baptized, the children and spouses of believers, and often their household servants and slaves. For instance, when Paul wrote letters to various churches, he intended those letters to be read to everyone who was directly associated with those churches. And as we can see from his exhortations to Christians to test themselves to see if they really had faith, Paul fully expected that there would be unbelievers within the church. We see this in passages like 2 Corinthians 13:5. Jesus also had the same expectation in his parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30, where he said not to take the unbelievers out of the church. We also see the same thing in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3, where Jesus consistently encouraged them to overcome and to endure to the end. And we see the same emphasis in the warnings against breaking the new covenant in passages like Hebrews 6:4-8 and 10:29.

As just one example, listen to these words from Hebrews 10:29:

How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:29).

In this verse, the author of Hebrews indicated that it was possible to reject Christ after having been sanctified in covenant with God. As the rest of the chapter makes clear, the punishment in view here is eternal suffering in hell.

It's important to remember that in the visible church there will always be "wheat and tares," as Jesus said. You'll have the true people of God; you'll have those that appear to be. Just like you had the disciples who were those faithful to Jesus, but you had Judas in there. Paul had his Demas among those that were his disciples, if you will. So, there will always be those in a local church.

— Dr. Donald Whitney

The mixed character of the visible church means that we must always be on guard against unbelief and error in the church. At the same time, the holiness of the church persists even when unbelievers are involved in its ministries. So, we honor the sacraments, God's holy ordinances. And we respect God's holy Word, even when it is preached poorly or hypocritically, as Paul taught in Philippians 1:14-18. The holiness of the church is both a warning against looking to the church in place of God, and an assurance that God uses the church effectively despite human sin and unbelief.

With this understanding of the visible church in mind, let's consider the idea of the invisible church.

Invisible Church

The visible church is the gathering of believers, Sunday by Sunday, in a local community, and across and around the world and it's made up of those who have shown some outward profession of faith. It's those who would meet together and to share the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and by that give an indication that they are active members of God's visible church.

— Dr. Simon Vibert

Whereas the visible church includes everyone who is part of God's covenant community, the invisible church is composed only of those who have been united to Christ in salvation. For this reason, it is sometimes called the "true church." We might think of the invisible church as a smaller group contained entirely within the visible church. Generally speaking, we treat most people in the visible church as if they were truly saved, giving them the benefit of the doubt. But the reality is that only God can see the heart, as we see in Scriptures like Psalm 44:21 and Acts 15:8. And as a result, at this stage in history, only God can identify the invisible church with full certainty. Although we'll focus primarily on the invisible church as it exists on earth at any given moment, it is important to recognize that the invisible church also includes every believer who has ever lived, both before Christ's earthly ministry and after.

Usually, Scripture is addressed to the visible church rather than to the invisible church, but it generally gives its audience the benefit of the doubt with regard to their salvation. There are some noteworthy exceptions to this, such as 1 Corinthians 5, and 1 Timothy 1:19-20. And some of the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 are not very optimistic about their audiences. But in general, the authors of Scripture expected their readers to believe and trust in God, and to obey him faithfully. The goal was for everyone to be proven faithful — for the entire visible church to be part of the invisible church.

When Jesus returns, he will completely purify his church. He will purge all the unbelievers from it, so that the invisible church will be identical to the visible church. We see this in places like Matthew 7:21-23 and 13:24-30, 1 Corinthians 3:12-15, and 1 Peter 4:17-19. But until that time, the identity of those in the invisible church will be known with certainty only to God.

The fact that there is currently an invisible church within the visible church has important implications for everyone who claims to be a Christian. And one of the greatest implications is that the church needs to hear the gospel on a regular basis. We know there are unbelievers in the visible church. And that means that church membership is not enough to guarantee our salvation. And for this reason, we have to continue to teach, and to preach the gospel of redemption not only to ourselves, but to others as well. We have to make sure that the unbelievers in our congregations are invited to come to Christ and to be part of the invisible church.

When the *Apostles' Creed* affirms that the church is holy, it means that the church is in covenant with God, that it is set apart as God's special people, dedicated to his service. It also means that the ultimate goal of the church is moral purity, and even that the present experience of believers in the church hides them in the moral purity of Christ. Beyond this, as we submit ourselves to the Lord's commandments, we are constantly

purified from the sin we commit, bringing us closer to the goal of perfect holiness that God has laid out for us.

Now that we have looked at the divine sanction of the church, which gives the church its importance and authority, and at the idea that the church is holy to God, we are ready to address our third topic: the fact that the church is catholic or universal.

CATHOLIC

Our discussion of the term catholic will divide into three parts. First, we'll offer a definition of the word "catholic." Second, we'll look at the catholicity of the visible church. And third, we'll turn to the catholicity of the invisible church. Let's begin with a definition of the word "catholic."

DEFINITION

As we mentioned in an earlier lesson, the word catholic means: universal; or including all Christians in all congregations. The word "catholic" translates the Latin word *catholicus*, which in turn derives from the Greek preposition *kata* and the adjective *holos*, meaning "whole" or "complete." It's not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it's a description of the unity that exists between all churches that faithfully follow Christ.

You will remember from earlier lessons in this series, that the form of the *Apostles' Creed* we have today developed from early baptismal creeds. At the time these early creeds were written, the various Christian churches around the world had not yet come together under a single, overarching church government. So, when the *Apostles' Creed* speaks of the catholicity of the church, it does not have in mind an organization of all Christian congregations. Rather, it's talking about the unity of the Holy Spirit that exists between all legitimate Christian churches, despite our organizational differences. At this stage in history, the word "catholic" was inclusive. It was meant to extend the name "church" to every Christian congregation.

This idea was in keeping with Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 1:2, where he addressed his letter in this way:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours ... (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Here, Paul indicated that the various Christian congregations in Corinth, which he referred to collectively as "the church ... in Corinth," were part of a larger church that included all who called on the name of Christ, regardless of where they lived.

In the middle of the third century, Cyprian of Carthage began to emphasize the role of bishops or priests in defining the church. In his *Epistle 68*, he had this to say:

They are the Church who are a people united to the priest ... [T]he Church, which is Catholic and one, is not cut nor divided, but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another.

For Cyprian, the church's unity was rooted in the unity of the clergy and its ministry. As this view began to grow, Christians also began to affirm the unity of the church in its unity of government. The church was a single organization that was present everywhere throughout the world because its bishops and priests were present throughout the world.

Even at this point, though, the word "catholic" was intended to be inclusive, encompassing all people and congregations that were called by the name of Christ and that were faithful to the traditional doctrines of the church.

Later, however, the church was fragmented by divisions. For example, in A.D. 1054 the Roman Catholic Church excommunicated the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy, and the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy excommunicated the Roman Catholic Church.

At this time, these churches began to use the word "catholic" in a new exclusive sense. By insisting that their own churches were catholic or universal, each meant to identify itself as the only valid church, and to condemn rival churches.

Later, in the wake of the Reformation of the 16th century, most Protestant churches took a different approach. Essentially, they returned to the original meaning of the creed, appealing to the earlier inclusive meaning of the word "catholic." In agreement with both Scripture and the *Apostles' Creed*, Protestant churches affirmed the unity of Spirit that all Christian churches share under the headship of Christ. And they recognized that this unity could be maintained even without solidarity in the area of church government, and without losing the positive contributions made by each of their denominations.

Recognizing the catholicity of the church in the modern world means affirming the validity of every church that maintains the doctrines affirmed in the *Apostles' Creed*. All Christians in all faithful churches are under Christ's covenant headship, and all true believers are blessed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And for this reason, we should be eager to benefit from the gifts of every true Christian in every faithful church, and we should be willing to serve alongside them as much as possible.

With this definition of the word "catholic" in mind, let's look at the ways in which the visible church can be called "catholic."

VISIBLE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When we combine our understanding of catholicity with our understanding of the visible church, we can define the visible catholic church as: one worldwide fellowship of all people in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. Obviously, this fellowship is one of Spirit rather than of church government. There is no single denomination whose government extends over all Christian congregations. Rather, the unity of the visible church is based on the fact that each church is in covenant with the same God, and under the covenant headship of the same Christ.

Historically, the visible church has traced its catholicity in a variety of ways. In some traditions, it is traced through church government. The church expands as it multiplies itself, each new minister being ordained and having hands laid on him by those who are already ministers.

But generally Protestants have emphasized that the unity of the entire church rests in our faith in Christ and the work of the Spirit, rather than in the succession of ordained ministers and priests. For this reason, new congregations can arise wherever unity of Spirit exists, wherever those who are in covenant with God gather in the name of Christ. Protestants insist that the visible church is catholic because it exists everywhere that people are in covenant with God, under the headship of Christ, in the unity of the Spirit.

One of the most common problems that many Christians face today is knowing which churches they should embrace as part of the catholic or universal church of Christ. In most parts of the world, there are so many varieties of churches that claim to be Christian that well-meaning Christians often go to one of two extremes. Either they open their arms too widely and embrace any church that claims to be Christian, or they exclude everyone except their narrowly defined congregation or denomination.

One helpful solution to this difficulty can be found in the three traditional marks of the church. These marks were formulated by John Knox in 16th century Scotland, but they represented the thinking of many Protestant churches during his day. Essentially, the marks enable Christians to distinguish genuine congregations of the visible catholic church from impostor congregations.

The marks of the church were absolutely necessary in order to find out where the church is, because in reality, anything could call itself a church. In points of great theological crisis, such as in the Reformation of the 16th century, the question is, “Where is the true church to be found?” And thus the reformers, for instance, most carefully defined the marks of the church by saying, “Well it’s not the sign out front. It’s not the architecture of the building. It’s whether or not, first of all, there is the preaching of the word of God.” Wherever there is the right preaching of the word of God, there is a church. Wherever the ordinances, the sacraments, are found rightly administered, there is the church. Later marks included, especially, the discipline of the church — understanding that without that mark of discipline the purity of the church is surrendered, and thus the church eventually is surrendered in terms of its integrity and identity.

— Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Let’s take a look at each of the three traditional marks of the visible catholic church, beginning with the Preaching of the word of God.

There is no church or denomination that has an exclusive claim to the possession, interpretation, application or proclamation of the word of God. Some churches and denominations claim to have the exclusive right to interpret and teach Scripture. Some claim to have special enlightenment that makes their understanding of the Bible truer than all others. But no church perfectly manifests any of the marks, including the

preaching of the Word. God has given the Bible to the whole visible church. And he has given the whole visible church his Holy Spirit to help us understand the Bible. We see these things in passages like 1 Timothy 3:15, and Hebrews 4:11-13 and 6:4-6. Moreover, Scripture exhorts the whole visible church to read, to understand, and to teach God's word, as we see in Matthew 28:20, 1 Timothy 4:17, and 2 Timothy 2:15 and 3:14-17.

The second mark of the church is the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These sacraments belong to the entire visible church, not just to one denomination or another.

It is the privilege and responsibility of every congregation within the visible church to administer the sacraments according to the Scriptures. We see this in the Great Commission's command to baptize in Matthew 28:19, and in Paul's teaching on baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. We also see it in Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke 22:15-20, where the Lord indicated that the supper was for his entire kingdom, for all those who were included under his covenant headship. Passages like these are the reason that most Protestant churches recognize and affirm the sacraments of other churches and denominations.

The third traditional mark of the visible catholic church is formal church discipline, such as excommunication.

No Christian enjoys exercising formal church discipline, especially excommunication. And this has often led churches to avoid the use of formal discipline. Of course, forbearance also has biblical warrant, as we can see in the parable of the wheat and the weeds, found in Matthew 13:24-30.

Even so, discipline has its place. There are times when a person's sin is so troublesome that it must be addressed through discipline — especially when it endangers the church and its reputation. At times like this, discipline is intended both to protect the church and to drive the offender to repentance. Scriptural grounds for formal discipline can be found in passages such as Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, John 20:23, and Titus 3:10. And we see it practiced in passages like 1 Corinthians 5:1-13. Because the entire visible church belongs to Christ and represents him on earth, it's important for every part of the visible church to protect Christ's people and to defend his honor through the proper exercise of church discipline.

The marks of the church are still important for us to consider today. They help us ensure that our own congregations remain within the boundaries of the visible catholic church in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. They also help us identify impostors and enemies of the church, so that we can warn Christians away from such groups, and so that we can proclaim to the world that these false groups do not represent our Lord and his gospel. They can also encourage us to work across denominational lines as we engage in ministry. When we recognize that the body of Christ is not limited to our churches or denominations, but extends universally throughout the world wherever the gospel of Christ is proclaimed, we can be encouraged to embrace everyone who is part of the visible church.

Now that we have looked at the universal nature of the visible church, let's consider some ways in which the invisible church is also catholic or universal.

INVISIBLE CATHOLIC CHURCH

When we combine our understanding of catholicity with our understanding of the invisible church, we can define the invisible catholic church as: all people from all ages who have been united to Christ for salvation. As we have said, the invisible church is a subsection of the visible church, so it is also true that everyone in the invisible church is in covenant with God under the headship of Christ. But in order to distinguish the invisible church, our definition focuses only on how it differs from the visible church.

While there are many ways to think about the catholicity of the invisible church, we'll focus on just two. First, the invisible church is universal because there is only one Savior. And second, the invisible church is universal because there is only one true religion that can lead us to that Savior. Let's look first at the idea that there is only one Savior.

One Savior

Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is the only savior available to humanity. He is the only one who has ever had the power to save us, and the only one who ever will. As Peter insisted in Acts 4:12:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Jesus Christ has always been the only Savior available to human beings. Our Lord himself proclaimed this truth in John 14:6 when he spoke these words:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Why is Jesus the only one who can save us? Well, the Savior must be perfect man as well as perfect God, and Jesus had to be a perfect man in order to stand in our place, in order to be our sacrifice, in order to be our substitute. And Jesus is the only one who could fulfill that role. And, of course, this is prepared for over redemptive history when God appointed the Lion of David ... to be the Messiah of God, to be the Anointed One. And Jesus is the great King to come after David, and Jesus holds this office, and so the whole Old Testament prepares us for the coming of Jesus. So, Jesus is the only one who meets the criteria for saving his people completely from sin.

— Dr. John Frame

Jesus is the savior of Presbyterians, and Baptists, and Anglicans, and Methodists, and Lutherans, and Roman Catholics, and Eastern Orthodox, and those in every other denomination of the visible church.

There is only one invisible church because everyone who is saved is united to the same Christ, the same Savior. He is the source of our unity. And because he himself is undivided, so are we.

A second idea related to the fact that the invisible church is catholic or universal is that there is only one true religion that can lead us to Christ.

One Religion

It's important to realize that Christianity is not primarily a system of salvation, but a covenant relationship with God. That is to say, unlike other religions, Christianity is not fundamentally a method for obtaining salvation. Instead, it's a relationship between God and his people. Yes, faith is critical as a means to putting us in a right relationship with God. But the *big* question is: What is your identity as you stand before God? Are you a faithful citizen in God's kingdom? When God looks at you, does he see someone that is hidden in the covenant blood of Christ? Or are you a citizen of the kingdom of his enemies? Are you one who stands before God on your *own* merit, who must therefore pay the penalty for your own sin?

Sadly, those in false religions are members of enemy kingdoms. They are not part of God's covenant people, and therefore they do not and cannot belong to Christ. Only Christianity can give us access to the savior. This is why biblical Christianity denies the possibility that people can be saved through other religions, even if those people or religions appear to have good intentions.

As we know, there are many non-Christian religions, what are sometimes called the "great religions of the world" because of their size and because of their influence. And it's often asked if a person who is not a Christian, but they are faithfully involved in one of these other great religions of the world, they are devoted followers of the doctrines and of the practices of that particular religion, if they are sincere in their practice, will they go to heaven even though they do not acknowledge Christ — maybe they've never even heard of Christ. Well, the Bible is clear on that. In John 14:6, Jesus was explicit in dealing with this particular situation. He said of himself, "I am *the* way; I am *the* truth; I am *the* life," and if that were not clear enough he goes on to say, "And no one comes to the father, but through me."

— Dr. Donald Whitney

Because of God's common grace we see all sorts of goodness in people's lives regardless of what religion they hold to. But we also see great evil in people's lives, and if we recognize the holiness of God and the fallenness of human beings, we realize that coming before God and having a relationship with him requires much more than merely ethical behavior. We can never do anything pleasing to God in our sinful condition. And so we need a Redeemer and a Savior, not just religious practice. And Jesus is the only one who provides that way to establish a relationship with God again.

— Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

As we have said, the living members of the invisible church are ordinarily contained within the visible church. For this reason, many theologians have made the point that salvation is not ordinarily possible for those outside the *visible* church. That is to say, if a person is not part of the visible church, that person has no ordinary opportunity to be saved.

The early church father Cyprian, who lived from A.D. 200 to 258, put it this way in his treatise *On the Unity of the Church*:

Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ. He is a stranger; he is profane; he is an enemy. He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother.

Here, Cyprian was arguing against those who had left the visible church. And his point was that you cannot enter the invisible church to receive the rewards of Christ unless you are also part of the visible church. This argument is consistent with what we have said about the visible church being in covenant with God.

The fact of the matter is that salvation itself is a blessing of God's covenant. We see this in Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 1:69-75, Romans 11:27, Hebrews 7:22-25, and many other places. As just one example, listen to Jesus' words in Luke 22:20, as he instituted the Lord's Supper:

This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you (Luke 22:20).

On the night of his arrest, Jesus said that the blood he would shed in atonement for our sins would be a covenant. In other words, salvation in Christ's blood comes only through his covenant.

Since God's covenant is made with the visible church, salvation ordinarily comes *through* the visible church. This happens when people within the visible church come to faith, or when the visible church gains converts through evangelism. Of course, sometimes people also get saved apart from any interaction with the church. But when this happens, it's important to recognize that something unusual is taking place — something *extraordinary*.

Because the invisible church is universal, only those who are faithful to God's covenant can be saved. There is no hope that people in other religions will make it to heaven by being good by the standards of their own religions. We must evangelize. We must tell people about the only Savior. We must bring them into the only covenant community, the earthly kingdom of God, and teach them to love and obey its Lord and King. The catholicity of the invisible church is a great encouragement to all of us who are saved — it is our solidarity in Christ. But it's also a terrible warning to everyone who has not yet come to Christ.

So far in our lesson on the church, we have looked at the divine sanction of the church, and we have seen that the church is both holy and catholic, or universal. At this point, we are ready to turn to our last major topic: the idea that the church is a communion of saints.

COMMUNION

In our discussion of the word “holy,” we saw that the term saints refers in a general way to everyone that is in the visible church, and in a special way to everyone that is in the invisible church. So, as we discuss the communion of saints, we’ll focus our attention on the term that we have not yet investigated, namely communion.

In ancient Greek versions of the *Apostles' Creed*, the word for communion is *koinonia* (κοινωνία). Scripture commonly uses this word to refer to the fellowship that exists between members of the church, especially through their union with God. We see this in passages like Acts 2:42, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and 1 John 1:3.

The New Testament also uses *koinonia* (κοινωνία) to refer to sharing, often of materials goods and money. We see this in Romans 15:16, 2 Corinthians 9:13, and Hebrews 13:16. It is also used to describe the sharing of the gospel — not primarily in evangelism, but in a mutual way within the church, as in Philippians 1:5 and Philemon verse 6.

In line with these ideas, the word “communion” in the creed has traditionally been taken to refer to the fellowship between members of the church; to the sharing of things we possess in common; and by implication, to our mutual dependence on those who share with us.

As we explore the communion of saints, we’ll organize our discussion around a distinction that should be familiar by now. First, we’ll look at the communion that exists within the visible church. And second, we’ll consider the communion that exists within the invisible church. Let’s begin with the communion of saints in the visible church.

VISIBLE CHURCH

While there are many aspects to the communion that exists in the visible church, we’ll focus on just three: first, the means of grace; second, spiritual gifts; and third, material goods. Let’s start by looking at the means of grace.

Means of Grace

Means of grace are tools or mechanisms that God ordinarily uses to apply grace to his people. John Wesley, one of the founders of the Methodist Church, described the means of grace in a way that reflects the beliefs of many Christian traditions. Listen to what he wrote in his *Sermon* number 16, based on the text of Malachi 3:7:

By "means of grace" I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

The means of grace, which some people refer to as spiritual disciplines or works of piety, depending on the tradition that you come from, when I hear that phrase, "How do they work?" The thing that I always want to say is, "They don't work. It is God who works; it is the grace of God that is at work." But, the means of grace provide us with the opportunities to receive and process that grace. They create the time and the space to pay attention to the grace of God at work in our lives. I like to think of them as pipelines. We don't want to confuse the pipe with the water. It's the water of life that we want to receive. But it's the pipelines that help carry that water to us. So that we can drink of that water, the means of grace enable us to drink of water of life.

— Dr. Steve Harper

Practically speaking, there are many means God uses to apply grace to us, including such things as adversity and suffering, faith, charity, and fellowship itself. But traditionally, theologians have focused especially on three particular means of grace: the Word of God, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and prayer. All three of these means of grace belong to the visible church as a whole, including both its believers and its unbelievers.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a traditional Protestant summary of Christian teaching, describes the means of grace in this way in its question and answer number 88:

Q: What are the outward means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption?

A: The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicateth to us the benefits of redemption, are his ordinances, especially the word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.

Scripture talks about the benefits of these means of grace in places like Romans 10:14, 1 Corinthians 10:17, and 1 Peter 3:12, 21.

Now, even though the benefits of redemption are only for those who are saved, that is, only for the invisible church, the ordinances themselves are for the entire visible church. Remember, the invisible church is just that: invisible. We don't know who's in it. It doesn't hold its own worship services. It doesn't have its own ministers. It doesn't have its own church government. Those things are appointed to the *visible* church. In the same way, all our means of grace — our preaching, baptisms, celebrations of the Lord's Supper, and prayers — can be observed by others. They are visible. They are things that

the visible church shares in common, and therefore they are part of the *communion* of the visible church.

The means of grace have always been important ordinances through which God ordinarily applies the blessings of redemption to our lives, and we should take full advantage of them. We should preach the gospel that converts, and teach the word that brings wisdom and maturity. We should celebrate the sacraments that visibly present the gospel and seal us in God's covenant. And we should pray for God's grace and forgiveness, for conversions and maturity, for help to resist sin, for protection from evil, and for rescue in our times of need. In all these ways and more, the means of grace are valuable ministries of the visible church.

Besides the means of grace, the visible church also possesses spiritual gifts in common.

Spiritual Gifts

Now, it's important to understand that when we say spiritual gifts belong to the entire visible church, we are not saying that everyone in the visible church is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They are not. Only believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Even so, the Holy Spirit uses all spiritual gifts for the purpose of building up the visible church. For some people, this means increasing their sanctification and growing toward maturity. For others, it means bringing them to faith first. But in all cases, everyone in the visible church is exposed to spiritual gifts, and even allowed to participate in them in some measure. And because of this, it is right to say that spiritual gifts are shared by the entire visible church.

That spiritual gifts are shared by the entire visible church is demonstrated in several ways. First, they are used in public worship services. We see this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 14:13-26. Second, the gifts are given to build up the entire church. We see this in places like 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and Ephesians 4:3-13. Third, Paul specifically said that tongues are a sign even for unbelievers within the church, as we read in 1 Corinthians 14:21, 22. Fourth, unbelievers within the church are condemned for failing to benefit from spiritual gifts in Hebrews 6:4-6. In these ways, Scripture makes it clear that believers and unbelievers alike share and partake in the spiritual gifts of the church.

Like the means of grace, spiritual gifts are a great benefit to the modern visible church. They are useful for proclaiming the truth and converting the lost. They are useful for helping believers grow in faith and maturity. And many gifts, such as mercy and hospitality, are useful for meeting the earthly needs of God's people. Whenever the Holy Spirit grants gifts to his people, we should encourage them to use those gifts for the benefit of all, and not to withhold them from anyone in the visible church.

Communion also exists in the visible church in the way that members share their material goods with each other.

Material Goods

Part of the meaning of communion, or *koinonia* (κοινωνία), in the Bible and early church was that Christians shared their material goods with others in the visible church who were in need. The word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) was often used to refer to contributions for the poor, as in Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:4 and 9:13, and Hebrews 13:16.

Even when the word *koinonia* (κοινωνία) is not used, this aspect of communion can be seen in the practice of early Christians. For example, many early Christians sold their possessions and gave the proceeds to the church, as we see in Acts 2:44-45, and 4:34-35. In the early church, some heroic Christians even sold themselves into slavery in order to free others or to raise money to feed the poor.

The early church father Clement, who lived from A.D. 30 to 100, wrote about this practice in a letter commonly known as *1 Clement*, which he wrote to the Corinthians. Listen to these words from 55 of that letter:

We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others. Many, too, have surrendered themselves to slavery, that with the price which they received for themselves, they might provide food for others.

The sense of communion was so strong in the early church, and believers considered others so much more highly than themselves, that they were not only willing to share their possessions, but even to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of giving to others.

Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:3-5 help explain their thinking. Listen to what he wrote there:

They gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability... [T]hey urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints... [T]hey gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will (2 Corinthians 8:3-5).

In this passage, Paul described the generosity of the Macedonian churches. And he explained that it was their dedication to the Lord that led them to be so sacrificial in their sharing with the Lord's visible church.

Sharing material goods with those in need is an important part of the life of the visible church. The entire church is God's people, his covenant community. He cares for everyone in it, and he calls us to do the same. To put it plainly, all we have belongs to the Lord. He has only made us stewards of his property. And that means that our charity and giving are the *Lord's* ministry to his people, and *his* witness of the gospel to the world. So, if we want to be faithful to him, we must not withhold the Lord's property from his people who need it.

Now that we have explored the communion of the saints in the visible church, we are ready to consider the communion that the invisible church shares.

INVISIBLE CHURCH

We'll look at two main ideas related to the communion of saints in the invisible church. First, we'll talk about the union that all believers share with Christ. And second, we'll speak of the union we share with other believers in the invisible church. Let's begin by looking at our union with Christ.

Union with Christ

The New Testament frequently mentions that believers are united with Christ. This idea is most commonly presented by saying that believers are "in Christ," or "in Jesus" or "in him." On the one hand, this union means that Jesus represents believers before the Father, especially in his death and resurrection. But on the other hand, it means that believers are mystically united to Jesus in a vital way. Jesus dwells in believers, and they dwell in him.

I think one of the central teachings in the apostle Paul in particular is that we're united with Jesus Christ; that we belong to him. When we look at all of Biblical revelation, I think the Bible teaches that we are either in Adam or we're in Christ. Of course Adam was the first human being. All human beings are born as sons and daughters of Adam. And therefore they come into the world as sinners. They have a sin nature. They are alienated from God. What it means to be saved and redeemed and to trust in Christ is to be incorporated into Christ, to belong to Christ. What it means to be united with Christ is to be part of his person.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

It is in union with Christ that we receive all the benefits of Christ. Historically we understand these benefits to be: justification, sanctification, adoption — all of the things that we describe in terms of what we receive in Salvation. They are only received in Christ. And therefore, it is important for us, it is essential for us, to be united with Christ to receive these benefits. And how do we receive these benefits, or how are we united to Christ? We are united by faith, and faith alone. It is faith that brings us into union with Christ, that gift of faith that comes from God.

— Dr. Jeffrey Jue

Theologians often speak of this vital union between Jesus and believers as *mystical* because the Bible doesn't explain exactly how it works. But Scripture does make it clear that this union involves both our bodies and our spirits. We see this in John 15:4-7, Romans 8:9-11, and many other places. As just one example, listen to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 6:15-17:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? ... He who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-17).

Charles Spurgeon, the famous Baptist preacher who lived from 1834 to 1892, spoke of our union with Christ in his sermon *The Matchless Mystery*, based on Ephesians 5:30. Listen to what he said:

A vital union exists between us and Christ... It is not unity; it is identity. It is more than being joined to; it is being made a part of, and an essential part of the whole... Christ ... must have his people; they are essential to him.

It is amazing to think that our union with Christ is so vital that Christ himself would be at a loss if we were taken from him. He loves us, and died so that we could be his prize, his inheritance. Because we are united to him, every believer should feel great security in our salvation, great assurance of pardon, and great encouragement of our right standing before God. We should draw strength from this union, being nourished by Christ and sustained by his Spirit. And we should feel boldness in our fellowship with God, knowing that because we are hidden in Christ, we are perfect in the eyes of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This does not mean they will not discipline us for our sins. But it does mean that when they do, it will be a work of love, intended to bring us to a maturity and perfection fit to be united to God forever.

Now that we have looked at believers' union with Christ, we are ready to look at our union with other believers in Christ.

Union with Believers

Because every person in the invisible church is united to Christ, believers are also united to one another in him. We see this in Romans 12:5, Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 4:25, and a number of other places. Listen to the way Jesus spoke to the Father about this communion in John 17:22-23:

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:22-23).

Whereas our union with the visible church is relational and experiential, our union with the invisible church is spiritual and ontological. Our very beings are knit together through Christ and his Spirit. As a result, we all have equal dignity in Christ, as Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 5:14-16, Galatians 3:28, and Colossians 3:11. And we even experience each other's joys and pains, as we read in 1 Corinthians 12:26.

And the communion of the invisible church is not limited to the church on earth; it also extends to the church in heaven, to those believers who have already died and gone

to be with the Lord. Just as believers on earth have a mystical communion with each other in and through Christ, we have the same communion with everyone who is united to Christ — including the believers who are now in heaven. Scripture teaches this idea in places like Hebrews 11:4 and 12:22-24.

One striking image Scripture uses to teach this fact is the portrayal of the church as the bride of Christ. There is a sense in which the visible church is treated as the bride of Christ, but this is always with a view toward the perfection of the bride in the invisible church. We see this in the Old Testament in Isaiah 54:5-8, Hosea 2:19-20, and Ephesians 5:26-27. And the fulfillment of these images appears in the perfected invisible church in Revelation 19.

Listen to the account of John's vision in Revelation 19:6-8:

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Revelation 19:6-8).

Here we see that the bride of Christ consists of all the redeemed saints of all ages, in communion with each other. We all stand as one, wearing one wedding gown composed of the righteous acts of every believer.

Scripture draws many applications from the fact that believers are united to each other in Christ. It teaches us that every believer is valuable and even indispensable to Christ. It teaches us to honor each other, and to minister to each other. It teaches us to be compassionate toward each other, to be kind, to be gentle and patient, and to forgive. It teaches us to treat others the same way we want them to treat us, and the same way we treat ourselves. Because in our union with them through Christ, they are just as much a part of us as our own bodies are.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the *Apostles' Creed*, we have explored the doctrine of the church. We have looked at the church's divine sanction as God's special community. We have discussed the fact that the church is holy, being both set apart and pure. We have spoken of its catholic or universal nature. And we have explained the ways in which it is a communion of saints.

As modern Christians, our experience of the church is often very different than it was in the days of the Bible, or even in the days when the *Apostles' Creed* was formulated. But the underlying realities of life in the church have never changed. The church is still God's covenant people. It is still his chosen vessel for bringing the gospel to the world, and for turning the world into his kingdom on earth. We, the church, are

holy to the Lord. We are his kingdom. We are his people, united to each other in him.
And the Lord himself is working through us.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
FIVE

The Church
Faculty Forum



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Five: The Church

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David Bauer

Dr. Saul Cruz

Mr. Daniel Fajfr

Dr. John Frame

Rev. Mike Glodo

Dr. Steve Harper

Dr. Dennis Johnson

Dr. Robert Lister

Dr. John McKinley

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Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Dr. Derek Thomas

Dr. Simon Vibert

Dr. Peter Walker

Dr. Willie Wells

Dr. Stephen Wellum

Dr. Donald Whitney

Question 1:

What is the church?

Among the articles of faith affirmed by the Apostles' Creed is belief in the church. But there are many different conceptions of the church among Christians today. Is the church a group of people? Or a building? Or a historical institution? Or is it more complicated than any of those concepts? What is the church?

Dr. Saul Cruz (translation)

The church is the community of believers, the body of Christ. The church is the new humanity whom God has called out of a sinful world to live with him forever and to represent him. The church is also the way by which God unleashes his power and his might to transform the world. The church is the living testimony to Christ's sacrifice that can be seen working itself in the life of people as they fight to keep holy lives, to distance themselves from sin, and at the same time, learn to love and serve their fellow man. The church is also the way by which we communicate the gospel in a clear and bold way to the world.

Mr. Daniel Fajfr

The name, "church," has its origin in a Greek word, *ekklesia*. Originally, it is not a Christian word. Generally, it means "community," "fellowship," which is gathering for a certain reason. In the New Testament, *ekklesia* represents about four possibilities. It's a universal church, general church of all saints. We read it in Ephesians 1, "He put all things under his feet," and has made him the "head over all things" for the church. Second, it's a local church, means congregational fellowship in the town. We read in Romans 16, "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae." Third, worship, assembly of the saints. The church is also Sunday morning assembly. We read in 1 Corinthians 14, "[For in the first place], when you assemble [as a church]..." And the fourth, home groups. Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila: and greet them ... and "greet also the church in their house."

Rev. Mike Glodo

I think a good starting point is remembering that the word for church in the Greek New Testament, *ekklesia*, is really the Greek term used to convey the Old Testament idea of the assembly of God's people, the *qahal*, so that the New Testament church is in continuity with the Old Testament assembly, the assembly of God's people.

Dr. Derek Thomas

When Paul at the end of Galatians, Galatians 6:16, says as his farewell to the churches in Galatia, "Peace be ... upon the Israel of God," you can make that statement to mean Paul is saying greetings to fellow Jews in Galatia, converted Jews, Christian Jews. Now that hardly seems plausible in a letter in which the distinctive note has been Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile." Why would he, after recording his public outburst with Peter in Antioch, where Peter had refused to eat his pork sandwiches because the heavyweights from Jerusalem had come to Antioch, and he went and sat and ate kosher food with his Jewish buddies, and Paul dressed him down to the face, why would Paul then at the end of this letter say, oh, and by the way, peace be to my Jewish friends? No, when he says, "Peace be upon the Israel of God," he's making the same point. The Israel of God consists of Jews and Gentiles. The church of the Old Testament is the church of the New Testament, or perhaps more pointedly, the church of the New Testament is but the flowering of the church of the Old Testament. There is one administration of a covenant of grace that operates from Abraham right through to Paul, and right through to you and me, today. There is no distinctive Jewish church and Gentile church or Jewish kingdom and Gentile church. There is but one church, the body of Christ.

Question 2:**Why is it helpful to consider the church's Old Testament background?**

Scripture indicates that there is great continuity between the Old Testament assembly of God's people and the New Testament church. But what practical difference does this continuity make? Why is it helpful to consider the church's Old Testament background?

Dr. John Oswalt

The Old Testament background of the church is essential because the whole concept of God's called-out people comes from the Old Testament. It's fascinating that the church fathers never seriously considered the idea that somehow the Christian church is separate from its Old Testament roots. When the "saintly" Marcion proposed that the Old Testament be discarded, it did not take the church very long to declare him a heretic. Fundamentally, I think the point is summed up in Paul's frequent description of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Savior. He is indeed Yahweh, and of course that gets masked in English when we say, "Jesus is Lord." Well, to the Jew, they understood what that was saying: "Jesus is Yahweh." So, who is this God who comes in the form of a baby? He is, incredibly, the Old Testament Yahweh. He is the one who comes to satisfy, in himself, his own justice. If we don't

know the Old Testament as a church, we are going to miss God's transcendence, we're going to miss his justice, we're going to miss his holiness, and we're going to reduce God to a little useful God who exists for us. So it's absolutely essential that the New Testament church be founded upon the truths of the Old Testament.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

To try to be a Christian, and to understand what it means to be the church without the Old Testament, is to try to enter the story at a decisive turning point and act as if nothing had come before. But actually, you can't understand the new covenant without reference to the old. You can't understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah until you understand Israel's longing for the promised Son of David who would come to be Israel's king. We can't understand the fulfillment of prophecy in the New Testament. Matthew repeatedly says, these things happened in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. Well, if we don't understand the Old Testament then we can't possibly understand what is being fulfilled here right before our eyes. You know, the New Testament tells us — for instance in the prologue of the Gospel of John — that Jesus is the divine Logos for whom the worlds were created, but it doesn't give us a sequence of creation. It doesn't tell us the things we need to know even that come before the gospel. And it doesn't tell us something else that is just really, really important, is central to the gospel. It's impossible to understand the gospel of Christ without Genesis 3, or not understanding human fallenness, sinfulness, and the consequences of human sin. Without that we can't possibly understand what it meant for Jesus to come and save sinners. The Old Testament is absolutely necessary, not just so that we can know who our ancestors are, but so that we can know who we are.

Question 3:

How similar were God's purposes for the Old Testament church and the New Testament church?

Besides the continuities of identity we find between the Old and New Testament churches, there are also important continuities between their purposes. In both Testaments, God regularly used his church to advance his kingdom. And his plans never failed. The New Testament church is not God's contingency plan. It's the natural development of the Old Testament assembly. And one way to verify this is to look at God's purposes for his people in both ages. So, how similar were God's purposes for the Old Testament church and the New Testament church?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

When we speak of the church in the New Testament it's important to realize that it's not totally brand new; it's rooted back in terms of God's redemptive purposes with Israel of old. God has one people, one plan, that from all eternity he has had, and then he has worked it out in redemptive history and unfolded it before us. In the Old Testament, with the nation of Israel, they were the chosen people of God. They were chosen as an ethnic nation for a number of reasons, primarily to bring about the

coming of the Messiah, to bring about the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ who would, in terms of fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, would bring blessing to both Jew and Gentile in terms of the whole world. Within the nation of Israel as that ethnic nation, there were believers within that nation. Not all Israel is Israel. Paul makes that very clear in Romans 9, so that just because one was an ethnic Jew, an ethnic Israelite, a covenant member in that way, did not guarantee that they had saving faith. You could think of, you could have simultaneously Elijah and Ahab, and you got a great contrast there with those two individuals. The believing remnant from the Old Testament are the people of God. Those were the ones who, we would say, experience salvation the way that we're speaking about it in terms of the New Testament. The rest of the people would have had incredible privileges, blessings. They would have had redemption. You think of, at the exodus, many of them were redeemed from Egypt, brought out of slavery. That didn't necessarily mean, though, that they had the full salvation sense of redemption.

And so, only those "by grace ... through faith" in the Old Testament were the true people of God. That then carries over in continuity to the church. The church is comprised of those, by grace through faith, who have believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, believed in God's promises. The Old Testament believer believed in God's promises, covenantal promises that looked forward to the coming of Jesus Christ. The church now, in light of his coming, believes in him with greater understanding and greater clarity, but the same promise, the same Redeemer, we are all one in that. We are one people of God throughout the ages. Yet, obviously in the New Testament there are some differences. There's the fulfillment that has taken place. There's the greater understanding. There is the whole community that are comprised of those who are regenerated and those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But we must not minimize the continuity, the sameness of the people of God of old, of the church of the new. We must not so separate Israel and the true people of God in terms of believers in the old from the church. And remembering that there is one people, one plan, and that is still being worked out. And in the new heaven, new earth, when Christ comes again and consummates all things, both Jew and Gentile, those who are believers in the Old Testament, the true church comprised of Jew, Gentile, and all the nations, are those that will bow before the knee of the Lord Jesus Christ and give him praises for all eternity.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

It's a great thing to think about the continuity of the purpose of the Old Testament church and the New Testament church because it really stems, I would argue, particularly from God's covenant with Abraham. In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham not only Abraham, who at that point, of course, was childless that he would have a seed that could not be counted, but that through Abraham the nations would be blessed. And we see that working its way out throughout the Old Testament. Israel is called to be a people who are distinctive to the Lord and yet also a people who represent the Lord and his reign among the nations. They are called the kingdom of priests as they gather at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. And priests stand in the presence of God and serve him, but they also have the role of standing on behalf of others and

interceding for others. As Aaron and his sons did for Israel, so Israel is to do for the nations. Of course, we know that Israel in so many ways failed, as we would have failed, to be that kingdom of priests, to be that avenue through which blessings would flow from God through Israel to all the nations. But Jesus is the ultimate seed of Abraham, and now in Christ the new covenant church is both the recipient of blessing through Jesus, the seed of Abraham, and avenue of blessing among the nations.

So we stand as Israel stood in the presence of God to bring him glory, to adore him, to admire him, to speak of his marvelous deeds. And God speaks of Israel's calling in Isaiah 43 as the people whom he formed for himself to declare his praises. Peter picks up that very terminology in 1 Peter 2 and talks about our being called out of darkness into light that we might speak the excellences of the one who called us in Christ. Israel, we read, is called to be the Lord's witnesses among the nations, to declare what he's done. That he alone is the Savior and the God — and the true and the living God. And we read now in the New Testament, in the book of Acts, that the apostles, and really in their ministry the church, is called to be witnesses to the mighty deeds of God among the nations. So there is a great deal of continuity of purpose as we move from what Israel was called to be, sadly too often failed to be, what Christ has been perfectly as the perfect worshiper of the Father on our behalf and the perfect witness to the nations on our behalf and now what he's making us. We're still imperfect, but by the grace of the Holy Spirit we can worship in the presence of the Father and we can bear witness to the nations. So the blessing promised to Abraham is flowing to the nations through Christ, from Christ, through the witness and the worship of his church.

Question 4:

How is the Old Testament church's relationship to Christ similar to the New Testament church's relationship to Christ?

The Bible tells one main story — the story of redemption — and it's helpful to understand that this redemption began long before the modern church was established. Of course, Old Testament believers couldn't have known Jesus in the same way that New Testament believers do. But they still depended on him in important ways. How is the Old Testament church's relationship to Christ similar to the New Testament church's relationship to Christ?

Dr. David Bauer

The way in which the Old Testament's relationship to Christ relates to the New Testament church's relationship to Christ, I think, is very well explained by the great Basel Swiss, the great Basel New Testament theologian Oscar Cullmann. A number of works of his such as *Christ and Time* or *Salvation in History*, he argues that, as far as the Bible is concerned — the whole Canon of the Bible is concerned — Jesus Christ stands at the center of time. He views in terms of a funnel down to Christ, and then a funnel out from Christ with Christ as the center, that salvation history — the history of God's dealings in the Bible — begin with God being equally concerned

with the whole of the cosmos. You have this, for example, in the beginning chapters of Genesis, but then the focus narrows to one nation, Israel, and even within the Old Testament it narrows even further to the notion of the righteous remnant in Israel. And finally, all the promises of God, all of God's dealings with his people, Israel, focus upon one man, Jesus Christ. Paul could say in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "all the promises of God find their Yes in him." As far as Cullmann is concerned Jesus is really, in a sense, the embodiment of Israel of the Old Testament people of God so that everything was moving towards him. In the New Testament everything moves, uh, from him, so that you have again a broadening out from the one man, Jesus Christ, to the church, and finally, of course, in the consummation God will once again take control of the cosmos in ways that have not, up to this point, become clear so that the New Testament church relates to the Old Testament people of God through Jesus Christ.

That is the basis of the continuity between New Testament faith, New Testament church, and what God did for his people, with his people, Israel, prior to Christ. And that means, really then, that Israel's history becomes our own. And this understanding of the relationship between the New Testament church and the Old Testament people of God is extremely important for a Christian's self-identity, because it does mean, of course, that what we can know or should know about Christ, the truth about Christ, is anticipated in God's dealings with his people Israel there. And, therefore, there are aspects about Christ that we would not know, would not be able to embrace, if it were not for the Old Testament giving, bringing its witness to Christ in that way. So, you can talk about a kind of continuity between the experience of the people of God in the Old Testament and the experience of the people of God today. And now that means to some extent, in some ways, Old Testament saints actually did participate in faith in Christ without really knowing it fully, or knowing fully, at least, what was involved, and actually experienced salvation in Christ even though they lived before Christ.

There is a passage in the ninth chapter of Hebrews that talks about a death having occurred — the death of Christ — which redeems us from transgressions committed under the first covenant, which suggests, really, which means that those who participated in Israel's faith in the first covenant actually find, or will find, their salvation in the atoning work — including death of course — the atoning work and death of Christ. Looking at it from another way, of course, Paul can talk about Abraham, for example, having the same kind of faith that we have. By which he meant not simply that it was the same faith that we have in formal terms. That is to say that it had the same formal characteristics, that Abraham's faith in God had the same formal characteristics as our faith in God through Christ, but actually Paul goes so far as to suggest that although he didn't know it and would not have been able to articulate it this way, Abraham had faith in Christ. Because, insofar as Abraham had faith in the promise of God, and insofar — again as Paul said — "all of the promises of God find their Yes in him," really, Christ is anticipated in the promise. In other words, insofar as Abraham had faith in the promise of God, and insofar as Christ is God's promise, ultimately, Abraham had faith in Christ. Still, where Abraham and

others in the Old Testament lived in terms of God's progress of redemption meant that their experience of salvation was limited in relation to our own.

Question 5: **Why do Christians need the church?**

In both the Old and New Testaments, the church was an essential part of God's plan for salvation. Sadly, many modern Christians tend to avoid the church. It's true that we're justified by faith alone in Christ alone. But there are many aspects of redeemed life that require our participation in a local congregation. So, what are some of these aspects? Why do Christians need the church?

Rev. Mike Glodo

Well, we should understand that it's God purpose to gather us into Jesus' church. There are things God does for us in the church that he doesn't do for us outside the church. We have the Lord's Supper, which Jesus instituted. We have baptism, which marks the entrance into the assembly, or the church of Jesus. We also have to appreciate, letting Scripture interpret Scripture, that the church is the apple of Jesus' eye. The Apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 that he loved her and gave himself up for her. And it's Jesus' desire to gather his people into a community. And this is really a present important reality for us, that Jesus himself was the embodiment of the kingdom, but as he gathers us into him, he also gathers us into a fellowship with one another. It's not just an elective or voluntary organization where we can get things done better, but we reflect the unity of Jesus when we unite together in his church and come under his shepherds because he did leave us, first of all, apostles. He told Peter, you are the rock on which I will build my church. Jesus is the cornerstone; the apostles are the foundation stones, we're told in places like Ephesians 4. And we're all being built into a spiritual house or a temple for God as 1 Peter 2 reminds us. And so we're not just followers of Jesus individually, but we are the embodiment of this new creation that Jesus has brought in by his resurrection from the dead and by his giving of the Spirit to us as his new temple, so that we are the presence of the kingdom of God in the church where people can find mercy and forgiveness, and they can find provision when they lack, and they can find companionship when they are lonely. So the church really is a foretaste of the new heavens and earth, which will one day be visible throughout the whole creation.

Question 6: **What is God's holiness?**

The church has many characteristics that it derives from God and that reflect his character. For example, the Apostles' Creed mentions that the church is "holy." But how do we know what that means? Well, since the church derives its holiness from God, one way to understand this characteristic is to look at the holiness of God. So then, what is God's holiness?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The holiness of God means that he is uniquely and supremely superior to and above everything in creation. It also has a moral element, which means that God is completely separate from sin and evil.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, holiness is really the first thing said about God, especially in the Old Testament, how he reveals himself. He is the Holy One of Israel. The most important part about being holy is that he is separate from who we are. He is distinct from us. And the first way in which most of us can most clearly understand how he's distinct from us is morally. What it means for God to be holy is that he is absolutely perfect. And when we think of imperfection, well, the most clear imperfection to us are the moral imperfections of our lives. God's holiness actually explains just about everything about who he is, but when we think most essentially about what we have to know it means for God to be holy, it means that there is no sin in him. There is no temptation to do evil in him. There is no shadow of turning in him. He is absolutely morally perfect. He is quintessentially, totally, in an undiluted way, holy. The most important thing we can know about him is that he is holy. And to understand that God is holy, the most important thing we can know about ourselves is that we are sinners desperately in need of his forgiveness. What did Isaiah say? He said, "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." When we understand God's holiness, everything falls into place, when we understand that the one true and living God is first defined by the fact that he is perfect.

Dr. John Oswalt

In many ways the idea of God's holiness is fundamental to his nature, to our understanding of that nature. The word "holy" is not very frequent in ancient Near Eastern literature. It occurs a fair number of times, most of those though relating to things that belong to gods and not talking about the gods themselves. But fundamentally, it defines that which is extraordinary, that which is somehow outside of our ordinary experience, and in the ancient Near Eastern literature it has no moral quality at all. It couldn't because the unclean gods are holy; the clean gods are holy. The good gods are holy; the bad gods are holy. They're extraordinary; they're other. What happens in the Old Testament is that this word becomes dramatically significant for describing God. It occurs more than 800 times in the Old Testament, and it refers then to God's absolute otherness. What the Old Testament then says is, really there's only one being in the universe who is other. Those gods, they're not other — the wind, the rain, the storm. And then you make your god out of a block of wood and plate it with gold. How could you call that other? No, no, we have met a God, though, who is not the wind, who's not the rain, who's not the sun. He is other. And there's only one truly other. That means you can talk about holy character now. His character.

It's fascinating to think that it's theoretically possible holiness could mean brutality, if the one holy one was a brute. If the one holy one was cruel, holiness would mean cruelty. But, praise God, the one Holy One is love; he is truth; he is right; he is pure. And so then, God's holiness not merely describes his essence — he is the “other one” — but it also describes his character. And that great good news, then, is this One who is the other with whom all of us have to do and whom all of us will one day stand before, this other is characterized by nature like this. So, to understand that God's holiness is expressed in these ways, then begins to help us understand what he means when he says, you must be holy as I am holy. He doesn't mean we've got to become gods, that we've got to become transcendent, but he does mean, I want you to share my character, and how the world needs character like his.

Question 7:

What does the church's identity as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation imply about its modern obligations?

When the Apostles' Creed speaks of the “holy, catholic church,” it's primarily focused on the church as a universal organization rather than as individuals. And this emphasis is drawn directly from Scripture, which identifies the church as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” But what does the church's identity as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation imply about its modern obligations?

Dr. Peter Walker

The book of 1 Peter in the New Testament describes all believers as being priests, or it talks about the priesthood of all believers. It's a great phrase, and it's picking up a phrase from Exodus 19 where the ancient nation of Israel is described as, “You shall be,” says God, “a nation of priests.” I think that what that's saying is that, just as Israel was meant to be the place which if you looked at Israel you saw something of the character of God, priests were meant to, kind of, reflect the character of God. So now, all Christian believers are those who, if you look at them, you're meant to see some of the character of God. It's in that sense that we're all priests; we are part of the priesthood of believers reflecting God's glory to the wider world.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

One of the most important things to know about the Bible's view of human beings is this: human beings were made to serve or to minister to God. I know we talk a lot about serving each other and ministering to each other, but from the beginning all the way to the end, the primary purpose of human beings is to minister or serve God. You can go all the way back to Genesis 2:15 where God said about Adam in the Garden that he was to work it and to take care of it. “To work it and to take care of it” was language that's used in the book of Numbers to refer to what priests and Levites do within the tabernacle. And so from the very beginning when God put humanity in his temple garden, the Garden of Eden, he commanded them to function as priests, in fact, royal priests. And as you go through the Bible, you discover that that's always been the case, that this is always the ideal for human beings, but that in the Old

Testament and then all the way up until the second coming of Christ, this activity takes place in relatively small areas, small pieces here and there. I mean, for example, it started off with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which was just one little piece of the earth. And you go on with Israel when they establish a tabernacle and they establish the temple in Jerusalem still the ministering and serving of God by priests is something that takes place in a “holy” place or a “sanctified” place, but nevertheless, this is what human beings were supposed to do. It’s why they were designed, why they were put on the planet.

But the picture of the new world, when God has sanctified the entire earth and made it all his temple, made it all his holy presence, then this is going to be the job, a priestly job, a royal priestly job for every single human being that lives in that new world. You know, God told Israel in Exodus 19 that God had chosen them to be a royal priesthood, an imperial priesthood, as it were. And that language in Exodus 19 is used by Peter in the New Testament to refer to the church. And so, this is the perspective that we’re to have, not only on ancient Israel as a whole, but also on Christians as a whole, that we are a royal priesthood, a chosen people, a royal imperial priesthood. Now, I know in many respects that sounds strange because when we think of priests what we normally think of is that priests do just a very limited number of things; they offer sacrifices, they pray, occasionally they sing, maybe they blow trumpets and are in choirs and things like that. But in reality, what the Bible is saying is that every legitimate, God-ordained activity on the earth, from the beginning to the end, has been an act of royal priesthood for those who serve God, and they do it in limited ways in the Old Testament, and even in the life of Jesus and in the Christian church today, but in the end, all of it will be such.

And in fact, the Bible portrays the creation in many respects, in many places, as if it is God’s temple. And, if you can imagine it, God’s throne, Isaiah says, is in heaven and his footstool is on the earth, and around his footstool — of course this is talking about the ark of the covenant — around his footstool is a holy place where the high priest and the Levites, the special priests of the nation of Israel, serve him. And they do this by decorating, they do this by making sure sacrifices are ready, that plants are grown in the right way, that it’s a beautiful place, a wondrous place for God’s environment, and keeping evil and unclean things out. This is the kinds of things they do, so all their activity is like that. But the Bible says that the whole floor of the earth, the whole earth is the floor of God’s temple, and what God is doing is he’s spreading out his influence, spreading out his holiness from that one little spot, the Garden of Eden in the beginning, later on the tabernacle as it moved, but then finally the temple as it was established. He’s now moving out and cleaning the whole floor of his great palace, which is the earth. And this takes place through Israel to some extent. Of course, they failed and misery came from that. And Christ comes, and now he has set us on this task of cleaning the entire floor, and the way we do that is by serving God in every single area of life as an act of worship to him. It’s not as if we have just some things that we do that are ministries to God, service of worship to him, and then other things that we do for ourselves or for no good reason at all. Rather, every single thing that we do as Christians is to be done heartily as unto the Lord because it is unto the

Lord; whether it's your six days of work, whether it's sleeping, whether it's raising your children. Whatever it is, it is an activity of a royal priest because our job is to move the holiness of God throughout the world in anticipation of the new world to come when everyone who is left will live in this wondrously cleaned, holy, sanctified earth, and they will serve God forever as his royal priests.

Question 8:

What is the proper role of ordained ministers in the church?

Since Scripture calls the entire church to serve as a holy nation of royal priests, it often causes Christians to wonder about the role of modern ministers. After all, if every member of the church now ministers to God, what's left for pastors to do? What is the proper role of ordained ministers in the church?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

It's important to think through the relationship between the entire church as a priesthood of all believers, and then what would be the point of having pastors? I mean, if we're all priests, why do we need them? As we work from the Old Testament to the New — the old covenant to the new — the nation of Israel was viewed as a priesthood. They had priests who represented them, but they were to also represent God to the entire world. As you work to the New Testament, the fulfillment of the priesthood is Christ as our great high priest. He is the one who offers himself for us. He is the one who takes our place. He is the one who intercedes for us. He then, by virtue of his work, makes us now priests. He brings us back to God. We then intercede for the world; we carry out our priestly work in terms of our restoration of what it was meant to be as his image bearers, of carrying out the cultural mandate before us. The whole body of Christ are priests, yet that doesn't mean then that we don't have teachers, leaders in the church. All of us are priests; all of us know God. Yet there are certain gifts that are given out to the church that are not all the same. Christ, as he ascends, pours out gifts of leaders, pastors, teachers. Even though all of us know God directly, intercede directly before him through our Lord Jesus Christ's priestly work, yet there are those who in the body serve different purposes, and pastors have that unique role of leading and teaching and equipping the people of God, and they're gifted in that way as fellow priests, but given a special role and a unique leadership role in the church.

Dr. Peter Walker

There is a need, as indeed in any organization, to have people who are in charge, and God is not a God who encourages sheer chaos, and any community needs to have good order. And therefore it is appropriate — and we see this in the New Testament — for people to be elevated, if that's the right word, to positions of authority, that we're called to be submissive to those who are in authority. If that's true in the pagan world, how much more in the Christian church we should be submissive to those that have leadership or who are over us in the Lord, to use a phrase from the New Testament. What, therefore, is the role of these people? Well, to serve their people.

We're called to be servant leaders, but also to be, well, teachers. I think that's a key role. If actually Christ rules his church by his Word, then those who are called to be leaders in his church must, as it were, exercise Christ's rule of his church by the same means, which is, by his Word, which then shows you the importance in the New Testament of people being called to be teachers. It's those who have an ability to teach who are meant to be those who lead. There's also a role, obviously, for pastoral care, for being nice to people and caring for the flock, those who are Jesus' sheep. I would put the primary role as that of being a teacher, ruling God's people by his Word.

Question 9:

How can pastors adapt their teaching to audiences that include unbelievers?

The church as a whole is holy to God. But people are drawn to the church for many reasons, and not everyone who comes to church is a believer. And this sometimes creates difficulties for pastors. How can pastors adapt their teaching to audiences that include unbelievers?

Dr. Dennis Johnson

Pastors and teachers can learn to adapt their teaching to the needs of different audiences, particular audiences, I think especially by paying attention to the sermons in the book of Acts. As the apostles preach, some of the sermons that they preach are in the context in which they expect a congregation, an audience, to recognize the Old Testament Scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures, to receive them as the Word of God, and so they will quote Old Testament Scriptures. We think of Peter on the day of Pentecost quoting several Old Testament passages, not only Joel 2, but Psalm 16 and Psalm 110. Or the apostle Paul preaching in the synagogues of the dispersion, again quoting Scriptures, because they know that's going to be received as an authoritative word from God. On the other hand, when Paul goes to Lystra, Acts 14, or to Athens in Acts 17, he doesn't quote Scripture. Now everything he says can be demonstrated from God's revealed Word from the Bible, but instead, he references the general revelation of God in the created order because that is revelation that confronts every pagan Gentile, whether they acknowledge or not, one God or many gods — many of them were worshipers of many gods — still Paul can know that they're confronted with that clear revelation of God the Creator. And so he speaks to them at a starting point in terms of what they were familiar with, in terms of God's general revelation, always to bring them to Christ, always to bring them to that point that now something, now something new has happened as a result of God sending the Messiah, not only as the rescuer of Israel, but also as the Savior of the nations. And that, I think, is a wise way for us to think about our preaching, thinking about where our congregation is, where our audience is in terms of what they understand already, beginning where they are and then leading them more deeply into an understanding of the fullness of the gospel.

Question 10:**What are some responsible applications we can draw from our beliefs about the visible and invisible church?**

It's inevitable that the visible church will have unbelieving members. But the invisible church is pure, consisting only of believers. But how do these two concepts relate to each other? Should we emphasize the invisible church to the point that we try to purge every unbeliever from the visible church? Should we focus on the visible church to the point that we assume that everyone in our congregations is saved? What are some responsible applications we can draw from our beliefs about the visible and invisible church?

Dr. Donald Whitney

We talk in both theology and in history about the visible church and about the invisible church. The visible church is generally referred to as the local expression of the body of Christ that can be made up of real Christians, and people who think they are Christians. The invisible church would be the people of God of all times, and all places, heaven and earth — so, all that have been the people of God forever — that's the invisible church because there are many members, a great majority of them, we cannot see at the present time. They are in heaven with the Lord, or they are in other places of the world. The visible church is that which we typically think of as the local church — when Christians gather together, maybe many churches come together. But it's important to remember that in the visible church there will always be “wheat and tares,” as Jesus said. You'll have the true people of God; you'll have people who appear to be. Just like you had the disciples who were those faithful to Jesus, but you had Judas in there. Paul had his Demas among those that were his disciples, if you will. So, there will always be those in the local church.

Nevertheless, it's the responsibility of the local church by means of church discipline, by means of preaching a faithful gospel, by means of holding people accountable to walk faithfully to Christ, that if we discern there may be an unconverted people among us — a tare among the wheat — then we should deal in biblical ways. Even though on the one hand we acknowledge there will be tares among the wheat, we are not encouraged thereby to just ignore that. So, when someone manifests themselves as potentially a Judas, a Demas, a tare, the Lord has given us in Scripture a biblical means to pursue that church discipline: we start with Matthew 18, we go to that person, we confront them, and so forth. We bring someone else with us on step two. Ultimately, that comes to the church, and the church is to decide, according to what Matthew 18 says and 1 Corinthians 5, that if that person decides to continue to live like an unbeliever, unrepentant in their sin, then we are to treat them like an unbeliever. We are to remove them from the visible church, from the privileges and protections of the visible church, and we are to consider them now an unbeliever and pray for them. We continue to witness to them, but we don't give them the privileges of membership and of fellowship.

So, the idea of the invisible church is largely a very important, but a theoretical concept in a sense that we acknowledge it is there. It does not have a lot of impact except in the sense that we know we are dealing with people in other places that we cannot see who are alive now. We say that we are part of the church of Christ with them. That brothers and sisters in China, in Africa, in America are all one in Christ, and we will never see each other except in heaven. It's important to acknowledge that, because that makes us want to pray for one another and love one another, support one another, and help one another as best we can, and these sorts of things, because we will never see each other in this world perhaps.

But most of the idea of the invisible church is largely not unimportant theory, but theory to us. But the visible church, the local body of Christ, is the emphasis in the New Testament. I have done a study that I recall the statistics were something like 125 mentions of the Greek word *ekklesia* of the church of the New Testament, about 117 or 118 were clearly about the local church, about the visible church. So that's the emphasis in the New Testament. That's the emphasis I'm giving now, and I think that's the emphasis we want to give it, without neglecting the other, but really, the New Testament emphasis is the local, the visible church.

Dr. John Frame

The church in a way consists of both believers and unbelievers, but we have to understand what that means. We're talking then of the external relationship that people have to the church. Internally, what the reformed traditions call the "invisible church," there are no unbelievers there. The unbelievers enter the visible church only because we can't read their hearts, and sometimes they will be interviewed by elders for church membership and they will make a good show of it, and they'll sound as though they believe the things we do, and they'll sound as if they're united to Christ in faith and so they get into the church, but we can't read their hearts, and so, perhaps under all of that they're hypocritical, they're unbelieving, and so the church, externally the church that meets on Sunday morning, may consist of both believers and unbelievers, but of course that doesn't mean anything so far as God's reckoning of who's in the church and who isn't, and so from God's reckoning, of course the only ones that receive salvation, the only ones who are going to heaven will be the ones who are united to Christ in faith. And in the final analysis that's a matter of the heart, and God sees it. And so the church is going to be divided in time, the wheat and the tares will be separated and so believers alone will find themselves in glory with Jesus for all eternity.

Question 11:

How should the church treat the unbelieving world?

If believers sometimes have difficulties figuring out the relationship between ourselves and the unbelievers in the visible church, it can be even harder to know how the church should respond to unbelievers outside the church. Are we obligated to serve them and sacrifice for them as if they were part of the church? Are we

allowed to ignore them and let them deal with their own problems? Should we despise them since they're God's enemies? How should the church treat the unbelieving world?

Dr. Robert Lister

Christians, in their attitude towards unbelievers, need to start with the careful reminder that we're not God. And we can be glad that we're not God. Not being God means, among other things, that we're not responsible to pass final judgment on anyone. And so, while we can trust that the Lord of all the earth will do right in what he does with any individual, that's not a role that's assigned to us. And we know that while unbelievers are yet living, while they're yet breathing, one of the things that God is doing is being kind to them in giving them yet more opportunity to repent. God's demonstrating patience to people who already deserve to be under judgment that they might have more opportunity to repent. And so one of the things that we would do as creatures and not the Creator, is seize that opportunity to pray for them, to share the gospel with them. Many of us have loved ones who are not believers and are committed to be in prayer for those loved ones as well as unreached peoples around the world. So we have to differentiate our role from God's role, trusting God to do his and to do his in a way that no one will have a claim of injustice against God, while also recognizing that while unbelievers are living, they have an opportunity to repent, and we want to present them with that opportunity as much as we possibly can. The other thing that's critical to remember is that we were once unbelievers ourselves, and if we had a holier-than-thou attitude or a superior-to-unbeliever kind of attitude, that would betray a misunderstanding of what we were and that the only difference between us and them now is God's grace in our lives, and it's nothing intrinsic to us. And so we can celebrate God's work in our lives and seek by prayer and evangelism God's work in their lives as well, trusting that the Lord will call his sheep to himself in ways and times that are appropriate to the outworking of his plan.

Dr. Dennis Johnson

In view of the fact that Revelation shows so clearly that all of God's enemies will be destroyed in the final judgment, our attitude toward unbelievers should be a combination of courage, compassion and humility. Courage because we don't need to be intimidated by those enemies. We know that the God of justice will bring his and our enemies to justice in the last day. Martin Luther was right in that great hymn that we so often sing, "A Mighty Fortress is our God": "The body they may kill; but God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever." So we don't need to be fearful, intimidated or silenced. We do need to be compassionate for unbelievers. They deserve justice even as we deserve justice, but we also are called in the whole Scripture to long for God to intervene, to turn enemies into friends in the way that only he can through the gospel and the power of the Spirit to give new life. So we should be involved in compassionate witness to them. One of the key attributes of the church in the book of Revelation is that the church is the witness of Christ, extending the work of Jesus who is the faithful witness. And so our witness is to God's truth, but it's also for the sake of God's mercy entering into the lives of more people. And then we need humility toward unbelievers. The reality of coming judgment reminds

us that that's exactly what we, as followers of Christ, deserve as well. This is what Jesus bore for us on the cross. And so we have no reason to be arrogant toward unbelievers. We have no reason to be harsh toward them. We have every reason to be humbled by the reality of judgment, even as we express a courageous and compassionate witness to the gospel to them.

Dr. John McKinley

We can be tempted to have an attitude of superiority about ourselves, and especially if they have mistreated us or if they mock us, that kind of thing. But I think that Jesus would want us to have the attitude of desiring to serve them, have compassion, to view them as the lost because we don't know who is going to turn, and so we want to serve them by preaching the gospel to them and hope that they will respond. When we think about on the other side of judgment, what is our attitude to be then? And there should be, I think, a sense of pity and sadness towards them. And we would want to have at that point a clear conscience that we did love them while we had the opportunity to tell the gospel to them and that they won't be able to point the finger to us and say, "You knew. Why didn't you tell me about this Christ?" So we need to be living with them with a view to the future, not condemning them in advance, but serving them and helping them find rescue in Christ, and also not being retaliating, you know, nursing a grudge in our heart or something like that, but having pity when they don't respond to the gospel and having hope that they will.

Question 12:

When should our charitable giving remain with those in the church, and when should it go to people outside the church?

Historically, one important way that the church has provided help and shown mercy to those outside the church is to meet their physical needs. And these means have often been instrumental in bringing people to faith. But it can be hard to know when to spend our limited resources on the needs of those outside the church, especially when there may be similar needs within the church. When should our charitable giving remain with those in the church, and when should it go to people outside the church?

Dr. John Frame

The rule that Paul gives us in the New Testament is to do good to all, but especially to those who are of the household of faith. I don't think that means sitting down with a ledger and planning your church budget and saying, "We're gonna give 95% to the church and 5% to people outside the church." I don't think it works that way. The church is a family, it's an extended family, and so naturally we're going to give more to our own people than to people outside. For one thing, we know the needs of the people that we see every week, and we're able to help them in a way that we can't help people beyond that realm. But consider the parable of the good Samaritan where you see somebody who's dying by the side of the road or when somebody enters your life or enters the life of your church in a very dramatic way, and there's no way to

ascertain what his religious beliefs are or if he has a belief in God or anything that you believe, but your first instinct ought to be to help, to meet the person's needs. And you don't give him a creedal test or religious test. You simply do what you can. And so I think we ought to, more or less, leave this up to God's providence. Of course we want to help our — just as in a family — we give the bulk of our assistance to our own children and our own spouses, but if we run into somebody who's in need, and we're uniquely able to provide for that need, then we ought to do it.

Question 13:

What are some practical ways that churches can carry out the Great Commission?

The church's most important task related to the unbelieving world is Jesus' command that we make disciples of all nations. We often call this the "Great Commission." As part of the Great Commission, the church evangelizes the lost in every nation by telling them the gospel. The Great Commission also includes discipling believers, and gathering believers into local church congregations. Given the monumental nature of this assignment, what are some practical ways that churches can carry out the Great Commission?

Dr. Simon Vibert

The challenge at the end of the Gospels is that we should go into all nations, proclaiming the good news and making disciples. The language of discipleship implies more than just being a learner. It implies more than just being a believer, but it also implies being in a relationship with God. Yes, the God who will teach us. Yes, the God who will lead us, but the challenge to make disciples is to have people who will be in a lifetime's apprenticeship, relationship, with God, and therefore that needs to be well-modeled. So, I think that people need to be in relationship with other believers who can show them how to live the Christian life well. It needs, obviously, teaching as well. People need to understand God's requirements of his followers and his disciples. But I think, also, it needs to be embedded in the church because it is there that God has put in place the structures for people to grow as Christians and indeed to be "lifelong learners," to use that phrase, those who are in relationship with God and following him faithfully.

Dr. Saul Cruz (translation)

Communicating the gospel, taking the Great Commission seriously, implies proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It's like John Stott once said: It's like two wings of the same bird. The bird cannot fly with only one of them; it needs both wings to fly. In the same way, the Great Commission only really takes true effect in the lives of people, in their relationships and their societies, when people understand that the message needs to be communicated with words and deeds. The words bring a sense of clarity to the message, but the deeds also show us the significance of God's love, of God's compassion.

Mr. Emad Sami (translation)

It's essential for believers and servants of the gospel to strive to make the gospel alive if they want to reach out to people and fulfill the Great Commission. For God to come to the world, he became flesh in Jesus Christ. And for us to be able to proclaim the gospel and to reach out to the world, we have to realize that the world is comprised of different peoples, different languages, different cultures, and different civilizations. In every nation, every race, and every ethnic group we recognize that there is a special shape, color, civilization, specific mentality and behavior. Everyone should present the gospel to the people in a way that they can understand, in a manner that they can grasp, and within the context of the mentality of the people and their civilizations. You might ask how we can effectively present the gospel to someone from another culture. In order to communicate the gospel to other people, we need to simplify and interpret the gospel through tools and a variety of methods that other people's way of life, culture, and civilization will accept.

Dr. Willie Wells

We understand that Jesus left us a model on how to reach the lostness of mankind, and it is a model that is without flaw. It is a perfect model. It worked in the twentieth century, it will work in the twenty-first century, and if Jesus stays in heaven a little longer, it will continue to work. That model is evangelism. Evangelism crosses cultures, it crosses denominations, it crosses the different positions of people, the socioeconomic standing whether it be good or bad. It comes to a person or to persons that are lost. So, some of the steps is that we not only get people saved by preaching and teaching and witnessing the gospel of Jesus Christ, but then, what are we are going to do after they have been saved? And the problem is that most people are not assimilated into different churches because they don't feel like they are a part of it. So how do we continue to do the Great Commission? Well, we know we have to witness, and we know we have to witness first of all at home, and at home could be literally at your home. Then also I believe that we should do evangelistic work inside your particular churches because there are people in the church from time to time that may be associated with the church as a result of their parents or grandparents or some other personality. But I would say that if you want to start, start in Jerusalem — start at your home, start in your church, witnessing the gospel of Jesus Christ. And then once you've done that, then you reach out abroad, and you try to touch those in the community, and then from the community to other parts and facets of the world so that the gospel can be disseminated all over, that people would have a chance to hear the gospel and be saved.

So we think about we are to keep in mind our position when it comes to practical steps and witnessing, getting people saved is that let evangelism do what it's supposed to do. And when I talk about evangelism, there is a simplicity of it, and we have to make sure that we don't become muddled with the simplicity of it and try to add on things that make it become difficult. So what do I mean when I say that? I say that we are to, first of all, pray that the Holy Spirit leads us and guides us, and then secondly, make sure that we take the gospel, not man's ideology, but the gospel. And we do know that if we lift up Jesus, that he will draw men unto him. The great thing

that makes me so excited about witnessing to people that don't know Christ is the fact that I don't have the responsibility to bring them alongside Christ. I do have the responsibility to go in and preach the gospel, to witness the good news of Jesus Christ, but the hardest part is left up to Christ himself. All I need to do is lift him up, and then he'll draw men unto him. So when we think about that, prayer needs to be the object, needs to be the nucleus, and then we take the gospel and we take it into all the world. And once we've done that, I believe we'll hear him say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Question 14:

Can a well-meaning person be saved without coming to faith in Christ?

God commissioned the church to share the gospel with the world and to point people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. But many people think they don't need Christ. They believe that if they're good or moral enough, they can earn their way to heaven. Others believe that if they earnestly follow a different religion with good intentions, they can be saved too. But what does Scripture say about this? Can a well-meaning person be saved without coming to faith in Christ?

Dr. Simon Vibert

A question that people often ask is, is it possible for anybody to be saved outside of personal faith in Jesus Christ? And the Bible is quite clear that Jesus is the only way to be saved, to be rescued from our sins, and it's through a knowledge of him that we come to have our sins forgiven and come into relationship with God. But, of course, the particular angle to the question is, well, what about those who have never heard, is it possible for them to be saved without knowing Jesus for themselves? To which the Bible also says, well, no. That's why evangelism is so important and critical. We want the world to know that Jesus is the Savior of all people. Now, of course, ultimately God is the judge and what people have done with what they know about Jesus is ultimately his business. But our job is to make sure that we go with a degree of urgency so that all the world get to hear the saving message in Jesus alone.

Dr. Derek Thomas

Can a well-meaning person who is not a Christian, but maybe a good person — in whatever way you define that — can they come to salvation without putting their faith in Jesus Christ? The question is the so-called "wider hope" question. If we're thinking of those, say, living in another country who have never heard of Jesus Christ, can they be saved? Say, a well-meaning Hindu. Can he or she be saved apart from faith in Christ? And I think the answer to that must categorically be, "no," that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. And unless with our mouths we profess Jesus to be Jesus Christ, to be Lord and Savior, there is no possibility of salvation. Outside of Christ, there is none other name, under heaven, given amongst men whereby we must be saved, only Jesus Christ.

Dr. Donald Whitney

There are passages both in the Old and New Testament, I am thinking of one in Proverbs right now that says that, "The prayer of the wicked is an abomination of the Lord." It is the strongest possible term, and we naturally tend to think that, well, if a person is not a sincere follower of Christ, but they come to a place of crisis and say, "I will acknowledge, in this case, God, I need you, and I will bow the knee and I will pray. It is true that I have not been a follower of yours, but I really need help this time. I can't handle this on my own, and I'm turning to you. I'm asking you, and I'm humbling myself in this situation to ask for your help." The Bible says that's an abomination to the Lord. Now, that's really counter-intuitive to us because we think that surely God would be at least somewhat impressed that the person would be willing, on this occasion, to humble themselves and ask for God's help. But the Bible says that's an abomination because it implies that God would be impressed, and answer based upon the piety of that person. And if he were to do so, then that is the greatest possible insult to him, because he sent his Son Jesus to be the means by which we could come to him. So, it is ignoring the means that God has given. It is saying in effect, "Well, Jesus, thank you for coming, but it really wasn't necessary in my case. And all that you did on this earth for 33 years in suffering, and all that you did in experiencing the wrath of God, and all that you went through in your crucifixion, well, thank you very much, Jesus, but it wasn't really necessary in my case because I was convinced that God would be impressed by my piety." What greater insult could there be against God than that we would think that he would accept us based upon what we do, whether it's our temporary piety or something else?

So, the big question is not so much, why aren't there other ways to God; why can't there be a way to God through one of these other religions? The greater question really is, why is there still a way? Why is God good enough to permit there to be one way in light of the fact that the history of the world has been that in every nation people have turned away. In every tribe, in every tongue, in every people, in every individual, manifests what Isaiah talks about when he says that each of us has turned to his own way. That we have all, like sheep, have turned away, gone away, and we do that despite how much of the truth God has revealed in creation in general. The Bible says that through what has been made, Romans 1:20 tells us, that God has revealed himself in general through creation, but yet people don't respond to even that much light, and they tend to go their own way. And he has given us the gospel, and he has given us the Bible, and despite all that, even in nations where they have been raised to hear the gospel of Jesus and to hear of Jesus in the Bible, people still go their own way. And despite having done that since the creation of time, the issue isn't so much as why doesn't God permit there to be many ways to him, it's why in his mercy does he permit there to be one way. And he does, so to reject the one way he has given us through his Son Jesus is such a great insult. So, if Jesus says that he is the only way to God, either he is or he isn't.

And C.S. Lewis famously said that if Jesus makes such a claim, he is either a liar, and he knew he was not the only way to God, but he said he was. He is a lunatic because

he thought he was the only way to God. Or he is indeed what he said he is. He is the Lord of all, and he is the way to God. And Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus validates that claim. I could claim to be the only way to God. Anyone could claim to be the only way to God, but Jesus has validated that claim not only with the miracles of his lifetime because other people have claimed to perform miracles, but Jesus gave the ultimate validation of his claim by rising from the dead three days after he had been in the grave, and to ascend to heaven and live there forever. So, we believe that God in his mercy has given us this one way, and it's open to anyone. It is open to all.

Question 15:

What does the Bible say should be our attitude toward the suffering and persecution we endure?

Despite the wonderful gift of salvation that God freely offers in the gospel, many unbelievers respond negatively to the church's effort to carry out the Great Commission. And this negativity isn't restricted to rejections of the gospel message, or even to poor opinions of Christians. At various times and places throughout history, the church has been subjected to suffering and persecution because of our attempts to promote the gospel of God's kingdom. When this happens, it's easy for Christians to become angry, or frustrated, or to despair. But what does the Bible say should be our attitude toward the suffering and persecution we endure?

Dr. John McKinley

When we experience suffering and persecution, we can wonder what should our attitude be about these kinds of things. I think first we should have the attitude of not shock and surprise. We've been told abundantly in Scripture that this stuff is going to happen to us. Somehow in God's sovereignty, he perfects his people through suffering. It was the case for Jesus, we're following in his steps, and so we can expect to have difficulty in life. We're assured in the midst of that that God is going to bring us through even as much as we're sure we're going to have suffering. And in Romans 8, Paul tells us that we are more than conquerors through all these things, that we are to count them not as somehow God abandoning us, but God using them, just like a good coach for an athlete, to train us, to bring us closer to him, to fight against our real enemy which is our sin, in ways we obstruct God by our fears and hold back from him. So, the apostles rejoiced when they suffered. They thought it was a great thing to be counted worthy, to suffer for the name. Certainly persecution for the sake of Christ is easier to bear, but all kinds of sufferings that come to us are redemptive, whether it's cancer or a difficult sickness, or trouble at work, or financial distresses. These things are all God's materials to transform us. And then we cry out for help. We cling to God, we identify with Christ, and we have a communion of suffering with our fellow believers and find God comforting us in that. So we should have gratitude in a weird kind of way that we are being treated as children, and this is discipline, where God is disciplining us and helping us to become like Christ through these difficulties that we go through.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

How Christians grow and mature in Christ is seldom determined by how little or how much persecution they experience, but by their attitude or response to the persecution or suffering that comes into their lives. And so, what is the appropriate response to suffering and persecution? I think the first thing is that a true follower of Jesus Christ will grow more concerned about the suffering of others than their own suffering. The Spirit is always nudging us away from the narcissist center of ourselves to vigorous advocacy of others in pain. It's a self-forgetful dynamic. God's redemption involves the deliverance of human beings from all suffering and injustice, and so we should not be passive in the face of that which is wrong, that which makes human beings suffer, because it grieves God's heart as well. And so we should be active in kingdom work, active in peacemaking, active in exposing and rebuking evil. That's part of our calling. But there come times when it is not within our authority or our power to change some of the variables that cause pain and suffering in our own lives and the lives of others. There the wisdom of the New Testament writers comes into play. We are to reframe these experiences as opportunities to grow in the transformation of our souls. These are opportunities for us to reconceptualize ourselves as prisoners, not of evil, but as prisoners of the Lord Jesus Christ, accepting, when there is no other way, that this is the will of God for us. And to endure these things with a cheerful expectation that they are interim, provisional, transitory, short term. And so we see even the dark things that cannot be removed as purposive, and as something in which we can show a measure of grace and thankfulness to our Lord Jesus, and see ourselves as his servants.

Rev. Mike Glodo

If you look at God's people throughout the Old Testament, God allowed them to suffer at different times for two general purposes. One is to refine them, to teach them to depend upon him alone, and the other is to show his glory among the nations and how he would deliver his people or save his people from suffering. The slavery in Egypt is an example. The cycles in the book of Judges where Israel's heart would turn away from him during times of ease and prosperity, and through the suffering or the persecution that he allowed, their hearts would be turned back to him. In a very large-scale way, he does it through the exile. In the book of Hosea, we hear God say through the prophet, I will take her into the wilderness, and there I will speak kindly to her. It often requires suffering for our hard-heartedness, or our ease to cause us to not persevere, or to not be faithful to the Lord. And God uses that. But he also uses it to bring attention to himself for the sake of the nations. Jesus said that if anyone would seek to be my disciple, he would need to take up his cross and follow him. In Matthew 8 and 9, Jesus is making clear that the path to his glory was going to go through the cross, including his rejection and suffering, but moreover, that the path to glory for Jesus' disciples would also travel that same way. And just as Jesus' suffering and death was for the life of the world, so in a similar, although not identical sense, the suffering of the church and the suffering of God's people is a life-bringing thing for the world. The apostle Paul talks about filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, meaning we are to bear with humility and gladness the cost of discipleship. It is often said of the early church, the power of their witness was that

they died so well, that they bore suffering in a way that showed their ultimate loyalties weren't to this world but to God. But because of that, then they were of great earthly good, that they were compassionate. They didn't seek to associate with the powerful, but instead they went to the powerless. They didn't seek favor with those who could bless them, but rather they sought to bless those who were in need. And so we have this mind in ourselves, this attitude that was in Christ Jesus, as Paul says in Philippians 2, so that if we share in his sufferings, we will also share in his resurrection and his glory.

Question 16:

What does it mean to be “in Christ”?

When we suffer for the sake of the gospel, it's helpful to remember that we don't suffer alone. Not only does the church suffer with us, but Jesus does too. Through our spiritual union with him, our sufferings are his sufferings. This theological concept of “union with Christ” is present throughout the New Testament, but it's particularly prominent in Paul's writings, and can frequently be seen in phrases like “in Christ,” “in Jesus,” “in the Lord,” “in him,” and so on. But how exactly does this union work? What does it mean to be “in Christ”?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Well, one of Paul's favorite terms for what it means to be a Christian is to be “in Christ,” and the idea there is that, as we become a Christian, we are brought into such a relationship with God that we are tied up with the person of Christ. So, it's because of his sacrifice for sin, because of his resurrection from the dead that I can know forgiveness, that I can know new life. And that's integrally tied to Jesus's person and work. So, to use a shorthand, Paul says that, I can talk about being in Christ because all that's Christ's benefit has become my benefit and standing before God, too.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Jesus has told us that he came in order that we might have life and have it more abundantly. But, you know, in this life, after we come to know the Lord Jesus Christ, we still experience suffering, pain, illness; we still die. We still have frustrations and ambitions. We still experience irritations and for that matter griefs. You know, a part of what we need to recognize here is that evidently a part of what it means to receive this abundant life is to have Christ in the midst of these things. We will come to know things in our Christian life we would not know if we were never irritated or frustrated. We would never know if we did not experience grief as well as exhilaration and joy. I think there's something more here that's really important. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life, and that you might have life that is abundant.” But you know, we are yearning for something. A part of what it means to be “in Christ” is to yearn for the fullness that he's going to bring. There's a day coming when Christ is coming for his church. There's a day coming when Christ will reign over all things in a way that is visible to all. There's coming a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. There's coming a day

when every eye will be dry, and every tear will be wiped away. A part of what it means right now for us to have the abundant life in Christ is for us to rest in Christ, experiencing all the joys and travails that come into a life in this fallen world while yearning for that which we know is coming. The abundant life means trusting Christ until he comes.

Question 17:

What are some of the benefits of union with Christ?

Union with Christ is a remarkable reality that spiritually joins us to our Lord. It's the source of great comfort when we suffer, since we know that Jesus suffers with us. But it's also a source of many other blessings, too. So, what are some of these blessings? What are some of the benefits of union with Christ?

Dr. John Frame

Some of the benefits of union with Christ? Well, for one thing it's very hard for us to list them all because just about everything we have according to the New Testament is in Christ. But in theology we usually distinguish between legal and representative union, and that brings, of course, justification and adoption. Jesus is the one whose righteousness becomes imputed to us, and so we become righteous for his sake. And we are righteous in Christ, not in ourselves. And on that ground, of course, God adopts us to be children of his family. And then there's what is sometimes called "mystical union," which, again, is very hard to describe, very hard to form into words. But we're told in the New Testament that all the blessings of salvation are in Christ, and particularly, he is our friend. He is our Lord. He is the one we turn to in times of trouble. He says, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth." He is with us in the Spirit. He is with us as we worship and as we eat the elements of the Lord's Supper. He's just always near to us and always involved in everything that we do.

Question 18:

Should each means of grace be administered every time the church gathers for worship?

God has provided the church with a variety of means or tools through which he applies blessings to our lives. And because these blessings are based on his gracious love for us, we often refer to these tools as "means of grace." Theologians have traditionally highlighted three of these as being central to the life of the church: the Word of God; the sacraments or ordinances of the Lord's Supper and baptism; and prayer. But other means of grace are important, too, and all depend on faith as an underlying means. Now, given the importance of receiving God's blessing, Christians sometimes wonder, should each means of grace be administered every time the church gathers for worship?

Dr. Steve Harper

When we're talking about the means of grace, the spiritual disciplines, the revelation of God's grace and our response to that grace, we can always talk about it in the personal, or maybe even small group sense of that term. But, sooner or later you have to ask about worship. What happens when the people of God gather to worship? Some people will ask, do the means of grace have to manifest themselves every time that we worship? I think that a response to that question hinges on the phrase, "every time" and also on "worship." So let me deal with it. Nothing has to happen every time. In other words, there is no checklist that God has given us when we worship. In our church, sometimes the prayer time is not much more than the pastoral prayer; sometimes there are twenty-five or thirty prayer requests. And that moment extends into maybe fifteen, twenty, twenty-five minutes. Which means that other things don't get the same amount of attention that they might on some other Sundays. So, I think when it comes to the means of grace, we want to be sure that we don't try to control how God uses the means of grace because, in the final analysis, worship itself is a means of grace. So, it's not saying, you know, "Are the means of grace active in worship?" as much as recognizing that worship is a means of grace.

Now, having said that, I think it is reasonable when we gather for worship, that the means of grace of Scripture should be there, the means of grace of prayer should be there. I happen to believe that we should celebrate the Lord's Supper every time we gather together. Churches that do it once a month, once a quarter, twice a year, have not tapped their richness of the sacramental theology. Whether there needs to be a baptism every time; that would be wonderful. If we had new believers coming to faith, or in some cases, traditions that baptize infants that had parents, that had parents who were ready to present their child to the church for holy baptism. That would be wonderful. So, I think what I want to say about that is, every time we gather for worship, worship is itself a means of grace. We don't have to say, "We hope a means of grace is happening;" worship is a means of grace. Then in that larger picture, in the means of grace God is going to give to us Scripture and prayer and Lord's Supper and Christian conferencing and out of that will come a unique experience of worship, but which is, itself is, a means of grace. That is, it is a response to what God wanted to say to us that moment and do for us in that moment.

Question 19:**How can we promote unity and reconciliation between believers?**

Despite the great blessings God has poured out on the church, believers are still fallen human beings. And as a result, sometimes the opposition we face comes from sin within the church itself. Believers are all united to Christ and to each other in Christ. But sometimes we don't act like it. We fight with each other, condemn each other, and even divide from each other over issues like theology, practice, church government, and even ethnicity. How can we promote unity and reconciliation between believers?

Dr. John Frame

I think that Christians of different denominations should take every occasion they can to work together and to discuss their differences and I think that we need to come to a point where we can admit that our own traditions, our own denominations, haven't always been what God has wanted them to be. We need to look at our own denominations with a critical eye, and we should be looking for opportunities in which to bring denominations together. Denominations, of course, differ on many accounts. They differ doctrinally, they differ according to practices, liturgical practices, and they differ ethnically too. A lot of denominational differences are just because one is Dutch and one is English, or something like that. There ought to be, given that there are 20,000 denominations or so, it ought to be possible to find a lot of cases where these differences really don't matter much, and we should be willing to sacrifice those for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ. And so, I think we ought to hang loose to our denominational traditions much more than we do, and we ought to be looking as hard as we can to find opportunities to erase these differences and to restore the unity of the body of Christ.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

There is a unity that we must always seek and understand. It's the unity of all believers: one faith, one Lord, one baptism. And you can never forfeit that, and we must never slander that nor slight that. But the reality is that there is also a real sense in which that one church is one doctrine. It's one great truth. I mean, you go to one Lord, one faith. That means that there are certain centrals we have to hold together as a mark of that unity. That's also just a reminder to us that where there are doctrinal aberrations that deny that which is central in, essential to, Christianity, it's not really a question of church unity. It's a question of whether it's a true church at all. Because where central to central doctrines are denied, it's not really a question of the unity of the church. It's a question of the identity of the church. The true church is always going to be marked by unity even when we disagree on matters of secondary importance, even when we might organize our congregations differently, different believing Christians, recognizing each other as authentic Christians differ on different points of understanding. But the unity is that we know that God knows exactly what is true, and that God will one day instruct his true church in such a way that we will all come to a common understanding. That's when we are before him glorified, when the church is face to face with our Savior. Until then, we need to demonstrate unity, but we need to make sure that that unity is established in doctrine and in truth, not merely in our intentions.

Ephesians 5:25 says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." We are the bride of Christ. And since humanity's fall into sin, God has used the church to build his kingdom and to redeem our broken world. The church is not our salvation, but it is the heart of God's kingdom on earth, and it's a means of healing and restoration. And for that reason, we should confidently affirm, with all the saints throughout the world, "We believe in ... the church."

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The Apostles' Creed

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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Six

Salvation

INTRODUCTION

Throughout these lessons, we've mentioned that the *Apostles' Creed* began as a brief summary of the beliefs that early Christians confessed when they were baptized. In that context, it's easy to imagine that the most emotional part of their confession, for many, would have been the articles of the creed expressing faith in their personal salvation.

And isn't that true for us, as well? We love our great God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we value the church he's built. But our greatest joy is the good news that salvation is for *us*. We rejoice in the assurance that God loves *us*, that he forgives *our* sins, and that he has a wonderful destiny for us, both now and in the world to come.

This is the sixth lesson in our series on *The Apostles' Creed*, and we have entitled it, "Salvation." In this lesson, we'll look at the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* that affirm belief in the good news of forgiveness and eternal life.

In Scripture, the word "salvation" is used in a variety of ways, indicating that there are many facets to our salvation in Christ. When modern Christians use the word "salvation," we generally have in mind the reception of the blessings that Christ purchased by his atoning death, beginning with being born again and reconciled to God, continuing through life in a process of sanctification, and culminating in our ultimate glorification in the new heavens and earth.

The *Apostles' Creed* speaks of this aspect of salvation with these words:

**I believe in ...
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting.**

Now, these three ideas — forgiveness, resurrection and eternal life — do not exhaust the Bible's description of our salvation. But they are the primary statements in the *Apostles' Creed* that confess belief in particular aspects of what God does when he saves individual believers.

Our discussion of salvation in the *Apostles' Creed* will address each of these dimensions of our salvation. First, we'll talk about the forgiveness of sins. Second, we'll explore the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. And third, we'll consider the nature of everlasting life. Let's begin with the familiar subject of the forgiveness of sins.

FORGIVENESS

To understand what the *Apostles' Creed* means by forgiveness, we'll touch on three closely related issues: first, the problem of sin that makes forgiveness necessary; second, the divine grace that makes forgiveness possible; and third, our individual responsibility, the things we need to do to receive forgiveness. We'll look first at the problem of sin.

PROBLEM OF SIN

Christians who believe in the Bible recognize that one of the main reasons Jesus died was to solve the problem created by our sin. Sin separates us from God's blessings, and places us under his curse. And there is no way that we can overcome this problem by ourselves. This is what we mean when we talk about the problem of sin: Sin condemns us. And apart from Christ, we have no way to save ourselves from its presence or its consequences.

We'll investigate what the Scriptures teach about the problem of sin in three parts. First, we'll offer a biblical definition of sin. Second, we'll talk about the origin of sin in the human race. And third, we'll look at the consequences of sin. Let's start with a definition of sin.

Definition of Sin

The Bible talks about sin in a variety of ways. It uses words like lawlessness, rebellion, transgression, offense, evil, missing the mark, and a variety of other words to describe things that are sinful. And each of these words adds something to our understanding of sin.

But when Scripture speaks of sin abstractly — when it offers its own definition for sin — one word tends to rise above the others: lawlessness. In the Bible's vocabulary, sin is most fundamentally a violation of God's law. As the apostle John wrote in 1 John 3:4:

Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4).

We see this same emphasis on sin as lawlessness in places like Romans 7:9-25, and 1 Corinthians 15:56. This basic concept of sin is also reflected in the theology of many different Christian traditions.

As just one example, listen to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* question and answer number 14. In answer to the question:

What is sin?

The Catechism answers:

Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Notice that this answer identifies two general types of violations of God's law: want of conformity unto the law, and transgression of the law.

On the one hand, want of conformity unto the law is failure to do what Scripture commands. This is often called sin of omission because we omit or neglect what we should be doing. On the other hand, transgression of the law is doing what Scripture forbids. This kind of lawbreaking is often called sin of commission because we actively commit sin by thinking, feeling or doing something that Scripture forbids.

Now, when we talk about the law of God as the standard that defines sin, it's important to point out that God's law is not arbitrary or random. On the contrary, the law is a reflection of God's perfect character. Listen to the way Paul described the law in Romans 7:12:

The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good (Romans 7:12).

As Paul said here, God's commandments are always holy, righteous and good, just like God himself. God's commands always accord with his nature.

This is why Scripture teaches that if we love God, we'll keep his commandments. If we love God, we will also love those things that reflect God, such as his law. We see this in Deuteronomy 5:10 and 6:5-6, Matthew 22:37-40, John 14:15-24, and many other places. Listen to what John wrote in 1 John 5:3:

This is love for God: to obey his commands (1 John 5:3).

Love for God is manifested in obedience to his law. So, when we break his law, we are not acting in love for God. And therefore, we are sinning.

There is in the Bible a very close connection between loving God and obeying God. I think the first thing that we have to clarify is that merely loving God is not a fulfillment of the command to love God. There can be a duty-oriented, obligatory drudgery that was never in mind when the Bible said 'If you love me', or Christ said, 'If you love me, keep my commandments'. But if the love is there, if there is this voluntary self-giving rooted in a delight in God, then the most natural and validating manifestation of that will be a profound, willing and ready obedience because it's rooted in a desire to be pleasing to this God whom you love and delight in; it's rooted in the trust that this "God's way" is as reliable and for your good as his own character.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

When we fail to act out of love for God, we sin by rebelling against him, by transgressing his law, by doing evil, by missing the mark, by offending his holy, righteous and good character. But when our love for God motivates us, we put his interests and demands above our own. And as a result, we can avoid many sins and their terrible consequences in our lives.

With this definition of sin as violation of God's laws in mind, let's turn to the origin of sin in the human race.

Origin of Sin

Most of us are familiar with the events recorded in Genesis 3, the account of when our first parents Adam and Eve rebelled against God by eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From a biblical point of view, this act was not an isolated event. It caused the entire human race to become guilty of sin, and to be corrupted by sin. Theologians commonly refer to this event as *humanity's* fall into sin, or simply the Fall.

Genesis 1:26-31 tells us that when God created humanity, we were very good. In this case, the word "good" means that we were precisely what God wanted us to be. Our first parents were morally pure images of God, perfectly suited to serve him by filling and ruling over the world God had created.

As Paul indicated in Romans 5:12, sin had not entered humanity before the Fall. We had never committed sin, we were not inclined toward sin, we were not corrupted by sin, and we were not indwelt by sin.

But even in this sinless state, we did have both the *ability* and the *opportunity* to sin. When God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden, he revealed many things to them. But one command quickly moved to the foreground as a test of their willingness to serve God. In Genesis 2:16-17, we read that God permitted Adam and Eve to eat from any tree in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the possibility of breaking this law presented an opportunity for Adam and Eve to sin.

Tragically, as we know from Genesis 3:1-6, the serpent deceived Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. Then Eve offered some of the fruit to Adam, and he ate it too. Adam and Eve violated God's righteous law and willfully chose to sin. Revelation 12:9 indicates that the serpent was actually Satan, and 1 Timothy 2:14 indicates that Eve was deceived. But neither Satan's temptations nor Eve's foolishness excused the sin of our first parents. They both were guilty of choosing evil instead of good.

In these events we see once again that sin is fundamentally a matter of violating God's law, his revealed will. Whenever we think, speak or act in ways that differ from God's revealed law, we are choosing evil instead of good. And even if we're deceived or tricked into sinning, God still holds us accountable for what we've done. That's why it's so helpful to hide God's word in our hearts — not just so that we know it, but also so that we love it. When we know God's law, it helps us recognize sin so that won't be deceived. And when we love God's law, it makes it easier to choose to obey him.

Having considered sin's definition and origin, we're ready to look at the consequences of sin.

Consequences of Sin

Scripture indicates that after Adam and Eve sinned, God judged and cursed the entire human race. This curse affected every aspect of their being. It immediately resulted in the spiritual death that is spoken of throughout Scripture, as in John 5:24-25, Ephesians 2:1-5, and Colossians 2:13-14. It also produced corruption in our beings, both body and soul, as we see in Jeremiah 17:9 and Romans 7:18–8:11. And it ultimately led to physical death, as we read in Genesis 3:19 and Romans 5:12. Finally, sin earned humanity eternal suffering under God's judgment in hell, as we learn from passages like Matthew 5:29-30.

The well-known pastor Charles Spurgeon, who lived from 1834 to 1892, spoke of God's curse on Adam and Eve in his sermon *The Curse Removed*. Listen to what he said:

What does that curse include? It involves death, the death of this body ... It includes spiritual death, a death of that inner life which Adam had — the life of the spirit, which hath now fled, and can only be restored by [the] Holy Spirit ... And it includes, last of all, and worst of all, that death eternal ... all that can be gathered in that terrible, that awful ... word "hell."

What's worse, the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin also spread to the entire human race — to everyone who descended from them through natural generation. We see the universal extent of sin in passages like 1 Kings 8:46, Romans 3:9-12, Galatians 3:22, and Ephesians 2:3. Listen to the way Paul talked about Adam's sin in Romans 5:12-19:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned... [Through] the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners (Romans 5:12, 19).

As we saw in an earlier lesson, Adam was the covenant head of the entire human race. And Paul taught that because of this, Adam's sin was credited to all his descendants. And as a result, we are sinners by nature. We come into the world spiritually dead, subject to pain and hardship, and destined for physical death.

It's hard to exaggerate; it's impossible for us even to understand the full consequence of sin. But our sin is a revolt against the Creator. It is an effort to rob him of his glory, it is breaking his law, it is falling short of his glory. It is in every way setting ourselves as God's enemies. Sin disrupts our relationship with God because God is holy. He cannot look upon sin. As a consequence of his holiness, he must pour out his wrath upon sin. So, when you look at human sinfulness, it is everything we need to know about our problem. It's also everything we need to know about ourselves. Sin is the short, three-letter psychology that helps us to understand what we see in the mirror, and what we know ourselves to be. It also reminds us that there is no way

we can rescue ourselves from this predicament. Only God can do that, and he does so in Christ.

— **Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.**

The problem of sin is truly dire. All humanity is utterly lost and condemned. We have no way to redeem ourselves. We are perpetually doomed to suffer under God's judgment. There is no way for us to earn back his favor, or to make amends for our sin. Apart from God's gracious forgiveness, there is absolutely no hope of salvation.

Having looked at the problem of sin, we should turn our discussion of the forgiveness of sins toward the divine grace that makes forgiveness possible.

DIVINE GRACE

In his mercy, God was not willing to let the entire human race remain under the curse of sin. He still planned for humanity to fill and rule over the earth, and to turn it into a kingdom worthy of his presence. So, he sent a Redeemer to solve the problem of sin. And that Redeemer was his Son, Jesus Christ.

As Redeemer, Jesus saves us from our guilt and corruption; he reconciles us to himself; he restores our ability to turn the world into his earthly kingdom. God's plan does not rely on the ability of mere human beings to merit our own salvation. It relies on God's grace, his unmerited favor, granted to us through our special representative: the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read in Romans 3:23-24:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24).

As a work of divine grace, forgiveness involves all three persons of the Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And it began with the Father.

Father

Salvation is Trinitarian at heart: the Father who initiates, the Son who accomplishes, the Spirit who applies. When we think of the Father-Son relationship we should think of — when we think of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all three persons are involved in the planning of our salvation. All three persons are acting in grace and in love and in mercy as well as upholding wrath and righteousness and judgment. So when the Father is seen as initiator, he's not doing that independent of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

— **Dr. Stephen Wellum**

Forgiveness began with the Father because he was the one that planned it. The New Testament explicitly teaches that the Father sent the Son into the world and appointed him as the redeemer. We see this in John 3:16-18, Acts 2:34-36, and Hebrews 3:1-2.

The New Testament also teaches that the father authorized Jesus' empowerment as the Redeemer of his people, and promised to accept Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as payment for sin. We read about these roles of the Father in passages like John 10:14-18, Colossians 1:18-20 and Hebrews 2:10.

In fact, Romans 3:25 says that it was the Father who offered up Jesus as a sacrifice. Listen to what Paul wrote there:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3:25).

The Father is the great architect of redemption. It's his gracious plan and merciful desire to forgive our sins and to bless us. And it's his authority that makes salvation both possible and certain.

The idea that at the cross, that Jesus is trying to turn away the anger of his heavenly Father against his people in such a way that Jesus is loving and that the Father is not, is actually a very serious misconstrual of what is happening in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Jesus' work on the cross is actually the expression of the Father's prior love for his people. Think how often in the New Testament it is stressed that Jesus coming into this world and his bearing of the cross is in fact the result of the Father's love. The verse that most of us memorize perhaps first in our Christian life, John 3:16, emphasizes "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." Now, whose love is being emphasized in that verse? I don't mean in any way to take away from the love of Jesus, but it's the love of the heavenly Father in the giving of the Son, that is being emphasized in that passage.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Son

The divine grace that accomplishes our forgiveness also involved the Son, who is our Redeemer.

In fulfillment of the Father's promise, the Son was sent into the world, becoming incarnate as Jesus, the long awaited Messiah, in order to atone for human sin. We find this teaching in many places like Romans 3:25-26, and Hebrews 2:14-17, and 10:5-10.

Jesus atoned for sin by dying on the cross in place of sinners. He received the divine curse that had been warranted by our sin. And his perfect righteousness was credited to our account, so that we would be counted not as sinners, but as obedient children of God. To list just a few of the places this theme appears, we find it in John

10:14-18, Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 5:21, and Hebrews 10:9-14. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:7:

In [Jesus Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace (Ephesians 1:7).

Our sins are forgiven not because God ignores them, but because he has punished them in Christ. And that's why Scripture encourages us to have such confidence in our salvation.

Besides depending on these works of the Father and Son, forgiveness is also the result of divine grace from the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who actually applies forgiveness to our lives. The Father laid the plans and the Son accomplished the atonement. But our sins are not actually forgiven until the Holy Spirit does his work.

When we first come to faith, the Spirit reconciles us to God by forgiving all the sins we have committed up to that point. He also gives us new spiritual life by regenerating our spirits, as Jesus talked about in John 3:5-8. Acts 11:18 speaks of this experience as "repentance unto life" because regeneration and faith will always involve sorrow and confession of our sinfulness. This idea is confirmed in many passages, such as 1 Corinthians 6:11.

And the Spirit continues to apply forgiveness to us throughout our lives. He is the one that maintains our faith, that leads us to daily repentance, and that continually applies forgiveness to us. We see this in places like Romans 8:1-16 and Galatians 5:5. As just one example, listen to what Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 2:13:

God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Here, Paul wrote that believers are saved by the works of the Spirit that cleanse us from sin and unrighteousness, that is, the works of the Spirit that apply forgiveness to us. And the Spirit continues to apply forgiveness to us as we continue to believe in the truth.

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all demonstrate saving grace toward us. And this has at least three implications for our lives. First, when we sin and appeal to God for forgiveness and other aspects of salvation, we are right to make our petitions known to all three divine persons. Second, when we receive these blessings, we should give thanks to all three persons of God. And third, we can take great confidence in our salvation, knowing that all three persons of the Trinity love us and work to ensure our redemption. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are all working together, for our benefit, to solve the problem of sin.

Having looked at the forgiveness of sins from the perspectives of the problem of sin and divine grace, we're ready to talk about the role individual responsibility plays in forgiveness.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Scripture clearly teaches that God does not forgive the sins of every person. Some people are forgiven, and some are not. Why is this true? From a human perspective, the reason is that the process of forgiveness ordinarily involves an element of individual responsibility. Generally speaking, those people that fulfill these responsibilities are forgiven, but those that shirk these responsibilities are not.

Our discussion of the role of individual responsibility will divide into two parts. First, we'll mention some conditions that Scripture identifies as ordinary requirements for forgiveness. And second, we'll talk about the means of receiving forgiveness. Let's begin with the conditions that Scripture associates with forgiveness.

Conditions

Scripture speaks of two primary conditions for forgiveness. First, it speaks of faith in God as a prerequisite for forgiveness. In Scripture, faith is a multifaceted concept. But in this context, when we speak of faith in God, we have in mind:

Acknowledgement of God's divine sovereignty, loyal submission to him, and trust that he will show us mercy for the sake of our redeemer Jesus Christ.

Although it may sound strange to modern ears, Scripture often refers to this type of faith as the "fear of God."

For example, Psalm 103:8-13 describes the conditional nature of forgiveness in this way:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him (Psalm 103:8-13).

Notice that it's those who fear the Lord that receive his forgiveness, whose transgressions are removed.

This same idea is found throughout the Bible. For instance, we find it in 2 Chronicles 30:18-19, the Lord is said to pardon the people who set their hearts on seeking him. In Mark 4:12, Jesus indicated that only those who perceive and understand the Lord can turn to him for forgiveness. And in Acts 26:17-18, forgiveness can only be had by those whose eyes have been opened to the truth of the Lord's glory and power.

The second ordinary condition of forgiveness found in Scripture is brokenness. Brokenness is:

Genuine sorrow over sin; true regret over violating God's law.

It's not simply sorrow over being caught or punished, but agreement that the Lord's requirements are holy, and broken-heartedness over having failed to honor him.

In terms of contrition, we are meant, you and I, to sense the guilt of our sin. I think of David after he'd sinned with Bathsheba. Yes he had sinned against Bathsheba, and he had sinned against Bathsheba's husband. He had sinned against the church of the Old Testament, but ultimately "against thee, thee only, have I sinned and done this evil in thy sight." And you sense something of the contrition of his heart. The modern term, I think, is "brokenness," and we need the word, by the Spirit, to break us, to break us in the presence of God.

— Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

For example, in 2 Samuel 11, David showed no remorse when he committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then arranged for the death of her husband Uriah in order to hide her pregnancy. He lived without sorrow for his actions for the entire time of Bathsheba's pregnancy, until after his child was born. At that time, the prophet Nathan confronted David over his sin, as we learn in 2 Samuel 12. Only then did David admit his crime and feel deep conviction over it. Then, in a spirit of true brokenness, he wrote Psalm 51, his great psalm of repentance, to express the depth of his sorrow and regret. Listen to what David wrote in Psalm 51:6, 17:

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts ... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:6, 17).

David recognized that in order to receive God's forgiveness, he needed to share God's perspective on his sin. He needed to hate what he had done, and to be truly sorry for it.

We see this same emphasis on brokenness in Psalm 32 verses 1 and 2, where forgiveness comes to those who have no deceit in them. We find it in Isaiah 55:7, where God's mercy is given to those who forsake their sin. And we hear it in Jeremiah 5:3, where forgiveness is denied to those whose hearts are hard with regard to their sin.

I think we cultivate contrition, which is the heart of repentance, by focusing our minds on the holiness of God. We can do that by

contemplating what the Bible says from Genesis to Revelation about the God who cannot fellowship with disobedient people, but who judges disobedience, brings retribution on those who transgress. That is God's holiness in its very essence. And as we brood on God's holiness, let's then look back to the track record of our own lives and review just some of the ways in which we have transgressed, disobeyed, wandered off in disregard of what God has said, made a mess of our lives in a way that dishonors him. Now then think back, now all the retribution that was due to me for that has actually fallen on Christ's shoulders and been endured by him. And that tells me just how grievous my own sins were, that they could only be atoned for by the death of the incarnate Son of God for me. And as I realize how grievous my sins are in light of the holiness of God and what was demanded to put them away, so my sense of the grievousness of sin will be made more acute, my contrition will be deepened, and out of that will come an honest attempt all over again, again and again and again, to commit myself to God for holiness, to tell him how much I regret and indeed hate the sins that made the atonement necessary.

— Dr. J. I. Packer

The conditions of faith and brokenness are important to the life of every person, whether or not we are believers. For those who have not received Christ as Lord and savior, these conditions are opportunities for them to come to God to have their sins forgiven, and to begin new life in Christ. For those of us who already belong to the Lord, they are reminders that we need to live lives of constant faith, and to be truly sorry for the sins we continue to commit, so that we can continue to receive forgiveness and cleansing on a daily basis.

Now that we've seen that the conditions for forgiveness normally include God working faith and brokenness in our hearts, let's look at the ordinary means by which we can receive forgiveness.

Means

Sometimes, Christians fail to distinguish between a means of grace and a basis of grace. As a result, they mistakenly think that a means of grace can be used to earn grace, or even to force God to be gracious to us. So, it's important to distinguish clearly between a means and a basis. To help us see this distinction, imagine that a person needs physical therapy to recover from an injury. The therapy is expensive, and is paid for by a donor. We might say that the means by which the person fully recovers is the therapy. But the financial basis for this recovery would be the donation.

We might summarize these differences by saying that a basis is the ground or merit on which an action or consequence is based, whereas a means is a tool or mechanism for bringing that action or consequence to pass.

When it comes to receiving forgiveness and grace from God, the *basis* is always the merit of Christ, which he earned by his obedient life and sacrificial death on the cross. We see this in places like Matthew 26:28, Colossians 1:13-14, and 1 John 2:12. Forgiveness is always earned. But it's earned by Christ, not by us. And the fundamental means by which all grace is applied to our lives is faith. Whether expressed directly to God, or through means of grace, faith is the primary tool through which God applies grace and other blessings to our lives.

Scripture mentions several means through which faith normally works. For our purposes in this lesson, we can summarize these other means in two general categories, beginning with prayer.

Throughout Scripture, prayer is presented as an ordinary means for appealing to God for grace and forgiveness. For instance, the Bible commonly speaks of prayers of confession and repentance as expressions of faith through which the Holy Spirit applies forgiveness to us. The effectiveness of these prayers is taught in 1 Kings 8:29-40, Psalm 32:1-11, Acts 8:22, 1 John 1:9, and many other places.

For those who have just come to know the Lord, faithful prayers of confession and repentance are the means through which the Holy Spirit initially applies forgiveness and salvation to their lives. This is why the church referred to conversion as “repentance unto life” in Acts 11:18. And for all believers, prayers of confession and repentance continue to be important means of receiving God's grace in our lives. As we read in 1 John 1:9:

If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

The wonderful news of the gospel is that God freely forgives our sins on the basis of what Christ has done for us. And we can receive this forgiveness simply by asking for it in faith.

You know, a lot of folks think that if you teach that God will forgive sinners, simply by their coming to him and saying, “Forgive me, heavenly Father,” that that will cheapen the grace of God. But the fact of the matter is, it exalts the grace of God, not because our repentance saves us, or is the basis on which God forgives us, but because God has himself provided the basis of our forgiveness and reconciliation in the infinitely valuable and incalculably costly death of his only begotten son.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

The fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity came to earth and spent thirty years in humility and servanthood and then suffered and died on the cross — took on the eternal debt of sin on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. That's an eternal price, that's an eternal cost, an enormous cost, an infinite

cost for our sins. So this is not cheap grace at all. This is the most expensive grace ever achieved. We receive it as a free gift, but only because Jesus gave his all for us.

— Dr. Mark Strauss

All who come to him and simply say, “Forgive me, Lord,” are forgiven. Not because their request for forgiveness was so noble, not because their repentance was so good, but because Jesus has done everything that is necessary for us to be reunited in fellowship with our heavenly Father.

— Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III

Now, we should pause to mention that in addition to prayers of confession and repentance, which function as ordinary means of forgiveness, prayers of intercession sometimes function as extraordinary or unusual means of forgiveness. Intercession can be defined as: mediation; or petition or prayer on behalf of another.

Scripture records many biblical examples of people offering effective intercessory prayers. We see this in Numbers 14:19-20, where the Lord forgave the sin of Israel in response to Moses' intercessory prayer. We find it in 2 Chronicles 30:18-20, where the Lord forgave the people who had not properly prepared for Passover in response to Hezekiah's intercession. We see it in Job 1:5, where we learn that Job regularly offered effective intercessory sacrifices for his children. And we see it in James 5:14-15, where James taught that the elders of the church can obtain forgiveness for those who have sinned. God does not always apply forgiveness in response to the intercessory prayers of the faithful. But there are many times when he does.

And beyond these types of human intercession, both the Son and the Holy Spirit intercede for people. The intercession Jesus offers is mentioned in places like Isaiah 53:12, Romans 8:34, and Hebrews 7:25. And the Spirit's intercession is taught in Romans 8:26-27.

The second general category of means of forgiveness is the sacraments, or what many modern Protestant churches call the “ordinances,” namely baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Now, when we use the term “sacrament,” we need to be clear that we are not talking about the view of the Lord's Supper and baptism found in the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, the word “sacrament” has historically been used by many Protestant denominations to refer to the Lord's Supper and baptism. These ceremonies are special, holy ordinances that God provided to the church as means of expressing our faith and receiving his blessing. Protestant traditions differ over the details of the workings of these ordinances. But they all agree that they are special in some way.

Sometimes Christians feel suspicious when they hear others talk about the Lord's Supper and baptism as means of forgiveness. So, it's important to emphasize that we are not saying that these ordinances have any merit in themselves that make them effective. They are not the *basis* of forgiveness.

At the same time, the Bible teaches that when we express our faith through the Lord's Supper and baptism, the Holy Spirit uses these ordinances to apply forgiveness to our lives.

Baptism is spoken of as a means of grace in passages like Mark 1:4, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:1-7, and Colossians 2:12-14.

As just one example, listen to Ananias' words to Paul in Acts 22:16:

And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name (Acts 22:16).

In these instructions, Ananias indicated that Paul's sins would be forgiven or "washed away" through baptism.

Now, of course, baptism is not a necessary means of forgiveness. We can be forgiven in other ways as well. For example, the thief who came to faith while being crucified with Jesus was never baptized. Nevertheless, Luke 23:43 indicates that he was forgiven and saved. So, we should not make the mistake of thinking that forgiveness and salvation are only available to those who have been baptized. Still, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that baptism ordinarily functions as a means of applying forgiveness to our lives.

And the same is true of the Lord's Supper. Paul explicitly taught that partaking of the Lord's Supper is a means of receiving the benefits of Christ's death, such as forgiveness. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:16:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 10:16).

These were rhetorical questions. Everyone reading Paul's letter knew that the answers were, "Yes, of course." By partaking of the Lord's Supper in faith, we are united to Christ.

Forgiveness of sins is a great blessing of salvation that we experience throughout our Christian lives. Whether we are new converts, or lifelong believers, forgiveness is a continual aspect of our walk with Christ. And it results in many other blessings as well.

John Wesley, a founder of the Methodist church who lived from about 1703 to 1791, spoke about forgiveness in his *Sermon number 26*, in which he expounded the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to what he said there:

As soon as ... we receive forgiveness of sins, we receive likewise a lot among those who are sanctified, by faith which is in him. Sin has lost its power: It has no dominion over those who are under grace, that is, in favor with God. As there is now no condemnation for them that are in Christ Jesus, so they are freed from sin as well as from guilt. The righteousness of the law is fulfilled in them, and they walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.

I think the forgiveness of sins is, in some ways, the most precious reality we have as Christians. Fundamentally what it means to be forgiven of our sins is to be in a right relationship with God, with our Creator. When we look at the world today, we see that people are longing for meaning, for significance, for purpose. And there's so much confusion in our culture. What is life all about? What is the reason for living? Why am I here? And so people try all sorts of things to find meaning and significance — whether they pursue their job or sexuality or drugs. I mean there are all kinds of venues and paths where people are trying to find happiness and joy. But the gospel tells us our fundamental need as human beings is to be in a right relationship with our Creator, with the one who made us. The gospel says that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sins, to absorb the wrath of God. God out of his love sent his Son so that our sins could be forgiven, so that if we put our trust in him we can be forgiven of our sins. And when we come to that experience, when we turn to Jesus Christ for such forgiveness there is an incredible sense of peace, a sense of rightness with the world because it truly is a rightness with the world. We suddenly realize this is what we are created for. We are created to be in right relationship with God. We recognize at that moment.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

Now that we've explored the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, we're ready to consider our next article of faith: the resurrection of the body.

RESURRECTION

Recall these words from the *Apostles' Creed*:

**I believe in ...
The resurrection of the body.**

We need to be clear at this point, that the creed is not talking about the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' own resurrection appears earlier in the creed when it says that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day. When the creed speaks of "the resurrection of the body" it has in mind the general resurrection — the resurrection of all people when Christ returns in glory.

We'll consider the general resurrection of the body in three steps. First, we'll look at the curse that results in death for our bodies. Second, we'll explain that the Christian gospel offers life for our bodies. And third, we'll look at the way our bodies will eventually experience redemption. Let's begin with the curse that causes our bodies to die.

CURSE

As we saw in an earlier lesson, God created human beings to consist of physical bodies and non-physical souls. Based on Hebrews 4:12 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23, some traditions have maintained that each human being also possesses a spirit in addition to a soul. But there are approximately 200 verses in which one or the other of these terms is used to refer to all the inner, non-physical aspects of our being as a whole. So, most Christian traditions have concluded that the words “soul” and “spirit” both refer to the same underlying reality, and that human beings consist of only two main parts: body and soul.

Before our fall into sin, our bodies and our souls were unaffected by sin and its corrupting powers. But when Adam and Eve fell into sin, sin corrupted not only their souls, but also their bodies. And this corruption of their bodies ultimately resulted in their physical death. Listen to God’s curse on Adam in Genesis 3:19:

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to the dust you will return (Genesis 3:19).

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, he cursed them both. And part of his curse was that they would be mortal. They would eventually die and return to dust. And because all human beings descend from Adam and Eve, we are all born with similar corruption. As Paul wrote in Romans 5:12:

Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned (Romans 5:12).

Sin affected Adam and Eve in both spiritual and physical ways. And because we are their natural descendants, we bear the same curse. Our souls come into the world in a state that the Bible describes as spiritual death. We are under God’s judgment, and have lost all ability to please him. We read about this in passage like Romans 5:12-19, and 8:1-8.

And just like Adam and Eve, our bodies are also corrupted by sin. This corruption results in physical hardship, sickness, and eventually death. Paul talked about this in Romans 6:12-19, and 7:4-25. Sin corrupts all that we are — our entire being, body and soul. But the wonderful promise of God is that salvation in Christ redeems both our souls and our bodies.

Christians should never view human death as something that’s normal. We often use in our language, or convey that kind of idea. Sometimes at funerals we can say of someone, “Well, they lived a good long life.” And it’s only at, maybe, the death of a young child or the death of someone maybe in their twenties or thirties that we say, “Oh, this is terrible.” No, this is really not a proper Christian view of

human death. A Christian view of human death views all death as that which is abnormal. We were made to live from the very beginning forever. You think of how, even in the creation account on the seventh day, God rests. He would enter into full enjoyment with his creation. We would then live to his glory and carry out the creation mandate. We were not ever made to die. But instead, the wages of sin, the entrance of sin into this world, Genesis 3, the wages of sin the apostle Paul says, and spoken of in Genesis 2, is death. Death, which is physical; death which is also spiritual.

— Dr. Stephen Wellum

In some sense, physical death is a blessing to believers because we are taken directly into the presence of Christ. But in a more fundamental sense, physical death is tragic. It's a universal human experience, but it's also horribly *unnatural*. God did not create humanity for death; he created us for life. And our salvation won't be complete until Christ returns and redeems our bodies.

Having looked at the curse that results in death for our bodies, let's turn to the aspects of the gospel that ensure our resurrection.

GOSPEL

How many of us know Christians who believe that they will spend eternity in heaven as disembodied spirits? Probably more than a few. As odd as it may sound, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is almost completely unknown in some modern churches. And one reason for this is that Christians often fail to understand the significance of our human bodies. But Scripture clearly teaches the good news that not only our souls, but also our bodies, will be glorified when Christ returns.

We'll explore the idea that bodily resurrection is part of the gospel by considering three issues. First, we'll mention the Old Testament background of this doctrine. Second, we'll see that it's clearly proclaimed in the New Testament. And third, we'll talk about the relationship between the resurrection of believers and the resurrection of Jesus. Let's start with the Old Testament.

Old Testament

Many modern Christians don't realize this, but the word gospel, which means good news, actually comes from the Old Testament. In particular, we find it in Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1, and Nahum 1:15. As just one example, listen to Isaiah 52:7:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7).

In the Old Testament, the “good news” or “gospel” was that God would save his people by defeating his enemies and theirs. In a narrow sense, this was the good news that God would rescue his people from the oppression of their earthly enemies. But in a broader sense, it was the good news that God would reverse all the curses that resulted from Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. He would extend his glorious heavenly reign over the entire earth, and ultimately bless everyone who had faith in him.

Of course, the salvation God provided in the Old Testament was based on Christ’s future victory. Although Christ had not yet come to die for sin, he had already promised to die on behalf of his people. And that promise was sufficient to secure their salvation. In fact, every hope of salvation in the Old Testament pointed to Christ and what he would accomplish.

Listen to the way Hebrews 10:1-5 describes the Old Testament sacrifices:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves... [I]t is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me." (Hebrews 10:1-5).

The author of Hebrews indicated that the Old Testament sacrifices were only shadows of the reality that was later realized in Christ. Animal sacrifices could never perfectly atone for sin because God required that human sin be punished with human death. But they could and did point to Jesus, whose fully human death was a perfectly sufficient and effective atonement for sin.

As part of the gospel in the Old Testament, God’s people were taught that a day was coming when God would raise all the dead of humanity, and judge them for their deeds. Those who had lived righteously, having faith in God, would be everlastingly blessed. But those who rebelled against God would be condemned to a perpetual future of punishment. Both of these sets of consequences would continue forever in bodily form. Christian theologians commonly refer to this event as the last judgment.

As we saw in a prior lesson, the *Apostles' Creed* refers to the last judgment in the line:

From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Perhaps the clearest statement of the idea that the last judgment involves bodily resurrection can be found in Daniel 12, where an angelic messenger revealed to Daniel that in the future God would deliver his people from oppression.

Listen to what Daniel was told in Daniel 12:1-2:

At that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:1-2).

Daniel specifically referred to bodily resurrection when he spoke of those who sleep in the dust of the earth. Souls do not sleep in the dust of earth; bodies do. And it's those bodies that will be raised at the final judgment.

Isaiah also spoke of a day of judgment that included a general resurrection. Listen to what he wrote in Isaiah 26:19-21:

Your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy... [T]he earth will give birth to her dead... See, the LORD is coming out of his dwelling to punish the people of the earth for their sins (Isaiah 26:19-21).

Once again, we see that the dead, those who dwell in the dust, will rise from their graves with new life, as if the earth were giving birth to them. And this will occur in the context of judgment, as the Lord comes to punish the people of the earth for their sins.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the dead is also implied in several Old Testament passages that speak of deliverance from Sheol in the context of final judgment and recompense, such as Psalm 49:7-15, and Psalm 73:24-28. And in Job 19:25-27, Job confidently expressed his belief that he would be resurrected to see God on the day the Lord came to stand upon the earth — the day of judgment.

The future resurrection and judgment isn't as clear in the Old Testament as it is in the New. But certainly there are indications in the Old Testament that this is going to take place. Isaiah for example speaks of a time in which dead people will live, come out of their graves. Daniel speaks similarly of a time when the dead will come forth, the righteous and the wicked to final judgment. And so this is something that, this is a belief that sprang up, at least among some of the Jews, not all of them. The Pharisees of Jesus' time believed in the resurrection. The Sadducees did not. But Jesus himself, when the Sadducees come and ask him whether there is such a thing, and they give him a trick question to make it look ridiculous, Jesus actually quotes the passage when God says: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Jesus says, "[God] is not the God of the dead, but of the living." So, Abraham, when God forms a relationship, a covenant relationship with somebody, it really is a personal relationship with that individual and if Abraham was just going to lie in the ground, and was never going to waken again, doesn't make a whole lot of sense to say that God is in a covenant relationship forever with Abraham. So, that means that the New Testament is, of course, irrevocably committed to the doctrine of resurrection. And, of course, the resurrection of Jesus puts the final seal on that.

— Dr. John Frame

Having seen that the general resurrection was part of the gospel in the Old Testament, let's look at the fact that it's also part of the gospel message in the New Testament.

New Testament

The biggest difference between the Old Testament and New Testament gospel proclamations is that in the New Testament, the redeemer had finally come. He had finally been revealed in history as Jesus of Nazareth. God was now reigning through his Son, Jesus. This is why the New Testament so often emphasizes that Jesus is Lord, meaning that he is the reigning king. We see this in places like Luke 2:11, Acts 2:36, Romans 10:9, and 1 Corinthians 12:3.

Salvation comes the same way in the Old and New Testaments, by faith in the promise of God's provision. What's different about faith in the Old Testament and faith in the New is not faith towards God, but the specificity with which the promise is given. Faith in the Old Testament is fundamentally forward looking in a promise yet to be fulfilled. Faith in the New Testament forward is retrospective looking back at the cross, at a promise that has been fulfilled. So they're, they both involve faith directed towards God for a provision that he will make and we cannot supply.

— Dr. Robert G. Lister

In Jesus, all the Old Testament promises of salvation are being fulfilled. As we saw in Hebrews 10:1-5, his death is the reality to which the Old Testament sacrifices pointed. And in Romans 15:8-13, and Galatians 3:16, Paul taught that Jesus' gospel fulfills the promises made to the Old Testament patriarchs. In these and many other ways, the New Testament affirms the Old Testament gospel — the good news that the divine king has finally come to bring salvation to his people by grace through faith.

Jesus taught that the general resurrection will take place at the last judgment. For instance, in Matthew 22:23-32 and Luke 20:27-38, he refuted the Sadducees' denial of the general resurrection. In Luke 14:13-14, he encouraged believers to do good works on the basis that they would be rewarded in the resurrection. And in John 11:24-26, he confirmed the doctrine in his talks with Martha, the sister of Lazarus. Listen to what Jesus said in Luke 20:37:

In the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise (Luke 20:37).

Here, Jesus insisted that the doctrine of the general resurrection had already been revealed in the Old Testament. And this same idea is confirmed throughout the rest of the New Testament. Unfortunately, in many branches of the church, the bodily resurrection of the dead is largely ignored. Many Christians believe that we will remain disembodied

spirits for all eternity. But in Hebrews 6:1-2, the resurrection of the dead is described as one of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. And in Hebrews 11:35, believers' resurrection is held out as a motivation for doing good works. In fact, the Apostles regularly pointed out that Christians believed in the Old Testament promises of resurrection. For instance, Peter and John did this in Acts 4:1-2. And Paul did it in Acts 23:6-8 and 24:14-21. As just one example, listen to how Paul defended his ministry in Acts 24:14-15:

I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (Acts 24:14-15).

Here, Paul pointed out that the Christian hope in the general resurrection at the last judgment was precisely the same as the Jewish hope. The difference was that the Christians believed this resurrection would be accomplished through Christ.

It's important for us to understand that God's plan of salvation has always been the same. He didn't appoint one way for ancient Israel to be saved, and another way for us to be saved. He didn't appoint one way of salvation for the Jews, and another for the Gentiles. The Old and the New Testaments are united in their teaching. And that's part of the reason that Christians treasure the Old Testament as God's word for their lives. God's people have always been saved by grace, through faith, and in Christ. Christians are part of a long history of the mercy and redemption God has always provided for his faithful people. And the whole Bible — both Testaments — teaches us about this wonderful truth.

Now that we've seen that in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the gospel included the good news that there would be a resurrection of the dead, let's take a look at the relationship between the resurrection of believers and the resurrection of Jesus.

Resurrection of Jesus

The New Testament teaches that there are at least two very important connections between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of believers. First, we'll be resurrected to blessed life specifically because we are united to Jesus in his resurrection. As Paul wrote in Romans 6:4-5:

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:4-5).

Paul taught that through faith, baptism unites us to Christ's death, resulting in the payment of the debt we incur by our sin. But it also unites us to his resurrection, resulting in the regeneration of our spirits in the present life, and the resurrection of our physical bodies at a future time. Our union with Jesus' resurrection is also taught in places like 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, Philippians 3:10-12, and Colossians 2:12.

As a result of the fact that we are united to Jesus in his resurrection, our own resurrection is guaranteed. Listen to what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:20-23:

Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man... But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Here, Paul referred to Jesus' resurrection as the firstfruits of a harvest that includes all those who belong to him.

In the Old Testament, God required Israel to bring him an offering of the firstfruits of the harvest. We see this, for example, in Leviticus 23:17. These firstfruits were just the first part of the whole harvest, and they represented the entire harvest. They were a form of guarantee — by giving the Lord the first part of the harvest, the Israelites expressed faith that they themselves would receive the rest of the harvest. By giving us Jesus' resurrection, God demonstrated his full intention to resurrect us in the same way. So, as believers, we can have great confidence in our own future resurrection, knowing that God has sealed us for that day by the resurrection of Christ.

So far in our study of the resurrection of the body, we've looked at the curse that results in death for our bodies, and at the gospel that offers life for our bodies. At this point, we're ready to consider the way our bodies actually experience redemption.

REDEMPTION

We'll consider the redemption of our bodies in three stages: First, the things believers experience during our present life on earth. Second, the intermediate state of our bodies that begins with our physical death. And third, the new life of resurrection itself, which will begin when Christ returns. Let's start with our present life.

Present Life

Although Christians normally talk about the redemption of our bodies in terms of our resurrection on the last day, the Bible actually teaches that the salvation of our bodies begins with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when we first come to faith. This indwelling is mentioned, for example, in Romans 8:9-11. Although it does not result in our immediate bodily resurrection, it does seal us with the guarantee of the full redemption of our bodies in the future, as Paul taught in Ephesians 1:13-14.

And our bodies continue to benefit from the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence throughout our lives, especially through the process of sanctification. The sanctification of our bodies is similar to the sanctification of our souls. The Holy Spirit sets us apart for God and purifies us. He continues to sanctify us throughout our lives, as he forgives the sins we commit with our bodies, and ensures that we use our bodies in ways that honor the Lord. Ideally, this results in us honoring God with our bodies, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 6:20, and giving our bodies to God as living sacrifices, as we read in Romans 12:1.

Intermediate State

After the beginning of the redemption of our bodies in the present life of believers, the process continues during our physical death.

When we die, our bodies are temporarily separated from our souls. This stage is often called the intermediate state — the state between our lives on earth now, and the lives we'll have in the resurrection. During the intermediate state, our souls dwell with Christ in heaven. Scripture talks about this in places like Matthew 17:3 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-8.

But while our souls are in heaven, our bodies remain on earth. Our bodies are still corrupted by sin, as proven by the fact that they decay. But the sin that corrupts them can no longer influence us to commit sin. For one thing, death frees us from sin's mastery, as Paul taught in Romans 6:2-11. For another, our bodies lie in the grave in an unconscious state, being incapable of any thought, action or feeling, whether good or bad.

But even though our bodies and souls are temporarily separated at death, the Bible never says that our bodies cease to be part of us. Whether they are buried, or cremated, or seemingly lost, our bodies continue to be part of us. There are dozens of examples of this in the Bible. For instance, 1 Samuel 25:1 says that Samuel was buried at his home in Ramah. 1 Kings 2:10 says that David was buried in Jerusalem, the City of David. And the regular refrain throughout 1 and 2 Kings, as well as 2 Chronicles, is that the kings of Judah are buried in the city of the forefather David. Their bodies still belong to them, and are still part of their persons.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* describes our death in this way in question and answer number 37. In answer to the question:

What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

The Catechism answers:

The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united in Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection.

Here, the Catechism says that believers have two fates at death — one for their souls, and one for their bodies. Our souls pass into glory in heaven, but our bodies, being still united to Christ, rest in their graves — they lie dormant, waiting for new life in the resurrection.

I think it is true to say that when our soul is in heaven and our body is in the grave, yes, we're in two places at the same time. That requires some explanation, and one answer in the shorter catechism is very good at this point. "The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness and do immediately pass into glory. And their bodies being still united to Christ, rest in their graves until the resurrection." The first part of that about the soul departing from the body is the subject of Second Corinthians 5 verses 1 to 10. Paul speaks of his present mortal body as an earthly tent and he doesn't relish the prospect of death because his soul will then be separated from his body, which is an unnatural state.

— Dr. Knox Chamblin

This tension between being in two places at one time is felt even in heaven. There is no doubt that heaven will be wonderful beyond our expectations. But it's also true that even in heaven our salvation will not yet be complete because our bodies will not yet have been resurrected. Listen to how Paul talked about bodily resurrection in Romans 8:23:

We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Romans 8:23).

Here, Paul said that we groan in this life because we don't have our resurrected bodies. But the souls in heaven are still waiting for their new bodies, too. So, it makes sense to think that they are also groaning, in some sense, as they wait for the redemption of their bodies.

Some people think that the bodies we will receive are just convenient earth suits, optional equipment, that we are absolutely content and quite happy to be disembodied. That seems to be just a little more platonic than biblical. So, what is it like to be in this intermediate state between your personal death and the promised resurrection from the dead? What is it like? We have not been given photographic reportage of that. We have not been given detailed descriptions of that. But the answer we are given from Scripture is very assuring and it's highly relational. We will be with the Lord.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

With our present life and our physical death in mind, we're ready to see how the redemption of our bodies is completed in new life.

New Life

Our bodies will receive new, perfect life when they are restored to life in the general resurrection. In the resurrection, the consequences of sin will finally and forever be completely put away from us. We read about this in Romans 8:23, 1 Corinthians 15:12-57, and Philippians 3:11. Theologians often refer to this stage of salvation as glorification, because it results in us being made into glorious, perfected human beings. Scripture does not give us many details regarding our glorification. But Paul did briefly compare our glorified bodies to our existing bodies in 1 Corinthians 15. Listen to what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44:

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

We can't be sure of the precise continuities and discontinuities between the bodies we have now and the bodies we'll have in the resurrection. Just as Christ's body underwent changes in his resurrection, our bodies will also be changed. They will be renewed and perfected. They will be immortal, glorious, powerful and spiritual. But they will also be entirely human. In our resurrection, we will finally become the people God has always planned for us to be.

Our bodies die as a consequence of sin; physical death is God's judgment against humanity's wickedness in the Fall. But the good news is that the gospel proclaims the restoration of our bodies. It tells us that Jesus came to redeem us as whole persons, body and soul. And this redemption is glorious. It's a cause for great joy and celebration. With the resurrection of our bodies, we will finally be able to declare victory over death. We will finally be prepared to inherit all the blessings God has in store for us in the new heavens and new earth. And we will finally be able to see with our own eyes the victory of Jesus Christ.

So far in our discussion of salvation, we've talked about the articles of faith in the *Apostles' Creed* that deal with the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body. At this point, we are ready to turn to our last topic: everlasting life.

EVERLASTING LIFE

The *Apostles' Creed* mentions everlasting life in its last article of faith:

**I believe in ...
The life everlasting.**

At this point, the creed has in view the everlasting life, often called eternal life, that follows the resurrection of our bodies. The creed affirms the belief that all God's faithful people will ultimately be rewarded with perfect, blessed, incorruptible, never-ending life.

Although there are many things we might say about everlasting life, we'll focus on three issues in this lesson: First, we'll mention the timing of everlasting life. When does it begin? Second, we'll talk about the quality of everlasting life. How does it differ from other kinds of life? And third, we'll mention the location where we will live forever. Let's begin with the timing of our everlasting life.

TIMING

When does eternal life begin? Christ said that he's come that we might have life and have it abundantly. Certainly he's suggesting that to be in Christ, to be a disciple of Christ, introduces us to a qualitatively superior way of living, but is that eternal life? Does eternal life begin when we pass from this sphere of mortal existence to the life beyond? Is that when eternal life begins? Well, in a sense, yes. But there's, in another sense, the new life, the resurrection life of Christ that will carry us through the grave and propel us on into eternity, an unending eternity with God, is a life that has been planted as a seed within us now. So that the life that will never end is beginning now, and it's important to understand that this eternal life is not just a life defined by endless duration, but a life defined qualitatively as a life that is now Christ-centered and God-centered and is moving toward the full restoration of all that was intended for human beings. And we get to participate in that now, even while we were still embedded in a painful, struggling, broken world.

— Dr. Glen Scorgie

Scripture often says that believers already possess everlasting life as a present reality. We see this in John 10:28, 1 Timothy 6:12, 1 John 5:11-13, and many other places. As just one example of this, listen to what Jesus said in John 5:24:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (John 5:24).

Jesus and the writers of the New Testament sometimes talked about eternal or everlasting life as a present reality that results from our union with Christ. And of course this is true. Our souls will never die, even though our bodies will. The spiritual life we possess now is the same life we'll have forever.

On the other hand, Scripture talks even more frequently about the fact that we will be given everlasting life as our inheritance at the last judgment. We see this in places like

Matthew 25:46, Mark 10:29-30, John 12:25, Romans 2:5-7, and Jude 21. As just one example, listen to what John wrote in 6:40 of his gospel:

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:40).

As John did here, Scripture often associates our full reception of eternal life with the resurrection of our bodies. When our bodies are made alive, we will live forever, body and soul, as fully redeemed and fully restored human beings.

I think it's helpful to describe what we receive in Christ, through our union with Christ, is that which is both "already" and "not yet." And by that, I mean that the benefits of Christ, which includes eternal life, are ours "already" when we receive Christ, when we put our faith in Christ. They are ours — we have eternal life. Yet at same time, it's "not yet" in this sense, that, of course, even after we receive Christ many of us will grow old, many of us will get sick, many of us will experience death if Christ does not return before. And in that sense, then the "not yet" of eternal life awaits us still. So the "already" — "not yet," I think helps us understand, yes, we do have an eternal life, and yet at same time, eternal life awaits us in the new heavens and new earth.

— Dr. Jeffrey Jue

There's a sense in which it's fair to say that eternal life for our souls begins in this life when we are regenerated. But we won't be completely alive until our bodies are raised at the last judgment. Only then will our entire being live before God. Before then, we have a foretaste of everlasting life through the redemption of our souls. But only when our bodies have also been given new life will we really live as God intended.

With this understanding of the timing of everlasting life in mind, let's look at its quality.

QUALITY

In the Bible, everlasting life is not simply a matter of having our existence and consciousness continue forever. After all, even people who are under the eternal judgment of God have continued existence and consciousness. Rather, the key quality of eternal life is that we will live forever in the blessings of God. In this sense, to have life is to receive God's favor and blessing. And by contrast, to suffer death is to fall under his wrath and curse. Both eternal life and eternal death involve continued existence. The difference between them is the quality of that existence. As Jesus prayed in John 17:3:

This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent (John 17:3).

Here, Jesus taught that eternal life is equivalent to knowing God and Jesus. In this context, the idea of knowing implies a loving relationship. Jesus' point was that eternal life is not defined merely in terms of existence or consciousness, but in terms of the experience of God's love.

Or consider the way Paul talked about life and death in Romans 7:9-11, where he wrote this:

Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death (Romans 7:9-11).

During the entire period that Paul described here, he was physically and mentally alive. He existed as a conscious, rational being. Even so, he claimed first to have been alive, and then to have died, to have been put to death. And the difference was his standing before God. Before the law condemned him, he was alive. But once the law put him under God's curse, Paul was dead. Later, when he came to Christ and the curse was lifted, he could be described as having new life. We see this same idea in places like John 5:24, and 1 John 3:14.

Think about it this way: On the last day, all the dead will be raised in the general resurrection. Our immortal souls will be reunited with our resurrected bodies. According to John 5:28-29, those who have done good will rise to be rewarded, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. Both will live conscious lives in their resurrected bodies forever. But the Bible calls the fate of the righteous "life," and the fate of the wicked "death." The difference is not whether or not they will exist or think or have experiences. The difference is their relationship to God. If we are under God's blessing, the Bible says we are alive. If we are under his curse, it says we are dead. So, everlasting life is continued conscious existence in a blessed relationship with God. But what are these blessings? What does blessed life look like?

I think we ought not to conceive of our eternal life with God as just floating on clouds, so to speak. But we'll have new resurrected bodies; bodies that are not touched by sin and disease and death. We will be immortal; we will never die. And we'll live on a new earth. Now, details elude us—what will that involve? We don't know all the details, but we know that we will have some responsibility. We will reign with Christ. And I take it, since it's a new universe that we will interact with the cosmos that God has created. So there'll be specific things, I take it, for us to do. But fundamentally, what the New Testament emphasizes, is not what we'll do, as interesting as that is, and I'm sure it will be fascinating and fulfilling. But what the New

Testament emphasizes is that God will be with us. We will see his face. Fellowship with him will be our all-satisfying joy.

— Dr. Tom Schreiner

The famous theologian Louis Berkhof, who lived from 1873 to 1957, described the final state of everlasting life in part 6, chapter 5 of his book, *Systematic Theology*. Listen to how he put it:

The fulness of this life is enjoyed in communion with God ... They will see God in Jesus Christ face to face, will find full satisfaction in Him, will rejoice in Him, and will glorify Him... There will be recognition and social intercourse on an elevated plane... [T]he joy of each individual will be perfect and full.

In some ways, it may seem strange that the Bible doesn't talk about the nature of eternal life very often. After all, eternal life is the great reward the gospel offers to those who repent and have saving faith in Christ. But the reality is that Scripture tends to talk about eternal life in fairly general terms. Revelation 21:3-4 tell us that God will dwell with his people, and there will be no death or sadness. We will have new bodies, and we will be completely free from the presence, corruption and influence of sin. But what about the details? The truth is that the Bible says very little about them. Instead, it mostly encourages us to trust that God is good, and not to speculate too much about the wonders he has in store for us. Listen to what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4:

I know a man in Christ who ... was caught up to the third heaven... caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).

Notice what Paul said about this experience. The things heard were inexpressible — they could not be sufficiently expressed in human language. Moreover, man is not permitted to tell what this third heaven contained. It is so wonderful that God is keeping it secret for now.

And this was only heaven — the intermediate state before our resurrection. If the secrets of heaven can't be revealed, how much more the secrets of our final state? Who can possibly imagine how wondrous life will be when Christ returns? The Bible tells us that there will be no more sorrow, suffering, disappointment, or death. These things are wonderful and true, but the Bible simply doesn't tell us very many details about them.

Now that we have considered the timing and quality of everlasting life, let's turn to our final topic: the location where we will live forever.

LOCATION

Scripture often speaks of the location where we will live eternally as the new heaven and new earth. We find this language in Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22, 2 Peter 3:13, and

Revelation 21:1. This recreation of the heavens and earth brings the overarching storyline of the Bible to full completion. History began in Genesis 1:1 when God created the heavens and the earth. But then it was corrupted by humanity's fall into sin, making it unfit for God to inhabit. The rest of the Bible tells the story of how both humanity and creation are being redeemed. And once Jesus returns, the ultimate result will be that the heavens and the earth will be redeemed and renewed, so that God will finally dwell on earth with his resurrected people. This is the goal Jesus had in mind in Matthew 6:9-10, when he taught us to pray these words:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).

The goal was always for God's kingdom to be fully manifested in both the heavens, where the angels and the souls of the departed saints live, as well as on earth, where we live. This is why Jesus taught us to petition God to bring his kingdom to earth, and to cause his will to be obeyed on earth as fully as it is in heaven.

Although Scripture does not often speak of this new creation, when it does it makes it clear that the ultimate destination of redeemed human beings will not be in the heavens, but on the renewed earth. For instance, in Isaiah 65:17-19, we learn that God's people will dwell in the renewed holy city of Jerusalem. And in Revelation 21:2, we find that this new Jerusalem will exist on the new earth. Listen to what John wrote in Revelation 21:1-5:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth ... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." ... He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:1-5).

Here we see that God is preparing the New Jerusalem in heaven. And when the new earth is ready, he will bring the New Jerusalem to earth as his holy dwelling among his people, who will also inhabit the new earth. If God's plan were simply to take us to heaven for eternity, there would be no need for a new earth. But as we read here, God is making everything new, including the world itself for our eternal home.

The early church father Augustine, the famous bishop of Hippo who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, wrote about the new earth in this way in his famous work *The City of God*, book 20, chapter 16:

As the world itself is renewed to some better thing, it is fitly accommodated to men, themselves renewed in their flesh to some better thing.

There is a day coming when God will renew all things. We can see this especially in the beautiful words that Jesus taught us, his disciples, to

pray when he said, “Our Father, who is in heaven, let your name be sanctified, let your kingdom come, and let your will be done on this earth even as it now is in heaven.” That crucial, central, foundational Christian idea is that we are now living in a time of waiting for the heavenly realities to become earthly realities — that the way things are done in heaven when God is hallowed, when all things are right, and righteousness and glory and truth and love reigns. Our hope as Christians, our sure hope, is that those realities of heaven will become earthly realities, and this is what the scriptures promise and hope as the new creation, our eternal home.

— Dr. Jonathan Pennington

If we lose sight of the fact that the new earth is to be our final home, it can be easy for us to detach ourselves from the physical aspects of reality, and to think that bodily existence on the earth is a hardship rather than a blessing. But when we recognize that the earth itself is to be our permanent home, we can see this present world as a blessing and a foretaste of the beauty and blessing that God has in store for us in the world to come.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on the *Apostles' Creed*, we have focused on the topic of salvation. We have talked about the forgiveness of sins in terms of the problem of sin, the gift of divine grace, and the role of human responsibility. We have explored the doctrine of the resurrection of the body by looking at the curse of death, the gospel of life, and redemption in Christ. And we have considered the nature of everlasting life, including its timing, quality and location.

In this lesson on salvation, we've seen that the *Apostles' Creed* focuses on the essential elements of our common Christian confession that the church has maintained throughout the millennia. If we keep these common doctrines in mind when we talk to Christians from other traditions and denominations, we'll find that we have a solid basis for pursuing unity with those that affirm the *Apostles' Creed*, and for correcting those that don't. Moreover, as we focus on these essential doctrines of salvation, it will help us to see the big picture of what God is doing in this world, and to find more and more reasons to praise him for his love and grace.

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The Apostles' Creed

LESSON
SIX

Salvation
Faculty Forum



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The Apostles' Creed

Lesson Six: Salvation

Faculty Forum

With

Dr. David Bauer
Dr. Ivan Bespalov
Dr. Steve Blakemore
Dr. Knox Chamblin
Dr. Stephen Chan
Dr. Peter Chow
Dr. Dan Doriani
Dr. Steve Douglass
Dr. John Frame

Dr. David Garner
Dr. Steve Harper
Dr. Robert Lister
Dr. John McKinley
Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.
Dr. Thomas Nettles
Dr. John Oswald
Dr. J. I. Packer
Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Dr. Glen Scorgie
Dr. Mark Strauss
Dr. Frank Thielman
Dr. K. Erik Thoennes
Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong
Dr. Simon Vibert
Dr. Peter Walker
Dr. Stephen Wellum

Question 1:

Why do fallen human beings need a Savior?

The gift of salvation is one of the greatest joys of the Christian life. Many Christians even remember the day and time they were saved. And we acknowledge our salvation in the Apostles' Creed when we confess our belief in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. But some people outside the church don't recognize their need for salvation. They argue that as long as we're good people, and as long as we don't do anything really terrible, we don't need a Savior. So, why is salvation so important? Why do fallen human beings need a Savior?

Dr. Thomas Nettles

The Fall brought man into a condition, not only of condemnation so that we need forgiveness of sins, but this condemnation is something that comes to us as a result of a single act of disobedience, as Paul said in Romans 5. Therefore, no matter what we do, if, say, if we were to obey the law from this time forward in our lives, we could never achieve a righteousness because we already are sinners. We've already broken God's law. There is no way that we can come back to the standard of righteousness. The one that does the laws shall live by them. But we already are law-breakers. And so from the fact that the law has been broken and we are under condemnation, we need a Redeemer. There is an absolute righteousness that is needed, and so one must come who can fulfill God's requirement of an absolute righteousness. But also, even if we could, say, achieve some degree of righteousness by our present obedience, there's still the necessity of someone paying for the sins of our past. There's someone that must pay for the law breaking that we have already done. God will not violate his law, and he said that if we break the law, that we will die, that we are under a curse. Everyone that continues not in all things written in the book of the Law to do them

are under a curse. So we are cursed, even if we obeyed all of God's law right now. So someone must pay for the curse, but we cannot pay it ourselves in such a way to gain forgiveness. It would simply be a just punishment that must continue forever. So, for someone to pay — in order for forgiveness actually to come — there must be a uniquely qualified redeemer to do this.

And a third thing that is involved in this, if I may continue with it, is that there must be such an authority and such a glory in the redeemer, that God is fully satisfied with the honor that is shown him by the obedience of this person. And Anselm, who was a theologian of the Middle Ages, talks about this particular aspect of the atonement, that Christ, who was God himself, could not gain anything by himself by his obedience because he already had equal honor with God and therefore, his obedience must be given to others. And God is infinitely satisfied with this obedience because the person obeying also has the kind of honor that God requires. So this honor that is given to God is another part of the redemption. And the granting of the Holy Spirit — he is the one who can grant the Holy Spirit so that indwelling corruption we have also is gradually removed in the process of sanctification. So for all of these reasons and perhaps more, we stand in need of someone outside of us to be our redeemer. We're helpless and hopeless without that kind of help.

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

Human beings need a Redeemer, and indeed need God to be their Redeemer for this reason: the nature of sin against God. God is not some impersonal force that launched the universe into existence. God is personal being — the doctrine of the Trinity, God is Father, Son, Holy Spirit. God is intimately, profoundly personal. And therefore, our sin is against God personally. Our sin is like a betrayal of our Creator more than it is like anything else, as I understand what the Scripture is trying to tell us. And therefore, since our sin is like a betrayal, there's nothing we can do to fix it. Betrayal is the sort of thing that only the betrayed party can ever do anything about. And so, only if God provides us redemption, only if God takes the brokenness of the relationship and fixes it, can we be redeemed. But we also need a Redeemer because of what sin has done to the human condition. It has trapped us. As we turn away from God and turn in on ourselves, it's trapped us in a kind of gravitational pull that apart from God's graciousness to allow us to escape and be able, once again, to have our hearts and lives turn toward God, apart from that we could not escape from our own sins. And so only a Redeemer who can first of all make things right with God can save us. And also, only a Redeemer who can reach into our sinful situation and undo the power of sin can save us.

Question 2:

Why did Adam's fall into sin have such terrible consequences for humanity and creation?

All fallen human beings need a Savior. But humanity wasn't always trapped in sin and condemnation. When God created the world, Adam and Eve were sinless. But

when Adam chose to disobey God, all humanity — in fact, all creation — fell under God's curse. But why? Why did Adam's fall into sin have such terrible consequences for humanity and creation?

Dr. John McKinley

The consequences for humanity's fall into sin, not just for us but for the whole creation, are severe because of what humanity was created to be and do. Genesis 1 tells us humanity's created to have dominion over all the orders of creation. When we misrule, when we mislead, all of creation is misled and taken away and cut off from God in a lot of ways. So the consequence in our lives is that we bring self-destruction into ourselves, but it doesn't stop with us. It happens to the entire race of human beings and everybody is now born into the situation of being separated from God. But then it's not limited to humans because it goes to everything as well. We are created from the dirt because we're bonded to creation in some sense so that the destiny of creation is bound up, wrapped up with what we do morally. It's supposed to function that we lead creation in harmony with God and bring his order to bear on how everything functions together. But how it actually works is — given great responsibility, great power — great consequences fall from that, and we have turned creation into self-destruction. Paul returns to this in Romans 8 when he says, the sufferings going on in the world — that can be natural disasters, that can be sickness that we have — these things are all related to creation being subjected to futility, having been put into our hands, and we then basically forfeited it under a whole sinful regime.

Dr. Stephen Chan (translation)

The worst consequence of the fall, and that of sin, should not be understood from the viewpoint of our cultural moral standards. As wrong as sins are, sin itself is being unable to reach God's standard. Adam and Eve's temptation was to be like God and be equal to him, and thus, this was the greatest betrayal and rebellion a creation could attempt on its Creator — rejecting God's authority and the boundaries God put there for our survival. There's no greater betrayal humans could have done than that of trying to usurp God's place. To use an analogy, it's like the administrator of some nation's government department trying to overthrow his president. This betrayal resulted in the eternal separation of humans from God.

Question 3:

What problem has sin created in our relationship with God?

God's curse against Adam's sin didn't just subject humanity to death and decay. It also devastated our relationship with God. But what is the precise nature of this devastation? What problem has sin created in our relationship with God?

Dr. David Bauer

The question of the problem that sin created for humanity in our relationship with God is that sin broke relationship with God, or better put, I think, sin is broken

relationship with God. The ethos, the culture of the Bible is, I think, ultimately relational. Reality is understood in relational, or inter-relational, or interpersonal terms. And so, sin I think should not be understood as some *thing*, but rather as broken relationship. Sins are, in fact, broken relationship in expression whereas, the life of righteousness, the life of obedience, is right relationship in expression. So that the Law, for example, the Old Testament Law was meant to present what right relationship with God, what reconciliation with God, what covenant with God looked like, how it expressed itself. And the New Testament understands the Christian life — that is to say, the life of righteousness, of virtue and all this kind of thing — as being right relationship with God in expression.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

It's important to recognize the personal nature of sin. When we rebel against our Creator we're saying, "I know better. I know better than you about what's right and what's wrong. I will determine truth and falsity." And so we shake our fists in God's face, and he rightly responds with wrath and judgment to that sort of rebellion. And so, what we have is a massive break in our relationship with God, who rightly judges us. And this causes devastating implications to all our other relationships, our relationships with other people who now become competition for the things that we want in life. And it also causes a break between us and our relationship with the creation itself, as the curse affects everything God has made.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

It's hard to exaggerate, and it's impossible for us to even understand the full consequence of sin. But our sin is a revolt against the Creator. It is an effort to rob him of his glory. It is breaking his law. It is falling short of his glory. It is, in every way, setting ourselves as God's enemies. Sin disrupts our relationship with God because God is holy. He cannot look upon sin. As a consequence of his holiness, he must pour out his wrath upon sin. So, when you look at human sinfulness, it is everything we need to know about our problem. It's everything we need to know about ourselves. Sin is the short, three-letter psychology that helps us to understand what we see in the mirror, and what we know ourselves to be. It also reminds us that there is no way that we can rescue ourselves from this predicament. Only God can do that, and he does so in Christ.

Question 4:

Why is Jesus the only one that can save us?

When Adam and Eve chose to disobey God, humanity and creation were corrupted, and our relationship to God was badly damaged. Because of Adam's sin, all people are now born under a curse that leads to adversity, suffering, and ultimately death. And God's solution to this problem was to send his Son to save us. But why can't someone else save us, like Buddha or Mohammed or Moses? And why can't we save ourselves? Why is Jesus the only one that can save us?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

Jesus is the only Savior because Jesus is the only person who's ever lived who's fully God and fully man. Jesus needs to be fully God to be able to take on the sins of the world and atone for an offense against an infinite God. He also needs to be fully man to truly represent us in his life of righteousness and his perfect death on the cross. Jesus' being fully God and fully man is what's necessary for him to be the true Redeemer of the world.

Dr. Robert Lister

There are not other redeemers than God the Son. 1 Timothy 2:5, for example, tells us that there's one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. And there were in the Old Testament other mediators — Abraham, Moses, Noah, Adam, for example — but what all of them fell short in, or where they all fell short, was in the limitations of their own sin. And what Jesus accomplishes as a mediator, that is different from all of the ways that those mediators anticipated Jesus's ministry, is he brings both a divine nature, so he's the incarnate Son of God, and he is sinless. In that way he is able to fulfill the ministry that all of the Old Testament mediators pointed forward to but were unable to fulfill in themselves on account of their own limitations as sinners. So, the short answer is, no, there are no other mediators aside from Jesus the Messiah.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

Jesus is the only one who can save us. He is the only one who does save us. We cannot save ourselves. No human being can atone for his own sins much less the sins of the world. No one can resolve the problem of sin. No human being can even come close to attempting. As a matter of fact, as the apostle Paul helps us to understand, the more we try to solve our problem, the deeper we find ourselves in our problem. We try to dig ourselves out of a hole only to dig the hole deeper and deeper and deeper. The only one who can save us is the one who the Father himself would send, whose perfect life would fulfill all, would indeed fulfill his righteousness. He would die in our place. He would do what we could not do. If I died a thousand deaths, it would not atone for my own sin, but this one death of the only begotten Son of God could atone for the deaths of every sinner who would come to Christ through faith. Without Jesus Christ there is no atonement for sins. Only Jesus could die for our sins. But that is not where the story ended, or we would still be, as Paul says, of all people, most to be pitied, still dead in our trespasses and sins. Jesus not only died for our sins, He was raised by the power of God. He is the firstfruit of the resurrection that is promised now to us as well. Only Jesus could save. Only Jesus does save.

Question 5:**Is Jesus the loving God who saves us from the Father's wrath?**

Jesus is the Savior of the world. And because of this, many people see Jesus as loving, gentle, and kind. But oddly enough, some of these same people view God the

Father as angry, intolerant, and vengeful. Where did this idea come from? And is it true? Is Jesus the loving God who saves us from the Father's wrath?

Dr. Glen Scorgie

There's an issue that comes up so often, that perceives God the Father as a rather bloodthirsty, demanding, certainly off-putting deity, and the Son, the friendly one, the one who loves us. It's a tragedy when the Father and the Son are played off against one another as differentiated beings, as though one is, in a sense, the "good" deity, Jesus, and the Father is the demanding and punitive and, in a sense, "bad" God. Some people who have misconstrued the nature of God have even gone so far as to suggest that the Father is the abusive parent and the Son is the victimized child on the cross. This is a travesty; this is a horrible, blasphemous misunderstanding of the true nature of God. Sometimes we need to come back to recognize that we believe in one God, manifested in three distinct persons, who are in a relationship where the heart of the Father is identical to the heart of the Son. And the Bible brings together the unity of the heart of the Father and the heart of the Son when it tells us that it was God who was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. There's one other thing that I think can be helpful here. It's that when the Bible speaks of the wrath of God we struggle to understand how that can be a good thing because the only kind of wrath we're acquainted with is sinful wrath, the vindictive, the drywall-punching kind of wrath that so often causes pain and is regretted afterwards. The wrath of God is analogous language to try to express God's absolute opposition to evil. Because evil is what harms the creatures he loves. And so we must understand that when the Bible speaks of the wrath of God, it is referring to the intensity of God's hatred for that which harms his beloved creatures. And the wrath of the Father is transcended by the love of the Father. But the love, this holy love, this burning love of the Father, is imbedded in the heart of Christ, no less than the Father. And the love of the Father and the Son is equal.

Dr. Simon Vibert

It is sometimes caricatured that the Father is the angry God who sent his Son into the world as the one who loves us and therefore saved us. But, I mean, there are a number of ways in which one would want to respond to that, not least the fact that the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit operated together in order to save and rescue the world. I mean, also we know, this is like John 3:16, so well, that God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son, into this world, and that the Father and Son, therefore, operating together. There's sort of a little catch phrase that's sometimes used at this idea of "cosmic child abuse," that the Father should treat his Son in such a way that we are to expect no parent to treat their son now. But that's to misunderstand, I think, the fact that it was in great love that God gave up his one and only Son in order to rescue this world. And he didn't come reluctantly; he wanted to come to fulfill the Father's will. And I think we should see the Trinity working together in love to rescue this world in love, all three of the persons, showing great love in order to bring us to saving knowledge of God.

Dr. Mark Strauss

Some people have this idea that God the Father is an angry God based on the Old Testament testimony where we see God commanding what looks like genocide of people and so forth. And then we get to the New Testament, and we see Jesus saying to turn the other cheek and Jesus saying to love your enemies. And they think, well, this God of the Old Testament is an angry, stern, mean God. And the God of the New Testament is kind of a loving, grandfather figure. But that's really much of a distortion of the biblical record of God. In the Old Testament, God is a loving God who reaches out and offers grace to those who turn to him in repentance. We see the same God in the New Testament. And we also see a stern God, a judgmental God in the New Testament as well as the Old. Jesus, more than anyone else in the Bible, talks about God's final judgment, and talks about the fact that sin must be paid for, and talks about eternal judgment and separation from God. Really, if you look closely you see that there is one true God, a God who is absolutely loving, absolutely merciful, offering his grace to sinners who turn to him. But a God who must also be just and must judge sin and those who reject him — must turn away from them and allow them to be separate. By their own choice, allow them to be separate from him. The early Gnostic, the early church Gnostic — eventually identified correctly as a heretic — Marcion, believed this idea that this God of the Old Testament was a evil and angry God, and the God of the New Testament was a loving God. And so his solution to that was to throw out the Old Testament. He decided that this was not an authentic revelation of God. This was a different God, a God that Gnostics view as an inferior God that eventually arose from the one true God. And he cut and pasted the New Testament where he removed many portions of the New Testament and chose those that he felt like presented the true God, the loving God. What Marcion missed was the very fact that, in fact, God is a God of love, and God is a God of justice in both the Old and New Testaments. The same presentation of God appears in both Testaments.

Question 6:

Were people saved the same way in both the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Evangelicals understand that God is the same God in both the Old and New Testaments. He is not a God of curses and punishment in one Testament, and a God of mercy and forgiveness in the other. Instead, in both Testaments, he is a God of justice and love. But despite this fact, some Christians still think that the Old and New Testaments teach different gospels, that God had different requirements for salvation before and after Jesus. But did he? Or were people saved the same way in both the Old Testament and the New Testament?

Dr. John Oswalt

One of the issues that is so important for Christians to come to grips with is how the two Testaments fit together. Tragically, some branches of the church, at least tragically in my view, some branches of the church have all but taught that the New

Testament has replaced the Old. I don't think that's true at all. In fact they are complimentary, they fit together with each one connecting to the other, the Old Testament providing the base upon which the New Testament builds. The Old Testament teaches from start to finish that the only basis for our redemption is grace. There are those who would argue that the Old Testament believer was intended to be saved by obedience. I don't think that's correct. I think that just as Paul deals with Abraham in the book of Galatians and says, you know, grace preceded Torah; grace preceded the Sinai covenant with its restrictions. I think that's even true in Exodus. I've often said to people, "Did God say to the Hebrew people in Egypt, 'Here's my Torah; keep that perfectly for about four hundred years, and I'll come and deliver you'?" If he had, they would still be in Egypt. But no, he delivered them by grace. Then comes the Torah — "Would you like to be my people? Would you like to walk with me? Well, here's what that would mean..." So, I think just as the New Testament epistles in particular speak about people who have come into the covenant by grace, and now Paul says, now here's what the implications are for your life. I think the Old Testament is doing the same thing; that it is saying, the only way anybody comes into a relationship with God is by God's grace. And having come in, then there is some implications from that.

Dr. Simon Vibert

I think there's a common misunderstanding about, namely, that people in the Old Testament were saved by works and that in the New Testament they're saved by grace. Whereas, in fact, a careful reading of the Bible shows that people in both the Old and the New Testament are saved by grace through faith, and that it was always the expectation that God would provide a perfect sacrifice for sin, and that it is through trusting in that sacrifice and believing in it that God gives us the ability to grasp by faith the benefit of Christ's sacrifice, that we are saved. And that was always the expectation in the Old Testament, looking forward in anticipation to the coming of Christ. And that is the expectation of the New Testament writers, that we're saved by grace through faith. So, it is a consistent message that runs all the way through the Bible.

Dr. Mark Strauss

There's a misconception by some people that the Old and the New Testaments teach different gospels, and it usually goes like this: they say the Old Testament teaches a gospel by works. You keep the Law and you're saved. The New Testament is a gospel of grace where you, by faith, you believe in God's gift of grace. But really that's a complete misconception of salvation. Salvation in the Old Testament was by faith, by faith in God, and especially faith in God's promise to provide a provision, God's promise to provide a sacrifice, an ultimate sacrifice for sins. And of course, it was looking forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Paul talks about this a lot. He talks about it in Galatians. He talks about it in even more detail in Romans 4. He refers to Abraham, the father of the Jewish faith, the father of the Jewish nation. And he points out that Abraham was not saved by works, he was not saved by keeping the Law. The Law hadn't even been instituted at that time. Abraham was saved by faith, by trusting in God, by believing in God's promise to provide a Savior.

So ultimately, salvation comes through faith, faith and trust in God's grace, God's gift of his Son who paid the penalty for our sins so that we can have an eternal relationship with him.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

How were people saved in the Old Testament? Were the rules different? Were God's requirements altered in the Old Testament? I've often thought, when we read in Hebrews 11 the list of the great heroes of the faith, some of them, most of them prior to the New Testament would all have flunked a basic quiz on Christology or the atoning death of Christ. So, if they were intellectually in the dark about the plan of salvation, how could they be saved? Well, I think that we need to break down our answer into two key parts. One is, what was the basis for their salvation? And secondly, what did they need to know in order to access that basis of salvation? And we seem to be able to stand on solid ground in affirming that Jesus Christ's atoning death and resurrection is the basis for the salvation of every human being who will be or ever was saved. In the case of saints like Moses and David and Abraham, they are, in a sense, in Christ, saved by Christ as the merits of Christ's death are retroactively applied to their account. They are saved on the basis of Christ's death, even before Christ died in the chronological sequence of history. Christ is the Savior of all people past, present, and future. But what did they need to know in order to access that? It seems to be that as we read the Scriptures, their willingness to trust God, trust his promises made to them, and trust in God's as yet undisclosed provision for their neediness, their moral inadequacy. That faith that God would supply, embodied in the words of Abraham as he takes his son Isaac to the altar in that hideous test of faith, "the Lord will provide" is what prompts the generous heart of God to apply the saving merits of Christ to the account of all these people who have not yet seen what we have been privileged to see in Christ.

Question 7:

What benefits do we receive as a result of God's forgiveness?

When we sincerely turn to God for salvation in Christ, God happily forgives us. In fact, Scripture tells us that God delights in showing us mercy. So, how does he express this delight in our lives? What benefits do we receive as a result of God's forgiveness?

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

When we're forgiven by God, we are restored to a status that allows us to have fellowship with God. The most important thing we need to understand is that sin is this great insurmountable obstacle between ourselves and our Creator. The forgiveness of sins explains why we are restored to a relationship with him, why indeed we come before him and we are no longer his enemies, but we are now his children. And to come before a father, as a child, is the way we can come before our heavenly Father, as a believer, with our sins forgiven. With our sins unforgiven, he

would have to close the door, turn himself from us, and treat us merely as the sinners that we are — as his enemies. Instead, he receives us as his children.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

When we're forgiven by God, God takes our sin and throws it as far as the East is from the West. The Bible tells us he forgives wickedness, rebellion, and sin — this Old Testament way of saying he forgives sin extensively, comprehensively, and holistically. There aren't certain kinds of sin God doesn't forgive. Whether it's something we've done in our past or something we think is particularly heinous, God forgives sin exhaustively. God loves to forgive sin, and this restores our relationship with him. We go from being enemies of God, to friends of God again.

Dr. Mark Strauss

The benefits we receive by being forgiven by God? The one we always focus on, I think, and especially when we're sharing Christ with others is eternal life. Absolutely, that's a great benefit — that fact that we will live forever. I think more important than that is that fact that we will live forever with God, that we have been reconciled to our Creator. We were created by God to be in relationship with him. That's our very essence, created in God's image to be in a relationship with him. We are, when that relationship is broken, we are incomplete people. And so, to be restored in that relationship, to be reconciled to God, is the greatest thing that could possibly happen to us. So the ultimate gift of forgiveness is to be back in the relationship with the God who created us, and then to have that relationship for all eternity in his presence.

Question 8:

If we can be forgiven just because we ask, does that cheapen grace?

In the Old Testament, God's people were required to bring sacrifices to atone for their sins. But Jesus' sacrifice made this unnecessary. Now we receive forgiveness simply by asking sincerely for it. Still, this raises an interesting question about the value of forgiveness: If we can be forgiven just because we ask, does that cheapen grace?

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, it's a fundamental mistake that we can be forgiven simply because we ask for forgiveness. We need to remember that something comes before that, and that is the atonement of Christ that purchases our forgiveness. So, we are actually forgiven, because once we are in Christ, he has paid all that is necessary, and done all that is necessary that our sins be forgiven. We are told nonetheless that we are to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. "When we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." But he is not waiting. The Father is not waiting to decide if he will forgive us our sins. That is already decided in Christ. Those sins are already forgiven. But it is absolutely necessary that we confess our sins, that we repent of our sins and ask for God's forgiveness of our sins. It would be cheap grace to think that we merely ask for God to forgive our sins,

and God, like some indulgent grandfather says, "It was no big deal. Don't worry about it." That's the furthest thing from the Christian gospel we can imagine. When we confess our sins we are doing so in the shadow of the cross, knowing that the infinite price was paid for the forgiveness of our sins. It is not cheap grace. And anyone who would live by sinning, believing that forgiveness is cheap, is living in denial of the gospel itself.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

Some people believe that we can be forgiven just by asking for God's forgiveness. And of course the rebuttal to that is, doesn't that make God's grace cheap? Well, first of all, the provision of forgiveness may come to us freely but it did not come without cost. And the reminder that what we receive, apparently so freely, cost so much should certainly give us pause in the first place. But there's something else that I think needs to be understood and that is that the request for forgiveness that brings to us the rich merits of Christ, decisively erases not only our guilt, but our shame, is a request we place in a Spirit of true repentance. And without repentance, our request is ineffectual. It is insincere. It is not saving. Because the request that saves, the request for forgiveness that saves is a request that comes from a heart that is open to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, to live in the way that rejects those things for which we are asking forgiveness, and wills, and with a heart that is now in sync with the heart of a holy God, that that will no longer be the way I chose to walk, that it is no longer my desire to heap up and accumulate more of the very things I am presently asking forgiveness for. The gift of forgiveness brings with it the implantation in the soul of the Holy Spirit. As Martin Luther once said, and I paraphrase generously, the one who receives this grace of forgiveness also has the Holy Spirit now implanted in their souls. And where the Holy Spirit resides he will not permit a soul to be idle and to continue on in the old ways, but stirs them up from within toward goodness, toward charity, toward good works, toward the progressive restoration of the very image of Christ.

Question 9:

Are there any benefits to modern Christians if we regularly repent of and confess our sins?

The Bible says that Jesus died to make us holy and blameless. And some people think this means that we shouldn't confess or repent of sins we commit after our initial conversion. They think that the forgiveness we received when we came to faith continues to apply to all the sins we commit throughout our lives, so that we don't need to repent of additional sins. But are they right? Or are there any benefits to modern Christians if we regularly repent of and confess our sins?

Dr. Peter Walker

Every Christian, I think, is called to a lifestyle of regular repentance and to confessing our sins and coming clean before the Lord. Jesus himself says we need to take up our cross daily, which is a hint, surely, that we're not just supposed to be prepared to

suffer, but that we're meant to go the way of the cross, which is dying to our sins and seeking God's forgiveness. The cross is all about that. And so although, yes, there's great truth that when someone comes to the Lord for the first time and confesses their sins, yes, they are a new person and they are washed clean — and those are great truths which we need to hold on to — yet, frankly, we all dirty our clothes on a pretty daily basis, and if we want to be washed white we need to come back for cleansing, for renewal. And the clear verses in the Old Testament which say, you know, there are great blessings for those who repent and come back to the Lord, who are not cherishing iniquity or hiding it in their heart, or Psalm 32, you know, blessed is the person who the Lord does not hold them accountable for their sins. And you see in that Psalm, you know, great joy as the person actually finds forgiveness. And that's an experience that Christians day by day can have, the joy of sins forgiven. So, incredible blessings as we pursue that discipline, repentance leading to new life.

Dr. Peter Chow (translation)

Repentance and confession are very important because we need to keep a clean conscience before God. We must become clean vessels, suitable for God. Not only that, but when we have guilty consciences, God will discipline us, and that can be difficult and painful. So, don't ask for trouble, but hurry before the cross. Confess and repent of your sins so that you can be covered by the precious blood of the Lord. That way we can experience the peace and joy of life and become precious vessels, useful to the Lord.

Dr. Simon Vibert

In our worship services, we're encouraged to begin by repenting of our sins, and that's not because we think we need to become Christians all over again, but there is a sense in which, in becoming a Christian, you believe for the first time, the direction of your life changes. But repentance means change of mind leading to change of conduct. And in a sense, we regularly need to do that because all of us continue to be sinful, and all of us need to continue to repent of our sins. So, ongoingly we say sorry to God for our sins as we repent daily of the things that we do wrong.

Question 10:

What will our glorified bodies be like?

One of the most misunderstood aspects of salvation mentioned in the Apostles' Creed is "the resurrection of the body." Many Christians mistakenly believe that we will spend eternity as disembodied spirits. But Scripture insists that we will ultimately be resurrected in physical bodies. So, what will our glorified bodies be like?

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

We've grown up to think about heaven as a place where you go when you die. Somehow your soul goes to be there. We forget that the image of the Scripture is that somehow redemption is just as much physical as it is spiritual, that our bodies will be

resurrected. Even as our souls are renewed and made perfect in Christ, our bodies will be redeemed. So the new heaven, the new earth will be similar to this heaven or this earth in the sense that we're going to have a physical kind of existence. It's going to be physical just as much as Jesus's resurrected body is physical. I don't think it means there are going to be literally streets of gold necessarily, or gates made of pearl. That sort of imagery is given to us to say it's so beautiful, whatever we can say beautifully about it, it's going to be that and more. But it's going to be a physical kind of redemption. That means we ought to take our physical bodies and all of creation very seriously. That's important to God. How will it be different? It will be different in this sense. If you take Jesus's resurrected body for instance as an example, that resurrected body can do things as a human physical body that I can't do or even Jesus prior to resurrection could not do. He could not walk through walls or appear. He didn't ascend into heaven bodily until after the resurrection. So our physical existence will have a different component to it, but what will be most different about the new earth will be this: God will be absolutely, unavoidably, and unmistakably the Lord over all things. He will be there present in a personal way that we can't even imagine now. I think that's the beauty of it all. Not how wonderful it'll be, not how suffering will be undone, but we will be there in the presence of God perfectly.

Dr. Frank Thielman

Our bodies will be similar to the bodies we have now. There'll be continuity between our physical bodies now and our physical bodies then. They'll be different. Those bodies will be immortal, Paul says, and they will be able to live an immortal existence. So they won't be subject to death and corruption. That's the way Jesus's body was when he rose from the dead in the Gospels' accounts of Jesus's resurrection. And the way his body functioned and appeared tell us a bit about what our life will be like one day when we too are raised physically from the dead. That has a very important theological ramification, or implication that goes along with it. If our bodies, our physical bodies are important and will exist eternally, then we need to be very careful what we do with our bodies now. And Paul makes that point very clear to the Corinthians who are not using their bodies in ways that glorify God. And so, one of the things Paul wants to do when he answers the Corinthians' questions about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, is to describe to them that our raised bodies, the eternal nature of our bodies, means that we need to be careful how we live in our bodies now.

Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong (translation)

Physical matter is created and can be destroyed. It is not eternal. But God can change physical matter into something new, something permanent. Our bodies will die, but the corruptible will become the incorruptible; the weak will become strong; the earthly will become heavenly; the shameful will become honorable; those belonging to the dust will become holy. This kind of renewal is God's revelation of his great power over all physical matter, such that the arrival of the new heavens and new earth replaces the old, and the change in the heavens and the earth is the completion of God's promise. I believe there will be continuity between the two.

Dr. Dan Doriani

The book of Revelation conveys the idea that everything that's good in this world will be present in heaven, except better — the new heavens and new earth. It's sometimes called "the way of eminence," so there will be light all the time, and life all the time, and purity and joy all the time. Everything we have here, more and always. And then there's "the way of negation." That is to say, everything that is not good will be gone. There'll be no more tears, no more pain, no more death, no more crying. All those things will be gone. Now, continuity? Well, we'll have bodies, for example. Hard to conceive exactly how that'll work. Certainly no one would always be the age they were when they died. For a long time, people have guessed that maybe everybody will always be 30 years old, at the height of their powers, bodies not breaking down, minds not failing us in any way, and yet maybe old enough to have a little experience. And so people make guesses as to what that would allow us to do. One of the things we know will still be in heaven is food and stomachs, not the stomach as the instrument of overindulgence or deranged desires, but the stomach as that which enjoys feasts and meals and festivity with friends.

Somebody once asked this question — it was a four-year-old boy. He asked his mother this question — it's a true question: "Mommy, will there be pears in heaven?" He liked pears obviously. And the mother wisely said, "Son, if you want pears, there will be pears," meaning that not only will everything there be good, but everything that we want will be a good desire. Let me say it a different way. A student of mine once asked me — he was a very talented and gifted volleyball player and he loved the game — and he said to me, "Dr. Doriani, will there be volleyball in heaven?" I said, "Well, that's a great question. I think there will be physical activity in heaven. But what would a volleyball game be like? Let's see, it would start since we have perfect bodies with a perfect jump serve screaming low over the net into the corner. But of course, the defense is perfect, too, and so someone dives and digs and then a magnificent set and a thunderous spike, which of course is blocked by the perfect defense, and would be trickling just over the net for a sure winner, but somebody else dives and digs and spikes again. And then after about 714 years, the players say, 'Man, that was a good point.'" Now the idea is there'll be continuity with everything that's good and blessed and yet heightened. This continuity, harder to understand except that all sin, all brokenness, all failed desires, all egotism, all those things will be gone, because we'll have the light of God, the light of the Lamb, and purified desires as well as heart and mind and body.

Question 11:

When our souls are in heaven and our bodies are in the grave, are we in two places at the same time?

The Bible clearly indicates that in the general resurrection we'll receive glorified physical bodies. But until that time, after we die our bodies remain in the ground, subject to decay and ruin. Our souls, however, go immediately into God's presence.

So, when our souls are in heaven and our bodies are in the grave, are we in two places at the same time?

Dr. Stephen Wellum

The Bible teaches that at death, what we call the “intermediate state,” the period before Christ comes again, and we die and then he comes again, what happens to us during that period, the Bible teaches that we as human beings are both body and soul, that we have an immaterial and material part to us. We are not just physical things. So that at death there is a separation, an abnormal separation of body and soul. So that our bodies go into the grave, our souls we have on the basis of, think of the thief on the cross, “you’ll be with me today in paradise.” Or Paul can say, “absent from the body, present with the Lord.” On that basis we say that our souls go on to be in the presence of the Lord, with a conscious fellowship that is there as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the finality to all things where the great resurrection takes place. In one sense, some people will say that we are sort of in two different places. Well, we are personally, as Christians, in the presence of the Lord. If we want to say that our bodies are that which is in the grave, then that is a kind of second place, then we could certainly speak like that. But I think it’s better to say that, no, we are present with the Lord; we are in a situation that is temporary, that we await the final end. We are, our great hope is not that intermediate state; our great hope is the new heavens and the new earth. The consummation, where then in the great resurrection, we will be reunited both soul and body to live forever in a glorified state, which is transformed, patterned after Christ’s glorious resurrection, glorious resurrection body, so that, that intermediate state gives us hope that we do not just disappear when we die, we are with the Lord. Yet, we long for the time where we will be reunited, body and soul, in a glorified state. That is ultimately our Christian hope.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

You know one of the great mysteries is when we die, where are we? For, we know that our bodies go into the ground, dust returns to dust, earthlings go back to what we were manufactured from, and we await the resurrection. Where are we? There’s a difference of opinion among believers on this matter of just how conscious our existence is while we await the resurrection of our bodies. Some people think that the bodies we will receive are just convenient earth suits, optional equipment, that we are absolutely content and quite happy to be disembodied. That seems to be just a little more platonic than biblical. So, what is it like to be in this intermediate state between your personal death and the promised resurrection from the dead? What is it like? We have not been given photographic reportage of that. We have not been given detailed descriptions of that. But the answer we are given from Scripture is very assuring, and it’s highly relational. We will be with the Lord. There will be a dynamic to this mysterious period in our existence, that we’ll be intimate, that we’ll be secure, that we’ll be feeling like we have come home. And we are asked to take the hand of God, who does not disclose the furniture or the arrangement or the details of this destination ahead, but says, “I will be with you. And through the valley of the shadow of death, I will never leave you or forsake you.” That is the consolation of the Christian, and in the end, what could we ask for that would be better than that?

Question 12:**Did the Old Testament saints believe in a future resurrection?**

Jesus, in his earthly ministry, preached about the future resurrection and judgment. And the rest of the New Testament upholds Jesus' teaching on this subject. But was this idea also present in the Old Testament? Did the Old Testament saints believe in a future resurrection?

Dr. John Oswalt

The question of the Old Testament's understanding of heaven, resurrection, those kinds of things, is another of these that is a bit open. I don't think you can find clear, irrefutable evidence that the Old Testament believers believed in bodily resurrection. Part of the reason for this is the Old Testament emphasis. I think it's very difficult for us to understand how radically different the Israelite religion was from all the religions around it. The religions around it tended to say, this world is just a shadow reflecting the invisible reality out there; and therefore, this world, really, in the end doesn't matter that much. Well, the Old Testament is saying, no, no, no, this is a real world. Our God made it, and our choices here will have long-term consequences. Get that through your heads; this is a real world. This is another of those areas where we need the New Testament then. The New Testament says, you got that point — this is a real world? Right. Now, let us tell you there's even more to reality. Heaven doesn't diminish this world's reality. It, in fact expands it. So, I think we should not be surprised if we don't find a lot of discussion in the Old Testament in the other world. They're trying to get this one straight. That being said though, it's clear that the Old Testament believers have this intuition. There's got to be something more. If God is faithful, it's clear that all rewards, all recompense don't come here now. We do see faithful people dying in tragic circumstances. We do see righteous people who are not rewarded for their righteousness. There's got to be something more. So for instance, I think of Psalm 23, "...and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Well, if in fact, my death is the end of that forever that leaves a lot of questions unanswered. And that's one of the things the Psalmists struggle with. How can I praise you in the grave? And yet I'm called to praise you. Does that suggest there is something beyond the grave? So, I think you see the intimations there that the New Testament then can pick up on and say, yes, what they were seeing is in fact reality.

Dr. Glen Scorgie

One of the questions we ponder when we look at the Bible as a whole is, did those Old Testament saints anticipate a resurrection of the dead? Did they anticipate a judgment to come? Did they anticipate eternal life as Christ made plain? We should expect. This is a good question. And to respond to it I would say that undergirding our understanding of the canon of Scripture, the long play of history from Genesis to Revelation, we see operating a dynamic that some people have described as "progressive revelation," where the full truth of God is unfolded gradually over time

as the capacity of people is gradually enlarged and able to understand the fullness of what comes finally to light in the revelation of Jesus Christ and his apostles. And so one of the things that surprises us is that some of the Old Testament saints did not have yet a very clear understanding that there was a resurrection of the dead, that there was a life to come and the hope of eternal fellowship with God. But even before this truth finally comes to clear light in the New Testament, there are embedded in the Old Testament certain intriguing hints of this, glimmers of insight, provocative suggestions of this. And we find them embedded sometimes in the most unlikely places, in the book of Job or Psalms or in one of the later prophets, preparing the way for light and life and our eternal destiny to come into brilliant focus when the light of life comes and becomes Emmanuel, "God with us."

Question 13: **What is eternal life?**

After affirming the forgiveness of sins and bodily resurrection, the Apostles' Creed concludes with the wonderful aspect of salvation referred to as "life everlasting." The concept of everlasting life, often called eternal life, is very familiar to most Christians. But what does it really mean to live eternally? What is eternal life?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Eternal life is a concept that John seems to love talking about. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life," — life everlasting. And life is not so much a quantity, but is a quality in John's gospel. Jesus said, I have come that you might have life and have it in all its fullness, in all its abundance. So, for sure, the confidence a believer has is that when they die they will spend eternity with God, but John seems to also speak about it as being a quality — life that we can enjoy because we know the one who said, "I am the way, the truth and the life," life of being reborn again, able to live the life that we should do in right relationship with God. So it's something that is a great celebratory note in John's gospel. Eternal life is what Jesus came to give us and it begins even now.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, the words that come together as "eternal life" come to us so easily because we encounter them so often in Scripture. We know that one of the gifts of our salvation through Christ is eternal life. But, you know, we are chronological creatures. That's just the way we think. We think in terms of seconds and minutes and hours and days and months and years, and so it's easy for us to think that eternal life is the life we know now, just with a longer calendar, a calendar that never ends. That's not actually the biblical notion of eternal life. The first meaning of eternal life in Scripture is that it is life in God — it is God who is eternal — that one of the contrasts between God and we who are his human creatures is that, we are very temporal. We feel time. But God is timeless. And by the atonement that Christ has

achieved for us, those who are in Christ enter into the eternal life of God. And so, eternal life means we are alive in Christ with God forever. It's not just a calendar that never runs out of pages. It's a state of existence, which is grounded in God himself, and in the fact that he is eternal. But, you know, the second word there in that couplet is really important, the word "life," because in the Scripture there's a contrast between life and death. And after the judgment, there's a contrast between eternal life and the second death. So, eternal life also is an affirmation that in Christ, those whose sins are forgiven, we know life with God and Christ forever. We are forever in the presence of God. We enter into a state of existence which is timeless, eternal, that is all about the glory of God and the comfort and joy and exhilaration of being in God's presence and praising him forever. The contrast of that is hell, defined as a second death. So what we're talking about here with eternal life is not just length in eternity. It's the richness of being with Christ and having fellowship with God, rather than spending eternity in hell.

Question 14: **When does eternal life begin?**

Eternity can be a confusing concept, and theologians have explained it in different ways. But regardless of the precise way we define eternity, Scripture assures us that our eternal or everlasting life will be spent in a loving relationship with God. But does this mean that we won't enter that relationship until our bodies die? Or does it start sooner than that? When does eternal life begin?

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

On one hand you could say that eternal life begins from the foundation of the earth as God chooses people to be saved and inherit eternal life. For the individual's subjective attainment of eternal life, we see in the Bible that the believer attains eternal life when he trusts Christ and puts his faith in him for eternal life.

Dr. J. I. Packer

Eternal life begins when we come into personal contact with the Lord Jesus and the form of the personal contact is acceptance of him as our Savior, as our Lord, and as our friend. We accept him as the one who commits himself to us in love on the basis of his cross, to be all of that to us, and to be all of that for all eternity. And we respond out of gratitude. Love on his part awakens love in our hearts and that love is expressed in our life of response. And thus the reality of eternal life begins for us. And we learn that in the course of that transaction the Spirit of God has come to dwell in our hearts. We have passed from death into life; we have become new creatures in Christ. We have been born again of the Spirit, and we live the rest of our life exploring what that new creation, that new form of existence means for us. So the Christian life is that sort of an adventure and in fact beyond this world in all eternity, the adventure will go on.

Dr. Knox Chamblin

Jesus says in John 10:10, “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” This life by its very nature is abundant and extraordinarily rich. Again, John 3:16, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” That phrase “eternal life” includes the adjective, “eternal” — in Greek, *aionios*. That’s the life that belongs to the age to come. The Greek noun for age is *aion*. So in the *aion* to come, we have *aionios zoe* or eternal life. And since Jesus in his first coming inaugurated the age to come, eternal life, he tells his disciples, is a present reality. In John 5:25, Jesus says, “Do not marvel at this for an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” The hour is coming and it has now come. But then you come to verse 28 of chapter 5. “Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all [those] who are in the tombs will hear [the voice of the Son of God] and those who hear will live.” In verses 28 and 29 he doesn’t say, “and is now here.” He’s talking about the consummation of his saving work in his glorious second advent, so it’s a present reality. It’s inaugurated now, but it will be consummated at the return of Christ. And then in John 11:25-26, sort of underscoring the truth of John 5:25-29, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who lives, who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” Though he die, yet shall he live. The mortal body must be replaced by the immortal but, everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. So, eternal life is not interrupted when a believer dies and goes to be with Christ. And just one other thing, John 3:1-21 make it plain that eternal life is related in the most immediate and closest way to the new birth achieved by the Holy Spirit, to the atoning sacrifice of Christ. So in verse 14, Jesus says, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” And so in verse 16 when, when Jesus says, “Thus God loved the world,” he’s harking back to the sacrifice of verse 14. So, he gave his only Son in incarnation, but supremely in death. And then obviously, as we’ve said already, you cannot have eternal life unless you’re united with Christ who is himself the life.

Question 15:**What’s the difference between everlasting life and eternal existence?**

Modern people tend to equate life with “existence.” But this isn’t how the Bible always used the term “life.” Frequently, life meant more than existence. After all, we already exist. But then we receive eternal life when we come to faith. And we possess eternal life now. It’s not something that will start after we die; we’ve already begun to live it. So then, what’s the difference between everlasting life and eternal existence?

Dr. John Frame

Eternal existence is something that both the righteous and the wicked have, both faithful and unfaithful people have, throughout time. The wicked are going to spend their eternal life in judgment and suffering. The righteous will spend their everlasting

existence in fellowship with God. But eternal life has a different connotation from eternal existence. "Life" is a value term. When Adam was created, God breathed into him the breath of life, which is not only existence. I mean, he had existence as a lifeless body before that, but he entered into a kind of fellowship with God, and life in Scripture is always a value term. Life is the opposite of death. Death is the wages of sin. Life is the gift of God, the grace of God, taking us out of sin and giving us personal relationship with him and friendship. So that's the eternal life that's going to continue. It begins here on earth when a person comes to faith in Christ. Jesus says that those who believe in him have everlasting life right now, and so as we enter into our relationship with Jesus as our Lord and as our Savior and as our Friend, that is eternal life, and we're going to see that grow and expand and deepen throughout all the ages of time, and that's the wonderful promise of the gospel.

Question 16:

What kinds of blessings do we receive as a result of Jesus' resurrection?

Our everlasting life is made possible in part by Jesus' resurrection from the dead, because our union with him in his new life results in new life for us, too. But Scripture indicates that the blessings we receive from Jesus' resurrection even go beyond this. What kinds of blessings do we receive as a result of Jesus' resurrection?

Dr. Frank Thielman

People sometimes wonder what sort of blessings or benefits we receive from Jesus' resurrection. We're often familiar with the benefit, great benefit and benefits we receive from Jesus' death. When he died on the cross, he atoned for our sins, and so we're forgiven and at peace with God. But I think people are, sometimes well, they're confused about the benefits that we receive from Jesus' resurrection. Was the resurrection just a confirmation that, yes, God has indeed forgiven us by Christ's death on the cross? And that's certainly true; that's part of it. But the resurrection of Jesus is a very rich concept in the New Testament. There are multiple benefits that we have as believers from it. The first and most important of which Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 15 — and it's also described in other places — and that is Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection means that we too have victory over death and that our bodies will one day be raised, will be physically raised.

Another benefit of the resurrection that sometimes people don't think about is that when we're raised together with Christ, we are seated together with Christ, Paul says in Ephesians 2:6, "in heavenly places." Paul says we are made together alive with him, we are raised together with him, and we are seated together with Christ. Now, the seating of Christ with God in heaven means that Christ has been victorious all over all the enemies of God and his people. And particularly in the book of Ephesians where Paul says this in chapter 2, the enemies that Paul's talking about are the cosmic enemies of the universe, the rulers and authorities of this present darkness. Those forces have been conquered by the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and Christ is

seated at God's right hand. And the wonderful good news is that we are seated also at God's right hand. So, as Christians we too have victory over all the demonic and evil forces of the universe. We do not need to fear the invisible powers that some people claim have power over us. We do not need to fear those because Christ has conquered them, and we are victorious together with him. So, that's another element, another blessing, of our resurrection together with Christ.

Paul also says in Romans 6 and in Colossians 3, that our resurrection together with Christ has huge implications for the way we live our lives. We're no longer under slavery to sin, but we are instead, according to Romans 6, enslaved to righteousness. Because Christ has been raised from the dead, we have been buried with him, with his death in baptism. When we become Christians we are buried with him, and we are raised now, just as he was raised to newness of life. And so Paul says in Romans 6 that that means the way we used to live, before we became Christians, our old way of life that did not honor and please God, has now been, has now started to be, set aside, and we are beginning to live a new resurrection life just as Jesus was raised from the dead. Colossians 3 also makes that point. Paul's very careful though, here, to say that we have not yet been raised from the dead in that final eschatological sense. There is a sense in which we have been raised with Christ, but there is more yet to come, and so we live in a time of tension, understanding that we need to live in a way that shows our resurrection life is united with Christ on one hand, but on the other hand, understanding also that there will sometimes be failures, and we will need to turn to Christ constantly for forgiveness for sin, and that we will never be completely sinless until that final day when we are finally raised from the dead and occupy our resurrection bodies.

Dr. Thomas Nettles

We focus much on the death of Christ because it is true that it is in his own body on the tree that he bore our sin, and that God is pouring out his wrath. And it's true that at the end of that time of suffering, which was exquisite, Jesus said, "It is finished." But then we know that the story doesn't stop there. God still has work to do to show us that it was finished, that the atonement has been made, that it has been complete, that he is perfectly satisfied with it. And so, after our Redeemer does experience the grave — he experiences the deadness of death in his body — he was raised from the dead by the power of the Father, by the glory of the Father. He was raised from the dead according to the Spirit of Holiness. He was raised from the dead by his own power resident within him. He says, "I have power to give my life; I have power to take it again." So the resurrection is a demonstration that the triune God is happy with the atonement that Christ has made, is fully satisfied with this. So one of the blessings that we have is the assurance that, indeed, when we go to God that Christ's death has been sufficient.

It also lets us know that Christ is, even now, at the right hand of God, interceding for us, this continued blessing, that if any man sinned we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. It also shows us that death, indeed, has been conquered. He has released from this fear those who all their lives were fearful of

death, and he has destroyed him that has the power of death, and he's shown this by the resurrection. If the atoning work had not been satisfactory, then he would not have been raised from the dead, but since he has been raised from the dead, we know that it's satisfactory. The Scripture also tells us that when he was raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and he gave gifts to men. All of the gifts that we have come as a result of this work being completed, and he, as it were, the Psalm says, he enters into glory — "Who is the King of Glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle." And so he has won this victory, and he gives gifts to men.

So all the gifts that we have in the church, the gifts of teaching, the gifts of preaching, the gift of the Spirit to sanctify us, all of these have been given by Christ in his resurrection, so we are utterly dependent upon this. Paul says, "if Christ be not raised, then we're of all men most miserable. God lays it all out there and says all of this is true because of the resurrection, and Jesus said, "You'll know that I'm the one I claim to be when I'm raised from the dead." So our entire confidence and all the gifts that we have are at least indicated to us, and then given to us, by the resurrection of Christ.

Question 17:

What might our life in heaven be like?

Jesus' death and resurrection made it possible for us to spend eternity with God. And as Christians, we joyfully look forward to our future fellowship with Christ. But the Bible doesn't give us a lot of details about what our life in heaven will be like. Some people think it will be like the Garden of Eden before the Fall — what theologians call "pre-lapsarian life." Others picture streets of gold and pearly gates. So, what might our life in heaven be like?

Dr. Steve Harper

All of us, at one time, or another, wonder what our lives are going to be like in heaven. I think that there are a lot of transferable concepts, even from the life we live here. There are dimensions that we have enjoyed and benefited from, and so it is at least logical to assume that those same kinds of blessings and benefits are going to be part of our life in heaven. Sometimes people will ask, "Is it going to be like going back to Eden?" And again, I think there are probably some transferable concepts. When you read Genesis 1 and 2, up to the Fall, there are some wonderful things happening between God, Adam, and Eve and the rest of creation. And we can assume that when the Bible talks about a new heaven and a new earth, that some of those things will be there as well. But, I think it is a mistake to limit our understanding of life in heaven to either life on earth, or what life might have been in Eden, because it's a different dimension of life. Over the years I have tried to illustrate it to students, by saying, "What if we could talk to a baby, in its mother's womb? And say to that baby, 'You know that when you are sixteen years old, you are going to get a set of keys, and a car, and a driver's license. You are going to be able to drive around town on your own.'" That baby wouldn't have any idea what we were talking about because it's another dimension of life. Now, that baby would understand peace, and

quietness, and being fed. The baby would understand all that from life in the womb. But a set of car keys and a driver's license? They wouldn't even know what we were talking about. I think heaven is the same way. There are things that we do have in our human life here on earth that we can extrapolate about heaven. But there are parts about it that are going to be beyond our imagination.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

We need to understand that the heavenly reality is even better than what we had in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were free from the state of sin that we're in now, and we'll be free from the state of sin in heaven. But Adam and Eve didn't have the righteousness of Christ given to them. They weren't inheritors of all the heavenly blessings because of Jesus that we will have in heaven. And so our standing before God is taken to a different level. We now have the basis for the worship that will take place around the throne of God, which is focused on the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world. As wonderful as it will be to be free from the encumbrances of sin and have blessings and eternal life, the centerpiece of the glee and the joy and the glory of heaven will be God himself.

Question 18:

What will the new heavens and new earth be like?

Although we can't know exactly what our lives in heaven will be like, Scripture promises that in the final resurrection we'll receive glorified bodies, and God will redeem everything in creation. The current heaven isn't our final destination. Instead, after the resurrection of our bodies, we'll spend eternity in the new heavens and the new earth. But what will the new heavens and the new earth be like?

Dr. Jonathan Pennington

Many Christians think of our eternal state as a heavenly disembodied existence, maybe floating on the clouds with angels, but this is not at all what the Scriptures teach. The Scriptures are very clear that God cares for and values the physical creation he's made, both the world and us as the apex of that creation. He has poured himself, in fact his own image and identity, into us as his creatures. He cares about us and he cares about the world he has made. The resurrection of Jesus is one of the witnesses to the reality that God cares about the physical state and its resurrected and renewed form. Our hope, and what the Scriptures teach, is that we, in our final home, will be in a new creation — a new heaven, and a new earth, the Scriptures call it — which is a physical embodied existence. We can't know the details because that of which the Scriptures speak on this matter must be necessarily imaginative language. It must be poetic imagery because it speaks of something, which is wholly other than what we can know and experience now. But we do know that it will be a life that is fully human and fully satisfying. It will be a life that is what we were meant to live for. It will be a life that is what we are longing for in our hearts. Every moment of brokenness, every moment of disappointment, every good thing that comes to an end, our witnesses, our crying out to us that this world is not our home, or at least this state

of the world is not our home. The great hope that is given to us is that God will raise us even as he raised Jesus and will renew the whole earth itself.

Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

You know, one of the most important pictures held before us in Scripture, one of the greatest pictures of promise is that we're told there's going to be a new heaven and a new earth. And we look at that and we say, "Wow. We kind of like this one." We see the sunsets, we see the mountains, we see the oceans, we see the beauty of it and we say, "This one looks pretty good." But the Bible tells us that this world, as beautiful as it is, as magnificent as it is, is telling the story of human sinfulness as well as of the glory of God. We need a new heaven and a new earth because in the new heaven and the new earth there will be the undiluted presentation of the glory of God. If we think we've seen a sunset now, just wait until we see a sunset unclouded by the evidence of human sin. Just wait until we see the mountains in all their majesty, untainted by human sin. So, we know that the new heaven and the new earth is not just going to be Eden. It's not just going to be a reversion to Eden. It's going to be a "better than" because we're going to know God there not only as the Creator, but also as the Redeemer.

But, you know, there's some pictures embedded in Scripture that are really important, and I'll tell you what my favorite one is. My favorite one is the picture of the lamb who will now lay with the lion. You know, G. K. Chesterton, I believe it was, who said that the lamb and the lion may lay together now, and yet the lamb's not going to get much sleep. But in the new heaven and the new earth, they will be in no danger. There will be no carnivores. The lion and the lamb will safely be together because there will be absolutely nothing that will be the evidence of sin. There will be no catastrophe; there will be no murder; there will be no carnivores; there will be no viruses. It will be a world that will be visible to us in its similarity and continuity with this heaven and this earth as we know it, but it's going to be remarkably different. The lion and the lamb will lie together. And they will do so safely to the glory of God.

Dr. Knox Chamblin

I think about this sort of thing more at the age of 73 than I used to, what blessings we will receive in everlasting life and how that compares to life that Adam and Eve had in Genesis 2. I would want to begin with Revelation 21–22, which is sort of a mirror image of Genesis 1 and 2. And there God promises his people life on a transformed earth. So chapter 21 begins, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God." This new earth will be fully as material as the Garden of Eden, a fitting setting for resurrected bodies. In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis says that life in the new world is more solid than life in the old world, whereas hell is less solid than this life. So, in the New Jerusalem, not only is paradise regained, it is surpassed. As one of the hymns puts it, "In Christ, the sons of Adam boast more blessings than their Father lost." In that transformed world we will live under the authority of Jesus, the second Adam, and we will live fully

productive lives in the City of God. Another thing at the heart of this everlasting life is an ever deeper fellowship with the Holy Trinity. At the beginning of John 14, Jesus says, "In my Father's house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again to receive you to myself, that where I am, there you may be also." We read in 1 John 4:8 that God is love, which witnesses to the joyous fellowship within the Godhead, because his love is by nature outgoing. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit love one another. And in the new Jerusalem we will be drawn into the joyous fellowship, the great dance of the Holy Trinity.

And then, another aspect of this is alluded to there in John 14, "In my Father's house are many rooms..." That is, all the people of God are going to be living together, and in that reunion in heaven, we will enter into an experience of the communion of saints that was quite impossible and even inconceivable in this life. And Christians with whom we've had difficulty getting along, we will enter into a reunion that will cause this bitterness and this resentment and this alienation to be cleansed away and we will enter into an unprecedented experience of the communion of saints. And we read in 1 Corinthians 13:13, "Now abide faith, hope and love..." I believe that Paul is saying that in the New Jerusalem, all three of those abide. We will always believe in the Holy Trinity, we will always have hope for a deeper understanding of the Holy Trinity, and we will grow in love for the Trinity and for one another.

Question 19:

How should we respond to God's gift of salvation?

Christians have been given the greatest gift possible: salvation. We've been saved from sin and death by the God of the universe. And because of this, we get to spend eternity with him and his Son in the glorious new heavens and new earth. This is such a wonderful gift that it deserves the greatest gratitude imaginable. But what should that look like? How should we respond to God's gift of salvation?

Dr. Stephen Blakemore

The final redemption that we are going to receive through Jesus is so unbelievably beautiful and glorious that our response has to be a sort of total response of our entire being to what God has done and promises to do for us in Jesus Christ. That's what I understand I John 3 to be saying when John says, "...we're now the children of God, but it does not yet appear to us what we shall be, but we know this, when he is revealed, we shall be like him. So anyone who has this hope in him purifies himself as he is pure." If the goal of God's redemption is to transform us into the image of Jesus Christ, if the goal of God's redemption in our lives is to bring us into a perfect union with him, a perfect relationship of loving trust and obedience, if the goal of God's redemption is to fill us with his love and his Spirit so that forever we are not just enjoying heaven, but forever heaven is living in us, then our response now can be only one thing: "Lord make me as much like Jesus in this life as a human being can possibly be. I don't know what that looks like; I don't know how it works, but Lord, make me into all that you can make out of me. I give you my all, I give you my life, I

surrender all that I am to you. I don't want to live for anything else, anything less than your perfect and complete redemption at work in my life now."

Dr. Ivan Bespalov (translation)

The redemption Jesus gives us is a priceless gift we receive without compensation, without any efforts on our part. Because when he redeemed us and applied salvation to our lives, we were sinners and struggled against God. And as we receive salvation, our natural response follows: how do we live when we have this salvation, when we have this salvation, this redemption? First of all, our lives are to be lives of gratitude. We have received this precious gift, and we don't want to defile it. Suppose all of our life we've been clothed in rags, and now we've been presented with a Versace suit. It is not likely that we'll dust furniture, or wipe dirty hands with it, or blow our nose into its sleeve. We'd try to be worthy of the garment we have on. And Jesus has given us much more than a Versace suit. He has given us his righteousness, the snow-white clothes we'll have on when we enter heaven. Are we going to defile these garments with sinful actions, thoughts, or words? Of course not. We'll try to live appropriately to this redemption. And second, after we've received this redemption, wouldn't we like to share it with our children? Wouldn't we like to tell them about salvation so they, too, would have these white clothes in which they, too, could enter heaven? We buy them school uniforms, clothes for parties, see to it that they learn a trade, but their salvation is much more important, much more precious. Why don't we tell them about it? Attend to their salvation? We should care about the salvation of our relatives and friends and neighbors. This is what life in Christ is like — a life worthy of salvation.

Dr. Steve Douglass

The fact of the matter is that Jesus redeems us. That has lots of meaning, but one of the most basic responses that we should have is to be grateful. My goodness! What he's done for us and what therefore we should do in response for him. A lot of what we do for God is because we are so grateful for the fact that Jesus has redeemed us. Now the second response is to encourage people to take advantage of that redemption. Yes, we know Jesus, but there are a lot of people around us who do not, and oftentimes we have, well, I'll call it "interesting opportunities" to share with people and make the issue clear. One time I was in Moscow — in the former Soviet Union, Russia — and we were on a project with Josh McDowell, the famous author, and we had 300 people there, but we were organized by bus groups, so my group was 30 people. And I remember in our first time together as our bus group we were talking about our backgrounds and why we were there. And there was a fellow named Jim who I judged to be about 70 years old who stood up and said, "Well, I'm really here because of my daughter. She invited me to come. I'm actually not a believer, but I'm here in support of her and because I wanted to go to Russia." And I remember thinking to myself, well, sometime in the next week I hope Jim and I have a chance to talk. Well, the week went by and we got busy, and I never had talked to him, until the last day, and I was sitting on the aisle seat in the bus, and Jim was across the aisle from me in the bus, and his daughter was at the window seat. So I could see framed over his shoulder his daughter's face; I knew what she was saying: "Please share with

my father.” I was already planning to anyway, but that just gave me a little added incentive.

So I talked to Jim, and I shared what we would tend to share in our ministry, the four spiritual laws, the content of the gospel, and at the end I said, “Jim, would you like to ask Jesus into your heart,” just hoping that he would say, “yes.” And he said, “No. No.” Well you should have seen his daughter’s face. Once more her father had eluded the Holy Spirit. I was not going to give up. I said, God give me some fresh approach that penetrates this incredible barrier that this man has to the gospel. And all of a sudden, God gave me an idea. So I said, “Jim, you’re retired aren’t you?” “Yes, yes I am.” I said, “I’m impressed, actually, that you have the money and the time and everything to come on a trip like this. I mean, you must have planned well, you must have worked hard, you must have been careful with your money to be able to do this kind of thing.” And I could tell I was sort of getting on his positive side. I said, “You just impress me as a man who thinks ahead.” He said, “Well, yeah, I do, I do.” I said, “Well, in light of that, Jim, I guess I’d like to explain to you a little bit about what comes next.” He didn’t know where I was headed, and I said, “Do you think, Jim, at some point you will die?” He said, “Well, of course, I’m going to die.” “Well, Jim, what will happen when you die?” Well, he was just kind of almost offended that I asked the question, and his daughter had this big question mark on her face like, “Where are you going with this? I’m hopeful my dad will respond someday.” He said, “I don’t know.” I said, “Well, therefore, let me clarify for you, Jim, and I’m going to put it in terms you understand since you understand retirement. Really, after death there are only two retirement plans. One is called heaven and the other is called hell. Now Jim, I only have one more question, and I’ll just stop all this. It’s a curiosity question. Frankly, in light of what I know about you, Jim, what is it about hell that you prefer?” And then I just stayed quiet. His daughter, she was just about perishing. I mean, she was, “Oh, man, you have terribly offended my father!” So I just looked at him in the face and didn’t say a word. And after a full minute, which is a long time, okay, in that context, he said, “Nothing. I’m ready to pray and ask Jesus Christ into my life.” And he did. And his daughter is like she swallowed a light bulb. You see? Nobody made it so plain to him. We’re talking about redemption from hell. What is it about that that doesn’t make sense? And so when we appreciate what Christ has done for us and then share that clearly with other people, I think we could be very excited about how those people will respond.

Dr. David Garner

The entire New Testament, and I think especially in the letters of the apostle Paul, we see this structure in the way in which he writes of what we describe as the indicative and imperative relationship. Paul recognizes that the heart of the gospel, as he articulates in 1 Corinthians 15, is that, according to the Scriptures, Jesus died, was buried, and on the third day, according to the Scriptures, he raised from the dead. And so what we find in the New Testament is that the events of the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ take center stage. But in keeping with the way in which Paul writes as well as the other New Testament writers, we find that resting in that indicative, those historical events that Paul describes, is a deeply rooted, necessarily

related responsibility that comes with that. There is the gift of faith that God gives us, Paul describes in Ephesians 2:8-10. But in that gift of faith, Paul describes it as a faith that works through love — Galatians 5. And then when you come back to 1 Corinthians 15, that I mentioned earlier, he describes an extraordinary reality of the realization of the eternal kingdom even now through our being conjoined to Jesus Christ and his resurrection. And Paul is explicit about that. He describes in chapter 15:42 through about 48 or so that Jesus Christ, and explicitly in verse 45, is the life-giving Spirit as the resurrected Son of God, that there is flowing from him by our union with him, the reality of new kingdom ethic, new kingdom power, new kingdom glory that is ours by virtue of us being united to him by faith through the Holy Spirit.

So what are the implications for us as we consider the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Well, Paul says that his resurrection is our resurrection. In fact, he will argue it the other way around. He will say that if we are not resurrected, then Jesus wasn't resurrected either. So sure is he about our solidarity with Jesus Christ, he will say that Christ's resurrection power is actually in our possession right now. The implications are astounding, because what we now have at our disposal by virtue of our union with Jesus Christ is the power, actually, to say yes to Christ, to say yes to God's expectations upon us. No longer is the law merely something that condemns, but by the outpouring of the Spirit and fulfillment of the new covenant realized in the resurrected Christ who is the life-giving Spirit, we are empowered, we are enabled, we are motivated now to respond in obedience to God in Christ. So our union with Christ actually fleshes itself out in the way in which we walk in a delighted obedience, and knowing that when we sin, we have an advocate with the Father who stands and lives ever to intercede for us. But in that reality, in that repentance, as we enjoy that forgiveness, we are compelled once again to live in the dynamic of resurrection power because Jesus Christ is raised, and we are raised with him.

Our salvation came at a great price. Jesus, the holy, anointed Son of God, had to suffer and die on a Roman cross, taking all our sins on himself, and then be raised to life. And the writers of the Apostles' Creed understood how important it was for Christians to appreciate and proclaim this salvation. When we recite the Apostles' Creed, we aren't just echoing ancient words. We're confessing anew that we trust in a God who loves us perfectly. And we're expressing our personal gratitude for his abundant and overflowing blessings.

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