

THINGS THAT MATTER

A Guide to Christian Faith

Third Edition

Edited by
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Things That Matter: A Guide to Christian Faith was written by present and former members of the faculty of the Austin Graduate School of Theology:

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Preface to Third Edition

This book was originally written for Russian readers in 1991. It has since been translated into several other languages including French, Croatian, Serbian, Telegu, Hindi and Nepalese. The first American edition appeared in 1996. We are thankful for the reception the book has enjoyed. Readers report its usefulness in such varied settings as classes in churches, Christian schools, and colleges, in ministries to seekers and new members, in campus ministry, hospital visitation, and prison ministry.

As in previous editions, we have attempted to keep the vocabulary and style as simple and straightforward as the subject matter permits. We continue to hope that in addition to informing readers about Christianity, the volume will strengthen faith and even awaken faith.

The Editors
Austin, Texas
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1

The Mystery of Life

*I know, O LORD, that a
man's life is not his own; it
is not for man to direct his
steps.*

Jeremiah 10:23

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Life presents us with many challenges. Every day we have schedules to meet, difficult people to deal with, our own anxieties to face. Sometimes, in quieter moments, we experience a fleeting sense of emptiness—a longing for something our words cannot fully describe; we face the mystery of life itself. We wonder, “What is the meaning of life? How should I live? What can I hope for?” We can avoid these questions for a while, but we must finally ask about things that matter.

Christian faith teaches that life is not an accident. We are made for relationship with our Creator. While the Creator does not force himself upon us, he places intuitions of goodness and truth in our hearts and minds. We are inescapably moral and spiritual beings. As the Bible says, the Creator has placed eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

We act above instinct and impulse; we have minds to know truth and wills to desire goodness. We build bridges and write poetry. More importantly, we make choices and commitments that define us as persons. Ultimately, we are created to seek and to know the One behind all created truths and goods—the One who is both Goodness and

Truth.

Too often we spend our time and our energies ordering our lives around limited goods and partial truths. Deep within us, however, there remains a longing for what the world cannot provide, a deep need that the world’s goods cannot satisfy. As Augustine said, our restless hearts find rest only in God.

Our lives are defined by how we respond to the Creator’s claim on our hearts and minds. Centuries before Christ, Greek thinkers saw that some goods offer immediate satisfaction; others, to be enjoyed, require time and effort. “Easy pleasures” are obviously more inviting and popular, but they are also “lower” or “lesser goods.” The inescapable choice between lower pleasures and higher pleasures shapes our entire lives.

Pursuing the easy pleasures prevents us from developing habits of character necessary to enjoy life’s higher pleasures. Pursuit of the greater goods and higher truths equips us with virtues like self-control, courage, and justice for living good and noble lives.

Playing the piano and watching TV both bring us enjoyment, but TV-watching involves no particular skill; playing the piano requires hours of practice and a number of

Three Central Questions

1. What is the meaning of life?
2. How should I live?
3. What hope can I have?

See Ecclesiastes 3:11

Big Idea: God has made us in such a way that we crave meaning but cannot find it without Him.

Concepts

Lower Goods: Easily obtained; limited satisfaction (distractions)

Higher Goods: Difficult to obtain; lasting satisfaction (virtues)

skills. A person who learns to play the piano also learns the importance of discipline, hard work, and patience. TV-watching, by contrast, may encourage expectations of instant gratification, foster impatience, and dull our critical faculties.

Tragically, modern culture distracts our attention from life's nobler pursuits. We are constantly offered an ever-changing menu of easy pleasures. Shallow and twisted models of the good life abound. Advertising invites us to acquire more things that meet artificial "needs." The flickering images of movies and TV constantly distort and trivialize life's deeper meanings.

We live in a world that exchanges living nobly for living well. We are more concerned with comfort and calories than with moral corruption and character. Dissatisfaction and impatience drive us in endless pursuit of the new and the different. Many are anxious and confused, torn by conflicting desires and ambitions.

Some of us seek relief by finding meaning in a career, or in our families, or in civic activities. Many give their lives for noble causes. Patriotism, for example, draws on our sense of honor and duty in ways that golfing doesn't. Still, even noble pursuits may leave

the emptiness and longing in our hearts unsatisfied.

Some turn to religion or spirituality, perhaps for the same reasons that we join the Little League or PTA: "it's nice to belong to something," "it's good for the children." In such cases, religion simply fills a small space in otherwise full and busy lives. Here, "religion" is only one among several other goods; it is not a life-defining commitment that shapes and orders all our other commitments. In fact, religion may even be viewed as useful in gaining other goods to which we are really more committed—health, success, or even family.

All of these efforts only partially mask our longing for something deeper; they do not satisfy that longing. Our various causes, especially the more noble ones, dimly reflect a need for something else. They point to our need for a relationship with our Creator—a need that cannot be satisfied by any created thing. Our many truths and various goods find their intended meaning only in the One who is their source.

C. S. Lewis warns us that only if we put first things first can we truly enjoy "second things." To ignore first things, or to pursue second things as if they were first things, is

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Lower Good Vs. Higher Good

Instant gratification vs. Patience

Wants and "needs" vs. Meaning

Living well vs. Living nobly

Comfort vs. Character

Higher or Highest?

Some things appeal to our desire for meaning, but still do not completely satisfy us or have lasting meaning: career, family, civic duty, patriotism, etc.

Highest Good

In our culture, even religious people tend to see religion as one among many good things. It is to be fit in between career, family, etc.

Big Idea: Religion, when understood, is not one of many good things in your life. It is the first and highest good. It is the "thing that matters."

ultimately to lose both. We must finally ask, "What really matters?"

This book is for those who wonder what really matters. It is for those seeking deeper meaning in life, who want a new beginning. It is also for those who have found new meaning in Christ and want fuller understanding. This book introduces the answers to our deepest longings offered by the Christian faith—what Lewis called "mere Christianity."

More specifically, the book introduces the reader to the *Creator* described in the opening pages of the Bible, to his *covenant* recounted in the Old and New Testaments, and to the *community* that lives in covenant with God through Christ today.

We begin in the next chapter, with the Christian conviction that God created the world and the importance of this conviction for understanding the meaning of our lives.

Chapter 3 traces the story of the Old Testament. Here we learn about God's choice of the nation Israel as his people and Israel's response to God.

Chapter 4 goes to the heart of the Christian faith, the story of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus, recorded in the New Testament, is called the "gospel," or

"good news." It is in the life of Jesus that the purposes of God for us are fully revealed.

Chapter 5 describes the community that Jesus established through his life, death, and resurrection. It is in this community, Christ's church, that God continues to reveal his will for us, to restore us to himself, and to enable us to live according to his purposes.

Chapter 6 follows the history of the Christian church through the centuries. It explains why we find so many differences among churches today.

Chapter 7 shows how the biblical faith transforms our lives. Living in response to the Creator's revelation in Jesus Christ, Christians can live new and fully human lives.

Biblical faith answers the deep questions of life. Too often these "big" questions are crowded out by the many distractions of our busy age. This book is for those who are aware of life's problems and questions, who have not found lasting comfort in the diversions of modern society, who even suffer loneliness and despair. The final chapter commends the journey of Christian faith as the life that truly satisfies our minds and hearts.

Mere Christianity

C.S. Lewis introduced the idea of "mere Christianity," by which he meant the basic shape of Christianity untarnished by Christian histories failures or the current church's shortcomings. Long before Lewis, the churches of Christ have always had this notion as our primary goal. We seek to simply be "merely Christian" rather than specific "kind" of Christian faith.

This class is aimed at exploring these basic tenets of Christianity and presenting it as the fundamentals of the identity of the Glenpool Church of Christ.

Major Themes

God the Creator: Who is God and why should I care?

The Story of the Old Testament: Who is Israel and why should I care? (*Why do the Christian Scriptures begin by telling us ancient history?*)

Jesus the Christ: Who is Jesus and why should I care?

The Importance of the Church: What is the church and why should I care?

Why So Many Churches?: If there is such a thing as "mere Christianity," why does Christianity look like it does today?

The Christian Life: What is a Christian and why should I consider this life?

Beginning the Journey: How do I begin?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between “the many problems of life” and “the mystery of life itself”?
2. What does the Bible mean when it says that God has set eternity in our hearts?
3. What signs of restlessness do you see in the human heart? In your own heart?
4. What is the difference between the so-called “easy pleasures” and “life’s higher pleasures”?
5. How do the distractions of modern culture trivialize the meaning of life?
6. How is it possible for “religion” to mask our need for God?

2

God the Creator

There is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came, and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

1 Corinthians 8:6

The Bible begins with a fundamental truth of Christian faith, that the world around us is the creation of a personal God. The books of the Bible are written in a variety of literary styles and reflect various historical circumstances, but the Bible tells a unified story, which begins with the estrangement of creation from God. The Old Testament discloses the Creator's refusal to abandon the creation and describes his plan and his promise to restore the creation. The New Testament tells the story of God keeping this promise and reconciling the creation to himself through his Son Jesus Christ.

The Creator

Genesis, the first book of the Bible, opens with the simple yet profound statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Bible says little about the nature of God "in himself." Rather, the Bible shows us who God is in relation to his creation—and especially in relation to human beings.

Many ancient peoples worshiped the sun, moon, stars, and other elements of nature; Romans and Greeks, for example, imagined powerful gods existing within an

eternal universe. Unlike these "gods," the biblical Creator of heaven and earth is not an element of the universe, nor does the universe in any way contain him.

If the universe did not exist, the God of the Bible would in no way be diminished. The Creator is the source of laws that govern the universe, but he is not subject to those laws himself. The God of the Bible is totally other than the universe that he creates by his word (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). The life of the Creator is unique.

Further, the creation of the universe is a free and gracious action of God, who is in no way forced to create. The God of the Bible freely calls into existence realities distinct from himself and continually preserves them in existence. In creation we see not only God's power, but also his incomparable generosity. The very creation of our universe is a personal, moral act.

The Creation

The Bible tells us, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). This is unlike many ancient religions, which saw the physical world as evil. It is also unlike modern views that the universe is the chance

Big Idea: The Creation is not a detail at the beginning of the story. It *IS* the story.

- God created humanity and the universe has been made for us to inhabit and glorify Him.
- Sin is humanity's rebellion against God's purpose for His creation.
- God has not given up on creation, but instead is working to redeem it from its futility.

In personal terms:

- God created you.
- You have rebelled against God's purpose for you.
- God has not given up on you, but instead is working to redeem you from a wasted existence without Him.

Big Idea: We are so used to the God of Christianity that we forget that he is unlike all the ancient and modern alternatives.

Big Idea: Many people believe the world is rotten. Christians believe the creation is good because God is good.

result of blind, impersonal, mechanical forces. In the biblical faith, the universe is a result of the Creator's love.

While the creation is good, it is not to be viewed as part of the Creator or confused with God himself. The created universe is not self-explanatory; it does not contain its own meaning within itself. In every moment of time, the universe depends on the Creator for its continuing existence and significance.

Indeed, the universe cannot be fully understood apart from the Creator's loving purpose. The presence of God in the universe affects everything—from the smallest subatomic particle to the remotest galaxy. Belief in God is not believing in just one more item within the vast array of the universe; God's presence gives the entire universe meaning and purpose.

More fundamental than the physical laws operating within the universe is the creative and sustaining love of God at the very depths of all reality. This love is not superimposed upon a neutral or impersonal universe; it is the origin and goal of everything that exists.

The goodness of the universe is found in the Creator's purposes and intentions. The beauty and grandeur of nature reflect the Creator's greatness; the intricate design

that modern science finds at every level of our delicately balanced universe points to an intelligent source beyond human comprehension. Still, the clearest reflection of God's image is found in the creation of beings capable of knowing and loving him. Biblical faith looks forward in hope and confidence to the time when God will make us able to know and love him fully.

Humankind

As the crowning act of creation, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Human life is not the accidental product of mindless physical processes. Although fully part of the creation and subject to its laws, we are unique among God's creatures. Human beings, made in the "image of God," are made to live together in relationship with the Creator and to accomplish his purposes in the creation.

As much as we may enjoy the good things of creation, we can still recognize that the world is not self-sufficient; the creation points beyond itself to its Creator. Our minds and hearts find their ultimate

See Hebrews 1:3. Even now God "upholds the universe by the word of his power."

Big Idea: The Creation reflects God's ...

- Love
- Beauty
- Intelligence
- Power
- Purpose

Big Idea: Humanity is ...

- Not accidental
- Made in the image of God
- Made to live with God
- Made to accomplish God's purposes

meaning and purpose in a relationship of trust and obedience to the Creator. In turn, this relationship with the Creator expresses and realizes itself in the other relationships in which we exist and through which our lives bring honor to the Creator. The image of God is especially seen in two aspects of human life.

First, the image of God is reflected in the relationship between man and woman. We are not created as isolated individuals; we are created to live in community. Man and woman are made to complete and complement one another (see Genesis 2:18). Marriage is a commitment between a woman and a man that reflects God's character and image with special clarity.

Just as the Creator commits himself in an unbreakable pledge to care for creation, so men and women are created to commit themselves to one another and reflect God's image. As God creates the world through a word, so our words of promise give shape to our lives.

The marriage promise creates families, protects marriage partners, and shelters children; it is the foundation of all human community. Our families and children bind us inescapably to one another, to the future,

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Big Idea: The image of God is seen best in two aspects of human life.

- The relationship between male and female
- The stewardship of Creation

and indeed to God's future for us.

We receive a glimpse of the Creator's love when we see husbands and wives putting one another's interests before their own, a mother or father sacrificing career opportunities for the sake of the children, adults caring for their aged parents, friends coming to one another's aid.

Second, human beings also reflect the image of God in that God entrusts us with the care of his creation. Genesis indicates that men and women are charged with responsibility to care for the world God has made (Genesis 1:26). In exercising this role, we are commissioned to carry out God's will for his creation.

Sin: The Broken Relationship

Chapter 3 of Genesis tells the story of humanity's tragic break with the Creator. Adam and Eve are created with the freedom to choose a life of trust and obedience to God. The serpent plants a doubt, which grows into mistrust and disobedience. Seeking "to be like God," Adam and Eve forsake the Creator and deny their own created nature. They are expelled from the garden of Eden and barred from returning.

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Big Idea: Sin is not merely a violation of an arbitrarily law, it is rebellion against God resulting in the lasting brokenness of our relationship to God.

Their tragic decision has far-reaching consequences: it breaks the original harmony between Creator, creation, and creature.

Estranged from our Creator, we are also alienated from nature and one another. Created in God's image and for relationship with him, we can only fully know ourselves when we know our Creator. Separated from the Creator, people become their own worst problem. Like an alcoholic "freely" choosing where to buy his next drink, human "freedom" finds countless illusory expressions. We find ourselves forced to wrestle with the consequences of not only our own actions, good and bad, but also the actions of others, past as well as present.

In the biblical view, therefore, sin is not just breaking arbitrary rules; it is rebellion against our created nature. "East of Eden," human life is haunted by a deep restlessness. A vague uneasiness follows every achievement, and sadness colors even our happiest moments. Countless diversions fail to conceal a gnawing sense that we are made for something more.

Human History

Disobedience and rebellion against God

Big Idea: Sin is now part of humanity's history and identity, having tragic consequences in every aspect of life.

Consequently, we are not only seeking forgiveness for our own sins, but we need to be rescued from the consequence of all sin and remade once again in God's image (now shown to us in Jesus, but that comes later).

determine the direction of human history. The remaining chapters of Genesis record the pervasive and destructive effects of sin unleashed in the creation. Jealousy, pride, deceit, brutality, injustice, sexual perversion, murder, tribalism, and war are all involved in the rebellion of God's creatures against the purposes for which he created us.

But the news is not all bad: the Bible declares that the Creator does not abandon his creation. Like a patient parent, God works to overcome the tragic effects of sin and to restore all his creatures to himself. The Creator refuses to impose his will on humanity. He will not violate the very freedom he conferred upon us. He seeks our free response of faith and trust in him.

Human history is a dramatic interplay of our faithlessness and God's faithfulness. Within the broader flow of history, as empires rise and fall, the Creator is unfolding his plan of forgiveness and reconciliation. The events in which God reveals and achieves his saving purpose are called "salvation history."

In the next chapter, we follow the unfolding drama of God's restoration of his estranged creation.

Big Idea: Human history is about rebellion and futility (faithlessness). God's history is about love and rescue (faithfulness).

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is meant by the statement that “the creation is not only a display of God’s power”?
2. How does the biblical understanding of creation differ both from ancient understandings of the world and from modern understandings of the universe?
3. Why is it unrealistic to expect modern science to determine the meaning of the universe?
4. What is the meaning of covenant? What is its importance in biblical faith?
5. How is marriage intended to reflect the image and character of God?
6. How does the presence of children in a family draw our attention to the future? What does this have to do with biblical faith in the Creator’s ultimate purposes?
7. It has been said that in sinning we freely forfeit our freedom. How does sin destroy our freedom to be truly human?

3

The Story of the Old Testament

*In the past God spoke to
our forefathers through the
prophets at many times and
in various ways*

Hebrews 1:1

God, who creates out of his own love, commits himself to preserve and restore his creation. The Bible's salvation history tells the story of God's faithfulness to creation disclosed in his covenant, or promise-making. Through salvation history, God reaches out to the entire human race. He desires that we know him, love him, and trust and obey him; God seeks for us to enjoy life as he created it to be lived.

From Adam to Abraham

Genesis, chapter 6, pictures how rebellion against God spread among the children of Adam and Eve. To limit the effects of sin, God sent a flood to destroy the rebellious inhabitants of the earth, sparing only one faithful man and his family. With Noah and his descendants, God made a covenant, an unbreakable promise. He pledged never again to destroy the whole creation by flood (Genesis, chapter 9).

At the same time, God's covenant also placed obligations on Noah and his descendants: they must be fruitful and multiply, they must not eat animal blood since animal life resides in it, and they must not shed human blood (i.e., commit murder), for

humans are made in the Creator's image (Genesis 9:1-7).

In the generations after Noah, God continued his plan by revealing himself to Abraham. God called Abraham and his wife Sarah to leave their homeland, trusting God to provide for them. God promised to give Abraham a land, to make his descendants a great nation, and through this nation Israel to bless all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:1-4; 15:1-6; 17:3-8). The sign of this covenant was the circumcision of every male child (Genesis 17:9-14).

Abraham's story is one of courageous faith. His life shows us that biblical faith is not only belief that God exists, it is also trust in his care. Biblical faith involves the total person—thoughts, attitudes, and emotions—and determines our entire life as one of trust in God and commitment to his cause. Abraham struggled against temptation, endured hardships, and overcame many challenges. Believers have found in his lifelong journey of faith an example of trust in God and obedience to his will (see Romans 4; Galatians 3:6-9; Hebrews 11:8-19; James 2:21-23).

Through the obedient faith of persons like Noah and Abraham, God's plan to

Big Idea: God has reached out to rescue humanity through promises made to individuals. The Old Testament is the story of these promises.

Key Promises:

Noah (Genesis 9): God promises to rescue rather than destroy humanity.

Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17): God promises to bless humanity through Abraham's family.

overcome the mistrust and disobedience of Adam and Eve began to unfold. In the covenant promise to Abraham we see the beginning of God's plan to create a people through whom he will restore the creation to himself and enable all people to know, love, and obey him (see Romans 3:21–26; 2 Corinthians 5:19).

From Abraham to Moses

The twelve tribes of Abraham's descendants entered Egypt to escape a famine. In time, they became slaves of the Egyptians. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, decreed the death of Hebrew male children. One of these, Moses, was rescued and reared by the Pharaoh's daughter. As a young man, Moses killed an Egyptian for abusing a Hebrew slave. Moses fled into the desert. There, at Mount Sinai, God appeared to him in a burning bush, calling him to return to Egypt to free the Israelites (Exodus, chapter 3).

Moses asked for God's name. The name that God revealed to Moses is "Yahweh." This name, formed from the Hebrew verb "to be," is variously translated as "He-who-is," "He-who-will-be," or "He-who-creates." The God who keeps his covenant with

Abraham by delivering the Israelites from Egypt is the origin and goal of all reality.

Moses returned to Egypt, confronted Pharaoh, and demanded that the twelve tribes of Israel be freed. At first, Pharaoh refused, but after Yahweh sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians, Pharaoh permitted the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Angered over the loss of his slaves, Pharaoh pursued them with his army. At the Red Sea, Yahweh destroyed Pharaoh's army and delivered his people (Exodus, chapters 14, 15).

After their deliverance, commemorated each year in the Jewish feast of Passover (see Exodus, chapter 12), the Israelites came to Mount Sinai. At Sinai, Yahweh the Deliverer stated Israel's covenant obligations in ten words of instruction, the "Ten Commandments" (Exodus 20:3–17). These commandments divide into two sections. The first four commandments concern the people's relationship to God, and the rest concern their relationships to one another.

The Ten Commandments, the heart of the law of Moses, may be summarized as follows:

Big Idea: Abraham's descendants, the Hebrew people, are the focus of the Old Testament story.

Big Idea: As with Abraham, Israel enters into a promise-based relationship (covenant) with God. They have been rescued and promised blessings, but the reception of blessing is dependent on faithfulness to their part of the covenant.

- I. *You shall have no other gods before me.*
- II. *You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*
- III. *You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain, or misuse the Lord's name.*
- IV. *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall work, but the seventh day is a day to the Lord; in it you shall not do any work.*
- V. *Honor your father and mother.*
- VI. *You shall not murder.*
- VII. *You shall not commit adultery.*
- VIII. *You shall not steal.*
- IX. *You shall not give false testimony.*
- X. *You shall not desire to possess your neighbor's belongings or spouse.*

These commandments are not arbitrary. God introduces the commandments by

reminding Israel, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The commandments are given by the Deliverer. They are also the words of the Creator; they reveal the way the Creator intends us to live before him and with each other (see Psalm 119:73). The commandments are given that we might enjoy life as our Creator intended.

It was not easy to leave behind the security of familiar ways in Egypt and follow the law of God in a strange land; the Israelites rebelled against their Deliverer and were made to wander in the wilderness between Egypt and the land of promise for a generation. Even Moses proved faithless and was not permitted to cross the Jordan River into the promised land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 32:48–52). God chose Joshua as Moses' successor to lead Israel into the land.

From Joshua to David

For centuries, the Israelites lived in Canaan as a confederation of tribes. Israel had to contend with the Canaanites and their brutality, immorality, and worship of false gods. During this period, Israel was governed by "judges," leaders who settled disputes and

Big Idea: The Ten Commandments were not arbitrary rules whereby God hoped to catch Israel in faults. The Ten Commandments reveal who God is and show Israel how to live with Him.

Big Idea: Israel repeats and replays the story of humanity—we are faithless when God is faithful.

3

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Hebrews 1:1

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led in battle against the Canaanites.

As conflict with the Canaanites continued, the Israelites began to desire a king. God instructed Samuel, the last of Israel's judges, to anoint Saul as Israel's first king. Thus, by the end of the eleventh century BC, the twelve tribes of Israel had become a nation under one king. God gave Saul great success in his battles to defend Israel. Although God was faithful to Saul, Saul was unfaithful to God and often disregarded God's commands.

God sent Samuel to anoint David, a youth of the tribe of Judah, to replace Saul. After Saul died in battle, David became king of Israel. David was a capable and highly popular leader. He was a man of great personal courage and military genius. While not without sin, David was a man of deep faith in God (see Psalm 51), and a musician and poet who composed many songs of praise to God; some of these are found in the book of Psalms.

David united the twelve tribes by establishing the central city of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. God renewed his covenant with Israel, now promising to bless Israel through David and his descendants. God promised David that his kingdom would

Big Idea: Israel longs for a leader to give them peace in the land and in life.

Big Idea: David shows us that God can provide us with a leader, but also that all human leaders will fail. It is a riddle that is not solved until Christ.

The new promise through David is like the previous promise through Abraham, only more specific.

endure forever.

I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, . . . and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. . . . My love will never be taken away from him Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.

(2 Samuel 7:12-16)

From David to Exile

God's promise was a source of great hope for Israel. After David's death (about 960 BC), his son Solomon became king. For forty years, Solomon reigned over Israel in peace and prosperity. He built a temple to God in Jerusalem. During his lifetime, Solomon's wisdom brought him honor both in Israel and beyond (see 1 Kings 3; 4:29-34; 10:1-9). Solomon's wisdom is recalled in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Nonetheless, Solomon was unfaithful to the covenant. He took foreign wives to gain political advantage with neighboring countries, and their worship of false gods led him into unfaithfulness. He oppressed the people with taxes to build the temple of the Lord and his own palace.

After Solomon's death (about 920 BC),

the kingdom which David had united split into two kingdoms. The ten northern tribes declared their independence from Jerusalem and the house of David and took the name Israel. The southern tribes remained loyal to God's covenant with David and became the kingdom of Judah.

After two centuries, the northern kingdom, Israel, was conquered by the Assyrians (722 BC). The kingdom of Judah continued until 587 BC, when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and exiled many of the people to Babylon.

The exile was not only a national tragedy; it was also a test of the people's faith. God had promised David that his kingdom would endure forever; had God's promise failed? The Old Testament presents this catastrophe as God's judgment on the people because of their unfaithfulness to his covenant. The promise to David gave hope that God in his mercy would restore the nation. This hope was justified in 539 BC, when Cyrus of Persia freed the exiles to return to Judah.

The "Jews" (as the people of Judah were called after the exile) returned to their homeland to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and restore the temple (see the books of

Big Idea: God's promised blessing is once again met with faithlessness in the descendants of David.

Big Idea: The exile of Israel is another example of the tragic consequence of rebellion and faithlessness.

Ezra and Nehemiah). The land of promise, however, remained under foreign rule. As the Persians yielded to the Greeks (332 BC) and then the Greeks to the Romans (63 BC), the Jews continued to hope for a king from the line of David.

The Prophets

Throughout this history of God's dealings with Israel, chosen messengers announced his will. These "prophets" disclosed God's purposes, hidden behind the rise and fall of nations. For the prophets, history is neither meaningless nor the story of inevitable human progress; history is the theater in which God's drama of salvation unfolds.

The work of the prophets was not limited to foretelling the future or teaching morals. While the prophets did announce God's coming acts, and while they called God's people to faithful living, more fundamentally they reminded the people who God was, what he had done for them, and who he called his covenant people to be.

The prophets repeatedly reminded the people that Israel's God is the Creator of the universe and the only true and living God. They warned Israel against worshipping

Things That Matter

false gods and idols. The prophets' harshest criticism was directed against Israel's leaders for not placing their confidence in God. The people often trusted in political, military, and economic power. Repeatedly the prophets unmasked and exposed the self-deception and faithlessness of God's own people. The people sought to manipulate God's favor by the outward performance of ritual acts. They honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from trust and commitment to his will (see Isaiah 29:13).

The prophets recalled the people to the obligations of God's covenant and warned that Israel's disobedience would not go unpunished. They urged the people to reflect the character and intention of the Creator in all their actions. They denounced those who concealed faithless hearts and minds beneath a show of religious rituals. Amos and Micah, for example, called the people to reflect God's own justice, mercy, and steadfast love in all their dealings with each other:

Let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!
(Amos 5:24)

Big Idea: The prophets ...

- Spoke for God
- Explained God's role in history
- Called people to faithfulness
- Reminded the people of God's identity
- Reminded the people of their obligations to the covenant of God

Big Idea: The big principles of faith, justice, mercy, and love were never to be lost amid minute details of the covenant's law.

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk
humbly with your God.

(Micah 6:8)

Finally, the prophets reminded the people that God does not abandon his covenant promises. God will not only punish; he will also bind up and heal. The prophets looked forward to a new day when God would restore the broken order of creation. They announced a time to come when God would decisively enter history and inaugurate a new order of peace and wholeness (*shalom*) for all nations and all people.

"The time is coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant with the
house of Israel and with the house of Judah.
. . . I will put my law in their minds and write
it on their hearts. I will be their God, and
they will be my people."

(Jeremiah 31:31-33)

With a deep awareness of the pervasiveness of human sin, the prophets announced a decisive act of deliverance and reconciliation by God. Isaiah records God's praise of a Servant who would bear the sins of the people and restore them to wholeness.

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. . . . Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, . . . he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. . . . Therefore I will give him a portion among the great.

(Isaiah 52:13-53:12)

As the centuries passed, the people of Israel continued to await the coming of a new king descended from David. This Anointed One (in Hebrew, "Messiah"; in Greek, "Christ") would fully embody God's covenant faithfulness and establish the kingdom of God over all the world. Through the Messiah, or Christ, God would bring salvation history to its final stage, establishing a new Israel and reconciling all people to himself.

In the next chapter, we turn to the promised Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

Big Idea: The prophets taught the people to expect God to finish his work of rescuing creation.

Big Idea: The prophets taught that one day the true Servant of God would save God's people. Over time, this came to be understood as a promise of "Anointed One" (Hebrew, *messiah*; Greek, *christ*) who would bring Israel's story to its final stage wherein God would rescue his people.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to say that faith is more than “belief that” God exists? How does Abraham’s life illustrate faith as “trust in” God?
2. How does God’s call of Abraham and his choice of Israel become a blessing “for all nations”?
3. Why is it important to remember that the Ten Commandments were given by one who is both Creator (Psalm 119:73) and Deliverer (Exodus 20:2)? How does this affect our attitude toward biblical law?
4. According to the prophets, what is the heart of God’s expectations of his people? How do the prophets of ancient Israel challenge people of faith today?
5. What does the Hebrew term “Messiah” mean? What role did the prophets expect the Messiah to play in the history of salvation?

4

Jesus the Christ

*. . . in these last days he
has spoken to us by his Son,
whom he appointed heir
of all things, and through
whom he made the uni-
verse.*

Hebrews 1:2

Blaise Pascal observed that captains and kings have one kind of greatness, the greatness of power, and that geniuses have another kind of greatness, the greatness of understanding; Jesus of Nazareth had greatness of an entirely different order, the greatness of holiness. Jesus was born in a remote province of the Roman Empire. He never traveled outside its borders, wrote a book, held public office, or led an army.

Christians honor Jesus because he is the Son of God. His life is the center of God's plan to reconcile all people to himself. Christians understand that it is through Jesus that God has fulfilled his promise to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants.

Jesus' life and teaching fully disclose the character and purpose of God. Through the person and work of Jesus, the Creator is reconciling his creation to himself. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God makes the world new and invites us to turn to him in trust and obedience.

The New Testament includes four accounts of Jesus' life, the books of the "Gospel" (i.e., good news). These are written to show how God was at work in Jesus' life—in his birth to the virgin Mary, in his teaching and healing, in his death and resurrec-

tion, and in his renewal of the people of God.

Each gospel writer, or "Evangelist," tells the story of Jesus' life in his own way, with his own distinctive emphases. The gospels give us four windows through which we view the life of Jesus. These books are attributed to two of Jesus' chosen followers, the apostles Matthew and John, and to two associates of the apostles, Mark and Luke. In the twenty centuries since Jesus' death and resurrection, millions have responded in obedient faith to the message of the gospels.

The conviction that Jesus is the Christ (i.e., Messiah, from the Greek word for "anointed one," *Christos*) is the center of biblical revelation and the heart of Christian faith. This chapter first outlines the life of Jesus as told in the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and then summarizes the distinctive presentation of Jesus' ministry in John's gospel. The chapter concludes with the meaning and significance of Jesus' resurrection.

The Ministry of Jesus

The first three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are the best place to begin getting to know who Jesus was and what his ministry

Big Idea: The first four books of the New Testament tell the story of Jesus, the person Christian's believe is the fulfillment of the hope of the prophets, the Christ.

Big Idea: The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are a great beginning for understanding Jesus. They tell a very similar life story with differing points of emphasis.

was all about. Because their accounts of Jesus' ministry are so similar, they are called the "synoptic" gospels (meaning that their accounts can be "viewed together"). To introduce the synoptic record of Jesus' ministry, we will primarily follow Matthew.

Before beginning his public ministry, Jesus left his home in Nazareth and journeyed from Galilee (the northern part of the promised land) to the Jordan River where a desert prophet named John was preaching. John warned Israel that God would soon judge them through a man mightier than John himself, one who would not only announce the divine judgment but execute it as well, purging Israel in the Holy Spirit of God and in fire.

John taught the people to confess their sin and prepare for the kingdom which God would soon establish. Those who believed this message were immersed in water, or "baptized," in anticipation of the coming kingdom (Matthew 3:1–12).

Jesus, one of many who responded to John's preaching, was baptized not because he was a sinner but "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). As he emerged from the water, a voice from heaven announced, "This is my beloved Son," and the Spirit of

God descended on him as a dove (Matthew 3:13–17).

These signs set Jesus apart from the others John baptized. Still, Jesus' baptism gives Christians a model for responding to God's call. As the Spirit of God descended on Jesus, so the Spirit is granted to Christians in baptism (see 1 Corinthians 12:13); as Jesus was declared God's unique Son at his baptism, believers are adopted as children of God at theirs (see Galatians 3:26–27).

After his baptism, Jesus was led to the wilderness. There at the hand of Satan he endured three tests of faith, or temptations, just as Israel was tested in the wilderness before entering the land of promise. Jesus had to decide whether he would use the power of God to his own advantage or to accomplish God's purposes. Jesus shunned displays that might win him fame but betray his divine mission (Matthew 4:1–11).

Christians have found in Jesus' temptations help for their own lives. Our lives are not free from struggles, nor are we able to choose when temptations and doubts challenge us. We are tempted to live as if material goods and physical needs are all that matters. And we are drawn to power, wealth, and popularity. Ultimately, we are tempted to

Big Idea: John the Baptist ...

- Preaching that God was about to act as promised
- Warned that people should repent in preparation
- Baptized believers of his message
- Baptized Jesus and identified him as the One for whom the prophets had hoped

Big Idea: The work of Jesus began with ...

- Being baptized
- Being identified in baptism as God's Son
- Receiving the presence of the Holy Spirit
- Entering into a struggle with Satan and temptation

live our lives on our own terms and use God for our own purposes. Jesus resisted these temptations. He committed himself wholly to his Father's will.

After his temptation, Jesus returned to Galilee, announcing that the kingdom of God promised in the Old Testament was at hand (Matthew 4:12–17). The Creator was advancing his rule over the creation and calling Israel to life under his reign.

Jesus called followers to assist him in proclaiming the kingdom of God, teaching, and healing (Matthew 4:18–25). The gospels call Jesus' followers his "disciples" (i.e., students); twelve of them are known as his "apostles" (i.e., ambassadors). Jesus chose the twelve to signify that his ministry was forming the twelve tribes of the new Israel, the Christian church (see Matthew 19:28).

Jesus began his teaching with a statement of the pattern for life under God's rule (Matthew, chapters 5–7). The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, or "words of blessing." Jesus announces that in the reign of God, the distressed will be comforted and the persecuted will be blessed (Matthew 5:3–12). To receive God's blessing, we must follow Jesus in every aspect of our lives. God gives his blessing to those who

regard others as they regard themselves and treat others as they want to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

Jesus also taught his disciples how to pray (Matthew 6:9–13; see Luke 11:2–4). The "Lord's Prayer" directs Jesus' followers to the Father, the world, and one another. The prayer is offered by disciples bound together before a common Father ("Our Father," "give us this day"). It first commits us to honor God ("hallowed be thy name") and his purposes in the world and our everyday lives ("thy kingdom come, thy will be done"). Only then does the prayer turn to our basic needs ("our daily bread," "forgive us our trespasses," "deliver us from evil"). This prayer has been repeated by Jesus' followers every day for centuries. These simple but profound words serve as a model for all Christian prayer.

In addition to teaching the will of God, Jesus healed the sick and welcomed the outcast (Matthew, chapters 8–9). By ministering to those for whom no one cared, Jesus showed that he was the heir to David's throne and the Servant of God whom Isaiah had prophesied, chosen by God to share his people's sufferings and restore them to wholeness (Isaiah 52:13–53:12).

Big Idea: Jesus preached that God's kingdom was arriving at that time.

Big Idea: The twelve apostles were the chosen messengers of Jesus sent out to spread the good news that the kingdom had come.

Big Idea: Jesus taught his disciples ...

- How to live in God's kingdom
- How to pray
- The importance of good works toward others

Tragically, the leaders of Israel rejected Jesus. In vivid illustrations, or “parables,” Jesus commented on the division that his ministry caused (Matthew, chapter 13). He explained that his mission was to take the news of God’s salvation everywhere, like a farmer casting seeds in every direction. The condition of a person’s heart determines whether Jesus’ message can grow there.

Jesus’ declaration of the will of God led to disputes with Jewish teachers over the Law of Moses (Matthew 15:1–20; 16:1–12); a particular point of controversy was the Sabbath, the weekly Jewish holy day on which work was forbidden. The Jewish teachers were outraged that Jesus healed the sick even on the Sabbath; in their concern to comply with the precise requirements of the Law, they had neglected the Creator’s intent in providing a day of rest (see Exodus 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:13, 14).

Jesus asked his critics, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). He taught his disciples that the two central precepts of the Law are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34–40). This teaching of Jesus identifies the two obligations

behind the ten commandments: love of God (commandments I–IV) and love of neighbor (commandments V–X). This two-fold love command does not permit us to ignore either God or neighbor. Love of God cannot ignore the neighbor (see 1 John 4:20, 21), nor can love of the neighbor ignore God. Both commands are vital.

Jesus’ disciples grew in understanding. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus forbade his disciples to announce this, telling them that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die at the hands of the chief priests and scribes and be raised from the dead. His disciples must follow his example by giving their lives in service for God (Matthew 16:13–28).

Long before, King David had entered Jerusalem in triumph; Jesus came humbly, riding on a donkey, while crowds acclaimed him as “the Son of David ... who comes in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 21:1–11). Jesus taught the people in the temple, denouncing the priests for their greed, asserting his authority to teach in God’s name, and threatening the people with God’s judgment if they rejected his message (Matthew, chapters 21–25).

When the priests and elders saw Jesus’

Big Idea: The leaders of the Jewish faith in Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah. Their conflicts often center on the traditional Jewish interpretations of how to keep the law versus Jesus’ teachings of the central premises of the law (love, mercy, justice, etc.).

Big Idea: While his disciples began to see Jesus as Messiah and more, Jesus continued to be rejected. He predicted that he would die, and that suffering was the price of being his disciple.

boldness and recognized that his teaching threatened their power and position, they resolved to kill him. They bribed Judas, one of Jesus' own apostles, to help them arrest Jesus in secret (Matthew 26:3-5, 14-16).

Jesus spent his last night observing the Jewish feast of Passover with his twelve apostles. As part of the Passover meal, he took a loaf of bread, gave thanks to God, and broke it, inviting his disciples to eat from the loaf. As they ate, he said, "This is my body," which would soon be broken in death. Then, sharing a cup of wine with the disciples, "This is my blood," which he would shed in death, sealing a new covenant between God and his people and cleansing them from their sins (Matthew 26:17-29).

This "Last Supper" which Jesus shared with his disciples is the model for the Lord's Supper, which Jesus' followers kept after his death and resurrection. This meal was the Christian Passover, in which the new covenant sealed by Jesus' death and resurrection was remembered and renewed. Because the Greek word for "give thanks" is *eucharistein*, many Christians since the second century have called the Lord's Supper the "Eucharist."

After the supper, Jesus led his followers

44

Big Idea: The last supper of Jesus with his disciples is the model for the meal we share today as his disciples in memory of Jesus' death.

to the garden of Gethsemane; Judas met them there and betrayed Jesus to the temple police (Matthew 26:36-58). Jesus was brought before the high priest and his council of advisers for questioning. He confessed that he was the Messiah, the Son of God (Mark 14:61, 62). The leaders seized upon this and charged Jesus with political insurrection before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.

Pilate, who was responsible for keeping the peace, ordered the execution of Jesus as an insurrectionist. Jesus was crucified, nailed to a wooden cross beneath a placard that mockingly proclaimed him "King of the Jews." After hours of physical agony, Jesus cried out a prayer to God (quoting Psalm 22:1) and succumbed to death.

Jesus' disciples had fled to escape arrest in the garden; Peter then waited outside the council's meeting place and three times denied any connection with Jesus. Only the women who had followed Jesus remained with him at the cross (Matthew 26:59-27:61). Moved by Jesus' death, the Roman officer in charge of the execution confessed, "Truly this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54).

On the third day after his death, the women who witnessed the crucifixion found

45

Big Idea: Jesus was falsely accused of crimes, tried, and executed by crucifixion.

Jesus' tomb empty (Matthew 28:1-7). Then Jesus appeared to his disciples, just as he had foretold (Matthew 28:8-20). Jesus' story ends not with his death but with his resurrection from the dead by the power of God.

The risen Lord announced to his disciples that his Father in heaven had given him all authority over creation. He commanded them to teach all nations and baptize believers into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18, 19).

Matthew's gospel closes with Jesus' promise that he will not leave his followers on their own to accomplish the mission of teaching all nations; he remains present with us "always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Luke tells how, after thus commissioning his disciples to preach to all nations, Jesus ascended to the Father and through the Holy Spirit continues to be present with his people (Luke 24:49-53; Acts, chapters 1, 2).

The Gospel According to John

The Gospel according to John stands as the final account of Jesus' life in the New Testament. John views Jesus' life against the backdrop of the conflict between light and

Big Idea: Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day. The Resurrection is the ultimate expression of the Bible's theme that no act of violence can prevent or deter God from faithfully rescuing His creation.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the kind of greatness displayed in Jesus' life.
2. How do the gospels complement one another?
3. How is Jesus' baptism a model for the baptism of Christian believers?
4. What were the three temptations that Jesus faced? What forms of these temptations do we face today?
5. How does Jesus' command to love God and neighbor relate to the Ten Commandments? Can these two "love commands" be fulfilled apart from one another?
6. How does the Lord's Prayer provide a model for all our prayers?
7. How is Jesus' resurrection different from other events in human history? In what ways is it like God's original act of creation?

4

Jesus the Christ

*. . . in these last days he
has spoken to us by his Son,
whom he appointed heir
of all things, and through
whom he made the uni-
verse.*

Hebrews 1:2

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darkness, truth and error, good and evil.

John begins his gospel not in first-century Judea, as the other gospels do, but "in the beginning"—when God began to create the heavens and the earth as described in Genesis 1:1. In Genesis, God creates by speaking; in the opening of his gospel, John calls God's creative speech "the Word." By his eternal Word, God created all things. This Word of God is the source of the life that God created human beings to enjoy and of the light that reveals life's true meaning and purpose.

This creative Word of God, God's very Son, became a human being in the person of Jesus (John 1:14-18). Jesus fully embodies the character of his Father and reveals God's saving purpose to the world.

John's gospel may be divided into two parts, which are summarized in the statement that Jesus "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11, 12). In the first half of the gospel (chapters 1-12), Jesus reveals the true nature of God to Israel by performing seven great wonders, or "signs." These signs point beyond themselves to the

Big Idea: John's Gospel tells the story again but with a completely different emphasis. He uniquely emphasizes the grand meaning of the life of Christ.

Outline of John

- Prologue—John 1
- The Signs of Jesus—John 2-12
- The Promise of the Spirit—John 13-17
- The Death & Resurrection—John 18-20
- Epilogue—John 21

deeper meaning of Jesus' identity, which most of Jesus' own people misunderstood or rejected.

In the second half of the gospel Jesus is found in the company of "those who received him" (chapters 13–17). He promises that when he returns to the Father he will not abandon them; he will send the Spirit to be with them. The Spirit will remind the disciples of Jesus' deeds and words and bring insight into their deeper significance.

The second half of the Gospel ends with Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection (chapters 18–21). After his resurrection, Jesus himself imparts the Spirit to the disciples, breathing upon them as God had breathed life into Adam (John 20:19–23). Christians throughout the centuries and in all circumstances have found hope in Jesus' promise and comfort in the presence of his Holy Spirit.

The Gospels and Jesus

Each gospel tells the story of Jesus with its distinctive emphasis. Matthew shows how Jesus, although rejected by the Jewish leaders, was the promised Messiah, the Son of David whom Jews had awaited for centuries

to establish a new age of blessing. Mark, according to Christian tradition written in Rome, gives readers the basic information about Jesus' life and message in a fast-paced story that can easily be read through at one sitting.

Luke instructs his readers more deeply in the apostles' teaching about Jesus so that their faith might rest secure (Luke 1:1–4). In part, Luke aims to defend Christians against suspicions that Christianity was a subversive political movement. John was recognized as early as the third century as a "spiritual" gospel, an account that shows us not only the events of Jesus' ministry but also their deeper meaning.

Each gospel tells the story of Jesus in its own way. Like the instruments in an orchestra, the gospels complement each other. All affirm that Jesus is the crucial figure in God's history of salvation. His life and teaching fully embody God's saving will for us.

The gospels teach that Jesus has gone before us into God's new creation through his death and resurrection from the dead. He now reigns alongside God and will return to judge all people at the close of human history. The crucial decision facing every person who hears the story of Jesus is

Big Idea: Each Gospel tells us something new and helpful in understanding Jesus.

Big Idea: Unlike many other stories, the Gospel Story requires that we make a choice about what we will do about this man, Jesus.

whether to acknowledge him as the Son of God and live as an obedient child of God through him.

The Resurrection of Jesus

The Gospels tell us that Jesus' disciples did not fully understand his teaching during his earthly ministry. They were not expecting his execution, and certainly not his resurrection. His death shattered all their hopes. But their disillusionment and despair were abruptly transformed. Within days of the crucifixion, God raised Jesus from the dead. The tomb where the disciples placed Jesus' body was found empty; Jesus appeared to the disciples, transformed but unmistakably himself. Significantly, Jesus' powerful enemies never produced his body to silence Christian preaching, and his disciples courageously suffered persecution and even death rather than deny the truth of the resurrection.

Just as God created the universe out of nothing, so in the resurrection of Jesus, God makes his Son the "firstborn" of the new humanity (Colossians 1:18; 3:9–11). The resurrection is not merely one more event within the flow of human history, nor is it evidence of an obscure natural law regarding

life after death. Like the original act of creation, the resurrection is a unique action of the Creator inaugurating a new creation. Christ's resurrection is the basis of the Christian confidence that God will not abandon us to death but will raise us to a new, perfected life in his presence beyond the grave (see 1 Corinthians, chapter 15).

The resurrection of Jesus is not merely "interesting." It forces us to make a decision about the meaning of life. Jesus' resurrection means that we do not live in a closed universe; the world that we see is intersected by another reality from which our lives receive their true meaning, purpose, and hope. The risen Lord remains present in his church and active through his Spirit for all time.

Life as a child of God is life with other believers in the presence of the resurrected Lord. In the next chapter, we turn to this community of believers, the church.

Big Idea: The Resurrection of Jesus marks the beginning of the true purpose of God being fulfilled. Creation is being rescued by Jesus and remade in His image once more.

5

The Importance of the Church

*They devoted themselves to
the apostles' teaching and
to the fellowship, to the
breaking of bread and to
prayer.*

Acts 2:42

For many people, a “church” is only a building marked by a steeple. Indeed, many church buildings now stand as monuments to an earlier time, when churches were central to American life.

Churches existed, however, long before buildings with a distinctive architecture appeared. Before Christianity became the dominant religion of the West, there were many churches in the great cities of the Middle East and North Africa. Those first churches were not known for their impressive architecture. A church was not a structure of brick and mortar. A church was a community of people called together by God. In fact, the earliest churches had no buildings of their own. Churches met in private homes, often on the outskirts of town.

The remarkable thing, of course, is that a movement begun almost two thousand years ago is still alive today. Empires have risen and fallen. Nations have flourished and died. Mass movements have come and gone over the last two thousand years. But men and women continue today to come together as the church, as they have for centuries. They meet not only in great buildings, but also in apartments, houses, rented halls—

even in thatch-roofed huts. The church is, in reality, not merely a building. It is a community of people.

Of course, there are many reasons why people gather together and many types of communities. Groups of people come together to be entertained, to make political decisions, to produce goods. But the Christian community, or church, differs from other human communities. The church has endured because of the person who established it two thousand years ago—Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus began his work by calling together a small circle of followers to hear his message about God’s will for their lives. These disciples followed Jesus, slowly recognizing that he was no ordinary man. Finally, when Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:15,16).

With his answer, Peter was confessing that Jesus was not just another religious teacher, but the Messiah promised in God’s covenant with Israel. Jesus announced that Peter’s confession would be the foundation of his church (Matthew 16:18). This group of followers, united by its loyalty to Jesus and the conviction that he was the Christ, was

Big Idea: A church is a community of people.

Big Idea: Like the original disciples of Jesus, the church is a group of people who believe Jesus is their only hope and have come to learn from and be saved by Him.

the nucleus of the church.

From the first, the church was a community of people united by faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. Only a few weeks after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, Peter proclaimed the gospel, the good news of Jesus, to Jews gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, the Jewish harvest festival. Peter invited his hearers to confess Jesus as "Lord and Christ" and to enter the community of Jesus' followers, submitting to Jesus' teaching as the will of God (see Acts, chapter 2).

In the years after the resurrection of Jesus, his disciples carried the Christian message throughout the world. Everywhere they found people who accepted their invitation to become followers of Jesus. Christians came together from many different social, economic, and racial backgrounds. The church embraced rich and poor, young and old, slave and free. The members of these first churches were different in many ways, but their differences were overcome by their common confession that Jesus is Lord and Christ.

In the Christian community, the Creator overcomes the brokenness that human sinfulness has brought into the creation and into our lives. Through the church, God has

begun restoring all of creation in Christ (see Ephesians 1:9, 10).

Followers of Jesus find strength in the church. They know that Christ has brought them into a community with others who share faith in him. It is almost impossible to be a Christian apart from involvement in the life of a church.

Entering the Church

When Peter first told the story of Jesus, his hearers were moved by his message. They could not go on with their lives as if nothing had happened. What God had done in Christ called for a response on their part. They asked Peter, "What shall we do?" Peter answered,

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.
(Acts 2:38, 39)

Peter appealed to his hearers to make a critical decision about the meaning and direction of their lives. The repentance he called for involved turning from distorted

Big Idea: Most big "movements" or organizations end when their leader dies. Because of the Resurrection, the death of Christ marks the beginning, not the end, of his church. His disciples carry on proclaiming his message even after his ascension to Heaven.

Big Idea: It is almost impossible to be a Christian apart from involvement in the life of a church.

Big Idea: A natural question is, "How do I become a part of this church, this group of believers?"

lives devoted to selfish and false goals and turning toward a fuller and more meaningful life, the life for which God created men and women. Repentance is the overcoming of evil and, at the same time, the readiness to regard Christ as the model for life.

Those who responded to Peter's message and repented were immersed in water, or "baptized." Through baptism they entered a new existence; their sins were forgiven, and they received the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

Wherever the Christian story was told, those who believed demonstrated their faith and sealed their commitment through baptism. The book of Acts records numerous instances of people responding to the message of Christ in trust, repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15; 18:8; 19:5). Baptism was the expression of obedient faith and the pledge of the believer's life to God (1 Peter 3:21, 22).

Paul reminded Christians at Rome that in baptism they had participated in Jesus' death and resurrected life:

All of us who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death . . . 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.

(Romans 6:3, 4).

Now as then, baptism marks the beginning of Christian life.

Baptism signifies the turn from our old way of life to receive God's new life for us. Jesus taught that to enter the kingdom of God, we must be "born again," "born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:3, 5). Early Christians recognized baptism as God's way of sharing his Spirit with believers and making us members of his people, the body of Christ. As Paul reminded the church at Corinth, "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body . . . and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The Church at Worship

The new life into which we are baptized is a life of gratitude and dedication to God for his mercy, a life of commitment to God's people and God's purposes. Since the beginning of the church, Christians have gathered regularly to worship God together. The first believers set the pattern for the generations of Christians to follow, devoting

Big Idea: When asked how to respond to the Good News of Jesus, Peter responded "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). It has been the correct answer ever since.

Big Idea: Baptism ...

- Makes one a new creation
- Marks the reception of the blessing of God's forgiveness and presence
- Is the consistent response of believers to the gospel
- Pledges one's life to God
- Participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus
- Marks the beginning of Christian life
- Signifies the turn from old to new life

5

The Importance of the Church

*They devoted themselves to
the apostles' teaching and
to the fellowship, to the
breaking of bread and to
prayer.*

Acts 2:42

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Things That Matter

themselves to "the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer" (Acts 2:42). Reading the Bible together, encouraging one another to faithfulness, and singing songs of faith, Christians renew their commitment to faithful life.

Sunday has always been the central day of Christian worship, for Sunday was the day of Jesus' resurrection. The first Christians gathered on the first day of every week to remember the death and resurrection of Jesus and renew their covenant commitments.

At his final meal with his disciples, Jesus took a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, gave them to the disciples, and said, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:23–25). From the first days of the church, Christians have met to break the bread and share the cup in honor of the Lord Jesus. Christians do this in obedience to the command of Jesus himself.

Christians continue to follow this practice today in the Lord's Supper. We meet at the Lord's table to share in the bread and the cup, the symbols of the body and blood of Jesus that were offered for us. In this sharing, or communion, with the Lord and

Big Idea: As with baptism, worship is a normal response of a disciple to the gospel.

Big Idea: Sunday has always been the Christian day of worship.

Big Idea: The Lord's Supper is an act of communion with God and with our brethren.

each other, we remember Jesus' death for us and his victorious resurrection. We acknowledge his presence with us in the communion.

We are brought into a closer relationship with all the other guests at the Lord's table (see 1 Corinthians 10:16, 17). The Lord's Supper, then, is the church's way of proclaiming his death (1 Corinthians 11:26), an occasion when Jesus' cross becomes vividly present in our own lives.

The commitments that Christians renew when they worship together extend to every aspect of life. Indeed, the whole of a Christian's life is offered to God as worship. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome,

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

(Romans 12:1, 2)

Every aspect of our daily lives, whether in the workplace or at home, is included in our service to God.

Other Elements of Worship Mentioned in Scripture:

- Prayer (Acts 4:23-31)
- Singing (Matthew 26:30; Ephesians 5:19)
- Reading of Scripture (1 Timothy 4:13)
- Discussing the Scriptures (Acts 20:7)
- Giving (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

5

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Acts 2:42

Images of the Church

The church is more than a society that occasionally gathers to worship. Like a family, members of the church accept a special responsibility for each other, even when they are apart. In the early church, Christians addressed each other with words of affection normally heard in a family. The apostle Paul wrote to a community of Christians, "I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:8). In another letter he encouraged a young church with the words, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you" (1 Thessalonians 3:12). The apostle frequently instructed his congregations in the practice of brotherly love.

We catch a glimpse from the Bible of the close relationships which Christians experienced in their churches. Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, instructing Christians not to offend one another, for every Christian is a "brother, for whom Christ died" (1 Corinthians 8:11). Likewise, he encouraged Christians in Rome to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15).

The New Testament regularly speaks of the church as a family. Christians who lived in large cities far from their own families found a new family in the church. Indeed, they addressed each other as "brother" and "sister," and they gave the same consideration to each other that one might find in a caring and loving family. Church members cared for the poor among them as they would the members of their own family. When Christians suffered the loss of loved ones, they received comfort from their Christian family.

Paul further described the church as the "body of Christ." To new Christians who misunderstood religion as strictly a private matter, Paul said that no Christian stands alone, for each Christian is a member of the body of Christ. He said, "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12). Just as the pain and pleasure of one part of the human body are felt throughout the body, so also in the church the joy and pain of each member are felt by the whole community.

In ancient times, lonely people found in the Christian church a caring community

Big Idea: The church is a family.

Big Idea: The church is the body of Christ.

and a place to belong. Today, Christians continue to draw strength from each other. Like a loving family, the church is a community where Christians enjoy being together. Christians take care of fellow Christians who are suffering or in need. In churches everywhere, Christians give aid to the sick, help those in need, and support each other in times of crisis.

Leadership in the Church

Leadership in the church takes Jesus Christ as its model. Jesus was no ordinary leader; he taught his followers that he had come not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life for others; he even washed the feet of his disciples (see John 13:4, 5). When his followers aspired to positions of power within this community, he reminded them that his new community would not have positions of power.

Jesus' followers were to live as brothers and sisters, and their task was to serve each other. In fact, Jesus said, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:35–45).

While the members of the Christian community perform different functions in

the church, all are important to the health of the church. The apostle Paul portrayed the church as Christ's body, saying that all Christians are one body in Christ. This body has its arms and legs, feet and hands, and each member has its role to play. Indeed, Paul indicated that "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22). The whole church is Christ's body and fulfills God's purposes when all its members work together.

In this body, there are leaders who guide the church (1 Corinthians 16:15, 16). But leaders in the church recognize that they follow Jesus, who led by serving. In the New Testament, the leaders of local congregations are called "elders," "overseers," and "shepherds" (see 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 1 Peter 5:1–4).

Christian leaders are recognized for their knowledge and practice of the Christian faith. They are charged to teach the faith and offer comfort and encouragement. In the New Testament, servants called "deacons" (from the Greek word for "servant") assist the elders in these tasks. Not only leaders but all Christians are called to follow the example of Jesus' servant life.

Big Idea: The church is a community of equals, wherein leadership is a function but not an assignment of greater personal value.

Big Idea: Different people in the church carry out differing functions.

- Elders/Overseers/Shepherds guide the church.
- Deacons/Servants assist the elders.

The Mission of the Church

When Jesus established the church, he gave his people a mission—to continue his ministry of reconciliation. He challenged his followers to be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The basic task of the church is to proclaim the message that through Christ God is reconciling the creation to himself (2 Corinthians 5:18, 19).

The book of Acts in the New Testament describes how the first Christians took the word of reconciliation from the insignificant provincial town of Jerusalem to the capital of the empire, the city of Rome. Wherever they took the message, people made the commitment to follow Jesus Christ and formed churches. Today, the church remains subject to Jesus’ challenge to “be my witnesses.”

Christians bear witness by proclaiming what God has done in Christ. Christian witness also occurs as the life of the local church embodies the covenant love of Christ. Further, Christian witness takes place when the church works to relieve human need and misery. Paul encouraged Christians not only to care for each other, but also to “do good to all people” (Galatians 6:10). Christian

witness occurs in both words and action as the church announces the good news of Jesus and follows his example in caring for others.

A Worldwide Fellowship

While the church is a local community of people who confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and serve him together, the church is always more than a local community. As Christianity spread, Christians knew themselves to be members not only of their local church but also of a worldwide fellowship.

Today Christians throughout the world meet regularly for worship, fellowship, and mutual encouragement. Each Sunday Christians on every continent meet to recall the death and resurrection of Jesus and share in the Lord’s Supper. The fact that Jesus is praised in countless languages around the world reminds us that Christian faith has indeed spread “to the ends of the earth.”

In ancient times, Christians could travel far from their home and not find themselves among strangers. Christians always had a place to belong because the many local churches composed a fellowship reaching across the world. This worldwide family was

Big Idea: The primary task of the church is to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

Big Idea: The church is a fellowship which includes disciples around the world.

based on the shared confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. In the church today, we discover a kinship with Christians from other races and nations that overcomes the barriers separating peoples—national, racial, social and economic.

Recovering Biblical Community

Christians—especially new Christians—are frequently discouraged when they encounter human frailty and faithlessness in the church. The church is a place where we are always learning to love our Father and one another as he has loved us in Christ. As we examine our individual lives of faith, we recognize that we are not perfect; we are continually growing toward Christian maturity.

In the same way, no church is ever perfect. There are many reasons why churches “lose the way.” Some churches become preoccupied with their own comfort and forgetful of Christian service. Others become so involved in social causes that they neglect the center of the Christian faith. Still other churches, eager to increase their numbers, seek to attract members through exciting and entertaining programs rather than calling people to faithful lives.

Nevertheless, the biblical ideal for the church continues to inspire renewal and reform; churches around the world are returning to the Bible to discover God’s intentions for Christ’s new community. Even after twenty centuries, faithful churches still exist where the gospel is taught and the faith is lived.

Christians have always found strength in being involved in the church because they know that Christ has brought them into a new community with those who share faith in him. Today, as in ancient times, the church is composed of those who come to Jesus. Indeed, churches continue to form throughout the world—wherever people are drawn together by faith in Jesus.

Big Idea: In this lesson we have looked at the ideal church, but no actual church is ever perfect. All churches should work daily to be more like the church revealed in the New Testament.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does the church visibly overcome the brokenness that human sin has brought into the world?
2. Why did early Christians gather on the first day of the week for worship together?
3. How is the Lord's Supper a proclamation?
4. Discuss two images of the church mentioned in the New Testament. How do they help us understand life in the church?
5. How does Christian leadership reflect the ministry of Jesus?
6. How would you describe the mission of the church?
7. What would you say to a young Christian discouraged by unchristian behavior (e.g., gossip, apathy, greed) in the church?
8. What does it mean for a church to "lose the way"? What are some ways in which churches do this?

6

Why So Many Churches?

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father.”

John 17:20, 21

The book of Acts tells the story of how the church spread from its beginnings in Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Within a generation, churches appeared across the Roman Empire. By the end of the first century, a community of believers had been established in virtually every city on the well-traveled trade routes.

The Church in the Empire

It was not easy to be a Christian in the Roman Empire. Relatives, friends, and coworkers were often suspicious of Christians. Christians saw themselves as exiles in the world (1 Peter 2:11), yet they were committed to living faithfully and caring for the unloved. The loving and generous lives of Christians attracted many to the new faith.

Further, government suspicions grew in the face of Christian insistence that Christ and not Caesar was Lord and King over all. In time, Christians were tortured and killed for their confession that Christ is Lord. Christians became martyrs (from the Greek word meaning “witness”) by bearing witness to Christ with their lives. One such was Polycarp (69–155), who refused to denounce his Christian faith. Instead, Polycarp publicly

Big Idea: The first phase of church history was one of heavy persecution.

announced, “Eighty and six years have I served Jesus, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I deny my King and my Savior?” Polycarp was then burned.

The example of Christian men and women like Polycarp impressed even non-Christians, and the church continued to grow. As one early Christian commented, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The lives of faithful Christians continued to impress their pagan neighbors and attract outsiders.

The church faced serious challenges. Internal problems ranged from personality conflicts to distortions of the Christian faith. From without, the church faced not only the hostility of its neighbors and persecution by the government but also attacks against its teachings. In its first three centuries, the church faced a struggle for its very existence.

The Church of the Empire

In the fourth century the struggle to survive became a struggle for integrity. The emperor granted toleration to the church. Constantine and his successors favored Christianity, making laws that supported the church and eventually making other religions illegal.

Big Idea: The second phase of church history saw the church tolerated and embraced by Rome, but now struggling to maintain its identity.

The results of such imperial support for Christianity were a mixture of good and bad.

As historians have said, the Christianizing of paganism resulted in the paganizing of Christianity. Government favor made membership in the church popular and advantageous. Municipal buildings were modified into expensive churches, church officials wore the vestments of government officials, and church organization began to reflect that of the empire.

Many became Christians for political or social reasons, bringing with them beliefs, practices, and superstitions from the old Roman religion. Prayers to saints (especially the Virgin Mary) and the veneration of places and relics associated with Christian martyrs played an increasing role in popular religion. Lost was the simple structure, the unadorned worship, and the familial spirit of the early church. The church grew in numbers, wealth, and influence but declined in faithfulness and commitment.

Still, an undeniable Christianizing of paganism did occur. Christianity made a lasting impact upon its social world. Echoing Israel's prophets (see Jeremiah 22:2, 3), the Christian teacher Lactantius exhorted the emperor to help the blind and lame, to care

for the poor and the sick, and to protect widows and orphans. Reform of Roman law came swiftly. The legal rights of wives were enlarged. The exposure and sale of children were prohibited. The release of slaves was encouraged, prisons reformed, cruel forms of punishment abolished.

Nevertheless, a bond was formed between the church and the state that had many negative consequences. In 325 the Emperor Constantine, although unbaptized, called a meeting of bishops throughout the Empire, which he presided over in the town of Nicea (in modern Turkey). Although issuing a profound statement of the Christian faith (the "Nicene Creed"), this "first ecumenical council" aimed to impose uniformity of faith and practice on all the churches of the Empire.

Constantine began a period of imperial religion, and it became ever more difficult to distinguish the imperial church from the society or the government. Augustine (354–430), a bishop in North Africa, encouraged the use of state force to suppress Christians who would not recognize the imperial church. These developments cast a shadow that has remained over the church into our own time.

Big Idea: There is always a struggle as the Church tries to influence the world and the world tries to influence the church.

Big Idea: The union of the church and the Roman state led to the loss of Christianity identity and purpose.

Christianity in the Middle Ages

The institutionalization of the church continued throughout the Middle Ages (the fifth through fifteenth centuries). Constantine had moved the government of the empire from Rome to Constantinople (modern Istanbul). This move left a vacuum of leadership in Rome, which was filled by the bishop of Rome. The bishop of Constantinople was the most powerful leader of the church in the East. In the Middle Ages, the power of the bishop's office grew throughout Europe as bishops became increasingly influential in secular politics.

In the West, the teaching of Augustine set the pattern for the medieval church. He had been the first to develop the doctrines of original sin and predestination. Augustine misread Romans 5:12 and taught that all children are born infected with Adam's guilt and sinful nature. Augustine also taught that God predestined those who would receive salvation, a number equal to the number of angels who fell from grace.

Within a century of his death, Augustine's views on predestination were rejected as fatalistic, discouraging responsibility, and distorting the biblical teaching that God

"wants all to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4) and "bound all over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32). His views on original sin remained influential in the Western church, supporting the practice of infant baptism for the next 1000 years. His views were never accepted in the Eastern church.

After enduring a series of invasions, Rome finally fell to barbarians in 476, thus ending the Western empire. Along with his responsibilities to the church, the bishop of Rome, the "pope" (from the Latin word for "father"), assumed the functions of an earthly ruler, governing large land holdings, administering great wealth, and holding court with his advisers. The Roman church now took on the role of an earthly kingdom.

In the East as well as the West, bishops of the church became powerful and wealthy. For many, Christianity became merely customary, and the costly commitment that had marked the early church was rare. The church became an institution, a place to go on special occasions, rather than the community of believers that Christ established. Even entry into the church reflected this changed understanding. In the early church, believers were baptized by immersion, united with

Big Idea: The third phase of Christian history saw the church divide and in political turmoil.

Big Idea: The first major church split was the division between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) church structures.

Jesus' death to live a new life of moral faithfulness to Christ (Romans 6:4). The baptism of children is first clearly evident in the third century, apparently practiced in cases of infant death. By the fifth century, infant baptism became widely practiced. In the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian made infant baptism compulsory throughout the Empire.

Some men and women left the cities and sought a less worldly Christianity by withdrawing to the desert. While the sincerity of these hermits and monks is commendable, they promoted a misunderstanding of Christianity. In effect, monasticism (from the Greek word for "solitary") separated Christians from the world that God created and Christ died for. Christianity was for all people; monasticism promoted a false spirituality. According to the Bible, all Christians are "saints." All Christians are called to live holy lives, to be saints in the world (2 Corinthians 10:3).

From the ninth century, tensions grew between Greek-speaking Christians in the East and Latin-speaking Christians in the West. At issue were the use of images, the pope's claims of authority for Rome, and the wording of the Nicene Creed regarding the

Holy Spirit. In 1054 the bishop of Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other.

The result was a divided "Christendom." Roman "Catholicism" dominated the West, while in the East "Orthodoxy" formed many national and ethnic churches (e.g., Greek, Russian, Serbian). In both East and West, the church became known for its corruption. Church offices were bought and sold, wealth and political maneuvering led to advancement in the church hierarchy, and worship degenerated into superstition. In spite of division and corruption, many Christians quietly continued to live humble lives of faith, praying for the reformation of the church.

The Sixteenth-Century Reformation

These prayers were answered by the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Reformers like Peter Valdes in France, John Wycliffe in England, and Jan Hus in Bohemia had called for a renewal of Christian faith and life, but it was Martin Luther in Germany (1483–1546) who had the greatest impact.

Luther was an Augustinian monk, a priest, and a university professor. He was

Big Idea: Monasticism was response to the chaos and worldliness of the medieval church, but it was not a solution.

Big Idea: When the worldliness of the church reached a tipping point, Christian leaders across Europe attempted to reform it in protest. This is called the Protestant Reformation.

dissatisfied both with the moral and institutional corruption of the medieval church and with distortions of the gospel in its teaching. His close study of the Psalms and Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians convinced him that salvation is the gift of God through faith in Christ.

Luther recognized that we are not saved by our own merit in doing good works and observing religious rites; rather, the merit of Christ becomes ours through our faith in him (Romans 5:15–19; Galatians 2:15, 16). Christians do good works and keep religious observances because God has already reconciled us through Christ.

Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1522 so that Christians not educated in Latin could read and understand the Scriptures. Luther also encouraged congregational singing as promoting the unity of the church and symbolizing the priesthood of all believers. Sixteenth-century church music consisted of Latin chants performed by trained choirs and musicians, which most worshipers could not understand. Seeing this, Luther composed hymns in the common language; "A Mighty Fortress" is still regularly sung in churches.

In 1517, Luther posted 95 "theses" on

Big Idea: Martin Luther is the most notable leader of the Reformation. His primary focus was to reform the Catholic doctrine of works-based salvation.

the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, the common debating practice in universities at that time. He publicly attacked the medieval distortions of Christian faith and practice; in time, this struggle led to the formation of the Lutheran Church.

A second generation reformer, the Frenchman John Calvin (1509–64) led a more thoroughgoing reformation in Geneva, Switzerland. Luther had called for a return to the apostolic preaching of the individual Christian's justification by grace through faith; Calvin sought a fuller recovery of the Bible as the guide for the faith and life of the whole Christian community. Calvin rejected the ornate sanctuaries of the medieval church and practiced a simple, unadorned worship. The psalms were sung *a cappella*, and emphasis was placed on public preaching from the whole Bible.

In their teaching, Calvin and his followers accepted Augustine's understanding of predestination and went beyond Augustine. Calvin taught "double predestination": that God predetermined not only who would be saved but also who would be lost, without regard to their actions. Calvin's views became widely influential as Geneva became an international center for Protestantism.

Big Idea: John Calvin furthered the concepts of the Reformation in many ways based on his study of the Scriptures.

Later Calvinists concluded that Christ's sacrifice was not for all but only for those predestined to be saved. In the seventeenth century, this doctrine of "limited atonement" led to divisions among Calvinists because of the biblical teaching that Christ died "for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2; see 1 Timothy 2:5, 6; 2 Corinthians 5:19).

Neither Luther's nor Calvin's reformation completely recovered early Christian faith and practice. Their churches maintained close ties with the government and in fact became state churches, where all citizens, routinely baptized as infants, were nominally Christians; understandably, little need was felt for evangelism, and commitment was scarce. Contrary to the intent of these reformers, their churches unintentionally encouraged indifference and secularism.

Other sixteenth-century reformers, not as well known as Luther and Calvin, went further in their call for a recovery of biblical Christianity. These "radical" reformers advocated a return to the New Testament pattern of the church as a freely chosen association of people seeking to live according to the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:38–39).

These reformers sought to sever the ties

between church and state that Constantine had established, and they renounced the use of force (see John 18:36). Inspired by this vision, they abandoned infant baptism and would baptize only believers, as the early Christians had done. Because of their practice of believers' baptism, opponents labeled them "Anabaptists" ("rebaptizers"). They were persecuted throughout Europe, tortured, burned, and drowned by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists alike. They fled, first to the Netherlands and later to America. Their direct descendants include the Mennonites and the Amish, and their rediscovery of the church as a voluntary association deeply shaped the religious life of North America.

In England, King Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, primarily for personal and political reasons. The introduction of the Book of Common Prayer by Thomas Cranmer in 1549 significantly changed doctrine and practice and set the pattern for the Church of England. Desiring further reformation of the church, English Christians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries formed independent Congregational and Baptist churches. In Scotland, John Knox, a Calvinist, led the

Big Idea: The Protestant Reformation was enormously important to us, but also full of various failures and shortcomings.

Big Idea: Other important groups developed in this period were the Anabaptists and the Church of England.

formation of the Church of Scotland or Presbyterian Church in 1560. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley led a revival in the Church of England that resulted in the formation of the Methodist Church.

Christianity in the Americas

Europeans brought Christianity to the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Roman Catholicism was brought to Latin America by priests accompanying expeditions sent to build empires for the Spanish and Portuguese thrones. Conversion to Christianity was made more acceptable by joining native religious rites and beliefs to Roman Catholicism. The resulting "Christopaganism" was forced upon the native Indian populations.

Latin American culture reflected the hierarchical structures of the Spanish monarchy, the Roman Catholic Church, and the native Indian civilizations. In this system, the native populations suffered greatly and became a slave class. Power was concentrated in the hands of landowners and the church. Only recently have many Latin Americans discovered the Bible for themselves and encountered biblical Christianity.

In North America, churches from England and Scotland found fertile soil, and in time Protestant Christians established democratic forms of government. At first the Church of England was established as the state church in most English colonies, but other churches soon spread through the colonies, such as the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Quakers, and Baptists.

North American Christianity has always been diverse. Indeed, the Bill of Rights to the United States Constitution protects the freedom of religious groups. The many nationalities and religious groups arriving in North America made religious freedom and tolerance necessary. Without being established by the state, religion has thrived.

The passion for individual freedom and democracy has also heavily influenced American church life. For many Americans, the freedom of religion came to mean freedom from religion. Thus, the American climate of freedom and individualism has proven both beneficial and threatening to Christianity in North America.

Revivalism has been another major influence on American Christianity. Largely operating outside of the churches, revivalism emphasized personal conviction, often to the

Big Idea: In South America, Christianity was largely influenced by the Catholic tradition and the native forms of paganism.

Big Idea: North American Christianity focused on individual freedom and revivalism.

neglect of basic Christian truths. Revivalists sought to evoke conversion experiences, and many people were moved to accept Jesus in revival meetings.

While revivalism did much good, it promoted a privatized Christianity. Large numbers of people unconnected to any church considered themselves Christians. By the early twentieth century, radio evangelists invited listeners to accept Jesus by reaching out to touch the radio. Television gave viewers at home the illusion of being present with the church at worship while offering no real contact with other Christians.

One reaction to the diverse American setting has been a concern for Christian unity. In the early nineteenth century, some Americans, concerned with divisions among Christians that weakened the church's ability to teach the Christian faith, appealed for a return to biblical faith and the practices of the early church. These reformers built on the insights of Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, and urged Christians to place the teachings of Scripture above the particular teachings and practices of their denominations. Through the recovery of biblical Christianity, men such as Barton Stone, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott

sought to restore Christian unity.

This "restoration movement" was one attempt out of many that sought to recover non-denominational Christianity. Over a century before C. S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity*, these reformers sought to recover basic biblical faith and life. Their contemporary heirs in Churches of Christ maintain a vision of Christian community overcoming denominational divisions. They seek to be "not the only Christians, but Christians only."

The Church Today

American Christianity reflects American culture. Observers tell us that the apparent strength of American Christianity masks fundamental problems. For decades American culture has been losing touch with its founding traditions, especially its roots in the Bible and Christian faith. In many respects ours is becoming a "cut-flower" culture; as a flower cut off from its roots eventually withers and dies, so modern culture, without roots, has only the appearance of health.

Today, a decaying culture, teeming with distractions and diversions from the ultimate

Big Idea: The Restoration Movement is the historical religious movement most clearly identified with the Church of Christ.

The Restoration Movement believed that unity of all believers could be accomplished by returning to New Testament teachings without embellishment.

Big Idea: The modern American church shares many of the illnesses of modern American culture.

question of life's meaning and purpose, surrounds American Christianity. Modern culture also makes powerful and subtle attacks upon Christian beliefs and values. Churches themselves have borrowed the methods and techniques of the modern entertainment and advertising industries. Some even dilute their message to appeal to religious "consumers," "marketing" Christianity as a formula for success, prosperity, and contentment.

While the gospel speaks to every human culture, it can never be fully at home in any culture. In even the most welcoming environment, the gospel always remains counter-cultural. Wisdom to shape faithful lives in a hostile and confusing world will not be found in marketplace religion, nor can truth be measured by popularity. There is an urgent need for contemporary churches to recover the richness and depth of the Christian faith and to offer believers and unbelievers alike a clear, biblical alternative to the shallow, self-centered culture of modern America.

In the next chapter we will explore more fully the Christian life of faith, hope, and love.

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Big Idea: "While the gospel speaks to every human culture, it can never be fully at home in any culture."

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is meant by the "Christianizing of paganism"? by the "paganizing of Christianity"? Is the church's success always a blessing?
2. What are some characteristics of the church in the Middle Ages?
3. What was the basic aim of Luther's reform? of Calvin's? of the Anabaptists'?
4. How have historical circumstances contributed to differences between Latin American Christianity and North American?
5. How has American religion been affected by individualism and by revivalism?
6. On what basis has the "Restoration Movement" sought unity among Christians?
7. What is a "cut-flower" culture? How does modern culture threaten Christian faith?
8. How are churches responding to contemporary American culture?

7

The Christian Life

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans 12:1, 2

The early church made its way in a social world that parallels life at the end of the twentieth century in many ways—an era of widespread confusion, unrest, and decay. Rome imposed its military will over an empire including widely different peoples. Political and social privilege was granted only to a small minority.

The religious scene was one of chaos and decay. Life went on amid the debris of old regional religions, superstition, and the hollow practices of the state-supported emperor cult. New religions from the East with secret rituals attracted some and offered escape from the rigors of daily life. Competing beliefs and practices jarred and clashed. Paganism, which would take a long time dying, was entering its last stages.

In this environment, sexual perversion, infanticide, and brutal forms of entertainment cheapened the value of human life. Men and women found themselves living meaningless lives, powerless victims of forces beyond their understanding or control. For many, life was marked with a deep sense of despair and helplessness.

It was in this confused setting that Christianity appeared and under these harsh conditions that Christianity spread

throughout the ancient world. Christianity was neither a set of magical rites nor an assortment of private beliefs. Christianity was a fundamentally new understanding of all reality—God, the universe, and human existence. Unlike Hellenistic religions in which morality did not play a major role, Christianity was a new way of life.

Early Christianity spread not only because of the convincing nature of its message, but also because of the compelling power of Christian lives. Many people were drawn to Christianity by the integrity, compassion, and quiet confidence that characterized Christians.

The New Reality

The revelation of God in Christ offered a radically new view of the world and the purpose of human life in the world.

Christians taught that the universe is neither eternally self-sustaining (as in many Eastern religions) nor a cosmic accident (as in some evolutionary theories); it is God's creation. It depends on its Creator not only for its origin but also for its continuing existence. Human beings are unique objects of the Creator's intention. Created "in the

Big Idea: The culture of the first century world is much like our own. The church faces very similar challenges.

Big Idea: Conversion to Christianity is not just the acceptance of a doctrine and obedience to a few rules. It is a change of worldview.

image of God" (Genesis 1:27), men and women are made to enter into covenant relationships of trust and faithfulness, both with their Creator and with one another.

Human history is not an aimless flow of events; it is a drama in which two great themes are being played out. First, history is the story of the creatures' suicidal rebellion against the Creator and their denial of their created nature. Second, history is the story of the Creator's covenant love for his creation. God's plan of reconciling his rebellious creation culminates in the appearance of his Son, Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19).

The new disclosure of God in Christ exposed the false claims of the political, military, intellectual, and religious powers of the age. The gospel revealed that the covenant love that created and sustained the universe was now reconciling the creation to its Creator. Surrounded by the political and military power of Rome, the intellectual accomplishments of Greece, and the exotic religions of the East, the Christian could see that Christ, not Caesar, was Lord. The wisdom of the cross was greater than the pretensions of the intellect. Reconciliation was to be found in Christ, and not in the many superstitions of the age.

The New Humanity: The Church

Christian life was lived in response to the reality of God as a loving Father revealed in Christ. It was also nurtured in the church, the new community formed and shaped by the Christian announcement of God's action in Christ. In the church not only was the good news of reconciliation announced; a radically new life was also empowered. The Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, was powerfully at work in the life of the church, sustaining believers and building up the new community (see Romans 8:9-11; Ephesians 1:18-21).

The church was the place where reconciliation between God and his creation was visible. The word of the Father's forgiving love delivered men and women from the guilt and misdirection of their former lives. But the gospel also required a restoration of right relationships between human beings. The reality of the Father's love and forgiveness empowered Christians to act in similar fashion, sharing the Father's undeserved love with others (2 Corinthians 5:18, 19; Ephesians 4:32).

The early church, then, was a place where the Holy Spirit was visibly at work,

Big Idea: Christianity, as a new worldview, cannot be one of many truths about our world. It is the exclusively true view of reality.

Big Idea: Just as Christian faith requires a new view of the world, it requires a new understanding of ourselves in nature and purpose.

building a new community in which divisions and hostilities were being overcome. Long-standing and deeply rooted prejudices—religious, national, racial, and social—were being transformed. As Paul says,

Here [in the church] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

(Colossians 3:11)

The church was open to all. It was a place where even slaves and masters could be reconciled to their common Father and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ (see Philemon 15, 16).

Christian faith involved a deeply personal relationship with the Father and the Son (Philippians 3:8), but it was not a private or individualistic relationship. The fundamentally social nature of Christian identity is illustrated by the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Although the Spirit dwells in each believer, the gifts of the Spirit are given not only for the individual's benefit, but for the common good of the church (1 Corinthians 12:4–7). Christian identity is grounded in the life of the church, the body of Christ, where God's love in Christ is regu-

larly remembered in worship and reflected in Christian lives.

The Christian Life: A Response to God

The individual Christian lives in response to the character and purpose of the Father disclosed in Christ. In Christ, believers are called and empowered to live lives distinctly different from those in the surrounding society. Above all, Christian lives bear the imprint of God's covenant love.

The new life received in Christ involves both conduct and character. In other words, the Christian life is not only a new way of behaving; it also involves a new mind and heart, new attitudes and dispositions. The apostle Paul urges Christians:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

(Romans 12:2)

He also reminds Christians:

God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us . . .

(Romans 5:5)

Big Idea: Christian identity is tied to the identity of the church.

Big Idea: The Christian life is centered on one question, "How should I respond to God's salvation?"

God's love not only guides our conduct, it also reshapes us at the deepest level of our "inner selves."

In terms of this "inner self," or character, Christian lives are shaped by profound thankfulness for the Father's creative and redemptive love (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Several basic dispositions that the Father develops in Christians are listed in Galatians 5:22, where they are called the "fruit of the Spirit"—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Other such attitudes are humility (1 Peter 5:5), tenderness and compassion (Philippians 2:1), and steadfastness (1 Peter 5:10). All of these Christian virtues are reflections of God's love imprinted on the Christian heart.

In their behavior, Christians follow the "law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21; John 13:34). Jesus taught:

"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."

(Matthew 22:37-39)

The New Testament contains many illustra-

tions of Christ's "law of love." For example:

Love must be sincere. . . . Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

(Romans 12:9-17)

Quite simply, God calls Christians to reproduce in their lives his selfless love fully expressed in the words and actions of Jesus.

Like Christians today, the early Christians faced harsh circumstances and difficult decisions for which they had no specific word of instruction. Through the guidance of the Spirit, however, they received wisdom and insight to discern the Father's will (Romans 12:2; James 1:5). As Christians pray for wisdom and guidance, they are enabled to see their own lives in the broader context of the Father's redemptive work.

In all things Christians seek to live in keeping with the Creator's purpose for our lives, as this is revealed by Jesus and his apostles. Discipline is required for Christians to live wise and faithful lives, just as discipline is necessary to perform such common

Big Idea: The primary law of Christian life is love.

Big Idea: Christian's respond to difficult choices by remembering the larger story of what God is doing and by trying to live in accordance with that story.

tasks as playing an instrument or learning a foreign language. As the discipline of practice “frees” one to play the violin, the disciplined Christian is freed from the damage and distortion of sin.

Christian disciplines include the habits of regular worship and fellowship with other Christians, daily prayer and Scripture reading, and simple acts of compassion. As these habits permit God to reshape our hearts and minds, they strengthen Christian discernment and commitment. We are equipped to distinguish good from evil, to remain faithful in the face of temptations and distractions, and to “live a life of love, just as Christ loved us” (Ephesians 5:2).

The Shape of Christian Love

In the modern vocabulary, the word “love” suggests a vague romantic feeling. Christian love, on the other hand, has a clear and definite meaning. New Testament writers use a particular Greek word (*agapê*) to distinguish Christian love from romantic love and friendship. Christian love, or *agapê*, draws its unique shape from the Creator’s own covenant love fully revealed in Christ. In fact, *agapê* is not only a response to the

Big Idea: Christian life is a disciplined life of loving practice.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How is the Christian life a life of response?
2. What does it mean to say that Christian faith is deeply personal, but not private or individualistic? Why is this distinction important?
3. How does Christian faith shape our inner life or character?
4. What is the “law of Christ”?
5. How is freedom related to discipline? What are some disciplines or practices that promote Christian freedom?
6. How does *agapê* differ from merely human love?
7. Some have said that Christian love is expressed only in individual relationships, and not in institutions. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
8. What is the basis of Christian hope? How does it affect daily living?

7

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Father’s love; it is our own participation in God’s love (1 John 4:7–12).

Several features of Christian love distinguish it from merely human love. First, Christian love does not arise from our natural affections. It is not simply an emotion or feeling associated with human experiences of love. Rather, *agapê* is a matter of the will. It is a total commitment of the self to honor our Creator and seek the good of our neighbors.

Second, Christian love is driven by the Father’s love; it is not drawn by the attractiveness of its object. As the Father loved us while we were unlovable (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:10), so we are called to love in the same way. *Agapê* is not limited to people that we are particularly interested in or find especially attractive. *Agapê* is not based on the worth of its object; *agapê* gives value to others now seen to be created in the image of God and recipients of his redemptive love. Thus, while the church is a community formed by God’s reconciling love, and Christians are taught to love one another, a real test of Christian love is how it is shown to outsiders and even to our enemies (Matthew 5:43–48; Galatians 6:10).

Third, Christian love is not an arbitrary

Big Idea: The Christian view of love is not the same as the world’s.

Big Idea: Christian love is ...

- Does not arise from natural affection
- Is driven by the Father’s love rather than the attractiveness of its object
- Is not an arbitrary rule but rather part of our created purpose and nature

rule imposed on us. Rather, *agapē* is the original law of our created nature, which was obscured by our estrangement from the Creator but is now restored to us as our “new self” in Christ (Colossians 3:10). *Agapē* renews our true human nature and our capacity for reflecting the Father’s love in our daily lives.

Christian love does not deny or diminish our humanity; it restores and enriches the true form of our created nature. It nurtures and attends to physical needs such as the needs for food, clothing, and shelter (Luke 10:25–37; Matthew 25:34–36; James 2:14–17). It also enables us to realize the Creator’s intent in the various forms of our life with others. Marriage and family, friendship, chance meetings with strangers, life in the workplace and in the broader community—all take on deeper meaning and promise as the arena in which the Father’s reconciling love is now visibly at work.

Changing circumstances have led Christians to see the broader scope of Christian love. In times and places where Christians have become numerous and influential—as in the United States today—they have had to reflect on love’s responsibility to maintain the basic institutions and practices necessary

for truly human society. The founding of orphanages, hospitals, and universities; the abolition of slavery; the elimination of brutal forms of criminal punishment; the establishment of freedom, justice, and equality as fundamental ideals of society—all are results of Christian recognition of the responsibilities of love. Though by no means perfect, Western civilization since the reign of Constantine has benefited deeply from the moral influence of the Christian faith.

Nonetheless, Christians do not practice the way of love because it is effective or popular in the eyes of the world. Christians voluntarily choose covenant love because they know that *agapē* is the very character of God revealed in the cross of Jesus. Christians should not be discouraged when they suffer rejection, failure, and ridicule; Jesus himself was rejected, ridiculed, and (so far as could be seen) defeated on the cross (John 15:20; Philippians 1:29; 1 Peter 2:21). Trusting in the Father and empowered by his reconciling love, Christians confidently look to the future with hope (1 Peter 1:3–9, 13, 21).

The Christian Hope

Christians look forward to the future and the

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Big Idea: Christian love touches every facet of Christian life and work.

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Big Idea: We do not practice love because it is practical but because it is of God.

ultimate victory of the Father's cause with confidence. The hope of Christians is not mere wishfulness, based on human emotions or feelings. Nor is it based on optimism about human nature, confidence in scientific and social progress, or speculative timetables about the return of Christ.

The basis of the Christian hope is God himself. Christian hope is rooted in the character of the Creator, fully revealed in Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul affirms, our confidence is not in ourselves—in our feelings, abilities, or circumstances. Our hope is in God who raises the dead (2 Corinthians 1:9, 10).

Christian hope empowers and liberates us. It enables us to remain faithful, confident, and courageous even in circumstances that appear hopeless. The God who creates the universe out of nothing never abandons us to the nothingness of death. As God raised Christ from the grave, so will he raise all who entrust their lives to him in Christ (Romans 6:3–8; 1 Corinthians 15).

Christian hope is not otherworldliness or mere escapism. It does not lead to a lack of interest in our present circumstances, nor does it relieve us of our obligation to work for justice and love in God's creation.

Destructive forces still appear frighteningly powerful in the world—sometimes even in our own lives—but Christians know that the decisive victory over evil has already been won at the cross (Colossians 2:15). Although unseen, the crucified Christ now reigns as Lord over creation, guiding history "behind the scenes" to its final act.

Christian lives are rooted in the confidence that

neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:38, 39)

We have described the Christian life. In the final chapter, we will discuss how we commit to the life of Christian faith.

Big Idea: The Christian hope is rooted in the gospel story of God's faithfulness and love.

Big Idea: The Christian hope is that now as history has entered its final act, the story of God and humanity will end with the victory of God and the blessing of his people.

8. What is the basis of Christian hope?
How does it affect daily living?

8

Beginning the Journey

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."

Matthew 16:24, 25

In the life of Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe fully discloses himself. Jesus shows us that the Creator's nature is not merely power, but steadfast, sacrificial love—covenant love. Like a parent reaching out for a wayward child, God reclaims his creation in Christ. As Paul writes, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Elsewhere Paul states, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

This message of God's redemptive and reconciling love, revealed in Jesus, is the heart of the Christian faith. The announcement of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus is not mere human philosophy or speculation; it is the Word of God.

Seeking the Kingdom

To be human is to make choices and commitments. What we do for a living, where we live, whom we marry, who our friends are—these decisions and others like them shape who we are. Too often the commitments that define us don't give our lives ultimate meaning; they don't meet our deepest longings. Through his Son Jesus Christ, our heavenly

Father offers us the life for which we were created.

Commitment to God is of a wholly different order than our everyday commitments. While few of us actually set out in pursuit of evil, many of us do spend our lives pursuing limited goods as if they were of ultimate value. In fact, greater goods such as family, friendship, or health can deceive us more easily than things that are evil precisely because they are in some sense "good."

Jesus taught us to seek first the kingdom of God, and he promised that "all these things"—created goods—"will be given to you" (Matthew 6:33). Clearly, the choice between "first things" and "second things"—between the Good itself and created goods—is as crucial as the choice between good and evil. Further, pursuing created goods apart from the Creator means that in the end we will have neither goods nor Creator.

The Word of God can be difficult to hear above the din of voices that compete for our attention. The world around us muffles the cry of our restless hearts and distracts us from thinking about the deeper meaning of our lives. Social pressures, economic forces, hidden ambitions—such powers conspire to control us and draw us away from the life for

Big Idea: This first step of this journey is to seek the God revealed in Jesus Christ's gospel.

Big Idea: Seeking God and his kingdom is seeking the greatest good, the thing that matters most (see first lesson for review of this concept).

which God created us. The Bible calls the sum total of the forces that separate us from the Creator "sin."

Modern culture has all but abandoned the quest for first things and become pre-occupied with the manipulation of created things. It is difficult to imagine the optimism with which the twentieth century began. Driven by the successes of science and technology, the century opened with expectations of unlimited progress. Confidence in human ability to conquer the age-old enemies of war, famine, and disease soared. The modern idols of power and efficiency displaced morality and compassion.

Looking back now through the smoke and ashes of the most destructive century in human history, we see that this faith in progress was tragically misplaced. The unspeakable horrors of modern warfare, the nightmare of the concentration camp, the enslavement of whole nations under brutal totalitarian regimes, and the legalized killing of millions of unborn children reveal that growth in technological knowledge has not been matched by an increase in human goodness. The very technologies that promised progress have been used as instruments of mass destruction.

Imagining themselves to be gods, modern men and women have sacrificed their humanity on the altar of progress. The twentieth century stands behind us as a grim monument to the destructive evil unleashed when we abandon things that matter.

Ignoring these warnings, modern culture continues to exchange truth and goodness for comfort and pleasure. The entertainment industry distorts reality, numbing our senses, coarsening our speech, poisoning our imaginations. We find ourselves, as W. H. Auden said, in a "haunted wood" where

The lights must never go out,
The music must always play, . . .
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood. . . .

(September 1939)

We are surrounded by distractions that mask reality and conceal the truth. At the first hint of the emptiness of our lives, we turn up the music, change the channel, make another purchase.

Our lives become shallow and self-indulgent; we become slaves to our appetites. Spiritual and moral confusion surrounds us in a culture where pornography is made public and prayer is made private. Many

Big Idea: Modern culture has failed to meet true human needs and to provide life's meaning.

Big Idea: Modern culture's greatest accomplishment has been to distract us from what really matters.

sense that something has gone terribly wrong. Do-it-yourself “spiritualities,” mixing eastern religions, health foods, and psychobabble, are everywhere. The effects of this culture are as inescapable as the air we breathe.

Today many of us find our lives incomplete and unsatisfying. Not only do we experience disappointment and failure; even our accomplishments fail to bring lasting happiness. Frequently we find ourselves discouraged, confused, and frustrated—“distracted from distraction by distraction,” in T. S. Eliot’s apt phrase.

With senses numbed and minds fogged by an endless parade of diversions, as casualties of modern life we grow unable even to take our distractions seriously. As Dorothy Sayers has said, we find ourselves believing nothing, caring for nothing, enjoying nothing, loving nothing; we live only because we have nothing worth dying for.

Toward the Light

Like lightning flashing in the darkness, the word of Christ illuminates all of reality. It delivers us from our tragic predicament and offers us a clear vision of our place in the

universe. We see that our lives are gifts of the Creator. The many truths that we have learned and the countless goods that we have sought take on deeper meaning as they are seen to point to the One who is the source of all truth and goodness.

As faith in Christ grows—sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually—we are released from the forces that have deceived us and freed from our old ways of living. We are enabled to reject the attitudes, habits, and loyalties that have separated us from God.

We now see that we have evaded the Creator’s claim on our lives and even fled from him. Our lives have not only been shallow, superficial, and indifferent to God—they have been in rebellion against him. In faith we turn from sin and re-turn to our Creator, whom we now know through Jesus Christ as our Father. The Bible calls this turning “repentance.”

When we turn to our Creator, we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (see Romans 10:9, 10; Philippians 2:9–11). We acknowledge that neither we nor the “gods” we have served are the rightful rulers of our lives. We confess that Jesus is Lord over our own lives and over all creation (see 1 Corinthians 8:6).

When we affirm Jesus as Lord, we make

Big Idea: The second step on this journey is to turn in faith away from sin and instead to return to our Creator. The Bible calls this repentance.

a decision, a life-defining commitment. We reject the other "gods" that have controlled our lives—pleasure, power, wealth. We acknowledge that Christ reveals to us the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. We enter a new reality; we place ourselves within a new order; we are "born again" (John 3:3).

From the first days of the church, those beginning the Christian life confessed faith in Christ and were baptized in obedience to Jesus' command (Matthew 28:19). Our baptism participates in Jesus' own death and resurrection (Romans 6:3, 4; Colossians 2:12).

As a participation in Jesus' death, baptism releases us from the hold of sin; it marks the burial of old habits and loyalties—the death of our "old self" (Romans 6:6, 7; Colossians 3:9). As a participation in Jesus' resurrection, baptism leads us into the new creation. Through baptism God's Spirit brings us a new outlook, new attitudes and loyalties—a new self being shaped in the image of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:10).

Although baptism involves our action in response to God, it is not an act by which we earn God's favor (Titus 3:4–7). Baptism is primarily God's work, not ours. Further,

while baptism is a deeply personal act, it is not individualistic. Baptism marks our birth into a new community. Christians, baptized "into Christ" (Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 13), become members of a new family of brothers and sisters, sharing the confession of Christ's lordship and calling on God as our Father (Acts 22:16). This family is the body of Christ in the world, the church.

Baptism also guides and shapes the rest of our lives. At baptism we begin a lifelong journey which is not free of difficulties, disappointments, hardships—even opposition and suffering. As we walk the "way of the cross," we are not alone. We walk with other Christians and the risen Lord himself. Our sufferings prepare us to enter God's new creation, as we suffer with Christ that we may at last be glorified with him (Romans 8:16–18). We are enabled by God's Spirit to die to our old life and to grow in the image of Christ.

Our baptismal journey will reach its final destiny when we enter fully into the new creation. As God raised Christ, he will raise us to enjoy life in his presence with the faithful of all ages (Romans 6:5; 8:11; Philippians 3:20, 21).

In the first chapter, we saw that there is a

Big Idea: The third step in this journey is a public commitment made in confession of our faith and in baptism.

Big Idea: Baptism is not the end, but rather the beginning of a life of discipleship and growth in Christ.

question mark imprinted on our hearts; we all at times face the mystery of life itself. Believing that God exists is not merely believing in one more fact about the universe. It is a belief that changes everything. It means that our life is not an accident. Just as there are light waves the human eye cannot see and sound waves our ears cannot hear, God is the unseen Reality, the source and goal of all that is. More fundamental than the physical laws governing the universe is God's love, which establishes all things. Through the gospel we come to know the Creator of the universe as our Father, who reaches out to us through Jesus Christ.

Nearly a century ago, G. K. Chesterton warned that Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried. The greatest difficulty comes with the first step.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How does modern society distract us from serious reflection about life?
2. How is it possible for modern non-believers to both have a secular, materialistic outlook and yet serve “gods”?
3. Many new Christians say that Christian faith helped them “make sense of things.” How does it do this?
4. More than just feeling sorry or regretful, what is meant by repentance?
5. What are life-defining commitments? Discuss baptism in this light.
6. Do modern people really trust in technological progress to solve our problems? In light of twentieth-century history, is this faith realistic?
7. What are some *practical* difficulties involved in becoming a Christian?
8. How does the reality of God enable us to see all things differently?