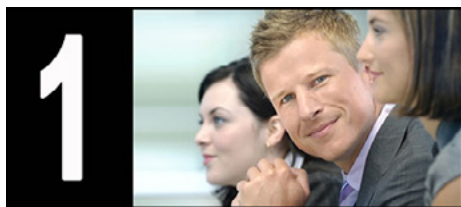




Faith Explorer

clear and concise
explanation of Christian faith

Online at www.faithexplorer.com



Bible Credibility

Bible books

The Bible is not a book in the usual sense of the word. Actually, it is a collection of 66 spiritual documents, all remarkably preserved and authenticated, and now translated, in whole or in part, into more than 3,000 languages.

Think of the Bible as a mini-library with certified information about God.

It's very IMPORTANT to understand that the Bible consists of two major parts: the **Old Testament** and the **New Testament**.

Testament means covenant, contract or agreement. The old agreement and the new agreement: the way God used to deal with people, before Christ, and the way God deals with us today.

Jews, Christians and Muslims all believe in the Old Testament, but the New Testament is uniquely Christian.

The New Testament is the primary documentation of the Christian faith. Without it, Christian faith would drift off into millions of personal philosophies without any anchor.

Bible size

As we experience the Bible today, our single printed volume is 66 small books bound together, about 1,200 pages in total, arranged in approximate historical sequence.

By number of pages:

- 77% is the 39 books of the **Old Testament**. (Catholics and Orthodox include about a dozen non-conflicting additional books). The Old Testament is a history of how God dealt with the Jewish people, before Christ.
- 10% is the four **gospels**, eye-witness accounts of the life of Christ.

- 3% is the **book of Acts**, a record of the teachings and growth of the early church.
- 8% is 21 **letters of instruction** from apostles (those who had been taught by Christ personally) to new churches springing up throughout the Roman Empire.
- 2% is the **book of Revelation**, the Apostle John's vision about heaven.

Bible writers

Approximately forty different people, working independently, were used by God to write the Bible.

They came from different geographic areas, different political systems and different social situations. They came from different walks of life – including king, farmer, shepherd, doctor, fisherman, priest, philosopher and tax collector. They ranged from educated to uneducated, from rich to poor. They lived on three different continents, spanning a period of more than 1,500 years.

Christians believe that God chose, inspired and directed these writers, and that's why, when all of these independent writings are put together, they read as a single coordinated volume.

The Bible has been rigorously challenged and investigated with regard to archaeology, bibliography, historical accuracy, fulfilled prophesy, internal unity, miraculous preservation and life-changing power. Thousands of studies and proof-books document this astounding evidence.

Ordinary writers, even if they worked as a team at the same time and place, could not produce a book that would survive such intense scrutiny over the centuries. The Bible has survived the tests of time and is still the world's most read book. The Bible itself is its own proof, beyond reasonable doubt, that God directed the writing.

The written Word of God keeps his message from becoming distorted over time.

Bible translations

The Old Testament books were written in Hebrew, the New Testament in Greek. (Jesus spoke Aramaic, but His words were translated and recorded in Greek.)

Our Bibles today are translations from the

original languages, remarkably preserved on thousands of manuscripts handed down from generation to generation and continually verified by new archaeological finds.

Different translations give slightly different shades of meaning, but they all say essentially the same thing.

Where to start

People investigating Christian faith for the first time, or wanting to re-examine and re-define their faith, shouldn't even consider the Old Testament or Revelation at this time. Those parts can provide rich historic and prophetic context for later study, but for now, they should stick with the essentials, found in the **gospels, Acts** and **letters**.

These 26 books of the New Testament define our relationship with God today.

Thus, we can distill the Bible to about 20% of its full size, to about 250 pages. We can handle that!

Unbelievable stories

There are many troubling stories in the Bible, and they are often major stumbling blocks to Christian faith.

For example: Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, Jonah and the big fish, God hardening Pharaoh's heart, Joshua stopping the sun, Israelites killing innocent people, and more.

Those credibility problems are in the Old Testament. It is usually in that part of the Bible where people get hung up.

People find it easier to believe the New Testament miracles, such as Jesus turning water into wine, walking on water and restoring sight to a blind man. We can understand how these public miracles were essential to prove that Jesus was actually God in human body, otherwise no one would have believed him.

But the Old Testament is about an ancient world we really can't understand, and Revelation is about a future world beyond our comprehension and open to many interpretations.

Actually, those parts of the Bible are not essential to Christian faith, and we should not be concerned about what we don't understand there. There are many explanations and interpretations, but no

consensus.

It's okay to have unanswered questions and suspended belief about parts of the Bible that are not directly relevant to us today.

Whether we believe or don't believe some of the stories in the Old Testament, or the dream in Revelation, or regardless how we explain or interpret them, literally or figuratively, a clear answer is not essential for today's decision.

There's nothing wrong or disingenuous about saying, *I don't know. I don't understand.* Like thousands of other questions in life we can't answer, and don't need to answer, we regard them as interesting, but not essential, and we move on.

So, in Christian faith, rather than get hung up on non-essential answers we don't have regarding the past or the future, we act on the essential answers WE DO HAVE for **TODAY** – in these 26 books of the New Testament.

Essential parts

But, by setting aside 80% of the Bible in defining our Christian faith, how can we be sure that we are not missing something of critical importance? Don't we have to read and understand the **WHOLE** Bible?

Here is some information to give us confidence that everything we need is in these 26 books:

The Old Testament says in many places that a new spiritual agreement is coming. And the New Testament says in many places that the message and sacrifice of Jesus has replaced the old agreement. And there are many confirming links of transition.

As stated clearly throughout the Bible (for example, Hebrews 11) and explained in [Jesus only way?](#), people can get to heaven without knowing anything about the Old Testament or Revelation.

In the book of Acts, when the church experienced it's most explosive growth, there wasn't any Bible at all! Everything was word-of-mouth and experiential. Most of the new believers were Gentiles (not Jews) who knew nothing about the Old Testament Jewish scriptures.

The New Testament, which came later, says that **SOME PEOPLE ARE** in heaven now because of their faith in Jesus Christ,

as personal Savior, based on oral testimony told to them, **NOT** because of anything they read in the Old Testament, or in Revelation, or even in the New Testament.

Central message

Therefore, it is God's central message that is essential for us to understand – the message clear to us from the words and life of Jesus Christ, documented in these 26 books of the New Testament.

The remaining eight sections are an investigation of this central message.



Reasoned faith

Our greatest risk

We live our life by faith, every day. We have faith in our chair ... brakes ... surgeon ... financial advisor. All day long we put faith in the things and people we trust.

Faith is usually associated with some kind of **RISK**. There are bad consequences if our faith is wrongly placed.

The most important faith of all is spiritual faith because it carries the greatest risk.

Death – which could come at any moment – seals our eternal destiny, and those who had wrongly placed spiritual faith will forever curse themselves for not making the right choice while there was still time.

What is faith?

Faith itself is not a thing or quality. It is not religious exercise or resolute disposition. It is believing – believing with good reason!

Just as we see something and know we have sight ... love someone and know we have love ... so we believe something and know we have faith. Sight, love and faith

come naturally, without striving, as a consequence of information and experience.

Faith is not a virtue. There's nothing either good or bad about believing or not believing something. Faith comes from **EVIDENCE**, which is a **rational matter**, not a moral one.

Faith is nothing apart from its object. What's good or bad is not the faith, but who or what we have faith in.

An intelligent person should believe something because of the weight of evidence for it, not merely because he feels like believing it, or because it is convenient to believe it, or because others tell him to believe it.

Everyone has faith

Everyone – even if he doesn't believe in God – attempts to make sense of the reality around us. If he doesn't attribute the world's existence to God, he forms an alternative naturalistic explanation for the world and has faith in that explanation.

- An **atheist** is one who believes he has positive evidence that there is no God. He explains all of existence in natural rather than supernatural terms. He sees nothing in the universe except blind and unconscious force. Christians and atheists both understand that something in the future is not a **fact** until it actually happens. Until then, both agree, it is belief – **faith** – based on study of best evidence available.
- An **agnostic** doesn't believe anything about God, saying that there is not enough evidence to believe either way. Sometimes this is just a cop-out for not wanting to think about it. The dominant form of agnosticism today is secular humanism, a philosophy which interprets the being of man solely within the human sciences and makes man himself the subject, source and primary object of values.

Agnostics and atheists usually pose as intellectuals. They say their views come by reason, not by faith. But their views **ARE BY FAITH**, because they must choose one or the other of two basic philosophies:

- (A) the universe bears evidence of intelligent design or
- (B) the universe just happened by chance by itself.

Either choice requires FAITH. And not choosing at all is still by FAITH – faith that a choice is inconsequential.

Every position – believer, atheist, or agnostic – is by FAITH, whether rightly placed or wrongly placed.

Ultimate arrogance

What any person knows, compared to all there is to know, is pathetically small. A person is neither wise nor intellectual when he feels no need to seek spiritual information.

It is ultimate arrogance when someone thinks he has the meaning and purpose of life all figured out and doesn't need to consider God's evidence (intelligent design of the universe), God's book (the Bible) or the personal testimony of others.

Doubt is not bad

When we encounter new information, we're likely to have some doubts about it. That's normal and okay.

There's nothing bad about doubt. Doubt can be a healthy step in the development of faith.

More than sincerity

Sincerity is not enough because sincerity is attitude, not fact. We can be sincerely wrong. We need to be RIGHT in our belief, not just sincere about it.

Best decision process

Solid faith comes not just from the heart, but from **heart AND mind** in sync.

As in every aspect of life, faith is strongest and most reliable when it is developed through this rational decision process:

- 1 We are confronted with new information
- 2 We think about it and question it
- 3 Often, we have some doubt about the accuracy or completeness of what we hear
- 4 We determine what additional information is needed and then set out to get it
- 5 With good data and careful assessment, we develop FAITH that something or someone will act in a certain way

Then, relying on this FAITH, we make our decision.

The greater the quantity and accuracy of our information, and the more rigorous our doubt and questioning, the stronger our FAITH will be.

In this respect, development of spiritual faith is like development of faith in other areas of life. It grows out of an inner processing of information, with doubt being the catalyst in the process.

What's dangerous is when a person cares so little about spiritual matters that he doesn't think about them enough to even struggle with doubt, or when he remains stuck in doubt for a long time without getting more information.

A wise person will be willing to alter what he has been taught to believe – or what he is expected to believe – if the evidence of his own search leads to new and more accurate understanding.

Important questions

Philosophers throughout the ages have not been able to pose any questions more discerning than these three:

*Who am I? Why am I here?
Where am I going?*

We can never rise higher than what we believe. Our beliefs shape our attitudes, motivations and decisions, and thus determine our future.

Our existence is essentially empty and meaningless without strong faith arising from a careful personal investigation into the meaning and purpose of life.

Empty inside

We may be able to fool others into thinking that all is going well, but we can't fool ourselves. Even when things look good on the outside, life can be empty on the inside, as illustrated by these comments:

- I'm president of the company, but I don't know who I am
- I have a Ph.D., but I don't know what I believe
- I'm famous, but I'm lonely
- I'm a multi-millionaire, but I'm not happy

It's part of the human experience to be engulfed at times by feelings of restlessness and futility. This happens when we discov-

er, sooner or later, that power, education, esteem and affluence cannot satisfy the real craving of the soul.

Only God can fill that God-shaped vacuum within us.

These feelings – sometimes described as spiritual hunger – can actually be good for us if they prompt inquiry and development of spiritual faith.

What matters

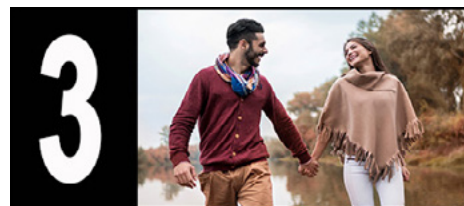
A measure of a person's wisdom and maturity is how far out in time he can plan and work.

Here's a question to put things in perspective:

Will anything I do today make any difference to me 100 years from now?

Over the long run, most thoughts really don't matter very much, but what we think about God – and how we respond to him – affects us forever.

Nothing is more important than the **accuracy** of our spiritual faith.



God's design plan

Design or chance

Which of the following do you think is true:

The world is the result of

- (A) intelligent design, or
- (B) random chance?

Most people will say it's both design and chance. Okay, let's say it's 50% design and 50% chance. Then the answer includes A, because design is an essential part of what we observe and experience. Even if it's 1% design and 99% chance, the answer still includes A.

Most people conclude that it takes too

much faith to believe that the world is 100% the result of random chance only.

This conclusion comes not from religion, not from emotion, but from reason.

Designer

It follows logically that if there is intelligent design in the world, there must be a DESIGNER.

And since we observe and experience reality of the design, it follows that there must be a CREATOR who implemented the design into actual existence.

Creation

Whether our world was created QUICKLY in 24-hour human days with built-in *apparent age* (e.g., mountains and trees were mature, Adam was a full-grown man) or SLOWLY in geological days, it doesn't matter.

The important point is: **God did it!**

Scientists say the universe began about 15 billion years ago from a bright flash of energy, the big bang. If that was the beginning of nature, then some intelligence outside of nature, and above nature, had to trigger the big bang, to start everything out of nothing, and to establish those predetermined laws of nuclear energy, gravity and physical matter that enabled it to happen with orderly precision.

Evolution may be God's method of creation within broad categories, but note that rocks never become plants, plants never become animals, and animals never become humans.

Throughout history the designer-creator has been called **God**, which means Almighty Being, nothing superior.

Science and theology

We call the study of God's physical design **science** and the study of God's spiritual design **theology**.

Science limits itself to time and space and to experimentation that can be physically observed, measured and repeated.

Theology moves into the intangible realm of relationships, motivations and decisions.

There is no contradiction between science and theology. They just make different

inquiries in different ways.

Good and evil

Something becomes obvious as we move beyond science (how does it work?) and begin to study theology (who made it, and why?).

We see that our world is more than just physical phenomenon. In it we find the concept of **right and wrong**, springing from an intuitive universal sense of good and evil.

This knowledge comes from somewhere outside of nature, and above nature, because nature is violent, survival of the fittest.

We recognize a MORAL LAW, operating by spiritual design as surely as gravity operates by physical design.

For example, if A pushes B off the curb into traffic, B will immediately want to know if A's action was intentional or accidental. If intentional, there would be something wrong with B's behavior. Not physically wrong, but morally wrong.

It is not wrong if A pushes B by accident, even though B gets hurt. But it is wrong if A pushes B on purpose, even though B doesn't get hurt. This kind of right-and-wrong thinking is built right into us.

Not only does our conscience tell us what wrong things NOT to do, but it also tells us what right things TO do.

If we were animals or machines, it would be meaningless to speak of good and evil. We don't accuse animals for attacking one another or computers for criminal behavior.

But for us, **good and evil is the major human problem**.

Evil is not a quality but rather lack or privation of a quality. It's like rot, rust and wounds. If you take all the bad out of something, it becomes better. If you take all the good out, nothing is left. For example, if you take all the rot out of a tree, it's a better tree. If you take all the good out, there is no tree.

Sin

For everyday shortcomings, we usually use a softer term for evil. We call it **Sin**.

Generally, we know what sin is, from our conscience, from the Bible and from our

civil laws.

The key point is not that we must eliminate all sin from our lives – we can't because we're human – or that we must identify and atone for every sin.

The key point is that every person, humbly and individually, must acknowledge that he or she is a sinner and needs Jesus Christ as Savior. **This is the core Christian belief**, as explained in [God's character](#).

Christianity different

It's here where Christianity differs from most religions.

Religions say that we must, by self effort, balance the weight of all our sin against the weight of all our sacrifices, rituals and good deeds. We achieve favor with God by doing more good than bad.

But the Bible says we can NEVER make enough sacrifices, perform enough rituals or do enough good deeds to overcome our sin.

Worst sin

The Bible says all sin can be forgiven, as a FREE GIFT from God IF – this is the big IF – IF we sincerely confess our sins, desire to turn from our sins, ask God for forgiveness, and claim Jesus Christ as our substitute.

It's the worst sin of all if a person knows about this offer of forgiveness but rejects it either by conscious decision or by procrastination.

Forgiveness is not automatic, earned, or transmitted by family or church. It's a personal offer and requires personal acceptance.

Failure to accept the offer is rejection of the offer, leaving that person guilty of a lifetime of sin, with judgment coming, hell instead of heaven after death, as explained in [Heaven/hell](#).

Unpardonable sin

The Bible tells about the one sin that cannot be forgiven, sometimes referred to as the *unpardonable* sin, but more accurately called the *unpardoned* sin.

This means that Christ's substitutionary death covers every sin except this one.

This fatal sin is rejection of God's offer.

This is the one sin we must not commit!

In other words, if we don't commit this sin, we get forgiveness of all other sins.

Free will

Why didn't God just create us as people who are always good? Why does he allow sin?

The answers become apparent as we investigate God's character. We see that God is love and gives us free will.

There is a necessary linkage and tension between love and free will.

True love can exist only when the object of love has freedom to choose whether or not to return love. Otherwise we would be robots rather than persons, and God could never have fulfillment in his love for us.

The stronger and freer we are, the better we will be when we go right, but the worse we will be when we go wrong. That's a necessary RISK of love and free will, inherent in God's design plan.



God's trinity

Trinity

Now we look more closely at God's design plan, focusing on the concept of trinity.

Trinity means functioning simultaneously in three different ways.

God uses three-in-one design extensively throughout his creation. For example, space is one nature, but a trinity: height, width and depth. Time is one nature, but a trinity: past, present and future. Matter is one nature, but a trinity: solid, liquid and gas.

Man is a trinity

Man is one nature, but a trinity: body, soul and spirit.

We know about our own trinity from inside information; not just from something we observe, but from something we experience, from our own understanding of ourself. We have:

- **Body** - physical
- **Soul** - mental (mind, will and emotion)
- **Spirit** - God connection

We say things like, *I tell my body to get going, but it just doesn't want to move.*

We come to know God by knowing ourselves.

Only man has spirit

Animals have bodies and souls. Some people may argue that animals don't have souls, but, to test, just kick a dog and observe not only the physical, but also the mind, will and emotion.

But among all earth's creatures, only man has the SPIRIT part, the God connection.

God is a trinity

The Bible says that God himself is a trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and that man was created in God's image.

Therefore, because we resemble God, and God resembles us, we get important insight into both natures, how they coincide, and how they work together.

One God, not three

The concept of God's trinity is cause of considerable confusion and friction. For example, Muslims think Christians worship three Gods. No! God is one God, not three Gods.

For centuries, God has been referred to as the three persons of the trinity. That's confusing because the word person now means something very different than in times past. Today the word refers to a self-conscious autonomous individual, but then the word referred to patterns and qualities of behavior.

Trinity in the Bible is not individual persons but functional behaviors.

In mathematical expression, it's not $1+1+1=3$, but $1 \times 1 \times 1=1$.

Our computer age gives us a practical understanding of the three-in-one concept:

Imagine a company with 100 stores, all computerized. There's the main **server** in company headquarters, there's a **terminal** in every store, and there's a digital phone **network** connecting them all together.

Now, which is *'the computer'* – the server, network or terminal? We can't say. They are all intertwined as one. Everyone in the company simply calls it 'the computer' – just as we say 'God' – even though there are three distinct parts functioning at once in different ways at different times in different places. Simultaneously!

Hierarchy in trinity

The Bible says there is hierarchy within the trinity. The Father sends the Son, and the Son sends the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit draws people to the Son, and the Son draws people to the Father.

Anything we say about God is an over-simplification due to limitations of our finite minds. But, very simply, from the Bible, we see that the **Father is in charge of the universe**, the **Son is in charge of the world**, and the **Holy Spirit is in charge of us individually** (if we let him be in charge).

God-the-father

God-the-father is the supreme God of the universe, generally recognized and acknowledged by people everywhere.

He is the designer-creator, and he established the physical and spiritual laws by which we live and die. He is not a body or a gender. He is all-powerful, all-knowing and everywhere present.

Nearly everyone throughout history has known he's out there, but without the Son and Holy Spirit, he would be only a remote power, and no one could really know or understand him.

God-the-son

As an analogy, suppose you want to communicate to a colony of ants. You could shout, gesture and drop notes, but all to no

avail. The only way is for you to become an ant and go down among them.

Similarly, God had to become a man to communicate with us.

True, he could continue sending prophets, as he did in the Old Testament, but people would not be able to distinguish between who is real and who is fraudulent or misguided. Many would claim to be prophets, and most people would not believe them, and we would be left in the dark.

So, for a brief time, the Son came into our world bodily as the god-man, being born of the Virgin Mary.

The Son is Jesus Christ. He was human body with divine soul and spirit. Jesus is His name (like James or Robert). Christ is his title (Christos in Greek, meaning the one sent by God).

He authenticated his deity with miracles and eye witnesses. He told us everything we need to know about God.

Jesus physically appeared at the time in human history – which we mark as the starting date of our calendar – when people had developed to the point that they were able to comprehend a fuller revelation of God and understand a new spiritual concept based on trinity ... the new agreement, the New Testament, as explained in [Bible credibility](#) ... the key features of this new agreement being a once-for-all forgiveness of sin and a new kind of personal relationship between God and man ... through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Because Jesus had a human body, he was limited to one place at a time. Even though he came into the highly developed Greco-Roman culture, most people still could not read or write, and there were no printing presses, no radio or television, no cars or planes. He couldn't physically be with everyone, then or now.

God-the-holy-spirit

And that's where the third part of the trinity comes in.

Just as a part of God came into the world, a part of God can come into every person, individually, if invited. His spirit in our spirit.

Now it's more than God among us; it's **God in us!**

The Greek word for spirit literally means *wind* or *breath*. A Christian can have the

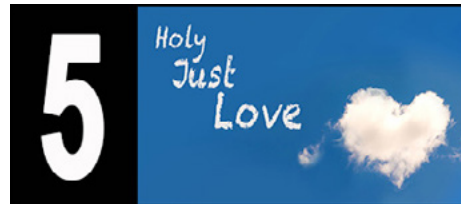
breath of God within him.

Function vs. character

So far we have considered God only from the viewpoint of how he functions (his trinity), but that's as limiting as trying to know a person solely by observing **WHAT** he does without regard to **WHY** he does it.

The Bible reveals two dimensions of God: **what he does** and **who he is**.

It's the distinction between doing and being. One dimension is **FUNCTION** (explained this section), the other is **CHARACTER** (explained next section).



God's character

Character attributes

The Bible says that God has three character attributes:

- God is **HOLY**
- God is **JUST**
- God is **LOVE**

The word **holy** in the original Greek means *separated*. Unlike us, God is separated from sin and error.

He operates by intricate principles and meticulous order – we call them laws – which govern the relationship of things that share common time and space, to prevent chaos, whether atoms in molecular orbit or people in a city.

The word **HOLY**, when referring to God, means perfect, always in accord with his physical and spiritual laws.

The word **JUST**, when referring to God, means fair reward for compliance and/or fair punishment for violation. Good spiritual laws would be meaningless without a commitment to uphold them.

The word **LOVE**, when referring to God, means a deep and tender feeling of affection and attachment for each of us and an enduring concern for our individual well-being.

Free will

The Bible says that God wants a reciprocal love relationship with each of us, individually.

Reciprocal love requires that the object of love have freedom to choose whether or not to return love. Therefore, God gives us free will.

He gives us an internal moral law (conscience) and external guidance (Bible), but we fail him miserably. At end of this life, we must face his judgment for our choices.

Dilemma

God is **HOLY**, so he cannot ignore sin.

God is **JUST**, so he must punish sinners; punishment for a lifetime of accumulated sin is hell, as discussed in [Heaven/hell](#).

God is **LOVE** ... BUT, if he is really love, how can he sentence someone to hell?

This is a dilemma!

Exchange offer

To resolve the dilemma, God offers a substitution option, commonly called the **plan of salvation**. Here's how it works:

Because God is a trinity, explained in [God's trinity](#), a part of God became man, and that part (Jesus) became God's **ONLY** acceptable substitute for our deserved punishment.

If the offer is accepted, our life (sinful) is exchanged for his life (sinless) at time of judgment, and thus we are declared free from the penalty of sin. We become pardoned sinners.

By offering this option, God is **holy, just** and **love**, all at the same time. Dilemma solved. No conflict.

Offer makes sense

This substitution principle (a sacrifice on someone's part) is similar to what we experience in our human justice system:

You violate the law, and the judge orders

a fine (a huge fine, more than you have ability to pay). A friend steps in and pays the fine for you. Justice has been served, and it cost you nothing, because of your friend.

We see this principle in the Old Testament. People sinned, but God accepted an animal on the altar as a sacrifice for sin. God said, then, that if a person is truly sorry for personal sins, he would accept the life of the animal in exchange for sin of the person.

As explained in [Bible credibility](#), there is a big difference between the old way (Old Testament) and the new way (New Testament). Then, sacrifices had to be made over and over again, for every sin or batch of sins.

Now, Jesus' death on the cross is the once-for-all sacrifice ... for all sins, for all people, for all times ... BUT the sacrifice must be individually acknowledged and accepted.

Sounds too easy

The exchange offer sounds too good to be true. Too easy, many people say.

So why doesn't God just give this substitution to everyone, automatically? Because that would be meaningless! There would be no real justice involved and no real love involved. We would not be ecstatic about it, and our lives would not be changed by it.

Therefore, the Bible says, to get this exchange – often called *salvation* – there are two conditions:

- 1 We must ask forgiveness for our sins and sincerely desire to stop repeating them.
- 2 We must claim Jesus as our exchange – or, in a common way of saying it, accept Jesus as personal Savior.

This is individual action, not something conferred by family or church. It is free, for everyone. It can never be bought or earned by good works.

A person can accept Jesus as personal savior at any time, any place, alone or with others, purposefully coming into the conscious presence of God.

A person does not need to clean up his or her life first. God will immediately grant forgiveness and begin transforming and em-

powering that person's life for the better.

The people who say this is too easy probably have not done it, proving that it is not easy, because of pride. God demands humility and confession.

Jesus

Jesus was crucified on a cross by Roman soldiers because of pressure from religious leaders who were furious that he claimed to be God and was attracting large crowds of followers.

His body was placed in a guarded tomb, but after three days, he was miraculously alive again, outside the tomb, meeting at various times and places with hundreds of disciples.

Forty days later he left earth by rising and disappearing into the clouds in the presence of witnesses, after instructing them to tell the entire world what they had seen and heard.

Jesus' time on earth was progression from a miraculous beginning to a miraculous ending. The beginning showed his humanity, the ending showed his deity.

We call him Jesus Christ. Jesus is his name, human; Christ is his title, deity.

He used miracles to authenticate his deity; otherwise, people would not believe him.

The Bible says that Jesus Christ is now in heaven, from where he came, and that he will return to earth at an unknown time to gather the living and dead for final judgment.

Some say, *So Jesus died, but only for three days. That's not a huge sacrifice.*

The point is not how long he remained dead or what happened when he was in hell for three days. The point is that he died as the only once-for-all sacrifice acceptable to God, forever ending all other sacrificial systems.

Furthermore, as humans, we are incapable of understanding what pain and humiliation Jesus had to endure, even for three days, to bear all the sins of the world.

Act of love

Because God can do anything, he could accomplish these free-will and substitution objectives without a death, resurrection or ascension, but that would not be an act

of love. That would be cold procedure, and most people would not understand it, identify with it, respond to it or often think about it.

The way he used his trinity, and the way he reconciled his conflicts of character, is a beautiful way of demonstrating love and fulfilling the the Old Testament laws. People of all cultures, ages, education and time can understand it. Not heavy theology. Just response to an act of love.

People in diverse cultures everywhere, even before contact with Judeo-Christian thinking, have always known that some kind of sacrifice – usually a blood sacrifice – is the necessary way to get rid of the heavy burden of sin. This knowledge is built right into us, part of [God's design plan](#).

Action step needed

A common Christian expression is the admonition to *ask Christ into your life* or *invite Jesus into your heart* or similar terms which emphasize that **salvation** (full pardon for the penalty of all sin) requires a personal decision.

Just believing in God or Jesus is not enough. The Bible says belief must be coupled with a specific action step:

Consciously invite him into your life ... confess your sins ... ask for forgiveness and salvation ... desire to turn from your sins ... and let him take control in daily living.

This is what it means to become a Christian.

This action step need be taken only once. Jesus called this *new birth* ([John 3:1-18](#)). Just as we have a time of physical birth, we have a time of spiritual birth, and we grow from there.

Sin will become increasingly distasteful, but we are still human, and we will still sin from time to time.

To maintain a close and happy relationship with God, we should confess known sins as they occur and increasingly turn over more control of our lives to him, explained in [Daily living](#).



Heaven / hell

Life after death

People of all times, places and religions have instinctively known that there will be a final judgment and reward or punishment after death. This knowledge is built right into us.

Heaven and hell are logical extensions of [God's character](#).

- God is **HOLY**. He has established good physical and spiritual laws we can depend upon.
- God is **JUST**. There is a penalty for wrong choices. Hell is the penalty for a lifetime of sin.
- God is **LOVE**. He offers a substitute (Jesus) to free us from the penalty. If we accept, we get heaven instead of hell.

The substitution is a gift, and hell is what's left if the gift is rejected.

Spirit world

Permeating the physical world, there is a spirit world we cannot see and can only barely understand; not only the Holy Spirit, but angels, Devil and demons.

This mysterious realm is most discernible to people who open themselves to spirit influences and powers.

Generally, modern Western culture is cerebral and chooses not to acknowledge spirits except in jest.

Christians need not be much concerned about it, except to recognize that the spirit world is very real and can have considerable power over individual lives.

Fortunately, **salvation**, explained in [God's character](#), takes care of it all for us. When we accept Jesus as Savior, we also get the

Holy Spirit.

To the extent we yield to the Holy Spirit, he (God within us) drives away evil powers that want to corrupt our lives. We don't have to think about the spirit world. We just yield to God.

Heaven

Polls by Gallup and others reveal that approximately 80% of Americans believe in heaven, 10% don't believe, and 10% are not sure.

Heaven is both a place and a state of being. The Bible says people there will have a different body (perfect!), and there will be no sin, pain or sorrow.

There are many references to heaven in the Bible but no detailed description except for a symbolic dream in the book of Revelation.

Heaven is beyond our capacity to comprehend, and human words cannot describe it.

We should dismiss as pure fantasy images such as a person with wings walking around heaven playing a little harp.

All we can know, and need to know, is that heaven is the wonderful condition after death, with God. It's where we want to be!

Hell

Hell is what's left after God leaves.

It is confinement together of all unforgiven sinners, Satan and evil spirits, left alone to fend for themselves in an environment of unstrained evil and suffering, without God and unable to die.

Hell is the exact opposite of heaven. It is the terrible place for people who are not in heaven, totally abandoned by God, cursing themselves for rejecting Christ in their earthly life.

We should dismiss as pure fantasy images such as the Devil with a tail, red suit and pitchfork.

All we can know, and need to know, is that hell is the horrible condition after death, without God. It's where we don't want to be!

Criteria

Some 'bad' people will go to heaven, like the repentant thief who died on the cross beside Jesus.

Some 'good' people will go to hell, like the pious religious leaders rebuked by Jesus.

A person goes to hell for relying on personal merits rather than on Christ's merits, regardless how good that person may be.

Rejecting Jesus as Savior – thinking I'm good enough or I don't need God's salvation – is what condemns a person to hell.

In legal terms, this is a matter of offer-and-acceptance. Accepting God's gift is heaven, rejecting it is hell.

No response is same as rejection.

God more than fair

God is not always 'fair' in our sense of the word. He is more than fair and always **HOLY, JUST and LOVE**.

Jesus told this story to illustrate ([Matthew 20:1-15](#)):

'A landowner went to town at 6:00 in the morning to hire laborers to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a *denarius* [a day's wage, let's say \$150].

'At 9:00 he went back to the marketplace and got some more laborers, saying I'll pay you whatever is right.

He went to town and did the same again at noon, and again at 3:00 in the afternoon.

'At 5:00 he saw men standing around the marketplace and asked them, "Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?"

"Because no one hired us," they answered.

"You also come and work in my vineyard," he said.

'When evening came, the owner said to his foreman, "Call the workers and pay them their wages."

'They all received \$150.

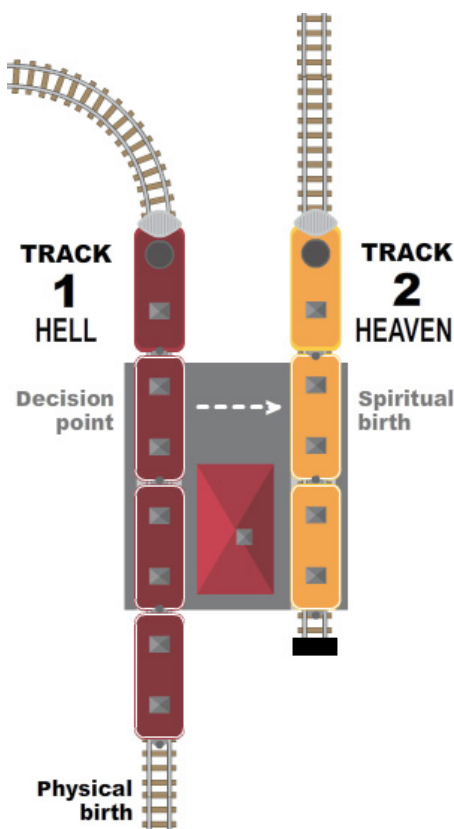
'But those who were hired early grumbled that it was unfair that those who were hired later got the same pay.

"The landowner answered, "Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for \$150? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you.

"Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

Original sin

Now, for another illustration, look at this train diagram to help explain some key Christian concepts and terminology:



Everyone comes into the world on **Track 1**, headed for hell because of our sin nature (original sin), and stays on **Track 1** unless the person makes a deliberate decision to get off and go to **Track 2**.

Because God is JUST, there are exceptions, as explained in [Jesus only way?](#), for children ... for mentally handicapped ... for people who have never clearly heard about Jesus ...

But the exceptions don't apply here. We KNOW, or at least are put on notice to investigate further. Now we will be held accountable, individually, for our response.

Predestination

Some people say there is really nothing we can do about our destiny ... that God has determined it in advance (predestination).

True, he has laid the tracks, and he has limited our option to only two tracks. He has predestined that all on **Track 1** go to hell and that all on **Track 2** go to heaven.

But, we can choose, with our own free will, the track we want.

We can look out the window and heed the signs at the stops and platforms along the way, which are our decision points.

To change, we simply get off the train on **Track 1** and walk across the platform to the train on **Track 2**, as explained in [God's character](#). Besides getting us to the desired destination, the train on **Track 2** has softer seats and nicer passengers.

Election

God has chosen (election) the category of people that will go to heaven – the ones on Track 2 – but each individual chooses with his own free will whether or not he wants to be a part of that category.

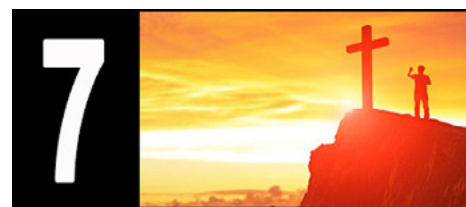
Failing to make a decision to change means that the person deliberately chooses to remain with the group on **Track 1**.

Justification

By what right (justification) can someone simply get off the train on **Track 1** headed for hell and get on the train on **Track 2** headed for heaven? Because Jesus Christ offers a fully paid ticket, purchased by his substitution death on the cross.

Grace

We don't pay for the **Track 2** ticket with our own money or works. It's a free gift from God, more than we deserve (grace).



Jesus only way?

Getting it right

The question – *Is Jesus the only way to heaven?* – put in perspective:

- If heaven is just a fairy tale, the question is irrelevant and not even worthy of consideration.
- If heaven is real, getting the answer right is the most critical issue in all of life.

For anyone who has heard the message of Jesus Christ, the New Testament is very explicit in saying that the only way to heaven for that person is to personally accept Jesus as Savior before life on earth ends.

However, the New Testament is not explicit about what happens to people who haven't heard this message.

If God is **JUST** and **LOVE**, how can he play favorites? How can most people be excluded from the possibility of salvation through no fault of their own?

For answers, we need to understand two theological concepts: **audience** and **impute**.

In theology: Audience

Messages are intended for the persons to whom they are addressed and delivered.

The New Testament is the part of the Bible that contains the message for us, here, today. However, not everyone has received this message.

What about people who lived before Jesus? Or lived in places where this message was unknown? Are these people held accountable for not responding to a message they never received? Or might they be subject to other messages or special revelations from God that we don't know about?

God may have other ways to heaven for people outside of the New Testament audience. For example, the New Testament names Abel, Enoch, Job and Noah as ancient people who pleased God but lived before there were Jews, Christians, Muslims or any of today's religions and scriptures.

Other examples cited in the New Testament include Abraham, Moses, David and the prophets. And people outside of the Abrahamic line, too, like Melchizedek and Rahab.

The New Testament ([Hebrews 11](#)) says that they are all in heaven because of their faith and obedience to what they knew. They died without knowing anything about Jesus Christ.

Since these people are specifically named in the New Testament as examples, we can assume that others like them will also be in heaven.

They were accountable only for responding to what THEY knew about God in THEIR lifetime, not for what WE know TODAY.

Revelation varies according to time and place in history, and apparently people are judged according to the light God gives them.

However, Jesus said: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' ([John 14:6-7](#))

There are two ways to reconcile these Bible statements:

- **Audience:** Jesus was not referring to all humanity but only to those who actually hear his words, directly or indirectly.
- **Impute:** Jesus was referring to all humanity, but the benefits of his sacrificial death are imputed to people who didn't know about him if they were seeking God in the best way they knew with their limited knowledge.

In theology: Impute

The word *impute*, when used in theology, means to credit to one person the righteousness of another.

For example, Jesus' righteousness was imputed to the thief being crucified on the adjacent cross. The thief had lived a life so bad that civil authorities sentenced him to death. He understood very little

about Jesus, and apparently he was never baptized. Because of the thief's last minute response to what little spiritual knowledge he had, Jesus said he will be in heaven, in contrast to the mocking thief on the other cross.

The Bible says: 'He [Jesus] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.' ([John 2:2](#))

We have no way of knowing how many people throughout history have had the benefits of Christ's death imputed to them because they lacked spiritual information or capacity to understand.

Uninformed

Most people have never heard a clear presentation of Jesus' death, resurrection and offer of salvation as stated in the New Testament.

Will they go to hell because they never heard ... or because what they heard was incomplete, convoluted or misleading?

Jesus said that we should not judge, that we should leave this to God, but we can't help speculating about the question.

Among Christians, there is a wide range of opinions, from narrow conservative to broad liberal:

- A **narrow conservative opinion** is that heaven is granted only to those who consciously and explicitly invite Jesus Christ into their lives as personal Savior. All others – regardless of knowledge, place or time – go to hell. It doesn't matter that we don't understand or think it fair; God is sovereign and does whatever he wants.
- A **broad liberal opinion** is that God's saving grace is operative in every culture, place and time. A person receives the grace of God on the basis of an honest search for God and obedience to God's word as heard in heart and conscience. True God-seekers who do not have the full revelation will become members of Christ's body and receive the grace of conversion and explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ at a later date, whether in this life or after death.

It's clear from the Bible that everyone must eventually pass through Jesus to reach the Father – see [God's trinity](#) – but apparently there is more than one path through Jesus.

Because God is present in the whole world, God's grace is also at work in some way among all people.

We can speculate, but we don't know how God will judge the uninformed and misinformed or what special arrangements he may have for them. But we DO KNOW how he will judge us.

For us, we know

People who raise objections about the way they think God is dealing with others usually do it as a smoke screen for their own resistance to God.

Most people in the modern Western world already know about, or have been put on notice to investigate, God's free offer of salvation through Jesus Christ.

It doesn't matter to us how God in his progressive revelation has been dealing with other people.

The way he deals with us today is spelled out in the New Testament and, as explained in [Heaven/hell](#), a response is required.

The personal response, or lack of it, is the difference between heaven and hell.



Daily living

More than religion

All through life, individually and in community, we struggle with good and evil. We are neither all good nor all bad, but some of each every day.

Our problem is not only with sins of **commission**, but also with sins of **omission**.

Because of this struggle, religions have evolved, setting rules of conduct, modes of worship and ways of trying to appease some deity for our failures.

Christianity is a religion in the broadest sense of the term, but upon inspection it IS UNLIKE any religion:

- **Religion** is man reaching up to God, trying to please God with good deeds and sacrifices.
- **Christianity** is God reaching down to man, through Jesus, offering salvation to all who will accept it, without requirement of any merit on our part.

This is a huge difference. Religions are hard work and essentially futile.

Authentic Christianity is not religious practice, but a different kind of life ... a radically different way of dealing with sin.

Dealing with sin

There are two parts to the way Christians deal with sin: the **PENALTY OF SIN**, which requires one-time action; and the **POWER OF SIN**, which requires continuous action.

1. PENALTY OF SIN. This is the most critical part, and it's the difference between heaven and hell.

After death, every person will stand judgment before God for sins of a lifetime. No one is pure enough for heaven. However, as explained in [God's character and Heaven/hell](#), God says that he will accept a substitution: **Jesus life for my life!**

It's at this point where Christianity is completely opposite from religions. Here we have a once-for-all sacrifice for all sins – past, present and future – and no need to offer further sacrifices. The penalty is paid in full.

But after dealing with the PENALTY part, there is still the problem of sin in daily living.

2. POWER OF SIN. After accepting Jesus as Savior, we sin less, but we are still sinners. We constantly struggle with bad things we do and good things we don't do.

Man is a trinity created in the image of [God's trinity](#). We are more than just body (physical) and soul (mind, will and emotion), more than animal life. As explained in [God's character](#), there is also a **spirit** (God-connection) within us.

Our spirit is where divine nature and human nature meet. It's the doorway to our life at the highest plane of existence.

The way we defeat sin is not by sheer will-power and discipline but rather by letting the Holy Spirit into our lives to overpower the sin.

To illustrate, think of the spirit part of us as a room without windows. When the door is closed, there is darkness and confusion, a breeding place for sin. When we accept Jesus as Savior, the door opens and the Holy Spirit enters as light. Now we have greater discernment of right and wrong, and a greater love for people. Now we see and understand things that didn't make sense when groping in the dark.

Throughout the Bible, God's presence is described as LIGHT ... and we understand the characteristics of light:

- Light cannot be grasped or held
- Light itself cannot be seen, but reveals everything in its presence
- Light overpowers darkness, but darkness never overpowers light
- Light is warmth and energy
- Light fills all space made available to it, but will not invade space closed to it
- Light is never consumed or exhausted by anything in its presence
- Light fades the further we move from its source

The concept is simple, yet profound: In the presence of light, sin becomes distasteful to us.

The Bible says: 'God is light. In him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.' ([1 John 1:5-7](#))

Our motivations change with less self-effort. In the light, WE WANT TO DO GOOD. Choices become clearer and decisions are better. Impulses, addictions and lethargy that once gripped us move out when the Holy Spirit moves in.

But there's still a problem.

Frequently, we don't want so much light, because it exposes too much, so our human nature prompts us to close the door a bit. It's not that we shut out the Holy Spirit completely; we just give him less access.

The result is not that we lose our salvation, but that we lose *joy* (a Christian term for spiritual happiness), lose clear direction, and lose power over sin.

To restore a diminished relationship with God, we need to open the door wide and let the Holy Spirit clean and reorganize. It's God doing the work, not us. *Filled with the spirit* is a Christian term for this renewal.

Opening up to the Holy Spirit is an act of the will – a surrender – usually facilitated by prayer and Bible reading.

Prayer

As recorded in [Matthew 6:5-13](#), Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray.

Jesus said, 'When you pray, do not keep babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'

Then he gave them a brief model prayer consisting of five points:

- 1 Submit humbly to Almighty God
- 2 Ask God to align us to his will
- 3 Ask God to supply our daily needs
- 4 Ask God to forgive us, and we forgive others
- 5 Ask God for spiritual guidance and protection

Jesus said that we should pray with sincere faith, without public piety or vain repetitions, and listen as well as petition.

He said to pray for others and think of ways we can help them.

He taught his disciples to pray often, formally and informally, word-by-word in language and thought-by-thought in spirit, alone and with others.

Prayer is for adjusting us to God's purposes, not for us telling God how to bless our endeavors and fulfill our desires. We don't give God directions; we ask for his direction and strength.

Even after being saved from the penalty of sin, we need to confess known sins and truly desire to cooperate with God in not repeating them. Confession and repentance cleans the contamination of sin from our lives and relationships.

Bible

An important way God speaks to us is through the Bible. When we read it, we

know we are getting God's words, not human philosophy. The Bible keeps God's message from becoming distorted over time.

The Old Testament has hundreds of commandments regulating Jewish worship and conduct. Most are arcane and don't apply to new life in Christ or modern society, but the basic principles – including the [Ten Commandments](#) – are still relevant for today.

As recorded in [Matthew 22:34-40](#), Jesus was asked which is the most important of all the commandments. He answered:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment.

'And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.'

We don't need a long list of do's and don'ts that choke us. That's what Jesus came to replace. Mostly, we just remember these two guiding principles and apply them to every situation.

In the Gospels, we read the teachings of Jesus. In Acts and the Letters, the instructions to new churches, we get more detail about specific sins (like lying, stealing and gossip) and about specific virtues (like compassion, charity and fidelity). The Holy Spirit uses words from the Bible to activate our spirit and identify issues that need personal attention.

The Bible shapes our Christian life style.

Bible commentaries, books, sermons and testimonies, when in accord with the Bible, are also helpful in keeping us clean and strong.

Holy spirit

Christian life is a journey, and we experience spiritual growth and maturity along the way. Not everything happens at once.

In [Galatians 5:22-23](#) we have a list of nine qualities that characterize a life directed by the Holy Spirit:

'The fruit [result, consequence] of the spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.**'

These qualities express themselves in

practical ways: positive attitude ... loyal and compassionate friend. ... good listener ... good citizen .. feeding the hungry ... caring for the sick .. giving to the poor ... working for social justice ... cleaning the environment ... encouraging the down-hearted ... acting with honesty, integrity, responsibility and consistency ...

Life directed by the Holy Spirit is quality life.



Church

Church is people

The word church has different meanings depending on the context. We say things like, Where's your church?, referring to location of a building. Or, What's your church?, referring to a particular fellowship of believers. Or, What kind of church?, referring to the beliefs and practices of that fellowship.

In Bible times, there were no churches as we know them today. The early Christians met in homes. No church buildings. No seminaries. No professional clergy.

The word church is English for the Greek term *ecclesia*, formed from two Greek words meaning an assembly and called out ones.

A person becomes a part of the church (universal) by exercising faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord, as explained in God's character.

The church (local) is an assembly of believers called out to live as followers of Jesus Christ, meeting together frequently for worship, prayer, teaching, fellowship, encouragement, family development, mutual help and group action.

The Bible describes the church as the body of Christ – many parts (believers) working together with individual personalities, abilities and functions – to continue the work of Christ on earth, reaching out to the world in love.

We ARE the church. Not we GO to church.

Apostles

Our understanding of church comes primarily through two apostles, Peter and Paul, in the first century. **Apostle** means a first-hand witness and special messenger chosen by Jesus.

Peter was one of the twelve apostles who spent three years with Jesus, witnessing his ministry and absorbing his teachings. He was an ordinary fisherman by trade, but emerged as leader of this group, in Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, **Paul** was a Roman citizen and highly educated member of Israel's Sanhedrin (comparable to U.S. Senate). In his government position, he persecuted the disciples of Jesus in and around Jerusalem. The Sanhedrin believed these disciples were becoming a threat to the practices of Judaism and to Israel's political relationship with Rome. On the road from Jerusalem to Damascus, shortly after Jesus' death, Paul had a dramatic conversion experience with Jesus (blinding light and voice).

Paul and Peter became the most influential missionaries of the first century. Together with other disciples, they started churches throughout the Roman Empire.

Luke, a physician, wrote the book of Acts, a chronological history of the growth of the early church. He detailed important events and conversations so we can understand what happened as this good news (called the **gospel**) began transforming lives around the world.

55% of the New Testament (Acts and Letters) are history from Luke and instructions from Paul, Peter, James and John to those new churches. That's how the books got their names. For example, Paul wrote the book of Romans to the church in Rome (Italy), Philippians to the church in Philippi (Greece), and Colossians to the church in Colosse (Turkey).

All Christians believe that what these men taught and wrote to the early churches – the direct teachings of Jesus – are still instructions from God to us today.

The early churches were basic and simple, with little resemblance to most churches today. Much has been added to the core beliefs, practices and venues.

Changes

In 312 Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the religion of the entire Roman Empire. The church merged with the state and became institutionalized and corrupted, except for pockets of genuine Christians who continued to follow the Apostle's teachings.

- In 1054, the catholic-state church split into Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branches.
- In 1521-1610, the Reformation divided the Roman Catholic church into Catholic and Protestant branches. The Protestant reformers resisted central hierarchy and believed that salvation is by grace alone, apart from any works of the church. Since then, the Catholic church has undergone many internal reformations, even as recently as Vatican II in 1965, and is today much different from the Catholic church of earlier times.

Today approximately 33% of all people in the world say they are Christian: Catholic 17%, Protestant 10%, Orthodox 6%.

Within the United States, 79% say they are Christian: Evangelical 26%, Catholic 24%, Mainline Protestant 18%, Historic Black 7%, Other Christian 4%, Other religions 5%, No religion 16%.

Each branch of Christianity has divided and splintered into so many parts that labels no longer tell what any particular congregation believes and practices.

Within each branch and sub-branch, there are both *genuine Christians* and *cultural Christians* (in name and tradition only).

Worship styles

The gospel is for all people of all places, cultures, times and personalities. Therefore, the church is very diverse in its expressions.

It is the central message that's important, not style or structure.

Some churches sing old hymns, some sing modern choruses. Some pray from a prayer book, some pray extemporaneously. Some emphasize learning, some emphasize experiences. Some are large, some are small.

The Bible doesn't prescribe any particular style of worship or organization.

Each individual can find the local church

that best fits his or her beliefs, needs and personality.

Sacraments

A *sacrament* is a special religious observance or ceremonial act.

There are seven *sacraments* in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches: Baptism, confirmation, holy communion, penance, anointing the sick, holy orders and marriage.

Protestants avoid the word *sacrament* and instead use the word *ordinance* when referring to an outward sign of commitment ordained by Christ himself. Most protestants say there are three *ordinances*: baptism, communion and marriage.

For the most part, these are differences in terminology and form, but there are differences between Catholic/Orthodox churches and Protestant churches with regard to baptism and communion.

Baptism

Generally speaking, Catholics (and some Protestants) believe that *baptism* confers salvation to a child through the church.

Most protestants believe that salvation comes only from God himself, through personal faith in Jesus Christ, apart from any work of the church.

In many respects, the two views eventually come together, in this way:

- Those who believe in salvation through **baptism** usually also believe that when a child becomes old enough to understand spiritual matters, he or she must **confirm** the baptism, usually facilitated by a course of study in the church, so that parents' choice then becomes personal choice by ratification. They believe an individual can lose the salvation by ignoring or disaffirming it.
- Those who believe that salvation is by **faith alone**, apart from any work of the church, usually also believe that a child is saved until old enough to understand God's offer of salvation, and then he or she either rejects the offer explicitly, rejects it by ignoring it, or accepts it by personal faith in Jesus Christ. They believe that baptism is essentially a public testimony of the decision to follow Christ.

Different churches use different modes of

baptism: Some sprinkle. Some pour. Some immerse.

Communion

Catholics call *communion* and accompanying liturgy the *eucharist* and celebrate it every Sunday as the central part of their worship service, called *mass*. Most Catholics believe the bread and wine miraculously turn into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus.

Protestants typically celebrate communion once a month as a part of their worship service. They believe that the bread and wine are symbolic only.

All Christians celebrate communion with the same objective: to commemorate Christ's death and resurrection.

Spiritual hospital

It is true that there are hypocrites found in the church, but hypocrites are everywhere. Hypocrisy is a part of the human condition, not an indictment of the church.

Think of the church not as a SPIRITUAL MUSEUM but as a **SPIRITUAL HOSPITAL** ... caring for all kinds of people, wounded and frail because of sin.

Though far from perfect, the church is the vehicle for Christian interaction, communicating the gospel to new generations, and extending the love of Christ throughout the world.