Things that Matter Most

by

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Central Teachings in the New Testament

The Atoning Work of Christ

The thoroughgoing teaching of the New Testament is that salvation is vitally connected to the death of Jesus on the cross. It is in this sense that Paul could speak of the Christian gospel as the "message of the cross" (1 Co. 1:18) and could say, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Co. 2:2). What was it that happened when Jesus died that made such a difference? How is it that the death of one man, tried for blasphemy by the Jewish Sanhedrin and sentenced to death for high treason against the Roman State, could bridge the gulf between humans and God? The answer to these questions is at the heart of the Christian message.

While there are a variety of models in the New Testament which explain the death of Jesus, far and away the most important and the most frequently mentioned is the idea of a vicarious, substitutionary atonement. The English word atonement comes from Anglo-Saxon and means "a making at one." It points to the act of bringing into unity those who were previously estranged. Theologically speaking, the word atonement refers to the reconciliation brought about between sinners and God. The terms vicarious and substitution refer to what Christ did on our behalf to bring us back to God. In the simplest terms, Paul explains, "Christ died for us" (Ro. 5:8).

This theme of substitutionary death, that is, a death on behalf of someone else, runs throughout the entire Bible. One sees it on Mt. Moriah as Abraham is provided with a ram to sacrifice in the place of his son, Isaac (Ge. 22). One sees it at the first Passover, when a slaughtered lamb became the necessary protection for the Israelites on the night that death stalked the Egyptian nation (Ex. 12). One sees it in the annual Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) commanded by Moses and perpetually observed by the Israelite nation -- a day on which two goats were chosen to represent the nation, one to be driven into the desert while symbolically bearing the nation's sins, and the other to be slaughtered before the Lord (Lv. 16). One sees it in the prophetic word about the future Servant of the Lord, a tragic figure who would suffer unto death for the sins of others (Is. 52:13--53:12).

This theme, which is so prominent in the Old Testament, reaches its climax in the death of Jesus. While he was on his final trip to Jerusalem, Jesus explained to his disciples, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On

the third day he will rise again" (Lk. 18:31-33). Just before entering the city, Jesus told his followers, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk.10:45). At the Last Supper, Jesus explained that his death was the "blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (Mk. 14:24). Finally, after his resurrection, Jesus talked with two of the disciples on the Emmaus Road and opened their perception so that they could clearly understand the centrality of his death from the Hebrew Scriptures (Lk. 24:13-32).

The atonement of Christ in his death is explained by several word-pictures in the New Testament. One of these is the metaphor of redemption, which arises from the slave markets of the Roman world. A slave was redeemed when he/she was purchased at the forum and then set free. This idea is very closely related to the words ransom (1 Ti. 2:6; He. 9:15) and freedom (Ro. 6:18; Ga. 5:1). Christians, then, are people who have been bought with a price (1 Co. 6:20; 7:23), and the price was the death of Jesus (Ep. 1:7; Col. 1:13-14; 1 Pe. 1:18-19).

A second word-picture arises from the analogy of a family quarrel. The human family has alienated itself from God, its Father, through rebellion (Col. 1:21). Similar to the Israelites in the Old Testament, who deliberately deserted the heavenly Father like a stubborn child (Ho. 11:1-8), humans have exhibited all sorts of depraved behavior while refusing to recognize God (Ro. 1:28-32). This alienation is so complete that it includes the entire human family (Ro. 3:9-18, 23). Nevertheless, God's love reached out through his Son to an alienated world! Though we were powerless to return to God on our own (Ro. 5:6), Christ's death demonstrated to us that God still loved us (Ro. 5:7-8). In the death of Jesus, we have been reconciled to God (Ro. 5:10-11; 2 Co. 5:18-19; Col. 1:22). His righteous anger toward our sins has been propitiated, that is, satisfied and turned away. Jesus bore the just punishment for our sins (1 Jn. 4:10; Ro. 3:5-6, 25; 5:9; Ep. 2:3-7). We have now been received back again as a member of God's intimate family (Lk. 15:11-32). By a slight adjustment of the metaphor, Paul can also say that we have been adopted into God's family (Ep. 1:5).

Yet another word-picture is derived from the law courts. Like the condemned thieves who were crucified with Jesus (Lk. 23:39-41), we deserved to be executed also (Ro. 1:32; 5:12; 6:23). Yet as we stood before the bench to receive our verdict, the judge pronounced us to be justified and acquitted of our crimes because of the death of Jesus (Ro. 3:23-26; 4:25; 5:1, 9). In this acquittal, we were declared to be righteous before God by faith (Ro. 1:17), and the holiness of Jesus Christ was appropriated to us (1 Co. 1:30; Phil. 3:7-9; Ep. 1:3-4). As Martin Luther expressed it, "....by a wonderful exchange our sins are now not ours but Christ's, and Christ's righteousness is not Christ's but ours!"

Finally, the death of Jesus corresponded to the Old Testament animal

sacrifices which were performed by a priest, but at a higher level. In one sense, Jesus was himself the great High Priest who performed the one sacrificial death effective for all (He. 8:1-2). In another sense, he is the sacrificial victim whose blood was shed for human sin (He. 9:12-14). As such, he is both the priest and the sacrifice, and at the cross he offered himself once for all (He. 9:24-28). Because the sacrificial work was done "once for all," Christ as the great High Priest sat down at the right hand of God (He. 1:3; 8:1; 12:2). His enthronement at the Father's right side denoted that his redemptive work was finished forever (He. 10:11-12).

In retrospect, Christians can say with confidence that in a most wonderful way, the death of Jesus on the cross involved them personally. With Paul, they can say, "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" (Ga. 2:20). Words such as substitution, redemption, ransom, freedom, reconciliation, propitiation, adoption, justification, holiness, and sacrifice are rich in meaning for believers, for they describe the atonement of Jesus, our Lord, who died for us. With Paul Christians can say, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Ga. 6:14).

Coming to Faith

All Christians should be prepared to share their faith with the goal of making disciples of others. Peter said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ...." (1 Pe. 3:15-16). However, sometimes Christians approach disciple-making with an over-emphasis on technique, and this is unfortunate inasmuch as there is no precise technique given in the New Testament. At the same time, there are some common elements in the "coming to faith" of New Testament believers. These may be summarized as hearing the gospel, internally believing and committing oneself to it, and outwardly affirming one's faith in its truth.

The gospel should always be focused on Jesus -- his life, death and resurrection. There is an important background for the gospel, however, which makes it relevant, and this background is the fact that the human race is at odds with God.

Everyone innately knows that there is something wrong with the world. The Bible informs us that all persons have lost their way back to God. In fact, as far as God is concerned, they are like sheep wandering in the desert. "Like sheep we have all gone astray" (Isa. 53:6).

But God determined to seek those who have lost their way. He sent Jesus, his only Son, into the world in order to bring men and women back to himself. Jesus is

the way back to God, as he himself said: "I am the way" (Jn. 14:6).

In his life, Jesus both lived and explained the way in which believers ought to live so that they might please God. This is why John says about Jesus, "In this world we are like him," and "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 Jn. 4:17; 2:6).

There is a problem with this as far as we are concerned, however. Men and women are not able by sheer willpower either to come to God or to live for God. They are in slavery to their own desires. Thus Paul says, "What I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do" (Ro. 7:15). And Jesus also says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn. 6:44).

In his death and resurrection, Jesus liberated all who would put their faith in him from their slavery to self and sin. His death was on our behalf, so as Paul says it, "When we were still powerless . . . Christ died for us" (Ro.5:6-8).

He forgave our sins and took away the accusation which was against us, "nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:14). In the great judgment, when history has come to an end, the death and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf will stand in our defense. "Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our acquittal" (Ro. 4:25). The resurrection of Jesus from the dead was God's way of verifying that he truly died for our sins, since "he always lives to intercede for them" (He. 7:25).

This, then, is the good news about Jesus. Jesus is the Savior, the Son of God, and "by believing you may have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31). Paul said that if you would "confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Ro. 10:9). The question is entirely appropriate, "But what does it mean to believe in my heart?"

The important distinction to be made is between believing "in your heart" and merely believing "in your head." The latter is only an intellectual agreement with the bare facts about Jesus, that is, admitting that he was born, that he lived as a rural teacher in Palestine, and that he died by being crucified on a cross. It is the sort of thing one might believe about Julius Caesar or Napoleon Bonaparte.

Believing "in one's heart," however, is much more. It has to do with the intensity with which one accepts the good news about Jesus. It is "welcoming the message with joy" (1 Th. 1:6) and "accepting it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Th. 2:13). To believe in one's heart means to believe that Jesus not only died, but that he is truly alive today. It is to put the maximum value on the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul says: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Co. 15:17).

To believe in one's heart means to dedicate one's life to following Jesus -- to become a learner whose life is shaped every day by the life and teachings of Jesus.

It is to answer Jesus' call, "Follow me!" It is to accept the unpopularity of faith and to reject the self-centeredness that characterizes all humans. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk.8:34-35).

The central affirmation of faith for Christians is the confession, "Jesus is Lord!" Paul says, "For us 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 who all things came and through whom we live" (1 Co. 8:6). This confession, which is orally expressed in the words "Jesus is Lord" and is visibly affirmed in the ritual of water baptism (Ac. 2:36-38), can only be truly made by God's help. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Co.12:3). This oral expression is the affirmation to one's friends and to the Christian community that one has become a Christian. Paul reminded Timothy, a young Greek whom he led to Christ, of this public statement when he wrote to him, "Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Ti. 6:12).

Coming to faith in Jesus is only the beginning of the Christian life. Becoming a Christian is not so much like taking up residence in a new house as it is like beginning a journey down a new road. That is why the earliest Christians were called "followers of 'The Way'" (Ac. 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It is indeed a "way!" It is, in the words of Paul, a lifelong commitment to "take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" -- to forget what is behind, and to press forward to what is ahead, the reward of eternal life with Jesus Christ, our Lord (Phil. 3:12-14).

In the meantime, the Christian life is a life of devotion to the teachings of the Bible, to fellowship with other Christians, to prayer, and to living a new life shaped by the Holy Spirit and the risen Christ (Ac. 2:42-47).

Christian Baptism

In the Gaza desert, two men sat in a chariot reading from the scroll of Isaiah (Ac. 8:26-39). One was a Christian, and the other, an African who had embraced the Jewish faith, was returning to Africa from a pilgrimage in Jerusalem. The subject of their reading was about a certain "Servant of Yahweh" who would suffer for the sins of others. The Ethiopian asked, "Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Philip began with that same Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. When Philip had concluded, the Ethiopian asked, "Look, here is water! Why shouldn't I be baptized" (Ac. 8:36b)?

Why, indeed? This is the question!

The last words which Jesus spoke to his disciples after his resurrection and before he ascended into the heavens contain this commission:

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”(Mt. 28:19-20a).

As is apparent, part of the mandate to Jesus' followers was to baptize disciples. Believers ever since have continued the practice of Christian baptism. The apostles in the early Christian churches baptized their converts (Ac. 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). The expected response of persons who had come to faith in Jesus Christ was to submit to baptism, and this pattern began with the first sermon preached by Peter after the ascension of Jesus back to God, the Father:

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ...." (Ac. 2:38a).

"Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized...." (Ac. 2:41a).

But just what does baptism mean? It obviously is a ritual, but what is its purpose? Is it a human act which attempts to induce God to do something? Is it magic? Does it symbolize something? Can one be a Christian without being baptized? The modern person, along with the African in the Gaza desert, might well ask, "Why shouldn't I be baptized," or perhaps better, "Why should I be baptized?"

The usage of the word baptism actually begins before Christianity, and this early employment helped to shape its meaning for Christians. The verb baptize, which means to dip, was used by the Jews to describe the ceremonial pouring of water on the hands for ritual purification (Lk. 11:38; Mk. 7:4). Furthermore, the act of dipping a person in water was performed for slaves who were baptized into the service of a household, or if emancipated, baptized in the name of freedom. Baptism was practiced for converts to Judaism, and for ritual purification among some Jewish sects.

Thus, when John the Baptist began baptizing people in the Jordan River, even before the appearance of Jesus, the public knew that this act signified cleansing and the adoption of a new attitude toward the future. Thus, John the Baptist baptized his converts as an outward sign of their inward change of heart (repentance) and as a sign of God's forgiveness (Mk. 1:4-5). Jesus himself was baptized by John, though as Matthew makes clear, it was not for his own sins but in order to conform to a

righteous pattern (Mt. 3:13-15).

Jesus' commission to his followers to baptize disciples, then, was not an inexplicable command. Christian baptism carries with it the primary symbolic value of the reception of God's forgiveness and a change of heart. It is an act which points toward a new future, a demarcation between one's old life under the slavery of sin and one's new life in the freedom of Christ's forgiveness (Ac. 22:16; 1 Co. 6:11; Ep. 5:26).

This does not exhaust the meaning of Christian baptism, however. In the letters of Paul, even further content is added. Baptism, according to Paul, also represents the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord (Ro. 6:3-5). Just as Jesus died and descended into the grave, Christians symbolically identify with his atoning death when they descend into the waters of baptism. The imagery of water closing over one's head is a particularly apt metaphor for death. Just as Jesus arose from the tomb, believers arise from the waters of baptism to live a new life. So Paul says:

"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" (Ro. 6:4).

Paul also writes that Christian baptism reflects one's new status as a Christian. Baptism signifies that the believer belongs to God's intimate family where there is no longer any racial, social or gender prejudice (Ga. 3:26-28). Finally, Christian baptism is a pledge toward God proceeding from a good conscience (1 Pe. 3:21). In other words, God calls for faith, and the believer answers with a sign of his or her faith by submitting to baptism. Baptism is thus an affirmation to God and to the Christian community that one has come to faith.

A final word should be said about the actual procedure for baptism. Christians perform this act in different ways. Some bodily immerse the candidate in water, while others pour water over the candidate's head with the person standing either in or out of the water. Still others baptize by sprinkling water on the head. Christians use differently worded formulas, the most popular being the words of Jesus in Mt. 28:19, though other formulas from the Bible are also used. Some Christians baptize infants, while others only baptize those old enough to understand the significance of baptism. Some churches rebaptize all new members, even if they have been baptized previously, while other churches accept the baptisms practiced by Christians other than themselves. In some churches, only clergymen can perform baptisms, while in others, any Christian is considered to be qualified.

These differences and the logic behind them, though not unimportant, cannot be addressed here. In any case, they often tend to obscure the real purpose of

baptism, which is to point backward to the atoning death of Jesus with its gracious forgiveness and forward to the new life of Christian discipleship. Surely technicalities are not so important with God as a heart, broken and contrite (Ps. 51:16-17). At the same time, all forms of Christian baptism must find their central meaning in the death and resurrection of Jesus -- in the grace of his forgiveness, the cleansing from sin which he offers, and the invitation to belong to his family.

Now, back to the original question first framed by the African in the Gaza desert: "Why shouldn't I be baptized?" If you believe with all your heart, you should!

Following Jesus

The first thing and the last thing that Jesus said to Peter was the same, "Follow me!" On the first occasion, Peter and his brother were casting a net into the Galilean Lake. Jesus passed by and called out, "Follow me, and I will teach you to fish for men" (Mk. 1:16-18). Peter quickly responded and became a follower of Jesus.

Throughout the preaching tours of Jesus in Palestine, Peter continued to follow. In the fishing villages, on the mountains, in the desert, by the lake -- he followed and he listened. Many months later, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, Peter even declared that he would follow Jesus to prison and to death (Lk. 22:33), though as Luke makes clear, due to his fear Peter only followed at a distance (Lk. 22:54). On that same night, he eventually denied that he even knew Jesus (Lk. 22:55-62).

After Jesus had risen from the dead, he left Peter with the same command as at the beginning, "Follow me!" Peter had questioned the Lord about the future of another of the disciples, but Jesus simply said to him, "What is that to you? You must follow me!" (Jn. 21:19-22).

Finally, in later life, Peter wrote to a group of churches with this admonition: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps" (1 Pe. 2:21). So, then, what does it mean to follow Jesus? Obviously, it cannot mean for us exactly the same thing that it meant to the rural people of Galilee who had Jesus physically in their midst. The call to follow Jesus must mean more than traveling around the countryside while listening to Jesus preach. When Peter wrote to the churches in Asia Minor that Christ left us an example that we should follow in his steps, it is apparent that he was talking about a way of life rather than a geographical route.

Perhaps we should start with the word "disciple." The followers of Jesus were called his disciples, and the term refers to someone who is a learner or a student. One who follows Jesus is always learning more about him, learning not

only in the sense of intellectual awareness, but even more importantly, in the sense of learning to live according to the pattern which Jesus taught. This is why John wrote, "Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus walked" (1 Jn. 2:6).

In the gospels, Jesus made the call to discipleship central in his teachings. He knew that at the very core of human nature was selfishness, pride, and the desire for power. So, he taught that in order to follow him, one must say "no" to him/herself (Lk. 9:23-24). Those who wished to follow Jesus but still retained other loyalties could not do so (Lk. 9:57-62). In fact, even family loyalties must be sacrificed, if necessary, in order to follow Jesus (Lk. 14:25-27). The cost of discipleship is the willingness to give up everything for Jesus (Lk. 14:28-33). It is the acceptance of Jesus' radical claims about himself, and the submission of one's life to him as the Lord of all of life.

The call to follow Jesus is an intense daily challenge. This is why Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must....take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk. 9:23). In every circumstance, to follow Jesus means that you ask yourself, "What would Jesus do?" When making decisions, when confronting clients, when socializing with friends, when addressing those in need -- all these circumstances are to be controlled by one's answer to the question, "What would Jesus do?" Sometimes, perhaps often, the answer will be acutely uncomfortable, because it will deeply conflict with our own wishes.

To a wealthy young man who claimed to have kept the ten commandments from his youth, Jesus said, "Go, sell everything you own and give it away. Then come and follow me" (Mk. 10:21). Sadly, the young man turned away. His love for wealth prevented him from following Jesus. The refusal to follow Jesus can be for many reasons of course. For the crowds in Galilee, it was the scandal of Jesus' claims about himself (Jn. 6:53-66). For the Jewish leaders, it was a deep loyalty to their traditional religion (Jn. 9:13, 16, 24-29). For Judas, it was disillusionment (Mt. 26:14-16, 20-25). For yet others, it was a field or a purchase or a marriage (Lk. 14:16-24). When Jesus calls us to follow him, he always seems to ask us to give up that thing which is most likely to draw us away from him. As one person has said, "The things that I do not understand about the sayings of Jesus are not what disturb me. What disturb me are the things that I understand all too well!"

One might well ask with Peter, "Lord, we have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (Mt. 19:27). But Jesus replied, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come, eternal life" (Lk. 18:29-30). Something should also be said about the importance of knowing the stories of Jesus. The accounts of the teachings and actions of Jesus were the primary preaching material for the earliest Christians. While they did not

have the advantage of a printed Bible, as we do today, the public reading of the gospels and the retelling of the stories of Jesus were eagerly received. Today, Christians can become familiar with the life of Jesus both by hearing and by reading, and it cannot be overemphasized that they must continue to learn more about Jesus. To daily ask oneself the question, "What would Jesus do," requires intimacy with his life and words. To ask the question without any familiarity concerning his life and words is to lapse into an ambivalent subjectivism.

It would be impossible here to enumerate all of the teachings of Jesus. Nevertheless, the essence of the life to which Jesus called us can be sketched in. Jesus himself said that upon two commandments hung the entire law and prophets of the Old Testament: to love God with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind --and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lk. 10:25-27). Who is one's neighbor? It is anyone with a need (Lk. 10:29-37). Jesus was concerned about things such as forgiving people of their offenses (Mt. 6:14-15; 18:21-35) and loving those who did not love in return (Mt. 5:43-48). The sum of the life of Jesus has been aptly capsuled by one person who said that Jesus simply "found wounds and healed them." He was the "man for others." He called his followers to servanthood (Jn. 13:1-17), not to power (Mt. 20:20-28). One of his final sayings on the cross was a prayer for the forgiveness of his executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian martyr in World War II, wrote, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." The call to discipleship is a gracious call, but it is also a costly call. As Bonhoeffer said, "It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life." So to you and I, just as to Peter and Andrew and James and John, Jesus says, "Follow me! Follow me and I will make you...."

The Resurrection

At the very heart of the Christian faith is the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The earliest New Testament documents to be written were the letters of Paul, and it is clear that the resurrection of Jesus was central. "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," Paul declared (Ro. 10:9). In his first Thessalonian letter, one of his earliest, Paul writes, "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Th. 4:14a). His explanation to the Corinthians is equally unequivocal: "I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand....Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures....he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Co. 15:1-4). In fact, Paul is so bold as to say that without the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus, the

Christian faith is nothing less than a charade (1 Co. 15:12-19).

The resurrection of Jesus was always at the forefront of the early Christian preaching of the gospel. Luke records that Peter (Ac. 2:24, 31-32; 3:15; 4:10; 10:40) and Paul (13:29-31; 17:2-3, 31; 23:6) boldly proclaimed in their sermon the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. In fact, one important function of the twelve apostles was especially that of giving eye-witness testimony to their experiences with the living Lord after his resurrection. Christ did not appear to all the people, but rather, to those whom he had specially chosen to be his witnesses -- those who ate and drank with him after his resurrection (Ac. 10:41-42). These witnesses were the twelve apostles who were with him from the time of John's baptism until his ascension into the heavens, and their testimony of his resurrection was essential (Ac. 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20; 13:30-31).

The historical reality of the resurrection has often been questioned. In the first place, no one actually viewed the resurrection when it occurred. After the resurrection, the soldiers who had been guarding the tomb were startled by the angel who came to roll away the stone, and they spread the story that the corpse had been stolen (Mt. 28:2-4, 12-15). In modern times, various naturalistic explanations have been offered, ranging from the idea of a supra-historical reality (leaving the physiological side unexplained) to the so-called swoon theory, that is, the notion that Jesus never really died but lapsed into a kind of coma from which he eventually revived in the cool air of the tomb. Such theories, however, are certainly not what the biblical testimonies themselves say. Rather, the biblical witness is that Jesus was actually raised from the dead by God, the Father.

The historical reality of Jesus' resurrection rests upon two kinds of evidence: the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord. While the first of these might not seem to be as significant as the second, further reflection suggests that it is not to be passed over too quickly. Any announcement that Jesus was still alive could have been quickly dispelled by simply producing his corpse, but all the witnesses agree, including the women (Mk. 16:1-8; Mt. 28:5-7; Lk. 24:1-3; Jn. 20:1-2), the men (Jn. 20:3-9), and the temple guards (Mt. 28:11-15), that the tomb was empty, and this after it had been closely guarded by soldiers. Furthermore, since the tomb was freshly hewn and had not previously been used for burial, there were no other corpses present to confuse the issue (Mt. 27:59-60; Lk. 23:50-53; Jn. 19:41-42). The only remnants left in the tomb to indicate that Jesus' body had been there were the strips of linen cloth and the facial napkin (Lk. 24:12; Jn. 20:6-7).

The other evidence of Jesus' resurrection was even more decisive, because he appeared in resurrected form to his disciples, both men and women, and in the words of Luke, he "gave many convincing proofs that he was alive" (Ac. 1:3). He appeared to Mary of Magdala (Jn. 20:11-18; cf. Mk. 16:9-11), to the other women

(Mt. 28:9-10), to Peter (Lk. 24:33-35; 1 Co. 15:5), to Cleopas and his companion (Lk. 24:13-35; cf. Mk. 16:12-13), and to the apostles (Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:19-25; cf. Mk. 16:14), all on Easter Sunday.

A week later, he appeared to the apostles again (Jn. 20:26-29; 1 Co. 15:5), some time later to seven disciples in Galilee (Jn. 21:1-24), later still to all the apostles in Galilee (Mt. 28:16-20; 1 Co. 15:6) and on one occasion to over 500 disciples (1 Co. 15:7). In addition, he appeared to James (1 Co. 15:7). On the day of his ascension, he appeared to all the apostles (Lk. 24:44-52; Ac. 1:1-11). Finally, on the road to Damascus, the Lord appeared to Paul (1 Co. 15:8; 9:1; Ac. 9:3-6; 22:6-8; 26:12-15). These appearances were sure and sufficient evidences that Jesus was alive.

In the face of this biblical testimony, the question must surely be raised, "Does it matter?" Why is the resurrection of such importance to Christian faith. Even if Jesus did not rise from the dead, would not the essential truth of Christianity remain unimpaired?

The fact is, as Paul says, the entire Christian faith does indeed hang upon a single event -- the resurrection of Jesus (1 Co. 15:14-17). If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then the Bible misrepresents God, Christians are both deceivers and deceived, and God is neither the living God nor the God of the living (Mk. 12:27). Even worse, death is stronger than God, and the greatest human enemy, death, is ultimately victorious. If Jesus' career ended in a tomb, then all his claims and promises which he made while on earth are lies. His prayer "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven" is an empty plea. If Jesus is dead, his entire message is a farce, and whoever he was, he was certainly not the Son of God nor our living Lord. Furthermore, there is no future resurrection for us either. Christ is neither the firstborn from among the dead (Col. 1:18) nor the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Co. 15:20-23).

The Christian English poet, John Donne, well describes the Christian hope in his sonnet, "*Death Be Not Proud*" (1633):

> Death be not proud, though some have called thee
> Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
> One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
> And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die.

This, of course, is the final meaning. If Jesus is indeed alive, then as he also said, "Because I live, you also will live (Jn. 14:19). "I am the Living One," he declares; "I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades" (Re. 1:18). In the great judgment, which all of us will face at

the end (Ro. 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10), it is an overwhelming comfort to know that the living Jesus will stand to defend his people (He. 7:25; Ro. 8:33-39)! As Jesus himself said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven" (Mt. 10:32). He will not be doing that if the story ends in the tomb!

Reading The Bible

In Paul's last correspondence to Timothy, he reminded his younger co-worker how that "....from infancy you have know the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Ti. 3:15). Then Paul described the purpose for which God inspired Holy Scripture -- a purpose which is very practical. The role of Scripture is to teach, to rebuke, to correct, and to train in righteousness so that Christians might be equipped to do good works (2 Ti. 3:16-17).

But just how did Timothy learn about Holy Scripture? And how did early Christians become familiar with the stories about Jesus? For most early Christians, familiarity with the Bible came not from reading it personally but from hearing it read aloud and explained in worship services. It is for this reason that Paul instructed Timothy to devote himself "to the public reading of Scripture, and to preaching and to teaching" (1 Ti. 4:13). The reading and explaining of Scripture had been part of the regular practice of the Jewish synagogue services (Lk. 4:16-21; Ac. 15:21), and the early Christians followed suit. The Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew into Aramaic and Greek, so whether one was a native of Palestine or a citizen of the world, the Scriptures were accessible.

Today, the Scriptures are even more accessible. The Bible has not only been translated into our own languages, it has been inexpensively reproduced so that each of us can have a full copy of our own. Unlike early Christians, whose local church might have been fortunate to possess a few of the scrolls of the Old Testament, perhaps one or two gospels, and a half dozen of Paul's letters, today we have immediate access to all the books of both Testaments. Each of us can read from them every day, if we so desire. And we should!

The fact that we can read Scripture, however, must not lead us into a careless or irreverent treatment of its contents. When we read the Word we must take care to handle it correctly. Paul also instructed Timothy to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Ti. 2:15). If Paul says that one should "handle it correctly," surely he implies that there are some incorrect ways to handle it as well. On one occasion, Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees because they "nullified the word of God for the sake of tradition" (Mt. 15:6). On another, he told them that

they were badly mistaken because they did not understand the Scriptures (Mk. 12:24-27). That sincere readers could misunderstand the message of Scripture is apparent in Jesus' words, when he said to some opponents, "....you do not believe the one God sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (Jn. 5:38b-40). Furthermore, the New Testament itself warns that no one is entitled to interpret Scripture at his or her own personal whim (2 Pe. 1:20).

So, then, how does one go about reading the Bible in a way which is faithful to its intent? At this point it is helpful to make a distinction between interpretation and application. Interpretation is the art of discovering what the original writer meant for his first readers. Application is discerning how the Bible might instruct, correct, and guide us today. Application without interpretation will inevitably undermine the authority of the Bible, for application without interpretation will encourage the reader to manipulate the Bible so that it will mean all sorts of things that were not intended in the first place. The first question which any reader of the Bible must pose is not, "What does it mean to me now," but rather, "What did it mean then." Too often, well-meaning but naive Christians pass over careful interpretation so that they can quickly get to what God might have to say to them personally, but this negligence is unwise. If one does not take the trouble to discover what the text meant to its first readers, the Bible will be terribly distorted. Its authority will be no bigger than the imagination and prejudices of its modern reader.

Of course, someone might say, "Well, one doesn't really need to interpret the Bible -- he/she just needs to read it for what it says." This homespun wisdom might sound impressive, and in fact, there may indeed be passages in the Bible that need little interpretation but which are quite clear without any special interpretive skills. But the person who amputates his arm or gouges out his eye because "the Bible says" could benefit from some sound interpretation (Mt. 5:29-30)!

In one sense, the availability of the Bible in the common language has created a danger which was not felt so acutely in the early church. Since the early Christians heard Scripture read in their services of worship, and along with that, heard the explanations of the Word offered by their leaders, they were not so apt to stray into unsound interpretations (providing, of course, that their leaders were sound in their teaching). However, as it is now with every Christian reading privately for him/herself, the danger of interjecting alien ideas into Holy Scripture is multiplied for those unskilled in language, literature, and logic, and/or unfamiliar with the teachings of the Christian faith. This danger ought not to discourage Christians from reading their Bibles, but it should caution them to be careful in how

they approach it.

Probably the greatest concern for one who wishes to correctly interpret the Bible is to pay close attention to context. This same care, of course, must be shown toward any kind of literature, whether a novel, a newspaper, or even a personal note, but it is especially critical in reading the Bible. The Bible, like most other literature, is written so that ideas flow into one another. Rarely does a biblical statement stand alone, but it must be read in light of what has preceded it and what follows it. Also, sometimes a particular writer in the Bible will exhibit certain tendencies in his writing. John, for instance, frequently uses double entendres, that is, words or expressions which are capable of being interpreted in two ways, as in for instance, the terms "light," "bread," "water," "birth," and so forth. Sometimes biblical writers use idiomatic expressions, such as Paul, when he speaks of "bowels" as an idiom for compassion.

A particularly dangerous approach to interpretation is the practice of stating a proposition about doctrine and then citing a list of biblical texts which "prove" it, an approach often called "proof-texting." This method is not bad so long as one carefully interprets the cited texts in their original settings, but very often, this method strips the biblical passages of their original context, and when they are put together with other passages, a new context is created which may be alien to the original meaning of the verse(s).

So, yes, Christians should read the Bible for instruction, rebuke, correction, and training in righteousness. They should read the Bible so that they may be equipped to do all kinds of good deeds. At the same time, they must not read the Bible in isolation from the church and their Christian leaders (2 Ti. 4:1-4). With the psalmist, we can say, "I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word" (Ps. 119:15-16).

The Gift and the Gifts

In the Asian city of Ephesus, on the coast of the Aegean Sea, Paul discovered some disciples who had known only the message of John the Baptist. He asked them a pointed question, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" (Ac. 19:2). John, of course, had preached that the one coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mk. 1:8), but these disciples were not aware that the Holy Spirit had been given. Paul explained to them the story of Jesus, and after they were baptized in water as a response to this new dimension of faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit came upon them (Ac.19:3-7).

The theme of the gift of the Holy Spirit is so central in the Book of Acts that some have even referred to it as the "Gospel of the Holy Spirit." At the time of his ascension, Jesus promised his disciples that in a few days they would be baptized

with the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:5). On the Jewish feast of Pentecost, which was the celebration of the firstfruits of harvest, about 120 disciples were gathered in Jerusalem at the temple (Lk. 24:53; Ac. 1:15). Abruptly, they heard a sound like a strong wind blowing, and they observed what seemed to be tongues of fire resting upon each of them. Each began to speak in a foreign language, and all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had said (Ac. 2:1-4). This event, according to Peter, was a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that they were even then living in the final period of history (Ac. 2:14-18). The Jesus who had been crucified, buried and raised by the Father, had poured out upon his followers the heavenly gift (Ac. 2:22-24, 33). Because the predicted baptism with the Spirit had been fulfilled, all believers everywhere could now expect to receive the promised gift (Ac. 2:38-39).

The remainder of Acts is filled with the Spirit's activities as it motivated the followers of Jesus. It enabled them to defend their cause (Ac. 4:8; 6:9-10), to boldly proclaim the gospel (Ac. 4:31), to serve each other in love (Ac. 6:3), and to face the future with courage (Ac. 9:31). Christian leaders received direction from the Holy Spirit (Ac. 10:19-20; 11:11-12), and the church was made aware of international needs so that they might respond in solidarity to their fellow brothers and sisters (Ac. 11:27-30). The Holy Spirit guided the church into making sound theological decisions (Ac. 15:28). The Spirit initiated the Gentile mission into Asia (Ac. 13:1-2), and later, further missions into Macedonia and Greece (Ac. 16:6-10). Paul was surely correct when he said that the Christian church, which is built upon the apostles, prophets and Jesus Christ himself, rises to become a spiritual temple in which God lives by his Spirit (Ep. 2:20-22). While the gift of the Spirit is central to the life of the church, it is well to remember that the work of the Spirit began in the Old Testament. As long ago as the time of Moses, the Holy Spirit infilled people for leadership (Nu. 11:16-17, 24-25; 27:18; Dt. 34:9) and service (Ex. 31:1-3; 35:30-31). During the early period of Israel's national history, the Spirit enabled her leaders to successfully fight their enemies (11:6-8; 16:13). Later, in the time of the writing prophets, the Holy Spirit inspired them to preach to the desperate ethical and political needs of the times (Ne. 9:30; 2 Pe. 1:21). After the period of the writing prophets, however, it was generally concluded that the Holy Spirit's work of inspiration had ceased. The promise was held forth, however, that near the end of the ages God would freely give the gift of his Spirit to all his people (Is. 32:14-15; 44:3; Eze. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-29). In particular, the Spirit of God would rest upon a specially chosen Leader, variously called the Branch (Is. 11:1-2) and the Servant (Is. 42:1). Though he had not appeared yet, this future figure would be anointed with the Spirit so that he might preach good news (Is. 61:1-3).

In the birth of Jesus, the witness of the New Testament is that the quenched Holy Spirit had returned. In a flurry of divine activity, Elizabeth, Zechariah, John,

Simeon and Mary were all filled with the Holy Spirit so that they might speak the words of God and fulfill major roles in God's redemptive purpose (Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27; Mt. 1:18, 20). When he reached adulthood, Jesus was himself anointed with the Holy Spirit to perform his messianic ministry (Mk. 1:10; Jn. 1:33-34; Lk. 4:1, 14-21). The apostles would later testify that, just as Isaiah had predicted, "God had anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power" (Ac. 10:38). Jesus, as the bearer of the Holy Spirit, extended the promise of the gift of the Spirit to all his disciples (Jn. 7:38-39; 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15). In his final earthly words to his followers, he told them to wait for the Father's promise (Lk. 24:49).

Thus, ever since the Day of Pentecost, when the promise of the baptism with the Spirit was fulfilled, all who believe in Jesus Christ are filled with the Spirit when they come to faith (1 Co. 12:13; Ep. 1:13-14; Ga. 3:2, 14). Every believer can be certain that he/she possesses the gift of the Spirit by an inner assurance which the Spirit himself gives (Ro. 8:16; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13), by the motivation to confess and affirm the Christian faith (1 Co. 2:14; 1 Jn. 4:2-3, 15-16), and by the inner urging of the Spirit to live the Christian life (Ro. 8:5, 14; Ga. 5:22-23). This gift of the Spirit is the guarantee of eternal life in the resurrection (Ro. 8:11; 2 Co. 1:21-22; 5:5).

In addition to the inner motivation and power to live the Christian life, the Holy Spirit also enables each believer to serve others in ways that do not come within his/her natural capacities. These promptings from God are called the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Co. 12:4-6). They are motivated by love (Ro. 5:5; 1 Co. 13), and they are given by God at his own discretion (1 Co. 12:11; He. 2:4) for the common good of the church (1 Co. 12:7; 14:12; 1 Pe. 4:8-11).

There are various kinds of these gifts, and Paul's letters provide several suggestive lists of them (Ro. 12:6-8; 1 Co. 12:8-10, 28-30; Ep. 4:11). Some are for leadership, some are for service, some seem rather spectacular, and others are performed in a quiet and unassuming way. Nevertheless, all gifts, of whatever sort, are important for the church as a body (1 Co. 12:12-27). No gift is universal in the sense that every Christian has it (1 Co. 12:29-31), but all gifts are worthy.

Paul's instruction, then, is appropriate for every believer: "Be filled with the Spirit" (Ep. 5:17b)! Again he says, "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Th. 5:19-21). For as Paul also says, "The kingdom of God is a matter of... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Ro. 14:17).

We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, and it is by the Spirit that we truly understand what God has done for us (1 Co. 2:12).

Prayer

The Third Gospel, more than any other, emphasizes the prayers of Jesus. It is Luke who tells us that the descent of the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism occurred as he was praying (3:21). It is Luke who describes Jesus as often withdrawing to lonely places for prayer (5:16), sometimes in the mountains (9:28), sometimes all night long (6:12), often in private places (9:18). Luke's account of Jesus' travail in Gethsemane is the most graphic of the gospels, and in it he details Jesus' exhaustion and anguish (22:39-44). The prayers of Jesus were so striking to the disciples that on one occasion, when they were with Jesus while he was praying, they asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1)! He responded with what we know as The Lord's Prayer.

But just what is prayer, and how did it begin? Prayer did not originate with Jesus, though he certainly altered the way in which it is to be performed.

Actually, although there is no formal doctrine of prayer in the Old Testament, the people of faith from the earliest times communicated with God spontaneously with implicit trust, usually in the form of intercession for special needs (Ge. 20:17; 24:12; 25:21; 32:9-12). The fact that they prayed for divine help implies that they believed God to be sovereign in the universe and that he could direct the outcome of their personal experiences. The character of prayer in the Old Testament contrasts sharply with that of Israel's pagan neighbors. Pagan prayer consisted of the magical use of the name of the god(s), a frequent repetition of phrases, a prescribed manner and tone, such as murmuring or whispering, the practice of radical actions to draw the attention of the god(s), such as self-inflicted wounds, and frequently enough, a self-induced ecstasy, either through psychological manipulation or narcotics. These sorts of approaches are absent from the Old Testament. There were no restrictions on posture or length of prayers. God was not to be manipulated, but rather, his sovereign will was to be examined and sought. Often enough, especially in the Psalms, prayers took the form of questions about God's purposes as well as requests for assistance or deliverance. Personal requests in the Psalms include such things as prayer for pardon (51), communion (63), justice (10, 13), protection (3, 7, 16), healing (6), and vindication (17, 109). Prayer also took the form of praise, and there are Psalms which are affirmations of confidence in God (5) as well as expressions of the joy of God's forgiveness (32).

By the time of Jesus, however, the practice of prayer had degenerated into form without relationship, a kind of rigid externalism which aimed at earning merit with God. There was a daily regimen of recitation, which included praying the *Shema* every morning and evening (a combination of Dt. 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Nu. 15:37-41) along with three scheduled periods of prayer each day. For many, prayer

was staged so that one's personal holiness could be publicly emphasized. The more that formality grew, the more distant God appeared to become.

It is into this tradition of prayer that Jesus was born, and he publicly challenged the distortion. Prayer was not to be an arena for exhibiting one's piety, long and drawn out, but it was to be private, to the point, and accompanied by a willingness to forgive others (Mt. 6:5-8; 23:5; Mk. 11:25). Jesus commended persistence in prayer (Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8) along with humility (Lk. 18:9-14).

Above all, Jesus left a pattern for prayer which indicated its essential character. This pattern, commonly known as the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13; Lk. 11:1-4), contains basic elements which should characterize the prayers of Christians. It begins with the simple, intimate address of God as *Abba*, the child's word for "father" in the native language of Jesus.

The next two clauses are directed toward God himself. One is a statement of deep reverence, and the other is a request for God's sovereign rule to be established in the earth. Then there are two personal requests, one for daily sustenance and the other for forgiveness.

Finally, the prayer closes with the request that the petitioner be kept in the time of great trial. The familiar phrase "lead us not into temptation" should probably be taken in the sense of "do not let us fall victim to temptation" or "do not allow us to succumb in the great trial."

This model of prayer redirected the externalism into which traditional Jewish prayer had fallen. Instead of prayer being formal and rigid, it was now intimate and close. In fact, the address of God as *Abba*, which Jesus himself practiced (Mk. 14:36), is directly motivated by the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ro. 8:14; Ga. 4:6). Furthermore, Christians have a new focus for the future, the establishment of God's sovereign rule in the world, and their prayers are directed toward that ultimate goal. Of course, the fullness of God's kingdom shall not come until the King himself comes at the end of the age (2 Ti. 4:1), but it has already been inaugurated in the life and ministry of Jesus (Lk. 11:20; 17:20-21), and it is being proclaimed by those who share with others the good news about Jesus (Ac. 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23).

Prayerful trust in God for daily protection and provision are always in order, even though God already knows our needs before we ask (Mt. 6:25-34). Martin Luther aptly stated that the Lord's Prayer can be prayed either 'forwards' or 'backwards'. It is prayed 'forwards' when the order of its clauses is observed, and one prays first for the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will. It is prayed 'backwards' when one begins with personal needs and anxieties. In the Lord's prayer, forgiveness plays a significant part, not only God's forgiveness for our own sins, but our own forgiveness for the offenses of others. In fact, the two are tied together, for if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us (Mt.

6:14-15;18:21-35).

Among the early Christians, prayer continued to function as a part of the normal Christian life. Some Christians of a Jewish background continued to observe formal periods of prayer (Ac. 3:1), but by far, most examples of prayer by early Christians were released from the formalism of Jewish tradition.

The early Christians prayed both privately (Ac. 10:9) and corporately (Ac. 12:5, 12). In emergencies, they confidently put their trust in God (Ac. 9:40). Similar to Jesus when he forgave his executioners, Stephen prayed for the forgiveness of the mob which lynched him (Ac. 7:59-60) and Paul prayed for the forgiveness of the Christians who failed to stand with him at his trial (2 Ti. 4:16). Prayer was offered when facing decisions (Ac. 1:24-25), when making farewells (Ac. 20:36; 21:5), when confronting difficult circumstances (1 Ti. 5:5; Ja. 5:13-16), and even when eating (1 Ti. 4:4-5). Leaders were consecrated with prayer (Ac. 6:6; 13:3; 14:23), and the church petitioned God's help in spreading the gospel (Col. 4:2-4; 2 Th. 3:1). Paul's letters abound with prayers for the maturity and perseverance of his converts (Ro. 1:9-10a; Ep. 1:16-17; Phil. 1:3-6, 9-11; Col. 1:9-12; 4:12; 2 Th. 1:11; 2 Ti. 1:3).

Sometimes prayer was so intense that it was expressed by inarticulate groans as the Holy Spirit enabled believers to pray in spite of weakness and in spite of not having a clear understanding of God's purposes(Ro. 8:26-27). In fact, the gift of the Spirit to each believer revitalized their prayers so that they might pray with the help which God in his Spirit offers rather than merely out of their own strength (Ep. 6:18; Jude 20). Finally, all prayers were offered to God, the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son (Col. 3:17).

Prayer was so natural, so thoroughly a part of the Christian life, that Christians developed a greeting which was in effect a prayer -- *maranatha*, "Our Lord, come!" (1 Co. 16:22). Paul's advice to the Thessalonian Christians still stands, "Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Th. 5:17-18).

The Church and the Churches

There may never have been a more profound significance between a singular and a plural than in the words "church" and "churches" in the New Testament. On the one hand, our Lord can speak of building his "church" on a rock (Mt. 16:18), and Paul can say, "To God be glory in the church....throughout all generations" (Ep. 3:21). On the other hand, Luke can speak of the "churches" in Syria and Cilicia (Ac. 15:41), and Paul can speak of practices that he has established for "all the churches" (1 Co. 7:17). This distinction, the distinction between the universal and the local, is often not well understood, and in fact, popular misunderstandings have created

unnecessary problems for many Christian groups. But let us begin at the beginning with the concept and the word itself.

Sometimes, definitions are clarified by explaining what something is not -- especially when there are popular misconceptions. Along this line, it is important to observe that in the Bible the word church is never used to refer to buildings where Christians gather. Furthermore, the word church never refers to a sect of Christians who have beliefs somewhat different from other Christians, that is, the word does not refer to various Christian denominations. Instead the word church in the Bible has the fundamental meaning of a congregation or an assembly of people (1 Co.11:18).

In the Old Testament, the church was the assembled congregation of Israel who came before God at the Tent of Meeting or the Temple (Ac. 7:38). Jesus used the term church to refer to the gathered assembly of the believing community which is able to exercise discipline (Mt. 18:17). After Pentecost, Luke uses the word to refer to the various companies of Christians in Jerusalem (Ac. 5:11), Antioch (Ac. 13:1) and Caesarea (Ac. 18:22). Paul can use the word to refer to a gathering of believers in the local home of Priscilla and Aquila (Ro. 16:5; 1 Co. 16:19), and in plural form, to a group of congregations in a Roman Province (Ga. 1:2). More rarely, a broader usage appears which seems to include all the various congregations of Christians united under the single word church (1 Co. 12:28; 15:9; Ga.1:13).

As such, the terms "church" and "churches" in the New Testament are more of a geographical identification than a denominational one. Even when the term church is used to refer to a local assembly of Christians which meets at a particular place, it is the assembled body of believers itself which comprise the church, not the physical structure in which they meet. While today we may continue to use denominational designations, such as, the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, and so forth, such expressions reflect a modern development of meaning and do not arise from the Bible itself. Similarly, when we say that we are "going to church," or we point out that such and such a building is "a Presbyterian church," we are not using the word in the way the New Testament itself uses it.

Someone may well ask, "So what?" In one sense, there is nothing wrong with using the word church in the modern sense of a denomination or a building where Christians meet, since we all know what is meant by such an expression. However, all Christians should understand that such usages have implicit dangers, since they tend to distort our understanding, and more seriously, may even come to displace the biblical meaning. Paul would have found it profoundly disturbing to have come to a modern city in which Christians had polarized themselves from each other as enemies. In fact, such a situation developed in Corinth. Some house congregations

were championing Apollos, some Paul, others Peter, and still others Christ, the latter being the purists, of course (1Co.1:10-13). Paul said that such quarreling among Christians was an indication of worldliness (1 Co. 3:1-8). Christians must understand that together they are all God's field and God's building (1 Co. 3:9, 16), and such divisiveness must be stopped (1 Co. 3:21-23).

Of course, the argument might be put forth that since the various streams of Christian thinking are often diverse, this incompatibility justifies our tendency toward judgmentalism and sectarianism. But does it? Does not Paul command the early Christians to "keep the unity of the Spirit" (Ep. 4:3) "....until we all reach unity in the faith" (Ep. 4:13)? Is not the commonality of true Christianity to be found in the one body, the one Spirit, the one hope, the one Lord, the one faith, the one baptism, and the one God -- who is the "Father of all, over all, through all, and in all" (Ep. 4:4-6)?

To be sure, there will be differences of Christian opinion on a host of secondary issues. There were secondary differences even among the earliest Christians. Jewish Christians in Palestine followed the Jewish customs handed down through Moses, and Gentile Christians did not (Ac. 21:17-26). Some congregations were mostly Jewish (Ac. 11:19), others were mostly Gentile (Ga.4:8), and some were mixed (Ac. 11:20-21; 13:1). Some Christians ate meat and drank wine, and other Christians were vegetarians and teetotalers (Ro. 14:2-3, 20-21). Some Christians observed holy days, and others did not (Ro. 14:5-6). Some congregations had a wide variety of worship expressions which do not seem to have been typical of all the other congregations (1 Co. 14:26). These secondary issues, however, were not a just cause for dividing the Christian churches from each other. God's purpose for Christianity was not to have a Jewish church and a Gentile church, or for that matter, any other kind of sectarian division. Rather, he determined to have a world-wide company of believers who were "members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Ep. 3:2-6).

At the beginning of the 20th century there were an estimated 1,900 church denominations; today there are an estimated 22,000. This is not in itself wrong, but it is essential that Christians stop thinking of their particular denomination as the "true church" and all others as deviants. One's own local church or one's own denomination is not the vine and all the others branches. Rather, Jesus is the vine, and all of us are branches (Jn. 15:5)! Furthermore, Christian unity need not be construed as uniformity. Unity is attitudinal, while uniformity is merely a stifling sameness. The challenge for Christians is to live in unity with each other without insisting that in worship, structure and theology we are more uniform than were the earliest Christians.

The statement from the Nicene Creed in about the Fourth Century A.D. is still very appropriate: "We believe....in one holy universal and apostolic church." This belief does not take away from the entity of the local congregations (the churches plural), but it affirms the unity of the Christian body of believers world-wide (the church singular). Labels are relatively unimportant; Christian faith is all-important.

Christian Worship

From the time of David, the central Israelite shrine for worship was Mt. Zion, where Solomon built the temple (Ps. 78:67-72; 132:11-16). Some thirty miles or so to the north was another shrine, this one maintained by the Samaritans on Mt. Gerizim. In the Samaritan edition of the Pentateuch, a special command was recorded after Exodus 20:17 which stipulated that a sanctuary was to be built on Mt. Gerizim for worship. By the time of Jesus, the argument about which was the proper place for worship had gone on for several centuries.

It is this controversy which was raised by the Samaritan woman when she met Jesus at an ancient well near the foot of Mt. Gerizim. "Our fathers worshiped on this mountain," she challenged, "but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." But Jesus responded, "Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (Jn. 4:20-25)!

While everyone seems to agree that Jesus was calling for a higher level of worship, it is also true that Christians sometimes engage in the same kind of argumentation as the Samaritan woman -- should we worship this way or that way? Liturgical, free-style, charismatic, ordered, spontaneous, solemn, vibrant -- with hymnbooks or without, with choirs or without, with musical instruments or without -- the styles are endless. Like the Samaritan woman, we are often preoccupied with our own particular sacred mountain.

What Jesus described as worshiping "in spirit and in truth" was not so much a matter of style as of a humble, contrite, grateful and adoring spirit. A new order of worship was being inaugurated which rendered the old questions obsolete. The fact that God himself is Spirit and that Jesus was that divine Spirit, revealed as the incarnate glory of the Father, meant that there was a new locus for worship -- Jesus himself (2 Co. 3:18). The place of worship was indifferent; the object of worship was crucial!

Some might assume, therefore, that Jesus intended to eliminate all external forms of worship in preference for a purely internal kind, but the worship of the earliest Christians seems to suggest otherwise. In fact, the early church practiced various external forms, including teaching, fellowship, celebrating the Lord's table,

and prayer (Ac. 2:42, 46). In their meetings, which they encouraged all believers to attend (He. 10:25), they practiced corporate prayer, which is especially reflected in the plural "Our Father" of the Lord's prayer (Mt. 6:9-13; cf. Ac. 4:24; 1 Ti. 2:8). They sang hymns (Mk. 14:26; Ac. 16:25; 1 Co. 14:26; Col. 3:16; Ja. 5:13). They publicly read the scriptures (Col. 4:16; 1 Th. 5:27; 1 Ti. 4:13). They preached and taught (Ac. 4:2; 5:20-21; 20:20; 2 Ti. 2:2; 4:2). They celebrated the Lord's Table (Ac. 20:7; 1 Co. 10:15-17; 11:33-34). They baptized converts (Ac. 2:41; 16:15, 33; 18:8). They shared in various sorts of spiritual encouragement and exhortation (1 Co. 14:26).

In these worship forms, there were at least three things which were different than before. One, as has been mentioned, was the object of worship. Jesus, the Messiah -- crucified, buried, raised and glorified -- was the center of their praise (Ga. 1:3-5; 6:14; Ep. 1:3; 3:20-21; Re. 5:11-14). Second, the gift of the Holy Spirit had established a new relationship between humans and God so that their worship was now at a deeper level of intimacy (Ro. 8:15-16, 26-27; Ga. 4:6; 2 Co. 4:6; Ep. 5:18-20). Finally, true worship was viewed as flowing over into everyday life. Worship was not merely a matter of congregational form, it was a matter of personally living a life of Christian service (Ro. 12:1-2; 14:17-18; Phil. 4:18; He. 13:15-16).

For the early Christians, true worship had to do more with the people than the building. Christians worshiped in synagogues (Ac. 13:14), the temple (Ac. 5:12), lecture halls (Ac. 19:9) and homes (Phlmn 2). What the temple was to the old form of worship, the community itself was to the new order -- for the people were the temple (1 Pe. 2:4-5; Ep. 2:19-22).

In early Christian worship there was both freedom and order. The freedom was not chaotic, nor the order stagnant. Rather, freedom was regulated by certain guidelines, and order was open to fresh inspiration. The general criteria by which any particular act of congregational worship was to be evaluated was edification and intelligibility. The propriety of worship was shaped by the questions, "Is it upbuilding?" and "Is it understandable?" This criteria is most clearly explained in Paul's first Corinthian letter.

In Corinth, freedom had degenerated into offensiveness and confusion. Outsiders were inclined to think that the Corinthians were insane (1 Co.14:23). Acts of worship were employed which were meaningless to the congregation as a whole (1 Co. 14:7-12, 16-19). People were apparently trying to address the church simultaneously (1 Co. 14:27, 30-32), and the service of the Lord's Table was so severely abused that Paul said, "Your meetings do more harm than good" (1 Co. 11:17).

In his response to the Corinthians, Paul sought to bring their worship into an

orderly form, since, as he said, "God is not a God of disorder" (1 Co. 14:33a). At the same time, he refused to strip them of freedom, instead giving them guidelines to prevent their freedom from becoming offensive and abusive (1 Co. 14:26, 39-40).

These principles of early Christian worship are just as valid today. Christ is still the object of all worship. The congregation is still the temple of the Holy Spirit in which God dwells. True worship should still overflow into one's lifestyle. The Holy Spirit still creates an intimacy of relationship with God which makes worship vibrant and personal. The principles of order and freedom should still characterize Christian gatherings.

Furthermore, the acts and forms of worship employed by the early Christians are still very appropriate. Christians today, just as centuries ago, continue to pray together, sing songs, read scripture, baptize converts, preach, teach, fellowship, and celebrate the Lord's Table. Above all, they do these things "in spirit and in truth!" When they do, they bring honor and glory to God, for these are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks (Jn. 4:23b).

Eucharist

One of the central elements in early Christian worship was a special meal of thanksgiving and sharing. In a letter by a non-Christian in 112 A.D., Pliny, the Roman Governor of Bithynia, described an early Christian worship service as closing with a "custom....to partake of food, but food of an ordinary and innocent kind." Christians know this meal as a reenactment of the Last Supper which Jesus held with his disciples on the night he was betrayed.

Why do Christians eat bread and drink wine as an act of worship? The answer to this question has its roots both in the Old Testament as well as in the life and ministry of Jesus.

In the first place, the eating of a sacred meal was an ancient way of sealing a covenant -- a way of confirming that a solemn promise would be honored and kept (Ge. 26:28-31; 31:51-54; Dt. 27:1-8; 2 Sa. 3:17-21). Just as important is the fact that the central redemptive event of the Old Testament, the Passover, was both sealed and annually celebrated by a sacred meal (Ex. 12). Even the term "the Lord's Table," so familiar to Christians from the writings of Paul, has its first mention in the Old Testament in the context of sacrificial worship (Mal. 1:7). Finally, the prophets envisioned a great banquet at the end of the world which would celebrate God's redemptive work (Is. 25:6-8).

These Old Testament ideas converge in the Last Supper which Jesus held with his disciples. The supper was held on the night of the Passover celebration, and it was at this supper that Christ confirmed with his disciples a new covenant, a covenant which offered forgiveness based on his sacrificial death (Mk. 14:12-15,

22-25; Heb. 8:6-8, 10-12). The Messiah had come! The salvation of God had come! The new covenant had been confirmed! The Last Supper heralded all these things.

In addition to the background of the Old Testament for the Last Supper, there are several important factors in the life of Jesus which give special meaning to the meal. One of these is the fact that Jesus offered table fellowship to all kinds of people as a symbol of God's invitation for salvation. Sinners, prostitutes, revenue officers -- all who were despised -- were freely invited to eat with Jesus (Mt. 9:10-13; Lk. 15:1-2; 7:33-34; Mt. 21:31-32). In his feeding miracles (Mk. 6:30-44; 8:1-10) and in his parables (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Lk. 14:15-24)), Jesus openly invited all who would come to participate in the great messianic banquet. The future joy and fellowship of all God's people in the end of the age was to be celebrated by table fellowship in the present (Mk. 2:18-19).

At the Last Supper, the words and actions of Jesus took on a heightened meaning for the disciples -- a meaning which collected all the strands of significance from Jesus' gracious table fellowship. His gestures and words were so striking that they would continue to be repeated in Christian celebrations from then until now.

Here are his actions (1 Co. 11:23-26; Mt. 26:26-29). He took bread, he gave thanks, and he broke and distributed the bread so that the disciples might share it with him. He took the cup, he gave thanks, and he gave it to the disciples, who received it and drank from it with him.

Here are his words. "This bread is my body which is given for you," he said (Lk. 22:19). "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," he said (Lk. 22:20). "I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new in the kingdom of God," he said (Mk.14:25). And finally, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Co. 11:24b).

In repeating these actions and words, Christians reenact and reaffirm the covenant ritual of the Last Supper. They celebrate the salvation of God which was made possible through the death of Jesus. Furthermore, they anticipate the coming of Jesus who promised to eat and drink with them in the Father's kingdom (Mt. 26:29; 1 Co. 11:26). This is why the meal is called Eucharist, since the Greek verb *eucharisteo* (= to give thanks) is used in all the biblical accounts to describe the gestures and words of Jesus. It is indeed a ritual of thanksgiving to God for the one who gave his own life for the life of the world (Jn. 6:51). Because one eats at the invitation of the Lord himself, it is truly "the Lord's table" (1 Co. 10:21).

Yet even all this does not exhaust the meaning of the Christian sacred meal. The elements of the meal also point toward the unity of the church in Jesus Christ. The sharing of the single loaf represents a *koinonia* (= fellowship), that is, a participation in the body of Christ which collectively consists of his redeemed

people. The sharing of the cup represents a *koinonia* in the redemptive power of Christ's shed blood (1 Co. 10:16-17). It is from this New Testament word *koinonia* that we derive the English term "communion." In fact, it is because the Lord's Table represents Christian unity in the redemptive death of Jesus that Paul reprimands the insensitivity and callous behavior of the Corinthians who were not observing the meal in love toward each other (1 Co. 11:17-22, 33-34).

When Christians celebrate the Lord's Table, they spiritually encounter the invisible Christ. Just as at pagan celebrations the worshipers encountered demons in their rituals, so also Christians encounter the risen Christ in Eucharist, since it is truly his table (1 Co. 10:18-21).

So then, reverence for Christ and love for each other are the central attitudes which the worshiper ought to exhibit at communion. To fail to do so, in the words of Paul, is to fail to "discern the Lord's body," and in fact, is to "sin against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Co.11:27-29).

Christians have various differences in their understanding of both the inner meaning as well as the outer procedures for celebrating Eucharist. Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Jesus, and they treat the meal as a sacrifice. Protestants consider the Roman Catholic teaching as verging on the magical and as foreign to the thought of the New Testament. Lutherans believe that Christ is bodily present in the bread and wine in a mysterious way, though they reject the idea that the bread and wine are transformed. Those from some traditions deny that Christ is present at the meal in any unique sense at all, while others hold that he is truly there, though in a spiritual way. This latter view, that Christ is truly present in a spiritual way, probably fits best with the biblical evidence.

In Christian practice, there is also diversity. Some use bread with yeast, others without. Some use wine, others grape juice. Some use a common cup, others individual cups. Some use bread already divided, others have a ritual breaking of the bread. Some only allow local or denominational church members to participate, others allow any believer in Christ of whatever background to participate. These various differences ought not to divide the universal church. Surely the reality toward which the supper points is the sacrificial work of Christ accomplished once and for all at Calvary (He. 9:26a-28)! That truth is shared by all who have come to faith in him.

The Divine Nature

Very early in his ministry, Jesus came into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders because, as they said, he was "making himself equal with God" (Jn. 5:18; 10:33). Indeed, the Fourth Gospel directly calls Jesus "God the only Son" (1:18,

NIV). While New Testament passages which directly apply the designation "God" to Jesus are not numerous, they certainly do appear (i.e., Jn. 1:1; 20:18; Ro. 9:5; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15; 2:9; Tit. 2:13; He. 1:8; 2 Pe. 1:1). At the same time, the uniform assertion of the Old Testament is that there is only one God (Dt. 6:4; Is. 44:6; 45:5-6). The New Testament agrees in the basic Christian confession, "Yet for us there is but one God, the Father....and one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Co.8:6).

So, then, what is the Christian understanding of the Divine Nature? How can there be God, the Father, and God, the Son, and at the same time be only one God? And further, how does the Holy Spirit fit into the Divine Nature? These questions concern one of the most basic affirmations of the Christian faith, that is, the affirmation that the Divine Nature has a three-in-one character. Such a statement is admittedly paradoxical, but it is the only way to do justice to the various biblical statements about God.

John begins the Fourth Gospel with the paradoxical assertion that the Word "was with God" and yet "was God" (Jn. 1:1-2). It is apparent that John understood the Son to be preexistent with the Father in the beginning (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1-3), and his term "the Word" is his way of referring to Jesus, God's Son. In making such a statement, he indicates that there is both unity and distinction between God, who is the Father, and the Word, who is Jesus our Lord. The Word who was with God and who was God became flesh, an act which Christians call the incarnation. Paul says much the same thing, though in different words, when he explains that though Jesus was in very nature God, he surrendered his rank and appeared in a body (Phil. 2:6-7; 1 Ti. 3:16). In still another biblical document, the writer says that the Son is the exact representation of God's being (He. 1:3).

The uniqueness of Jesus as the Son of God is most clearly expressed in the Fourth Gospel. The Son of God is from heaven (3:13), and it is to there that he returns (6:62; 16:28). He was loved by the Father before the creation of the world (17:24), and he alone knows the Father fully (1:18; 6:46). Yet in spite of this apparent distinction between the Father and the Son, there is also an interpenetration which prevents a separation of the Father and the Son into independent Beings (10:30; 14:8-11; 17:11, 21-23). The unity between the Father and the Son is clear in that there is undivided honor (5:23; 13:31-32), a singularity of purpose (5:19), and a unity of essence (12:44-45). Turning to the Holy Spirit, one of the first things to observe is that several important references to the Holy Spirit are personalized in John's Gospel. The Holy Spirit is *Someone*, not *Something* -- a divine "He" not a divine "It" (14:26; 16:13-14). This fact is more apparent in the Greek text than in English, due to grammatical considerations, but the fact remains that the Holy Spirit is not just an impersonal force. Furthermore, to receive the Holy Spirit is to receive Christ himself (14:16-20). Even though the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the

Father, yet he is sent by the Son (14:26; 15:26; 16:7). Once more, these sorts of statements, when taken as a whole, imply interpenetration as well as distinction. The Holy Spirit is described as interacting with God (Ro. 8:26-27; 1 Co. 2:11), yet at the same time He is God (Ro. 8:11). The Holy Spirit can also be called the Spirit of Jesus (Ac. 16:7; Ro. 8:9; 2 Co. 3:17; Ga. 4:6; Phil. 1:19; 1 Pe. 1:11). Yet there are not three divine Spirits but one (Ep. 2:18; 4:4)!

The evidence of the New Testament, then, is that in a paradoxical way there is one Divine Nature within whom are three clear personal distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, it is appropriate to speak of the triadic conception of God in the New Testament. There is no perfect analogy within the physical world, though the imperfect analogies of water, ice, and vapor, or sun, sunlight, and heat may provide partial analogies. The New Testament does not seek to explain this triadic paradox, but merely asserts it. In passages such as the baptism of Jesus (Mk. 1:10-11), the Great Commission (Mt. 28:19), the salutations in pastoral letters (1 Pe. 1:2), and closing benedictions (2 Co. 13:14), this triadic way of speaking about God is employed. Even internally within Paul's letters he frequently arranges his statements around the triad of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Ro. 15:30; 1 Co. 12:4-6; Ga. 4:6; Ep. 2:18; 4:4-6; Tit. 3:4-6).

Thus, the triadic pattern of the Divine Nature is central to the faith of the New Testament. The faith of the early Christians was that there was one God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is entirely proper to refer to the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God -- even though there are not three Gods but one!

This same triadic conception of the one eternal God continues in the literature of the Christians who followed in the post-apostolic period. Clement of Rome, for instance, writes: "Do we not have one God and one Christ, and one Spirit of grace poured out upon us?" (about the 90s A.D.). The triadic baptismal formula became the most popular one and is reflected in the *Didache*: "Baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (about the 120s A.D.). Justin Martyr speaks of Christian baptism in a similar way: "For in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water" (about the 140s A.D.). Placard, the disciple of the apostle John, composed a praise to God which reads: "I praise thee....through Jesus Christ, your Beloved Son, through whom be to you with him and the Holy Spirit glory" (about the 150s A.D.). By about 180 A.D., the theological term *Triados*, or Trinity, was being used, and while this term is not found in the Bible, the triadic concept of God surely is. The term Trinity has survived through the centuries as the one most generally accepted for describing the three-in-oneness of God.

Eventually, the term *Persona*, or Persons, came to be used to describe the

distinctions within the undivided Being of God, though it should be pointed out that the term was not intended to mean that God was three individuals on the order of three human persons. Rather, the term was meant to describe the three internal self-distinctions within the Being of the one undivided God. Finally, the statements of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed became the standard confessions of faith in the three-in-one God: "I believe in God the Father Almighty....and in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord....and in the Holy Spirit."

The church through the ages has exalted and worshiped God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doxology of Patrick, the 5th century missionary to Ireland, beautifully expresses this faith:

> "I bind unto myself today,
> The strong name of the Trinity,
> By invocation of the same,
> The Three in One, And One in Three,
> Of Whom all nature hath creation,
> Eternal Father, Spirit, Word.
> Praise to the Lord of my salvation:
> Salvation is of Christ the Lord!"

Sin and Forgiveness

One of the imperatives which God gave to the Israelites in the Old Testament is transferred over to the church in the New Testament. It is the command of the Lord, "Be holy, for I am holy" (Le. 11:44-45; 19:1-2; 1 Pe. 1:14-16). The fundamental meaning of holiness is the idea of being set apart for God's special use. Being holy is bi-directional. It involves separation from things that are sinful, that is, things that would violate the holy nature of God (1 Co. 6:9-10; Ga. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5-10), and it equally involves separation unto God's mission in the world (Jn. 15:16; 17:15-18; Phil. 2:14-16; 1 Pe. 2:9). Holiness is not achieved by becoming isolated from society; rather, holiness is being "in the world but not of the world" (Jn. 15:19; 17:11, 14-16).

The ethical side of holiness is both a *fact* and a *demand*. It is a fact in that when individuals have put their faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the righteousness of Christ has been transferred over to them (1 Co. 1:30; Ga. 3:27). One's faith is counted for righteousness (Ro. 4:3-5, 16, 23-25)! In this sense, the Christian is made holy by a divine declaration, and it is for this reason that the early Christians were called "saints," or literally, "the holy ones" (Ac. 9:32; Ro. 1:7; 16:15; 2 Co. 1:1; 13:13). At the same time, holiness is urged upon Christians in

imperative terms. It is a demand as well as a fact (Ro. 6:1-2; Ep. 4:1; Col. 1:10-12; 1 Pe. 1:15-16). It is quite correct on the one hand to say that all believers are already holy in Christ, and on the other, that they must live a holy life. God gives the gift of holiness, and then he calls men and women to be holy. The Christian does not live a lifestyle of holiness in order to become holy; rather, the Christian lives a lifestyle of holiness because God has given the gift of holiness and calls him/her to live up to that privileged position.

The imperative that Christians are to live a holy life implies what the New Testament makes explicit elsewhere, that is, that living a holy life is often a struggle. In fact, Paul describes it as a war (Ep. 6:10-17; 1 Ti. 1:18-19). Each person must contend with human weakness, a weakness which Paul calls "the flesh" (Ga. 5:16-17). Against our human weakness stands the power of God which is resident in the Holy Spirit, and as Paul says, men and women are slaves to whatever field of force they yield themselves (Ro. 6:16, 12-13). They can succumb to their weaknesses, or they can live in the overcoming power of the Spirit (Ro. 8:5, 9, 12-14). In coming to faith in Christ, they have been set free from the domination of their sinful natures (Ro. 6:17-22), but it is important that Christians do not lapse into indulging their weaknesses (Ga. 5:13). Christians are truly free -- not free to do whatever they like, but free to do what is right. They are free not only to choose the good but to do it! They are no longer a mandatory victim of their weaknesses. At the same time, freedom brings responsibility. Christians are responsible to work out the implications of their faith in practical terms (Phil. 2:12-13). Within every man and woman's inner self is a battlefield upon which are arrayed the tendencies of the sinful nature against the motivations of the Holy Spirit (Ga. 5:17). Paul vividly describes the inward struggle between evil and good (Ro. 7:15-23), and he makes clear that victory only comes through the power of Christ (Ro. 7:24-25; 8:1-4, 37-39).

Now it would be wonderful if every Christian could simply claim perfection and live up to it. Apparently there were some in the Philippian congregation who believed that they had reached the level of perfection, for Paul had to discourage this notion, pointing out that even he himself had not yet attained his goal in that regard (Phil. 3:12-16). John, also, contended with a faction who claimed to be above sin, and he rather bluntly pointed out that such a claim is a falsehood (1 Jn. 1:8, 10). Even the Lord's Prayer says as much, for part of the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples to pray was "forgive us our sins" (Lk. 11:4). At the same time, Christians cannot keep on living a life of sin, or else they betray the fact that they have never truly come to faith in Christ in the first place (1 Jn. 3:6, 9-10).

So, then, what are Christians to do when they succumb to their weaknesses? The first thing is not to fall into despair. Those who belong to Christ will not be

condemned, because in Christ they are declared to be holy by the atoning work of the cross. No one can bring charges against God's people, because Christ himself will defend them (Ro. 8:31-34). They are under his protection, and no one is able to snatch them away (Jn. 10:27-30; 17:12). Christ himself stands as their living defense (1 Jn. 2:1-2).

At the same time, sin is not to be trivialized. Paul explains to the Corinthians that some Christians will be saved, as it were, as those escaping through fire. The impact of their lives will be nil (1 Co. 3:11-15). Later, Paul urges the Corinthians to examine themselves to see whether they are in the faith (2 Co. 13:5-9). Every Christian needs regular self-examination, and one of the important occasions for this examination is the celebration of the Lord's Table, since it recalls Christ's sacrifice for sin (1 Co. 11:27-32). One need not wait for a special occasion, however, to ask for God's forgiveness. Believers are free to pray directly to God with confidence (He. 10:22-23), and if they sin, they may freely confess their sins to Christ (1 Jn. 1:9).

Forgiveness for sin and freedom from guilt are immediately available to anyone who asks. This process of confession and forgiveness is very similar to Jesus' statement to Peter on the night of the Last Supper, when the Lord intended to wash Peter's feet. The washing of feet symbolized cleansing, and Peter's reluctance was met with a rebuke by the Lord (Jn. 13:6-9). Jesus' closing statement puts into perspective the position of the Christian who has been cleansed already by the atoning work of Christ. "A person who has had a bath," Jesus said, "needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean" (Jn. 13:10a). So it is with believers. They are clean in Christ, but periodically, they need to wash their feet as well.

The one thing, more than any other, which would prevent Christ's forgiveness is arrogance and pride. The person who arrogantly believes that he/she does not need God's mercy will receive little of God's forgiveness (Lk. 7:36-48). At the same time, Jesus was quite clear that the person who came to him would not be turned away (Jn. 6:37). For those who are confident of their own righteousness, there is nothing to be received from the Lord, but to the one who humbly asks for God's mercy, there is immediate cleansing (Lk. 18:9-14). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).

Christian Stewardship

The New Testament ethic of giving is perhaps best summed up in a statement by St. Paul, who said, "Each person should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Co. 9:7). The freedom for Christians to financially support God's mission in the world

apart from pressure is not always well understood by churches. Either Christians are rigidly legalistic in their approach to financial stewardship, offering 10% of their money, no more and no less, or they are passive and apathetic, giving grudgingly and spasmodically, or they respond primarily when the psychological pressure is put upon them from some Christian fundraiser, whether a pastor or some other leader. Unfortunately, none of these approaches does justice to the Bible's teaching on financial stewardship. Many Christians regard the Old Testament tithing laws as obligatory upon the church, but when they do, such a conclusion is more likely to be in the form which is recorded in Leviticus 27:30-33 than in the form which is recorded in Deuteronomy 14:22-27.

So what does the Bible actually say about financial stewardship and giving? The earliest biblical account of giving to a religious person or cause is Abram's voluntary tithe (= a tenth) of the spoils of war to Melchizedek the priest of Jerusalem (Ge. 14:17-20). This gesture was not unique in the ancient Near East, and the practice of tithing to a religious institution can be found in Egyptian and Akkadian literature as well as in the Bible. Abram's grandson, Jacob, also voluntarily promised to tithe of his wealth to God (Ge. 28:22), though no details are given. However, it is in the law of Moses that tithing ceased to be voluntary.

The Mosaic law regarding tithes regulated the Israelites' giving in a three year cycle. The tithes of the first two years were to be gathered and taken to the central shrine for an annual celebration of God's bountiful blessings (Dt. 12:5-19; 14:22-27). The families of Israel were to feast before Yahweh while generously inviting aliens, orphans, widows and Levites to share their bounty. The third year's tithes were donated for the support of the clergy who had no land inheritance and who, therefore, could not cultivate crops or keep herds as a source of income (Lv. 27:26-34; Dt. 14:28-29; Nu. 18:21, 24-32). In an agrarian culture, tithing was largely in the form of animals and produce. Israel, of course, did not always follow these tithing laws, and in fact, reprimands were sometimes given when they did not (Mal. 3:8-10).

By the time of Jesus, tithing for many Jews had become a way to earn merit with God. The legalists boasted of the fact that they gave tithes of even the most insignificant things, like spices (Mt. 23:23), while at the same time they managed to manipulate their own laws to their advantage (Mt. 23:1-4). Jesus called for a higher ethic of personal stewardship. In the first place, giving which was ostentatious or legalistic did not impress God (Lk. 18:10-14; Mt. 6:1-4). Gifts were to be evaluated, not so much by how large they were, but by how much the person had left over after the gift had been offered (Lk. 21:1-4). Jesus taught that giving to God must be done without the selfish motive of seeking a return (Mt. 5:42; 10:8; Lk. 14:12-14), and in some cases, Jesus called upon people to surrender the totality of their wealth (Lk.

12:33-34; Mt. 19:16-24).

Once one passes into the era of the early church, Old Testament obligatory tithing can no longer be found. One reason is that early Christian culture was more urban than agrarian, and a tithing system based upon farming was impractical in the great metropolitan cities of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, the early Christian leaders strongly maintained that Christians were free from the Mosaic legalism which had dominated the previous age (Ro. 10:4; Ga. 5:1). In the council of Acts 15, when the Christian leaders gathered to discuss just what was to be required of Gentile Christians as far as the law of Moses was concerned, tithing laws were pointedly ignored, though there was certainly a concern for the poor (Ga. 2:9-10). Yet even though the early Christians did not employ the Old Testament laws of obligatory tithing, they were conscientious about financial stewardship.

In the Jerusalem church, believers pooled their resources in order to share with each other (Ac. 4:32-37), though such action was voluntary and not forced (Ac. 5:1-4). Special concern was given to the disadvantaged, such as widows (Ac. 6:1; 11:27-30; Ja. 2:14-17), though criteria were developed to avoid dispensing support unwisely (1 Ti. 5:3, 9-10). Paul solicited funds from the churches in Macedonia, Achaia and Galatia for the impoverished Christians in Palestine (1 Co. 16:1-4; 2 Co. 8:1-4; Ro. 15:25-27). In the collection of these relief offerings, some very wise principles were employed to administrate the gifts of the generous Christians in Asia Minor and Greece. In the first place, Paul allowed members of the assembly to oversee the collection and distribution of the money (1 Co. 16:2-4; 2 Co. 8:16-19). This principle, in a modern sense, calls for an open review of Christian finances with all who contribute. Second, offerings were voluntary, not obligatory, though generosity was certainly encouraged (2 Co. 8:1-8; 9:5-7). Paul called this kind of generosity the "grace of giving." Third, the motivation for such giving was a response to the selfless gift of Christ (2 Co. 8:9) and the desire for equality among God's people (2 Co. 8:13-15). Any gifts which were made were to be evaluated according to the giver's ability to give (2 Co. 8:12). Finally, the administration of the gift was conducted in a highly ethical and sensitive manner, for as Paul says, "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men" (2 Co. 8:20-21).

In summary, then, modern Christians should take their ethic of giving from the early Christians and the teachings of Jesus. Being stingy is surely antithetic to the liberality and generosity taught by the Lord Jesus. Tithing may even be encouraged as a voluntary spiritual discipline so long as it does not lapse into legalism. At the same time, psychological manipulation and guilt-building are inappropriate methods of raising funds, even for the best of causes. The advice

offered in Proverbs is still very much in order: "Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine" (3:9-10). As far as material wealth is concerned, it is well to remember, "Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting, with strife" (17:1). And finally, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward him for what he has done" (19:17).

The Kingdom of God

When John the Baptist came preaching in the Judean desert, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near" (Mt. 3:1-2), he did not explain what he meant by the expression the "kingdom of God," or in Jewish idiom, "the kingdom of heaven." (The Jews were reluctant to pronounce the sacred name of God, and they often substituted words, such as heaven, to avoid using the divine name). Following John's imprisonment, Jesus also began preaching in the desert, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mk. 1:14-15)!

While the exact phrase "kingdom of God" was not used in the Old Testament, the idea of a new order which would be inaugurated by God at the close of history runs throughout the prophets (cf. Am. 9:13-15; Is. 65:17-25). In Jewish thought, there were two ages -- the Present Age and the Age to Come. The idiom of the two ages was common in both rabbinic literature and popular thought by the first century, and the people who heard John and Jesus preach would naturally have understood the expression "the kingdom of God" to refer to God's coming new order in the world.

The hope for the kingdom of God burned intensely in the Jewish heart. The terrible exile of the Israelites from their land by the Assyrians and Babylonians had made it abundantly clear that the old kingdom of Israel was not the kingdom of God (2 Ki. 17:1-23; 25:1-21; La. 1-5). Even for the few who returned from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem, the domination of Palestine by the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans had reinforced the bitter truth that the only hope for the future lay in God's intervention in history (Zec. 8:1-8; 9:9-10; 14:1-9). Daniel, the prophet, described the coming of God's kingdom as a rock which would crush the kingdoms of the world -- and which would then become an eternal kingdom which would never be destroyed (Da. 2:31-45). Thus, it is little wonder that when John began to preach that the kingdom of God was near, people flocked to hear him from all sections of Jewry (Mt. 3:5; Mk. 1:5).

One of the things that became immediately clear in the preaching of Jesus was that the kingdom of God would be inaugurated along different lines than was popularly expected. The popular ideas were not compatible with what Jesus intended to announce (Mk. 2:21-22). The popular expectation was for a militaristic

messiah who would revive the theocratic throne of David and crush the Roman oppression (Jn. 6:14-15). In fact, various such messianic figures did indeed arise among the Jews, only to be crushed by the armies of Rome (Ac. 5:36-37). Jesus, on the other hand, announced that the kingdom was for the spiritually poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers (Mt. 5:3-10). He challenged his listeners to love their enemies, not to fight them (Mt. 5:38-48). Anyone who would not approach the kingdom on these terms would be like a fool who built his house on unstable sand (Mt. 7:24-29).

To be sure, the inauguration of the kingdom of God would be accompanied by war. Still, it was not the Romans who were to be defeated, but the powers of evil (Mk. 1:23-28, 34; 3:11-15, 22-30; Lk. 11:20). For those who thought that the kingdom of God would be inaugurated with great fanfare, Jesus simply replied that this notion was mistaken. Instead, the kingdom was within (Lk. 17:20-21). It could only be perceived by a divine act, an act which Jesus described as a new birth from above (Jn. 3:1-8).

Herein lies an important definition: the kingdom of God was not so much a realm as a reign. To speak of the kingdom of God is to speak of his rule or his dominion. It was Jesus' contention that the rule of God does not begin in the politics of Israel and Rome, but in the submission of every heart to him as the Lord. The real enemy of the kingdom is selfishness, sin and the powers of evil (Mk. 9:42-48). The kingdom is not a matter of materialism, but of deep trust in God (Mt. 6:25-33). It is not in acts of power, but in surrender to the will of the Father (Mt. 7:21-23). It is not in the urge for greatness, but in the humility of a child (Mt. 18:1-4). In fact, those with power and wealth will find it very difficult to enter at all (Mt. 19:16-26).

There was no privileged class or race, but according to Jesus the kingdom was for the people of faith (Mt. 3:9-10; 8:10-13). The kingdom would come unobtrusively, and it's inauguration was to be compared with the planting of seeds which would grow in time (Mt. 13:3-9; 18-30, 36-43; Mk. 4:26-32). While the beginnings of the kingdom were indeed being inaugurated in unobtrusive ways, the consummation of that kingdom would not come until later (Lk. 19:11ff.). In the final analysis, the kingdom of God was not worldly but other-worldly (Jn. 18:36-37).

One of the distinctive characteristics of the kingdom of God is that it is both present and future. In one sense, the kingdom has already been inaugurated in the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus. Even during his public preaching, Jesus claimed that men and women were then pressing into the kingdom (Lk. 16:16). Those who responded in faith to John and Jesus were eligible (Mt. 21:28-32). Those who rejected Jesus also rejected the kingdom of God, both for themselves and for those they were able to influence (Mt. 23:13; Lk. 11:52). Those who understand the

message of love -- love towards God and love towards others -- are close to the kingdom (Mk. 12:28-34).

At the same time, while Jesus clearly announced a present reality of the kingdom, he also announced a future consummation of the kingdom. The kingdom, God's rule, was truly inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus, but even though the kingdom has already entered human history, it will yet have a final manifestation and consummation at the end of history. It is for this consummation that Christians are to pray (Lk. 11:2). The consummation of the kingdom will be associated with a great judgment (Mt. 25:1-30; 8:11-12; 13:38-43, 47-50; 2 Ti. 4:1). At that time, all enemies, including death, will have been destroyed (1 Co. 15:24-26). The prophecy of Daniel, that all the kingdoms of the world will fall before the kingdom of God, will be fulfilled (Re. 11:15).

This dualistic character of the kingdom of God -- the fact that the kingdom is in some sense both present and future -- is what Jesus called the mysteries or secrets of the kingdom (Mt. 13:10-11, 34-35). What was occurring in the spiritual realm with the binding of Satan by Jesus would ultimately occur throughout all the world. In fact, there will yet be a political dimension to the kingdom of God, but the spiritual dimension comes first (Re. 1:9; 12:7-11; 19:11--20:6). While the question may well be asked, "When will all this happen?", the answer must still be given, "In the Father's own time" (Ac. 1:6-7).

So, Christians do indeed preach the good news of the kingdom (Ac. 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Though they themselves have surrendered to the rule of God, they await, with much endurance, its consummation (Ac. 14:22; 2 Th. 1:5). In the meantime, they continue to pray, as the Lord himself taught, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10)!

The Blessed Hope

Closely related to the historical resurrection of Jesus, our Lord, is the future hope of resurrection at the end of the age. Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised....then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Co. 15:17-19). The ancient Greek ideal was that matter was evil while only spirit was good, and therefore, the hope for an afterlife was that of a disembodied spirit. Unlike this, the Bible affirms the goodness of both matter and spirit inasmuch as God created both. Hence, the hope for all women and men is the hope of wholeness, that is, resurrection and immortality in their bodies. For Paul, with his background in the Old Testament, the state of disembodiment was akin to being naked. But God has given to believers the Holy Spirit's guarantee that they will not be disembodied at the end, but rather, they will be clothed with an immortal, heavenly body (2 Co.

5:1-5). Death will indeed be swallowed up in victory (1 Co. 15:50-55)!

This marvelous transformation will occur when Christ appears at the end of the age (1 Jn. 3:2). It is the Christian's blessed hope (1 Jn. 3:3; Tit. 2:11-14; Ro. 8:22-25; Ep. 4:4) no less than the hope of Israel (Ac. 2:26-27; 23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8; 28:20). When the New Testament describes the salvation which is in Jesus Christ, it does so in three verbal tenses, past, present and future. For those who believe, there is a sense in which salvation can be spoken of as an event in the past. Paul, for instance, says, "We were saved" (Ro. 8:24). Salvation as a past event rests in the finished work of the cross. The cross was a "once for all" event (He. 9:26b-28; 1 Pe. 3:18), and when believers have come to faith, they "have been justified" (Ro. 5:1). At the same time, there is a present character to the salvation which is in Jesus. Paul can also say, "We are being saved" (1 Co. 15:2). The implications of salvation are to be worked out in Christian living (Phil. 2:12). There is an ongoing, maturing process which is at work in the life of every Christian (Ep. 4:11-13; Ja. 1:2-4; 2:14-24). Finally, there is a future character to salvation. The same Paul who says, "We were saved," and who speaks of "being saved" also says, "We shall be saved" (Ro. 5:9). When Christ appears at the end, he shall appear "to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him" (He. 9:28). It is this future aspect of salvation, which involves resurrection and transformation at the second coming of Christ, that is the blessed hope of Christians.

But just how will this all happen? How will human history come to a close, and what does it mean to say that Jesus is coming again? When shall those events all take place? Christians use several terms to refer to the second coming of Christ such as, the "second advent" and the "rapture." Neither of these terms appear in the Bible (though the ideas represented by them are surely there), but there are three primary words used in the New Testament to describe the return of the Lord Jesus. They are apocalypse, epiphany and parousia. The Greek word *apokalypsis* refers to the revelation or disclosure of the Lord. Some forty days after the resurrection, Jesus ascended into the heavens while his disciples watched (Ac. 1:9). Since that time, he has been hidden from the view of his followers while he has remained in the heavens (Ac. 3:21). However, at the end Christ shall appear once more for the final salvation of his people (He. 9:28), and in fact, he will once more become visible to everyone (Re. 1:7). This is what the New Testament writers referred to when they spoke of the apocalypse of our Lord (1 Co. 1:7; 2 Th. 1:7b; 1 Pe. 1:7, 13; 4:13).

The second word, *epiphaneia*, is similar to the former in that it means the appearing or visible manifestation of the Lord, but especially, the glorious splendor of his return. It carries the nuance of what is remarkable, wonderful and marvelous, and hence it is sometimes translated in ways which reflect this nuance (2 Th. 2:8).

Because the word epiphany applies equally well to the first and the second coming of Jesus, it is employed when speaking of both events. New Testament writers can refer to the earthly life of Jesus as his epiphany (2 Ti. 1:9-10), and they can equally refer to his future coming by the same term (1 Ti. 6:14; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8; Tit.2:13).

The third word, *parousia*, is the most frequently used of the three, and it refers to the coming or presence of the Lord. The parousia emphasizes the fact that in the end, Jesus will once again be bodily present among his people (1 Co. 15:23; 1 Th. 2:19; 4:15-18; 2 Th. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:28). At his return, Christ will be accompanied by all his holy ones (1 Th. 3:13), and the glory and suddenness of that event is described by Jesus himself "as the lightning that flashes from the east to the west" (Mt. 24:27). It will be as abrupt as the flood of Noah (Mt. 24:37, 39). On occasion, more than one of the three words might be used in a single passage, such as when Paul speaks of the "*epiphany* of his [Christ's] *parousia*" (2 Th. 2:8). At his return, God's people will rise to welcome the Lord in the air as he descends (1 Th. 4:17), and their union with Christ will never be broken. Paul uses a technical term here, a term which normally is used for the ancient civic custom of publicly welcoming an important visitor to one's city. Similarly, God's people will rise to meet Christ in the air as a public welcome to his return to earth.

Of course the question might well be asked, "When shall this glorious event occur?" No one knows. Many people have tried to figure it out. In fact, just about every year some well-meaning Christian calculates by one means or another that this is the year, and some even set specific dates! This speculation is unfortunate, first because it often injures the faith of simplistic Christians who are terribly disappointed when the event does not happen, and second because Jesus himself said no one could know the time of his return, not even the angels (Mk. 13:32-35; Mt. 24:36-43). The disciples posed this same question just before Jesus ascended into heaven, but he plainly told them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Ac. 1:7).

Instead of speculation and calendar projections, Jesus left his followers with a single admonition -- to watch (Mk. 13:34-37; Mt. 24:42). It is the fool who thinks that he has much time (Mt. 24:45-51). For all believers, regardless of when they live, the coming of the Lord is near (Ro. 16:20; 1 Co. 7:29-31; Phil. 4:5; 1 Th. 5:1-3; Ja. 5:8-9; 1 Pe. 4:7; Re. 22:7, 12, 20). Though doubters may pose the mocking question, "Where is this coming he promised?" (2 Pe. 3:3-4), the fact remains that God does not reckon time in the way we do (2 Pe. 3:8). He is not slow by divine standards, even if he may seem slow to us (2 Pe. 3:9). It is just as the writer of Hebrews says, "In just a very little while, 'He who is coming will come and will not delay'" (He. 10:37). With the early Christians we heartily concur, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!" (Re. 22:20b).

The Apostles' Creed

A creed is a brief summary statement of the Christian faith, particularly calling for the element of personal trust in God. As such, a creed is more than simply a collection of doctrines. It states not only, "I believe *that*....", but also, "I believe *in*...." The term "creed" comes from the Latin *credo*, which is the opening word in the Latin versions of both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. The original significance of this expression was: "I place confidence in...." or "I rely upon...." or, more simply, "I believe in...."[1] In modern Christian parlance, many churches and denominations have what are called "Statements of Faith," which are creedal in nature. While some churches pride themselves on their anti-creedal stance,[2] the fact is that unless one wishes to accept all belief simply for the sake of its sincerity, faith without some creedal structure remains undefined. It is faith for faith's sake, and it concludes that to believe in anything is good enough.

The Apostles' Creed is the oldest and most generally accepted creed in Christendom. Though not actually penned by the apostles, it is based squarely upon the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament.[3] The received text of the creed, which is now translated and recited in modern English, dates from about 700 A.D., but various segments of it have been found in Christian writings as early as the second century. From earliest times, it has functioned as a confession for those who receive Christian baptism, a basis for catechetical instruction in the Christian faith, and a rule to provide continuity in Christian teaching over against heresies and distortions. The leaders of the Reformation gladly gave their assent to the Apostles' Creed and used it regularly in worship.[4] For English speaking churches who follow

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[1]A. Wood, *ISBE* (1979) I.805; G. Bromiley, *EDT* (1984) 283-284.

[2]The religion of Christian Science, for instance, as well as those of the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unitarians have no formal creed at all. The Disciples of Christ state that they have no creed but Christ. In Congregationalism, each local church usually writes its own creed. Quakers have no creed, but they do have the "Queries," a set of questions designed to encourage faithfulness in religious life. Eastern Orthodoxy officially accepts the Nicene Creed. Roman Catholics accept both the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. Lutherans, Presbyterians and various other Protestant denominations accept either/both the Apostles' Creed or/and the Nicene Creed, and of course, they may also give allegiance to various other confessions, such as, the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession, the Belgic Confession, and so forth, cf. L. Rosten, *Religions in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) 351-352.

[3]Actually, for hundreds of years many Christians assumed that the Apostles' Creed had indeed been penned by the apostles, and an ancient theory of composition was that each of the apostles added a clause to form the whole. Though this theory is probably legendary, it still remains true that the basic teachings in the creed are in agreement with the theological formulations of the apostolic era, and therefore, the creed is properly "apostolic," cf. O. Olivers, Jr., *EDT* (1984) 72.

[4]Oliver, 72-73.

the Book of Common Prayer, the Apostles' Creed is the standard confession to be used in the worshiping community.

The Development of the Apostles' Creed

Given that the Apostles' Creed has a lengthy history, it is appropriate to trace at least some of the highlights of this history. Of fundamental importance is the unity of the New Testament documents in their affirmation of central Christian truths which later were to be incorporated into the Apostles' Creed. These ideas are epitomized and summarized in the Greek words of various New Testament passages, such as:

Kerygma (= the proclamation)
Euangelion (= the good news, gospel)
Logos (= the incarnate Word, Jesus of Nazareth)
Skandalon (= the offense, particularly the offense of the cross)
Kyrios Christos (= Jesus as Lord and Messiah)
Soteria, Charis and Pistis (= salvation by grace through faith)
Ethnoi (= the nations, the beneficiary of God's promise)
Maranatha (= a prayer, "O Lord, Come")
Ekklesia (= the congregation, the church)
Mathetai (= the disciples)
Didache (= the teachings)
Koinonia (= the fellowship, the sharing)

While there is no formal creed in the New Testament called the Apostles' Creed, there are certainly creedal formulations in both testaments. Utterances of faith occur in such passages as the Decalogue (Ex. 20; Dt. 5) and the Shema (Dt. 6:4). The Israelites were taught to recite a creedal statement in the offering of their firstfruits (Dt. 26:5-10). Kelly is certainly correct when he says, "It is impossible to overlook the emphasis on the transmission of authoritative doctrine which is to be found everywhere in the New Testament."[5] References in the New Testament documents regularly describe an inherited tradition or body of doctrine (Ro. 6:17; 1 Co. 11:23; 15:1-4; 2 Th. 2:15; 1 Ti. 1:19; 4:6; 6:20; 2 Ti. 1:13-14; 4:3; Tit. 1:9, 13; He. 3:1; 4:14; 10:23; Jude 3, 20). In addition to these references, one regularly comes across creedlike slogans and formulations in the New Testament (cf. Col. 1:15-20; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Ti. 3:16; He. 1:3).[6] Thus, the development of creedal

[5]J. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (1960) 8.

[6]These may have originally been composed as hymns to be sung in the churches, cf. R. Martin, *Early Christian Worship*

statements in the post-apostolic church as based upon the teachings of the apostles was no innovation.

Particularly in the face of heresies and distortions, the early Christians came to summarize what they believed. One of the most important outlines was called the "Rule of Faith."[7] This outline was believed to have been handed down unbroken and unaltered from the apostles, and while there were several variations, depending upon which heresy was being combatted at the time and in what place, the Rule of Faith was intended to describe the basic essence of Christian belief. It was used as a profession of faith at Christian baptisms, and in fact, it was customary to pose questions to the candidate at the time of his/her baptism. Hippolytus' account of Christian baptism near the beginning of the 3rd century, for instance, is instructive. The question was posed, "Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?" The candidate responded, "I believe," which was followed by the first immersion. The next question was, "Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?" The candidate responded, "I believe," which was followed by the second immersion. Finally, the question was asked, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?" Upon responding the third time, "I believe," the candidate was then immersed again.[8]

Notice the kinds of things that the Rule of Faith sought to protect. Against Marcion, it emphasized the unity of God's fatherhood and sovereignty. Against the Gnostic notion of creation by a inferior deity, the Rule of Faith affirmed that the universe was created by God, the Father. Against the Ebionites who rejected the virgin birth and deity of Jesus Christ, it affirmed both to be true. Against Gnostics who doubted the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, it affirmed that he truly died and truly arose. Against the sectarians who divided the church, it affirmed the catholicity of the church. Against the Manichaeans who denied the resurrection of the body, it affirmed the hope of resurrection.[9] Thus, the Rule of Faith was largely shaped as an orthodox response to the distortions of Christian teaching which were developing all around.

The Rule of Faith was not a creed with fixed wording, but eventually, creeds

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(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 48-52.

[7]Or alternately, "The Faith," "The Tradition," "The Preaching," or "The Rule of Truth."

[8]Wright, 115; Heick, I.85-92.

[9]For more information about the various early heresies, see F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 245-252, 279-282, 287-288.

with fixed wording were adopted as adaptations of the baptismal questions and the Rule of Faith. The most significant early creed, dating from about the mid-4th century in its earliest form, is the Apostles' Creed. This creed summarizes the central confessional teachings of the apostles (cf. Mt. 28:19; Ac. 8:37; 16:31; Ro. 10:9; 1 Co. 8:6; 15:3-4; 2 Co. 13:14; Ep. 4:4-5; Phil. 2:10-11; 1 Ti. 2:5-6; 3:16; 6:13-14; 2 Ti. 2:8; 1 Pe. 3:19; 1 Jn. 5:1), though of course, it was not written by the apostles.[10]

The creed is clearly trinitarian and is constructed around affirmations concerning the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This was especially important as the gospel moved outward in Gentile circles. Among Jews, the Almighty God as the Creator of the universe and the Holy Spirit as the active divine inspiration of the prophets could be assumed. It was the messiahship of Jesus Christ which was paramount. However, for Gentiles, with their background in pagan deities and pagan spirit worship, the affirmation of God, the Father, and of the Holy Spirit, along with Jesus Christ, God's Son, was a much more complete confession.[11]

The Apostles' Creed continues to be used today, much as it was in the past. It serves many Christian denominations and churches as a baptismal confession, a liturgical expression of faith, a guard against heresy, and a teaching outline. Philip Schaff, the great church historian, has aptly said, "As the Lord's Prayer is the Prayer of prayers, the Decalogue the Law of laws, so the Apostles' Creed is the Creed of creeds." Luther declared, "Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement."[12]

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth"

The first section of the Apostles' Creed describes faith in God, the Father, the second section in Christ the Son, and the third section in the Holy Spirit, the church, and the Christian hope.

"I believe...."

The average person probably views belief as a weak substitute for knowledge.

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[10]For slight variations in the development of the Apostles' Creed, see H. Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1963) 23-24.

[11]This triadic confession and the triadic baptismal formula which accompanied it may very well have become popularized in Gentile Christianity. The shorter baptismal formula (Ac. 2:38) was quite acceptable for Jews, but the longer formula (Mt. 28:19) was better for Gentiles, cf. Heick, I.87.

[12]Quoted by A. Wood, 808-809.

The popular idea is that to simply state one's belief in something is to cling to that which cannot be proved by scientific means, and it assumes that true knowledge is scientific (i.e., empirical). This assumption is unfortunate, and it is certainly not the definition intended by the early Christians who formulated the Apostles' Creed.[13]

In addition to empirical knowledge, Christians also believe that there is knowledge by revelation from God (Mt. 11:27//Lk. 10:22; Mt. 16:13-17; Jn. 17:6-8; Ro. 1:16-17). This knowledge is not based upon empiricism, though there may be some empirical factors which can be verified.[14] The kind of knowledge acquired through this process is validated in human hearts by a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:26; 16:7-15; 1 Co. 2:6-16; 1 Jn. 4:13; 5:10).

Thus, when the creed states, "I believe....," it is not simply advocating some blind assertion of things which cannot be demonstrated. Rather, it is affirming a solid trust in the knowledge which comes to us in the gospel and is verified in our hearts by the Spirit. This kind of faith is an affirmation of one's whole being that God is at the 'deep core' of all things and that the situation could not be otherwise.[15]

"....in God...."

The majestic statement which begins the Bible is the ground for all faith, "In the beginning God...."[16] The Book of Genesis does not seek to prove God's existence; it assumes his reality as the most fundamental given. In fact, in the New Testament, Paul asserts that the one thing every human being instinctively knows is that God exists (Ro. 1:18-23). The fact that the creed states, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth implies that God is one (cf. Dt. 6:4; Is. 43:10-12; 44:6-8; 45:5-6; 1 Co. 8:6). This assumption became even more explicit in the later Nicene Creed,[17] but even here the oneness of God is not far below the surface.

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[13]G. MacGregor, *The Nicene Creed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 1-2.

[14]The verification approach to empirically testing the hypothesis of Christian truth can be followed in works such as G. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) and B. Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953) and J. McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (USA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972). Such works are valuable, but it should be born in mind that empiricism alone is not the ultimate ground of Christian faith.

[15]MacGregor, 4.

[16]While there is discussion on grammatical grounds as to whether this statement describes an absolute or relative beginning, there is a strong case to be made for the former, cf. W. Eichrodt, "In the Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible," *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 65-73. Certainly, the idea of an absolute beginning has been the understanding of Jews and Christians from the beginning, cf. G. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 [WBC]* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 13.

[17]I.e., "I believe in *one* God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...."

"....the Father...."

The term "Father" is first of all relational. In any society which is structured upon the family, the term "father" is appropriate for God inasmuch as he is the one who nurtures and cares for his earthly children. In the Old Testament, God is regarded as the father of Israel because he created the nation (Ex. 4:22; Dt. 32:6; Ho. 11:1; Is. 9:6; cf. Je. 31:9; Mal. 2:10). When the nation turned away from God, it was not only the breaking of a law, it was also the breaking of a relationship akin to a child rebelling against its father (Je. 3:19; Ho. 11:2-4). When the nation returned to God after its spiritual waywardness, it was like the return of a prodigal son (Is. 63:16; 64:8-9).

In the life of Jesus, this familial relationship with God as *Abba* is emphatic. Judaism had a great wealth of epithets with which to address God, but none of them were as intimate and powerful as the simple address used by Jesus when called God his *Abba* (Mk. 14:36).[18] Everywhere in the gospels Jesus called God his father, and he instructed his disciples to do the same (Mt. 6:9//Lk. 11:2). The gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to all who believe in Jesus Christ, wells up within them to express this same familial relationship with God (Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6). It is warm, close, and trusting!

"....Almighty...."

The Greek word underlying the English translation "Almighty" is *pantokrator*, which means "ruler of all things." When the creed was translated into Latin, the word chosen was *omnipotens* (= all-powerful, able to do anything) from which we derive the English word omnipotent. The Bible declares God to be the power above all other powers (1 Chr. 29:11; Is. 40:22-23; Ps. 22:28; 47:7-8; 103:19; Mt. 19:26; Lk. 1:37; Rv. 10:15-17). He exists in sovereign freedom, that is, he is determined and moved by himself alone. While he has chosen not to allow his power to negate all creaturely independence, he is always able to do anything he wishes whenever he wishes to accomplish his own sovereign purposes.[19]

"....maker of heaven and earth...."

D. Elton Trueblood has pointed out that given the fact that, the universe exists, there are only two alternatives as to *why* it exists. Either it exists due to blind

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[18]*Abba* is the transliterated form of "father" in Aramaic, the language of Jesus, and it was the form used by small Jewish children in referring to their fathers, cf. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Scribners, 1971) 61-68.

[19]This definition is not at all the same as the popular expression, "God can do anything." God cannot do that which is against his nature (cf. Ge. 18:25; Ha. 1:13; 2 Ti. 2:13; Tit. 1:2; He. 6:18; Ja. 1:13).

and unconscious force, which means that there is no reason, no cause, no universal spirit and no purpose in the universe, or it exists because there is an ultimate reality which causes it to exist, a reality we call God. If the latter, the existence of God gives the universe meaning.[20]

Francis Schaeffer has suggested that the question as to *how* the universe exists has only three possible answers.[21] Either everything has come from absolutely nothing, omitting even energy, or everything has developed from the impersonal elements of matter, time and chance, or there is a personal Creator. The first answer defies all experience, for how can something come from absolutely nothing? The second answer defies rationality, for how can the personal evolve from the impersonal--and if humans are not personal, they lose all significance and meaning and there is no explanation as to why they consider themselves to be personal. The third answer is the only one that satisfies, and it gives meaning to the universe. Particularly, it gives meaning to human life.

The Bible, of course, does not enter into philosophical arguments about the existence of the world. It simply asserts that God created the world (Ge. 1:1; Ac. 17:24-28) and that his agent of creation was Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16; He. 1:2; Rv. 3:14).

"And in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary"

This next section of the creed shifts from God, the Father, to Jesus, the Son. In particular, the first assertions concerning the Son address his essential nature as both divine and human.

There are four distinct names and titles given, each of which describes an essential aspect of Christ's person. It is probably appropriate to say that the New Testament writers did not always make the subtle distinction between names and titles as is sometimes done in modern English. To be sure, there is a Greek word *titlos* (= title), but it is never used of a title for Christ. Instead, the Greek word *onoma* (= name) is used for both given names and titles of distinction. The "name" of Jesus of Nazareth is not only Jesus, but it is also Lord, Son, Christ and so forth.

"....and in Jesus...."

Even before his birth, Jesus was named in the annunciation to both Mary and Joseph (Mt. 1:21; Lk. 1:31). Such advance namings in annunciations were a

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[20]D. Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 82-88.

[21]F. Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1972) 7-15.

common pattern stretching back into the Old Testament.[22] To Joseph, the angel explained that the name Jesus was significant with respect to the redemptive mission of the coming child. Divinely revealed names were full of meaning, and this one was no exception.

The name *Iesous* "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua.[23] In Hebrew, it means "Yahweh is salvation" or "Yahweh is savior."[24] As a name, it was common enough in the period, for there were others by that name in the New Testament (cf. Mt. 27:16-17; Col. 4:11),[25] including one of Jesus' ancestors (Lk. 3:29).[26]

"....Christ...."

Once the reader moves beyond the gospels into the letters of the New Testament, it is the exception to find the name Jesus without an associated title. During his earthly life, Jesus was known as Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus bar-Joseph[27] or Jesus the son of Mary (cf., Mk. 1:24; Jn. 1:45; Mt. 13:55). However, for Christians who had come to faith in him and his redemptive work, his name is most often coupled with the titles which appear here in the Apostles' Creed. The most familiar is probably the name "Christ" or "Messiah."

The name "Messiah" is related to the Hebrew verb *mashah* (= anointing). In the Old Testament, it was used of kings (1 Sa. 16:6; 24:6; Ps. 2:2), priests (Lv. 4:3), patriarchs (Ps. 105:15), and on one occasion, even of a pagan king whom God used for a special purpose (cf. Is. 45:1). During the intertestamental period, the Jews developed the hope for a messiah *par excellence* who would deliver them from the heavy hand of Gentile oppression. It was generally agreed that when this messiah came, God's victory over the worldly powers of evil would begin. Though ideas about this coming one were not unanimous (cf. Mt. 2:3-5; Jn. 7:26-27; 7:31; 12:34),

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[22]For more information on the nature of annunciations, see R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 156.

[23]In fact, in the older English versions (KJV and prior), the name Jesus is used in two passages to refer to the Old Testament military leader Joshua (Ac. 7:45; He. 4:8). In the newer versions, the translators have opted to translate these passages with the name Joshua to avoid confusion with Jesus of Nazareth.

[24]Two significant Old Testament characters bore this name, the Joshua who succeeded Moses, as mentioned above (Jos. 31:3; Jos. 1:1-3), and the high priest Joshua in the post-exilic period (cf. Zec. 3:1-10).

[25]The reading "Jesus Barabbas" in Mt. 27:16-17 appears in some early manuscripts but not in others, and thus one will find it in some translations (NEB, TEV) and not in others (NIV, RSV). The majority of the committee working on the United Bible Society Greek text was of the opinion that the original text of Matthew had the double name in both passages, B. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York: UBS, 1975) 67-68.

[26]In addition, Josephus mentions no less than twelve separate persons by that name in the first century A.D., and four of them were High Priests, cf. R. France, *Matthew [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 390.

[27]The prefix "bar" is the Aramaic word for "son of."

the anticipation for a coming Messiah was keenly felt (Jn. 1:41; 4:29).

Several Jewish freedom fighters appeared with messianic notions (cf. Ac. 5:35-37),[28] and to avoid being viewed as a political insurgent, Jesus did not allow his followers to use that title during his public ministry (cf. Mk. 1:25, 34, 44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36; 8:26). On one occasion, the Jews even tried to force him into kingship (Jn. 6:14-15). Nevertheless, Jesus was indeed the Messiah which was anticipated, and on certain occasions, he welcomed this title as entirely appropriate (Mt. 16:13-20; Jn. 4:25-26; 11:27). It was only after his death and resurrection that the title could be used without concern for confusion with a political agenda (Mk. 9:20-21; Mt. 26:62-64; Lk. 23:2-3; 24:17-27).

"....his only Son...."

It is well known that Jesus addressed God as his Father and encouraged his disciples to do the same. However, when the creed speaks of "Jesus Christ His [God's] only Son," it is not this more general notion of sonship which is intended. Rather, the word "only" is critical, for it points to Jesus as the unique Son of God. Jesus' sonship in this sense is entirely different than our own relationship to God as our Father-Creator.

The phraseology "only Son" comes from the Gospel of John (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), and it is in this gospel that Jesus also clearly distinguishes between God as his Father in this unique way and God as the Father of all those who believe (Jn. 20:7). Others may become the "sons of God" by a spiritual birth (Jn. 1:12), but Jesus is the only Son of God by his very nature. As this unique Son, he was sent by the Father from heaven into the world (Jn. 3:13, 17, 34; 4:34; 5:36, 38; 7:29; 8:26; 9:4; 11:42; 17:3; Ro. 8:3; Ga. 4:4), stayed temporarily on earth (Jn. 1:14a), and afterward ascended up where he was before (Jn. 6:62; 8:21; 16:28). Only the Son had a complete knowledge of God the Father (Jn. 1:18; 6:46; 10:15; 17:25), only the Son could mediate a true understanding of the Father (Mt. 11:25-27), and only the Son could be said to be "one" with the Father (Jn. 10:30; 14:8-11; 17:11, 21-23). In fact, one New Testament writer says that the Son is the exact representation of God's being (He. 1:3). He existed before all creation (Col. 1:15) and served as God's agent in creating the universe (Jn. 1:3, 10; 1 Co. 8:6; Col. 1:16-17; He. 1:2). To understand this uniqueness of Jesus' sonship is central to Christian faith (Mt. 16:13-17).

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[28]Josephus mentions "ten thousand disorders in Judea" which were like those of Judas and Theudas, *Antiquities*, XVII.x.4-5.

"....our Lord...."

The confession "Jesus is Lord" is one of the most important affirmations of faith in early Christianity (cf. Ro. 10:9; 1 Co. 12:3; 2 Co. 4:5; Phil. 2:11). Christians designated themselves as "those who call upon the name of the Lord" (1 Co. 1:2; Ac. 2:21; 9:13-14; 22:16).

In a general sense, the name "Lord" indicated a master or protector. Thus, to acknowledge Jesus as Lord was to submit one's life to him, and especially, it was to affirm ultimate loyalty to no one but him (1 Co. 8:5-6). In a more particular sense, the name "Lord" was used in the Greek Old Testament to translate the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, and when used of Jesus, the term carries definite connotations of deity. Old Testament ascriptions to Yahweh are made to apply directly to Jesus (cf. Jl. 2:32//Ac. 2:21, 36//Ro. 10:13; Ps. 102:21, 25//He. 1:10).

There is also a corporate implication in calling Jesus "*our* Lord." While the confession "Jesus is Lord" indicates a personal experience, it also includes a corporate dimension, for the one who confesses Jesus as Lord belongs to the community of faith each member of which makes the same confession (1 Co. 1:2).[29]

"....who was conceived by the Holy Spirit...."

The next assertions concerning Jesus concern his dual nature, divine and human.[30] This dual nature, which would be addressed and defined in more depth in the Definition of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.,[31] was affirmed from the earliest times in the simple ideas that Jesus was conceived by the Spirit and born of Mary. Ignatius (about 112 A.D.) describes Jesus as "of flesh and of spirit," as "God in man," and as the "Son of Mary and Son of God."[32] The virgin birth of Jesus lies at the heart of the historical-biblical Christian faith.[33]

From the very beginning, the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary has been extremely significant because she was, in fact, a virgin. At the annunciation, Mary was instructed that even though she had not experienced sexual intercourse (Lk. 1:27, 34; cf. Mt. 1:23, 25), she would nevertheless conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 1:31, 35; cf. Mt. 1:18). This virginal conception confirmed that the child born to Mary was to be God's Son (Lk. 1:32, 35b), that is,

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[29]Paul, for instance, uses the expression "*our* Lord Jesus Christ" some twenty-eight times, "*our* Lord Jesus" some nine times, and "*our* Lord" three times.

[30]Modern radical theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, have developed alternative viewpoints concerning the dual nature of Jesus Christ, cf. K. Runia, *The Present-Day Christological Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984). It is well-known that liberal Christianity frequently denies or at least questions the doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus.

[31]See L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937) 101-113.

[32]To the Ephesians, 7:2.

[33]T. Dorman, *ISBE* (1988) IV.992.

he was to be divine. It served as a sign pointing to his origin. The repetition of this truth in the Apostles' Creed was intended to convey belief in the deity of Jesus.[34]

"....born of the virgin Mary...."

Though Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was also born to a human woman, Mary. Mark's Gospel can speak of Jesus as "Mary's son," which in itself may imply the virgin birth (Mk. 6:3). Paul could say that regarding his human nature, Jesus was a descendent of David. Luke traces the human ancestry of Jesus through Mary to David, then to Abraham, and ultimately to Adam (Lk. 3:23-38). Thus, in his conception in the womb of Mary and his birth into the world, Jesus was truly human.

"Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell"

In this section of the creed, there are two parts, one concerning events in human history and the other concerning an event in the spirit-world.

"....suffered under Pontius Pilate...."

The centrality of the passion narratives in the four gospels of the New Testament is apparent when one considers that while the passion occurred over the space of only a week, each of the synoptic gospels gives three chapters to this brief period. The Fourth Gospel gives nine chapters, which is over a third of its total length. In the preaching of the gospel by the apostles, the death of Jesus is also central.[35] The centrality of the passion of Christ is no less emphatic in the letters of Paul. To the Corinthians, he could describe the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus as the very core of Christian truth which had been handed down by the apostles to the church (1 Co. 14:1-4).

That Christ, God's one and only Son, should suffer at all is a profound expression of his condescension to the human realm. In the Book of Hebrews, the suffering of Christ is important in that it is through his suffering that he became an empathetic high priest for his people. Since humans are always threatened with pain and death, it is in Christ's own pain and death and eventual triumph that he helps those who trust in him to face the future with courage and godly faith (He. 2:16-18). His suffering in Gethsemene and his prayer "not my will but thine" has become a

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[34]J. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 143-145.

[35]Special studies on the apostolic preaching of the gospel based on the sermons in the Book of Acts bear this out (cf. Ac. 2:14-36; 3:13-26; 10:34-43; 13:16-41), see C. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

model for all Christians when they face harrowing times (He. 5:7-9; 1 Pe. 2:21; Col. 1:24).

Along other lines, the suffering of Christ was a necessary climax to Jesus' mission on the earth (Mk. 8:31//Mt. 16:21//Lk. 9:22; 17:25). It fulfilled his role as the suffering servant of the Lord (cf. Is. 52:13--53:12; Lk. 24:26, 46; Ac. 3:18; 17:2-3). That Jesus suffered under the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate fixes his passion in the context of a particular historical period in real space-time history. In the midst of the many pagan religions whose historical roots were vague at best, the early Christians had no hesitation in placing their most profound religious event in the matrix of known history (cf. Lk. 3:1-2).[36]

"....was crucified...."

Crucifixion, a form of capital punishment used by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and later the Romans, was the method of execution used for slaves, provincials and the lowest type of criminals. The victim was compelled to carry the cross-beam of his death instrument to the site of the execution. Stripped naked, the condemned person was tied or nailed to the cross-beam and hoisted onto the upright post so that his feet, which were then also tied or nailed, were sufficiently clear of the ground. Death was a result of starvation, exhaustion, thirst, and especially asphyxiation.[37] The emotional impact of saying Jesus died on a cross would be somewhat comparable to saying, in a modern context, that he died in the electric chair. It was an event of supreme humiliation (Phil. 2:8). From the glory of the Father's presence, he descended to the nadir of a horrifying and shameful death.[38]

Since execution on a cross was such a disreputable death, the fact of Jesus' crucifixion became what Paul calls the "offense of the cross" (Ga. 5:11; 1 Co. 1:23). In particular, it was problematic for Jews, since Torah asserted that anyone hanged on a tree was under a divine curse (Dt. 21:23). Paul countered that Jesus was indeed under a divine curse--but it was a substitutionary curse for the sake of others (Ga. 3:13). For non-Jews, the notion that one who had been crucified could be the Lord of the universe seemed preposterous. Yet as offensive as this aspect of the gospel was, the early Christians were bold to proclaim it, for the cross was the most decisive event in all sacred history (Ga. 6:14).

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[36]For more on the relationship between Christian events and history, see G. Ladd, *Jesus Christ and History* (Chicago: IVP, 1963) and O. Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. F. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964).

[37]H. Weber, *The Cross: Tradition and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

[38]R. Martin, *Carmen Christi*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 227-228.

"....dead and buried...."

That Jesus truly died may seem to be superfluous after speaking of crucifixion, but in both ancient and modern times it needs to be emphasized.[39] It is something on the order of Dickens' statement about the death of Jacob Marley.[40] If Jesus had not truly died, nothing very wonderful could be said about what happened later.

One of the Gnostic heresies which the early Christians countered was the notion that Jesus did not have a real human body, and therefore, did not suffer a genuine death. Even in the apostolic period, it may very well be that some thinkers challenged the actuality of Jesus' death, for the Apostle John was compelled to write that Jesus was "the one who came by water and blood" (1 Jn. 5:6-8). The "water" refers to Jesus' baptism in which he was physically put into the waters of the Jordan. The "blood" is a synecdoche for Jesus' death.[41] The three witnesses, the Spirit, the water and the blood, all stand or fall together. If one rejects the witness of the water or the blood, he cannot at the same time accept the witness of the Spirit. That Christ was placed in the tomb serves as a verification of his death. In modern times, various theories to account for Jesus' death and resurrection have been put forward in opposition to the scriptural account.[42] Against all of these explanations stands the emphatic words in the creed, "Dead, and Buried!"

"....he descended into hell...."

There is a certain discomfort for the modern mind by this phrase, and it is perhaps sharpened by the fact that the phrase does not appear in either the old Roman Creed, which preceded the final form of the Apostles' Creed, or in the Nicene Creed which came later.[43] It is generally agreed that this phrase is to be taken

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[39]In light of some modern attempts to discredit the gospel accounts of Jesus' death, such as, H. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot: New Light on the History of Jesus* (New York: Random House, 1965), the actuality of Jesus' death should be emphasized. A thorough examination of the record concerning the actuality of Jesus' death by competent medical experts can be found in W. Edwards, et al., "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *JAMA* (Mar. 21, 1986 Vol. 255 No. 11) 1455-1463.

[40]The statement, in the opening paragraphs of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, reads, "Old Marley was a dead as a doornail. ...There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate."

[41]F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 118-119; I. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 231-235.

[42]Some, for instance, suggest that Jesus was given a drug to simulate premature death, so that he could be placed in the tomb and rescued later after he had regained consciousness, cf. H. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (USA: Bernard Geis Associates, 1965) 160-181.

[43]In fact, some evangelicals apparently are willing to eliminate this phrase altogether, as in the study guide to the Apostles' Creed produced by Serendipity House "Beginning a Basics Group: Six Sessions on the Apostles' Creed" (Littleton, CO: Serendipity House, 1991). Here, the phrase "descended into hell" is omitted altogether, along with the

that Christ descended into the realm of the dead before his resurrection.[44] Thus, some English versions of the creed use alternative terminology.[45]

The scriptural basis for this phrase is in several NT passages. 1 Peter 3:18-20 describes Christ as "preaching to the spirits in prison," and later, Peter also says that Christ "preached to the dead" (1 Pe. 4:6). Supporting passages speak of Christ being in the "heart of the earth," (Matthew 12:40) and of Christ descending to the "lower parts of the earth," (Ephesians 4:9). Due to his resurrection, Christ was not "abandoned to Hell," (Acts 2:25-35), though Christ was in "the Abyss" prior to his resurrection (Romans 10:6-7).[46] Many of the ante-Nicene fathers took these passages to mean that after his death Christ preached the gospel to those in hell so that no one who had died before the coming of Jesus would be deprived of hearing it.[47] Both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus attribute this idea to the Old Testament itself, Justin to Jeremiah and Irenaeus to Isaiah. However, the exact passage in either of these Old Testament prophets is unknown except that Justin claimed the Jews had excised it from the text. In any case, if there is a textual tradition of the Old Testament with such a reference, it has not yet been discovered.

In the Reformation period, Luther taught that Christ descended into hell to show his victory over the devil, and he rejected the idea of a second chance for anyone who had been condemned during the Old Testament era or the notion that Christ may have in any way suffered the tortures of hell.[48] Since that time, most Christians have been content to receive the phrase in its most basic interpretation, that is, that Christ descended into the realm of the dead.[49]

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phrase "the holy Catholic Church."

[44]O. Heick, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965) I.90.

[45]The Roman Catholic version of the creed, for instance, uses the expression, "He descended to the dead."

[46]Ephesians 4:9 is problematic as a supporting passage, however, in that the expression "lower parts of the earth" might be taken to mean either hell (the *Old Testament Sheol*), the tomb of burial, or the earth itself through incarnation (as opposed to the heavenly realms, so John Calvin). Still, in light of Ac. 2:25-35 and Ro. 10:6, the first of these alternatives is probably the best, cf. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1961) 83-84.

[47]Ignatius, for instance, envisioned Christ's preaching to the dead to be an announcement of triumph to the Old Testament prophets (*Magnesians* IX.2). Justin Martyr and Irenaeus interpreted the passage to mean that Christ preached salvation to "his dead people Israel who lay in the graves" (*Dialogue* LXXII.4; *Against Heresies* III.20.4; IV.22.1; IV.27.2). Tertullian speaks of Christ preaching in Hades to the "patriarchs and prophets" (*Treatise on the Soul* XV), while Hippolytus speaks of Christ "preaching to the souls of the saints" (*Treatise on Christ and Anti-Christ* 26). Clement of Alexandria developed a rather interesting variation of this theme in interpreting that Christ preached both to the righteous who were under the law and prophets and also to the pagans who were righteous under the tutelage of Greek philosophy (*Stromata* VI.6).

[48]C. Gausewitz, ed., *Small Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956) 125 (Article #203 with footnote).

[49]Some Protestant evangelicals have rejected outright the interpretation of the early fathers that Christ preached to the spirits in the realm of the dead. The NASB, for instance, inserts the word "now" in the rendering of 1 Pe. 3:19, so that it reads, "He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison." Such a rendering suggests that Christ preached through Noah to the antediluvian generation, a generation which after death was imprisoned in Hades. This translation

"The third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead"

The final statements concerning the Son in the Apostles' creed describe Jesus' resurrection, ascension and exaltation.

"....the third day He rose again from the dead...."

The cruciality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead could hardly have been expressed more emphatically than by Paul. "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost" (1 Co. 15:13-19).

At the heart of Christianity is a cross, but it is an empty one. The gallows at Calvary was not the last word about Jesus! He rose from the tomb, and this was the belief that turned Jesus' followers into courageous witnesses and martyrs. You could imprison them, flog them, and kill them, but you could not make them deny their conviction that "on the third day he rose again."[50]

After his disciples had come to understand more fully the nature of his messiahship, Jesus began to speak plainly to them about his coming passion and resurrection after three days (Mk. 8:31//Mt. 16:21//Lk. 9:22; Mk. 9:9-10//Mt. 17:9; Mk. 9:31//Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 10:33-34; 14:27-28//Mt. 26:31-32; Jn. 10:18).[51] This statement puzzled them, of course, since their traditional understanding of messiahship and the coming of the Son of Man was a vision of triumph. Why should the Messiah suffer and die? Nevertheless, Jesus did not at that time explain himself. It was only after his death and resurrection that he "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:45-46).

The preaching of the apostles was filled with the witness of Jesus' resurrection (Ac. 1:21-22; 2:23-32; 3:15; 4:2; 10:39-42; 13:29-37; 17:18, 31). In the letters of the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead declared him

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hardly does justice to the verb *poreuomai* (= to go), however, and the emendation must be rejected. Nevertheless, the position is defended in some evangelical commentaries, such as, W. Grudem, *1 Peter [TNTC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 157-161.

[50]G. Ladd, *I Believe in the Resurrection of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 7.

[51]There is a rather technical discussion concerning the precise dates of Jesus' death and resurrection, though most Christians have accepted the chronology that he was crucified on Friday and raised on Sunday, cf. H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 65-93.

to be God's Son with power (Ro. 1:3-4), established him as Lord of the living and the dead (Ro. 14:9), and verified him as the High Priest with a permanent priesthood (He. 7:23-25). Because he is alive, he holds the keys of hell and death (Rv. 1:18).

"....he ascended into heaven...."

Some forty days after his resurrection (Ac. 1:1-3), Jesus ascended up into the heavens "where he was before" (Jn. 6:62; 20:17; Mk. 16:19; Lk. 24:50-51; Ac. 1:9-11; Ep. 4:8-10; 1 Ti. 3:16; 1 Pe. 3:22; Rv. 12:5). The ascension should be understood as that which necessarily follows and completes the resurrection (Ep. 1:20). Resurrection was the first part of the total movement of Jesus from the earth back into the heavenlies. In his resurrection and ascension, Jesus has become the "firstfruits" of those he saved (1 Co. 15:20-23). What was contained in the first-fruits was applicable to the whole, and so the resurrection and ascension of Jesus guarantees the resurrection and ascension of his people (1 Th. 4:14-17). His ascension implies his exaltation, of which more will be said later. Furthermore, his ascension commences his ministry of high priestly intercession (Ro. 8:34; He. 7:25-26) and enables him to dispense the gift of the Spirit to all who believe (Ac. 2:32-33).[52] As the resurrected, ascended Lord, no longer limited by earthly things, he is able to fill the entire universe (Ep. 4:10).

"....and sitteth at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty...."

The exaltation of Jesus is most frequently described in the New Testament as his being seated at the right hand of God (Mk. 16:19; Ac. 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Ro. 8:34; Ep. 1:20; Col. 3:1; He. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pe. 3:22; Rv. 3:21). This exaltation was anticipated by Jesus (Mk. 14:62//Mt. 26:64//Lk. 22:69; Mk. 16:19) and predicted in Psalm 110:1 (cf. Mk. 12:36//Mt. 22:44//Lk. 20:42; Ac. 2:34; He. 1:13).

The expression "the right hand of God" is a metaphor describing the position of highest power and authority. It is because Jesus is at God's right hand that he has authority to grant forgiveness (Ac. 5:31) and dispense the gift of the Spirit (Ac. 2:33). Because Jesus is at God's right hand, he holds authority over all the powers and entities in the universe (Ep. 1:20-23; 1 Pe. 3:22). The author of Hebrews emphasizes that Christ is "seated" at God's right hand, a position which indicates his completed work.[53] The priests in the Old Testament performed their rituals while

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[52]P. Toon, *The Ascension of our Lord* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984) 3-20.

[53]To be sure, in Stephen's vision, he saw Jesus "standing" at God's right hand (Ac. 7:55-56), but here it is not unlikely that the standing posture is intended to indicate that Jesus served as a witness to the martyrdom of Stephen, and he stood to receive him, cf. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 167-169; R. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," *EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 9.350.

standing (He. 10:11), but Jesus, because his priestly work on the cross was finished "once for all," sat down at God's right hand (He. 10:12). As the exalted Lord, he is ever at the Father's side (Jn. 1:18). Because he is at the Father's side, believers are able to have fellowship "with the Father and with his Son" (1 Jn. 1:3).

"....from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead...."

The final phrase about Jesus Christ in the creed is an extension of his exaltation and concerns his role at the end of the ages as the judge of the living and the dead.[54] The Bible is quite clear that there will be a moral reckoning for all humans when they shall give account of themselves to God (He. 9:27; Mt. 14:40-43, 47-50; 25:32; Ro. 2:5-10; 14:10; 2 Co. 5:10).[55] However, in the New Testament, Jesus makes clear the fact that the Father has delegated to him the authority to judge (Jn. 5:22-23; Ac. 17:31; 2 Ti. 4:1, 8). This delegation of judgment to the Son is quite appropriate, since it is the Son of God who became incarnate, who died, and who rose again for the salvation of his people. Those who are saved are saved through him. Those who are lost are lost because they have rejected him.[56]**"I believe in the Holy Spirit"** This phrase introduces the third major section of the Apostle's Creed, being preceded by the statements of belief in God, the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son.

"I believe in the Holy Spirit"

In the Old Testament, the Spirit was the means by which God mediated his activity to the world (Ge. 1:2; Is. 40:13-14; Ps. 104:29-30). He sent his Spirit (Nu. 11:17; Is. 48:16) or withdrew it (Ps. 51:11). Such expressions refer to the action of the Spirit, but they do not define the Spirit as anything other than an extension of God himself.

In the New Testament, a much fuller understanding of the Spirit is given. In particular, the Fourth Gospel emphasizes the personality of the Spirit by using masculine rather than neuter pronouns ("he" and "him" rather than "it", cf. Jn. 14:15-17; 15:26; 16:7-8, 13-15).[57] Thus, in the New Testament the Spirit is depicted as having *mind* (Ro. 8:26-27; 1 Co. 2:11), *will* (Ac. 13:1; 15:28; 1 Co. 12:11), and even

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[54]The Old English expression "the quick and the dead" simply means the living and the dead.

[55]For a more extensive treatment of the nature of the last judgment, see G. Ladd, *The Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 87-102.

[56]A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 256.

[57] The Greek word *pneuma* (= spirit) is grammatically neuter, but John seems to have deliberately adjusted his grammar to emphasize this concept of personality, B. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 209, 230-231.

emotion (Ro. 15:30; Ep. 4:30; He. 10:29). In this way, the Holy Spirit is distinguishable from the Father and the Son, even though he also participates in the divine being of the Father and the Son.

Because of this understanding of the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that in the New Testament one finds the repeated description of God in a threefold way, as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19; Ro. 15:30; 1 Co. 12:4-6; 2 Co. 13:14; Ep. 2:18; Tit. 3:4-6; 1 Pe. 1:2; Jude 20-21). Similarly, in the post-apostolic church, this standard triadic conception of God abounds in the written works of the early fathers.[58]

The Apostle John uses a special word for the Holy Spirit which is unique to the literature which bears his name. This word, *paracletos*, is formed from two other words, *para* (= alongside) and *kaleo* (= to call). Idiomatically, it means "one who is called to someone's aid", and depending upon how it is used, can mean "one who appears in another's behalf," a "mediator," an "intercessor," a "helper," and on some occasions, a "lawyer."[59] The translations of the English Bible have rendered this word as Comforter and Advocate (KJV), Counselor (RSV), One who speaks in our defense (NIV), One to plead our case (NEB), Helper (NASB), and so forth.

Jesus promised that even though he was going away, he would not leave his disciples as orphans (Jn. 14:18). Instead, he would ask the Father to send the Paraclete who would abide with them continuously (Jn. 14:16; cf. 16:7). The Holy Spirit (or Paraclete) would serve as a teacher and guide to the disciples (Jn. 14:26). He would serve as a confirming witness, reminding them of Jesus (Jn. 15:26; 16:13-15). At the same time, the work of the Spirit would extend to the whole world in order to convince women and men of their sinfulness, Christ's righteousness, and God's judgment against evil (Jn. 16:7-11).

The Old Testament prophets envisioned a messianic age in which the Spirit would be bestowed upon all God's people (Eze. 11:19; 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Jl. 2:28-29; Is. 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; 61:1; Zec. 12:10). This future era would be marked by the appearance of a great leader who would be the bearer of the Spirit (Is. 11:2; 42:1). During the intertestamental period, when the living voices of the prophets were stilled, the prophetic Spirit was temporarily quenched.[60] But in the beginning of Luke's Gospel, a flurry of spiritual infillings occurred which heralded the approach of the new era (Lk. 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:26-27; 3:22; 4:1, 14, 18). Even

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[58]D. Lewis, "The Triadic Conception of God in the Post-Apostolic Church," *The Divine Nature* (Troy, MI: Diakonos, Inc., 1990) 56-67.

[59]BAG (1979) 618.

[60]D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 80-82; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 80-82.

more emphatic was the preaching of John the Baptizer, who announced that the Coming One would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Lk. 3:16).

At the close of his public ministry, Jesus announced to his followers that this prophetic promise of the Spirit would be fulfilled in just a short time (Lk. 24:49; Ac. 1:4-5; cf. Jn. 7:38-39). The 120 disciples waited in Jerusalem until the Feast of Pentecost, and on that day, the risen Lord Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon them all (Ac. 2:1-4, 33). What the prophets had promised, God had fulfilled (Ac. 2:16-18).

The messianic gift of the Spirit was not restricted to the Jewish-Christian community. In two critical episodes, the Book of Acts demonstrates how God broke through the centuries of racism between Jew and Gentile by giving the messianic gift of the Spirit to non-Jewish peoples (Ac. 8:14-17; 10:44-46). The Jerusalem church was at first reluctant to accept these newcomers into the circle of Christians, but the divinely-given messianic gift convinced them that such acceptance was God's purpose (Ac. 11:1, 15-18; 15:7-9). This new community of faith, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, had become the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Ep. 2:11-13, 18-19, 21-22), much as had Solomon's temple in the old era. The messianic gift of the Spirit is for all who believe the gospel (Ro. 5:5; 8:9, 11, 15-16; 14:17; 1 Co. 3:16; 6:17; 12:13; 2 Co. 5:5; Ga. 3:2, 14; Ep. 1:13; 4:30; 1 Th. 4:8; 2 Th. 2:13).

The messianic gift of the Spirit created new, spiritual life within the believers (Jn. 3:3, 5-8; 1 Pe. 1:3, 23). It guaranteed them that they would be resurrected to live forever with Christ (Ro. 8:11; 2 Co. 1:21-22; Ep. 1:13-14). Still, the function of the Spirit was not merely oriented toward the future. It was also a source of enablement for life on the earth. The Spirit enabled believers to control their lives in such a way as not to be dominated by their sinful nature, but instead, to live the Christ-like life (Ro. 8:5-17; Ga. 5:16-26). Even beyond the daily Christian life empowered by the Spirit, there were special enablements, called gifts, which the Spirit bestowed upon believers at critical times so that the community of Christians could be strengthened and encouraged (Ro. 12:6-8; 1 Co. 12:4-11; 2 Co. 12:12; Ga. 3:5; He. 2:4).

"The holy catholic church, the communion of saints"

These two clauses in the creed address the nature of the community of faith, the church.

"....the holy catholic church...."

The term *ekklesia* (= church or congregation) was not exclusively a religious

word in the common Greek of the first century. In its most basic sense, it refers to a gathering of people. However, in the New Testament, this word comes to refer to the individual congregations in the various cities of the Greco-Roman world as well as to the entire body of Christians in the world, who altogether form Christ's church. It is this latter sense which is intended in the Apostles' Creed. The creed does not merely affirm the existence of some local group, but rather, it affirms the entire company of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Co. 1:2). This entire company of Christians is declared to be holy. At first glance, someone may well say, "But how can that be? I know any number of people claiming to be Christians who are not particularly holy!" Sad to say, this is true enough! However, the holiness which is envisioned here is not the achieved holiness by the individual members of the church. Even Paul quite frankly confessed that he had not attained to Christian perfection (cf. Phil. 3:12-14). Instead, the holiness envisioned by the creed is the transferred holiness of Christ which he bestows upon his people through faith (1 Co. 1:30-31). It is this kind of holiness which led Paul to invariably refer to Christians as the *hagioi* (= holy ones, saints). The faith of the New Testament as represented in the Apostles' Creed is that there are not some few super-Christians who are holy, but rather, because of the forgiveness of God in Christ, the whole church which is made up of everyone who believes in him is declared to be holy (Ep. 5:25-26). In the end, the entire church will be presented and accepted by Christ as a pure and radiant bride (Ep. 5:27; Rv. 19:6-8). There is a paradox here, of course, inasmuch as the church is composed of imperfect Christians. This is why Martin Luther coined the Latin phrase *simul justus et peccator* (= at the same time righteous and sinner).[61] Still, as Paul says, "The Lord knows who are his" (2 Ti. 2:19)! Those who name Christ's name must turn away from wickedness.

One of the most famous quotations from a post-apostolic Christian leader is the statement, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church." This statement was written by Ignatius to the church of Smyrna, Asia near the beginning of the second century.[62] The term "catholic" is a transliteration of the Greek *katholikos* (= through the whole). It has been used ever since the close of the apostolic era to describe the entire church throughout all the world, that is, the church universal. As used in the Apostles' Creed, it refers to the unity and universality of the church in spite of its wide diffusion. With the rise of the various heresies in the late second century and beyond, the term catholic was also used to describe the orthodox church and its faith as opposed to those groups which were distorting the true faith.

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[61] R. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 61.

[62] To the Smyrnaeans 8.

In this sense, the expression "catholic church" is still quite valid for all Christians. However, during the period of the Reformation, the expression "Roman Catholic" emerged as a designation for those churches which remained loyal to the papacy. Although some Protestant churches, such as the Anglican Church, continued to openly use the term catholic as a self-designation, the Roman church held that unless a group submitted to the papacy, it could not properly be called catholic.[63] In the modern era, the term catholic, at least at a popular level, has come to refer to someone who is a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, some non-Roman Catholics deem it awkward to use the term and have found substitutes.[64] Nevertheless, the term catholic is not the private domain of any Christian denomination, whether Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox or Protestant. The tendency of many to regard their own denomination as being the only true church is both arrogant and misinformed. The affirmation of catholicity in the creed stands squarely against such sectarianism. The term catholic is a word that belongs to the whole church!

"....the communion of saints...."

The traditional interpretation of this clause is undoubtably the best, that is, that the *koinonia* (= communion, fellowship) of the saints refers to the union of all believers in Christ, both living and dead. When a woman or man becomes a Christian, he/she is joined to the company of all other Christians and becomes part of what Paul calls the body of Christ (1 Co. 12:12-13, 27). New Testament believers are "in Christ," but so also are the deceased faithful of the Old Testament, since they, too, have been made perfect by the once-for-all atoning sacrifice of Christ (He. 11:40; 12:23). Believers who have died are, in Paul's description, "asleep in Jesus" and "dead in Christ" (cf. 1 Th. 4:14, 16). When Christians die, they are spiritually in the presence of the Lord (2 Co. 4:6, 8; Phil. 1:23). Believers who are alive are also in Christ, and he in them (2 Co. 5:17; Ga. 2:20). So then, Christ is Lord, both of the dead and of the living (Ro. 14:9). All the faithful, living or dead, have a common bond of eternal life and blessing in Jesus Christ. They all belong to one body, the church. At the resurrection of the righteous, the living will not precede those who have died, but the dead will be raised so that together they may be caught up to meet the Lord in a single group (1 Th. 4:15-17). Luther was

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[63]E. Harrison, "Catholic," *EDT* (1984) 199.

[64]For instance, the Apostles' Creed in *The Hymnal* (Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 716, substitutes the word "Christian" for "catholic." Others substitute the word "universal," which is probably a better alternative. Still others have eliminated the phrase altogether, such as, the publication produced on the Apostles' Creed by Serendipity House (see Footnote #42). This omission, which is made without explanation, is highly inappropriate, both because the phrase is part of the original creed and because the concept should be affirmed by modern Christians.

doubtlessly correct when he insisted that the church is nothing more nor less than the communion of the saints, and therefore, it is spiritual and invisible in its essence, though it may be expressed visibly in the life of the church.[65]

In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas and others read the phrase communion of saints as "the communion of holy things," that is, the sacraments, particularly the eucharist.[66] Such an interpretation seems to limit the concept, and it risks an institutional sectarianism. Others have used the phrase as a justification for appealing to the deceased as intercessors or mediators in prayer.[67] Such a practice, however well reasoned, has no precedent in the Scriptures, particularly in view of what clearly seems to be the exclusive mediatorial role of Christ (1 Ti. 2:5; He. 4:14-16; 8:1-2; 10:19-22). The prayers found in the Old Testament were directed to God. The prayers in the New Testament are directed to the Father in the name of the Son. Thus, the practice of praying to the deceased saints is inappropriate, and the practice of venerating the deceased saints is questionable. The later development of these ideas is not part of biblical Christianity.

On the positive side, the communion of saints as the fellowship and blessing of all who are redeemed by Christ, both living and dead, both visible and invisible, is an important truth. This truth the church has always affirmed since the apostolic era.

"The forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

The final three clauses in the Apostles' Creed describe the eschatological benefits of Christian faith.

"....the forgiveness of sins...."

Sin is not a very popular word in the modern world, for above all others, it is

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[65]V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 55.

[66]F. Gouvea, "Communion of Saints," *EDT* (1984) 257-258.

[67]They have partially based this practice upon a vision by Judas Maccabeus described in the apocrypha, where he saw a deceased high priest along with the deceased Jeremiah praying for the Jewish community (2 Maccabees 15:12-16). Also, the Apocalypse depicts deceased saints in prayer (Re. 6:9-10). Since all Christians, whether living or deceased, are alive to God, and since the Scripture encourages believers to pray for each other (i.e., 1 Th. 5:25; He. 13:18-19, etc.), it is held that to invoke the deceased saints to intercede for the living on earth is appropriate so long as the redemptive, mediating work of Christ is not minimized, cf. G. Mastrantonis, *A New-Style Catechism on the Eastern Orthodox Faith for Adults* (St. Louis: Logos Mission, 1969) 151-155. Roman Catholics, of course, give to Mary a special role in this regard, based upon the communion of saints. She is believed to be the preeminent member of the community of saints by virtue of her unique relationship with Christ, cf. R. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) 893-895.

a word which holds men and women accountable to God. Primarily, the Bible describes sin as an offense committed toward God. While there are a host of related words, both in the Old Testament and the New Testament,[68] the general term sin captures them all. The essential meaning of sin is well expressed in the Parable of the Lost Son, when the returning prodigal cries out, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you" (Lk. 15:21). While sin can also refer to a breach of relationship with other humans, this breach is derivative, for all sin is ultimately against God. David cries out to God in anguish, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps. 51:4). The fact that all sin is a breach against Almighty God was clearly understood by the Jewish theologians, for they were indignant at Jesus when he offered forgiveness of sins to a paralyzed man, thus implying his own deity (Mk. 2:5-7).

Sin involves the entire human race and has done so from the fall. While the assumption of universal sinfulness is to be found throughout the Scriptures, Paul works it out most systematically in Romans, where he quotes a collage of Old Testament passages to prove that every human being of every race is under sin (Ro. 3:9-18, 23).

Given this understanding of sin, then, it naturally follows that forgiveness of sins must be an act of God. Furthermore, sin is so thoroughly imbedded in human nature and behavior that God determined to offer forgiveness for the whole corpus of sin, not merely the multitudinous single acts of sin. It is of this corporate forgiveness that Zechariah prophesies in the birth narratives of the gospel (Lk. 1:77). It is of this corporate forgiveness that John the Baptist preached when he offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). It is of this corporate forgiveness that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, when he described his blood as being poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Mt. 26:28; cf. Ep. 1:7; Col. 1:14; He. 9:22; 10:19-22). The great commission of Jesus to his disciples was to proclaim the availability of this forgiveness in all the world (Lk. 24:47), and the apostolic church faithfully preached this message (Ac. 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:17-18).

Thus, it should come as no surprise that the disciples and ministers of the Lord are privileged to announce absolution (divine remission) to those who have truly confessed their sins to God (Jn. 20:23; cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18). Humans, of course, cannot forgive sins against God--only God himself can do that (1 Jn. 1:9). However, humans may confidently announce absolution to the penitent upon the authority of Jesus himself!

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[68] i.e, missing the mark, rebellion, transgression, perversion, evil, impiety, unrighteousness, lawlessness, depravity, evil desire, cf. G. Bromiley, "Sin," *ISBE* (1988) IV.518.

"....the resurrection of the body...."

Christianity was bom in a Greco-Roman world which placed a minimum value on physical things. According to the Greeks, it was the spirit that was "good," while the body was more or less a physical prison from which the spirit would be released at death. There are still people, some even claiming Christianity, who hold such notions. Disembodiment, however, is not the ideal held up by the Bible. The physical world, including the human body, was created by God and declared to be good (Ge. 1:27, 31). Even in the Old Testament, one finds both implicit (Job 19:25-27; Is. 25:8) and explicit descriptions of resurrection (Da. 12:2).

Based upon the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the bodily resurrection of all believers is promised at the return of Christ (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Th. 4:16; 1 Jn. 3:2). The risen Christ is the "firstfruits" of resurrection (1 Co. 15:20-23; cf. Col. 1:18), and as the Lord of both the living and the dead, all those who belong to him shall also be raised to life at the end (Jn. 5:25-29). The Christian ideal is not disembodiment, but rather, an eternal, heavenly body (2 Co. 5:1-5). The perishable body of mortality will undergo a metamorphosis at the second coming of Christ (1 Co. 15:50-57). The exact nature of this changed body is not described in any detail except to say that it is heavenly, imperishable and like the resurrected body of Christ (1 Co. 15:35-49).

"....and the life everlasting."

Because as humans we are time-bound, it is very difficult for us to conceptualize the idea of eternal life. God, of course, is eternal (Ps. 90:2), and Habakkuk poses the rhetorical question, "O Yahweh, are you not from everlasting?" (1:12a). Believers are promised that after this life they will "ever be with the Lord" (1 Th. 4:17b), and they will live forever with him in a new heaven and new earth (Is. 66:22-23; Rv. 21:1-5). The tree of life, once made inaccessible because of human sin (Ge. 2:9; 3:22-24), will forever be accessible to God's people (Rv. 22:1-5).

"....Amen."

The final word in the creed is a solemn formula of affirmation meaning "so be it." It is to be found frequently in the New Testament as a liturgical formula, usually at the end of a doxology (e.g., Ro. 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 15:33; 16:27, etc.). Among the early Christian congregations, it was used as a collective response in congregational worship (1 Co. 14:16), and this usage reflects the worship in the heavenly realms (Rv. 5:14). As such, it is a fitting conclusion to the Apostles' Creed. Since the creed summarizes the central teachings of the Christian faith, the "amen" at the end emphasizes that these truths are firm.