



FOUNDATIONS of our Christian Faith

Foundations

The purpose of this booklet is to touch on the foundations of the Christian faith.

In our thinking, 'foundations' can often be interpreted to mean: 'the basics - simple stuff for beginners', or, 'information that's really not necessary to repeat for those with experience'. Sort of like riding a bike, once you've got it, you've got it. Once you've advanced past the training wheel stage, the training wheels stay off forever - they're never needed again.

While this concept is true for many things, I have found that spiritual matters are quite different. Our spiritual well being works a lot like physical exercise, in that repetition and consistency are vital to strength. If we get plugged into a regular exercise regime, we'll soon begin to feel better and stronger. However, if we decide to take a few months off, we'll quickly find ourselves going backwards. The same is true with our spiritual strength. Our consistency in the basics - the Word, fellowship, and prayer - will determine how big our spiritual biceps become.

In our walk with the Lord, constant focus and review of the 'foundations' is vital for all believers, regardless of their spiritual age. I think the reason that so many fall away from a close walk with God is because their 'foundations' either are not well established to begin with; or once in place are not well tended, eventually eroding away due to the bombardments induced by life.

While Jesus wants to teach us something new about Himself daily, this deeper knowledge will never move us away from the foundations - it will actually bring them into greater clarity and depth for us. We serve an infinite God, who has hidden all of the truths of life in His complete and perfect Book - His Bible. Those willing to search His Scriptures with Him will be taught new, deeper truths every day. I can't tell you how many times I've read a passage for the umpteenth time, and then suddenly the light clicks on - 'Oh Lord, it means this? I've never seen this before! Wow - you truly are awesome !!!'

Jesus wants us to learn about Him every day. We will never fully arrive - we'll just keep getting closer to knowing the infinite God who is so great that He can't be fully known. I believe that significant chunks of our eternity will be spent sitting at Jesus' feet, learning of His heart, will, and creation. Because He's infinite, we finite beings will never be able to hold or comprehend all of His wisdom. But that's OK - it'll make spending eternity with Him all the more interesting and fun.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will use this booklet to shed some new light for you about who Jesus is, and

what His purpose and calling is for your life. I pray that these 'foundations' will prove to be practical tools which enable you to really live and enjoy your faith in this difficult world.

I know that as you study God's Word and implement His wisdom into your life, you will be blessed greatly, for He "...is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6)

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Note - all Scriptures are taken from the New King James Bible, unless otherwise noted.

Salvation

Who needs to be saved?

ALL OF US !!!

Romans 3:23 " for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"

Isaiah 64:6 "...all our righteousness are like filthy rags"

How could Paul write that all people are sinners, or Isaiah write that even our most righteous acts, without the help of Jesus, don't amount to a hill of beans in God's eyes?

It is because God is perfect. As a Perfect Being, He requires perfection from those who want to live with Him eternally.

The problem is that the Bible says that we are not perfect. And, we know this to be true. (How many perfect people do you know?) If we're not perfect, and yet God requires perfection, then we appear to be in a perfectly unanswerable dilemma. Do we have any hope?

How can we be saved?

1 Timothy 2:4 says that God "...desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

What good news it is that God loves us so much that He wants every man and woman, boy and girl to be saved! He's not like other so-called 'gods', such as 'Allah', who really doesn't care all that much about puny human beings. Our God - the only true God - loves us so much, that He wants us to live with Him eternally. And so, He made a way for us to be considered perfect in His sight.

No, He's not offering slick marketing ploys, such as a subscription to the 'Get Saved Daily' magazine for

only \$19.99 a month, or a 'Holy Key, Guaranteed to Fit the Holy Gate', or your money back.

Actually, God loves us so much that He came to earth in a man's body, to live on this same planet that we do, to face the same problems and injustices and double-standards and hypocrisies, and to ultimately be placed on a cross, bearing the punishment that you and I, and the entire world, deserve because of our sins.

God didn't want to offer salvation for a fee, because then there would be some people not wealthy enough to be included, and this would be unacceptable in His eyes. And so, He paid the price in full. He gave us the greatest gift that is possible, and He picked up the tab. His shed blood for the forgiveness of our sins was so valuable that a price tag could not be placed on it. Our numbering system doesn't go high enough to assign a value. All of the money in all of the banks on the face of the earth couldn't begin to approach the worth of His gift.

John 15:13 says that: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for His friends." This is exactly what Jesus did for us. He gave everything that He had to give, for those whom He loves - you and me. And now, He wants us to prove that we love Him back, by receiving Him as Lord and Savior.

God literally stepped out of heaven and came to earth in a man's body - in the form of Jesus Christ - to remove any and all barriers that could possibly separate men from Him. Today, there is nothing keeping us from Him, except our own stubborn free will.

If we can humble ourselves, put our faith sincerely and solely in the God who loved us enough to die for us - Jesus Christ - and ask Him to come into our hearts, we are saved. Jesus wants to cover all of our sins with His perfection. He's big enough to get us into Heaven, despite our flaws, problems, and sinful nature.

Romans 3:21- 28 (the New Living Translation)

"But now God has shown us a different way of being right in his sight - not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago. We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet now God in His gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God's anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed His blood, sacrificing His life for us. God was being entirely fair and just when He did not punish those who sinned in former times. And He is entirely fair and just in this present time when He declares sinners to be right in His sight because they believe in

Jesus."

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The High Jump Contest

Imagine yourself standing next to the Olympic gold medal high jumper, about to take part in a jumping contest. To build up your confidence, you recite Paul's famous passage in Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Then you check the papers, and discover that all the odds makers are all betting 1,000,000 to 1 against you.) You resolutely lace up your best sneakers, take a deep breath, and give it your best shot. After doing so, however, your heart sinks as you watch your opponent take his turn, soaring about 15 feet higher than you did, hanging in mid air for several seconds and smiling, so the sports reporters can all get a good picture for the morning papers.

Who won the contest? Well, we never mentioned what the goal was - the winner needed to jump over the moon. And so, even though the gold medallist might have beaten you quite soundly, in reality neither of you won the contest. He jumped a lot higher than you did, but neither of you came anywhere close to meeting the requirement. And so, you both lost. Nobody won.

That's how it is with our righteousness. There are some people in this world that are more righteous than me, and there are some more righteous than you. But no matter how saintly, it is impossible for him or her, or anyone else, to be as perfect as God requires in order to be saved. It is just as possible for a human being to live a sinless, righteous life as it is for him or her to literally 'jump over the moon'. In other words, it is not possible. And so, every person needs Jesus' help if they hope to enter heaven. We need His perfection to cover our imperfection. We need His sinlessness to cover our sinfulness. We need His righteousness to cover our unrighteousness. When we pass on to the next life, we will need Jesus to say to the Father: "Dad, he's one of Ours. I paid the price for him, so You can let him in. We're not going to judge this one by his works, because he put his trust in My finished work." And so, we need to receive the gift of salvation that He offers us, by receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior. We need to do it while we live on this planet, because once we pass into the next life, the time for decision is over. It's literally now or never. According to the Bible, there is no other way to be saved.

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'

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Group Discussion

(1) Read John 3:1-21

What was Nicodemus' position among the Jews ? (verses 1,10) _____

Based on Jesus' Words, is it possible for anyone to go to Heaven if they are not born again? (verse 3)

Who does God love? Are there any races or people groups whom He does not love? (verse 16)

What is the requirement for salvation? (verse 16) _____

(2) Read Romans 10:9-10. What is necessary to receive salvation?

(3) Read Matthew 26:36-44 and Luke 22:39-44. Based on these passages, was it necessary for Jesus to go to the cross in order that men could be saved, or did God leave another path open to us?

(4) Read John 19:30. According to Jesus' last Words, did He leave anything unfinished during His earthly mission? _____

(5) James 2:19 says: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe - and tremble!" James brings up a good point - even the Devil believes in Jesus.

There were two neighbors watching the Buffalo Bills play one Sunday afternoon. A representative from the state knocked on the first man's door, and told him excitedly: "We have discovered that there is the

richest vein of gold in North America running under your swing set, and under your neighbor's swing set. If you dig two feet down, you will uncover millions of dollars worth of gold!" "Thank you - I believe you!" said the first man, but when the state representative left he immediately sat back down to watch the football game.

The second neighbor, when the state representative knocked on his door with this same information, said: "Thank you - I believe you!" Immediately, he grabbed a shovel, ran out back, and began to dig.

Both of the men professed with their mouth to believe the state representative - but only one man truly believed. Which one was it? Can you describe a true, saving belief in Jesus Christ?

Who is God?

The Holy Trinity

We serve One God, who is made up of Three Persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) is a mystery, which humans can't fully comprehend or describe. But, this shouldn't be surprising, since we really can't expect to fully understand God. If we could, then we would be equal to Him. It is impossible for those who are finite to be equal to One who is infinite.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' says the LORD. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'"

Our 'Triune' (Three-in-One) God created 'trinities' in nature. Atoms, the basic building blocks from which all matter is made, consist of three things: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Water molecules are made up of three atoms - two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom (H₂O). Water is one substance that can exist in three different forms, depending on the temperature surrounding it. Below freezing, it is ice; above freezing it is liquid; and at the boiling point it becomes steam.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus told His disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the **Name** of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Besides naming the three Persons of the Trinity, it is interesting to note that Jesus said to baptize in "the Name" (singular), not the Names (plural). This points to the fact that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are One God (they have one Name), and yet exist in Three Persons.

God the Father

I would describe God the Father as the 'Leader', if you will, of the Trinity. He appears to take the lead role in decisions made. The Son and the Spirit willingly submit to Him. It was the Father who sent His Son Jesus into the world to save us, and the Father who sends the Holy Spirit into our lives to guide and

empower us.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

John 14:26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

Jesus submitted to His Father's will, going to the cross in order to accomplish His Father's great plan of salvation for mankind.

Philippians 2:8-9 "...He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him..."

Jesus spoke His Father's message to mankind. He said in John 12:49-50: "For I have not spoken on My own authority, but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak. And I know that His command is everlasting life. Therefore, whatever I speak, just as the Father has told Me, so I speak."

God the Son

God came in the form of a man, to walk on this planet, and to live and die for those He loved - us. His Name on earth was Jesus.

Jesus (or Joshua in the Hebrew language) literally means 'God saves'. It's amazing to think that Jesus walked around in a human body containing God Himself. What did Jesus look like? (I would like to think that He looked sort of Italian.) What color were His eyes? Did they sparkle with laughter and joy? What was it like to peer into them? How did He smile? Was His voice soft and gentle? What did His laugh sound like?

What a tremendous privilege it was for His apostles to spend three years at His side, fellowshiping with Him - getting to know Him in special, intimate ways which we won't experience until we enter His Home to dwell with Him forever.

John 14:8-9 "Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip?..."

I wish that I could have seen Philip's eyes when Jesus told him that He was God the Father in a man's body - they must have gotten as wide as platters! I bet that Philip thought back with embarrassment: 'How many times did I burp in front of Him? How many words did I let slip out which were less than polite? How often did He overhear me telling Peter that I was the greatest apostle? And still, after all that - after knowing me so well - He still loves and accepts me!'

Jesus came to earth, always knowing that He would have to die an excruciating death that He didn't deserve, to pay for our sins. Yet He came gladly, because He would do anything to enable us to live with Him forever.

God the Holy Spirit

After Jesus ascended into Heaven, the Father sent the Holy Spirit to help believers live Christian lives.

God doesn't want our faith to be in words only. He intended that we would live for Him openly and gladly, as an example and invitation to the unbelievers. We are His representatives - His ambassadors to planet earth. Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) Now, shining for God is no easy task in a world that loves darkness. But, Jesus understands from first hand experience how difficult things are down here. And so, God the Holy Spirit was sent, to live inside of believers, to provide us with the power we need to live for Him with glad, honest, and sincere hearts.

John 14:15-18 "If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you."

When we become born again, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside of us. We can know this, because at the point of our salvation we become able to understand more clearly God's Word. What were before just a bunch of pretty words and perhaps even 'gobbly-gook' now begins to pierce our heart. Although we will never fully understand God's Word (because to do so would make us as smart as God, which is

impossible), yet He now speaks to us in deep, new ways daily as we study His Word, the Bible, with the help of the Holy Spirit teaching us.

John 14:26 "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

John 16:13-15 "...when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."

The Holy Spirit comes to live inside of us when we become born again. He also comes upon believers to empower them (the baptism of the Holy Spirit) at times and in ways that the Lord selects. We will look at the baptism and gifts of the Holy Spirit in a future chapter.

Group Discussion

(1) Read John 1:1-3, and Genesis 1:1-2. Do you see the Trinity in the earliest recorded account in history? _____

(2) Please read John 1:1 again, then John 1:14. Does the Scripture teach that Jesus is God?

(3) Compare 1 Corinthians 6:19 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. Does the Scripture teach that the Holy Spirit is God? _____

(4) Read Genesis 1:26, 3:22, and 11:1-8. Do the Scriptures show that our One God is actually a 'Plural' Being? _____

(5) Read Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, and Ephesians 4:4-6. Do you see Scriptural references to the Holy Trinity? _____

(6) Because of the difficulty of our human minds to understand the Holy Trinity, this truth was debated by some in the early years following the establishment of the church. The earliest writings found include authors such as Irenaeus (~180 AD) and Tertullian (~ 200 AD) defending the Biblical teaching of the Holy Trinity. To fight against heretical errors, including the belief that Jesus was not God, the church came together and produced a document from the 'Council of Nicene' in 325 AD, which is called the 'Creed of Nicea'. It reads:

"We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, Very God from Very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy Spirit. And those who say: 'There was a time when he was not', and: 'Before he was begotten he was not', and: 'He came into being from nothing', or those who pretend that the Son of God is 'Of another substance, or essence or 'created' or 'alterable' or 'mutable', the catholic and apostolic church places under a curse.'" (Taken from Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity, pg 158-159)

Just because our human minds can't fully comprehend a truth, it doesn't stop being truth. If you were a missionary in India, and were called before a large group of natives to explain the Holy Trinity, what would you tell them?

Worshipping God

Jesus, speaking to a brand new believer, made the following statement:

John 4:23-24 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

How can we worship God in spirit and in truth?

Worshipping God in Spirit

To worship God in the spirit, we must first have His Spirit living in us. This takes place when we become born again.

Ephesians 1:13 (the New Living Translation) "And now you also have heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, He identified you as His own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom He promised long ago."

Before I became born again, I would attempt to communicate with God by reciting standard prayers before meals and at bedtime. Though I did so with good intentions, my words tended to be quite hollow and monotonous. Every now and then I might 'free-lance' a little - throwing in a couple of 'I love You's' or a 'Thanks a lot - You're really great' - especially if I had narrowly escaped a car accident or speeding ticket earlier in the day. But, there was just no depth or intensity in my prayer life. I was basically 'doing my duty', the best way that I knew how. But, without the Holy Spirit, it was dry and lifeless.

However, when I became born again - when I received Christ as my Lord and Savior, and He sent His Holy Spirit to live inside of me - my prayer life changed dramatically. Now, instead of reciting dead, repetitious phrases, I was spontaneously speaking to God, from my heart. The difference was that before I was praying without being alive in the spirit - now God's Spirit was alive in me, helping me to pray.

Imagine two married couples. In one home, the husband has a laminated card that he carries around in his wallet, with some standard phrases printed on it. On Saturday night, he turns down the lights, puts on some soft music, clears his throat, and then pulls out the card and reads to his wife: 'Hey baby, you goin' my way?' Rather than causing his wife's heart to flutter, she is more likely to run into the bathroom and lock the door. On the other hand, the husband in the other home tells his wife from his heart that he loves her, using his own words, and he is much better received. Even though his presentation may not be polished, or his delivery may be a little rough, yet his heartfelt words will win his wife's heart.

Before I was saved, I spoke to God in very sterile language. It wasn't because I was trying to be distant from Him, but the truth was that I didn't know the One whom I was trying to speak with. And so, I wasn't using His language of love, which flows from the hearts of His children as the Holy Spirit enables them. I was instead speaking in the language of men - very respectful, and a little bit flowery - but unfortunately, quite dead.

Speaking to God in reverence, simplicity, and truth from a spirit-filled heart is pleasing to Him. To worship Him in the Spirit is to tell Him that we love Him in our own, heartfelt style. When God hears our words, and sees that they match up with our hearts, He is pleased. When we speak to God in true love, with words of thanks, reverence, and praise, we are worshipping Him.

Worshipping in Song

Ephesians 5:18-20 (the New Living Translation) "...let the Holy Spirit fill and control you. Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your hearts. And you will always give thanks for everything to God the Father in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Just as the Holy Spirit changes our prayer life, He also changes the way that we worship in song. Before I was saved, I liked to sing 'Silent Night' at Christmas time because it gave me warm feelings of tradition, family, and gifts. After receiving Christ, He really opened up the true meanings of the Christmas carols to me. Now, when I sing Silent Night, there is a different, more intense joy, because I am worshipping Jesus for coming to earth. The other emotions are still there too, but the primary one is worship to God.

Worshipping Jesus in song throughout the day is doubly useful: it honors Him, and in the process it also builds us up. It's hard to be worrying about our personal problems while we are humming or singing a praise or worship song to Jesus. As the song switches our focus from self to Him, we are reminded of His greatness and faithfulness. He holds our lives in the palm of His hand. What better place could we be in,

than there?

At our church services, we like to start by worshipping God in song for about 1/2 hour. Doing so helps us to focus on Him, and to forget about our personal concerns. It puts us in a mindset that is ready to receive and contemplate God's Word. Because of the limited length of time that a person can physically maintain attention, it seems that a format of about 25-30 minutes of singing, followed by brief announcements, a 45 minute Bible Study from God's Word, and then a final song, works well. This format is not set in stone - it's just the way that our church does it, and it seems to work out well.

What Do True Worshippers Look Like?

Revelation 7:9-10 "After these things, I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

Someday, when the entire Christian family is together in heaven, the worship services are going to be pretty awesome, as the different personalities of angels and men come together in honor of Almighty God.

Our various backgrounds and cultures certainly effect how we express our love to God. It would be fun to be able to drop in on Christian churches around the world, to experience their Sunday worship services first hand. It must be kind of neat for God, as He sits on His throne above, to listen to the multitude of voices rising up from His churches in Africa, Asia, Europe, the U.S., and everywhere else on Sunday mornings. I'll bet that it's His favorite time of the week. The different styles of music, instruments, and different languages mix and flow together in His ears - all in honor of Him, for His glory.

In addition to cultural differences, there are also the individual personalities of each person within the culture. God in His wisdom and creativity made each person a little bit different. Some tend to be a naturally a little louder, some a little softer; some naturally more expressive, some more controlled. Our natural personalities, as well as the effects of our culture, will come through as we worship God in the spirit.

I think that there is an over-emphasis in many American churches on the outward appearance of people as they worship. For example, if some people do not raise their hands, others may think that these are not

as mature and 'enlightened' as the 'hand-raisers' are. Many people have been trained to believe that if there is not a lot of movement and noise going on during a worship service, then the Holy Spirit isn't moving, and the people are not worshipping in the spirit.

I can only speak for myself, but during my deepest times of worship I am often motionless. The reason for this is that my eyes are filled with tears, and I am fellowshiping with God, intensely and personally. What is being communicated is between Him and I alone. The people sitting next to me don't need to be distracted by hearing my conversation with God - it is important for them to have their minds on Him, so they too can communicate with Him.

There is grace to worship God in various ways. However, I don't believe that God wants our worship of Him to be distracting to others, because doing so causes a separation between them and Him. And so, I don't want to do anything that will cause others to look at me rather than to focus on Jesus.

How we worship in our private time is a different matter. You might see me driving in my car with my hand raised up (don't worry, the other one is on the steering wheel). You may hear my tape player blasting at full volume through your window, and I might be singing along at the top of my lungs. If so, you've caught me in a moment of freedom, worshipping God in my own way. (As long as I'm obeying the laws of the land, and not swerving in and out of traffic like a maniac, it's OK.) However, when I'm in church, I don't want to do anything that will cause others to focus on me rather than God.

When I was an elder at Calvary Chapel of the West Side (which eventually planted us in Buffalo), I remember three young ladies who came to worship for a few Sundays. They were very attractive, always wore very tight fitting clothing, and would always do a lot of physical movement as they worshipped. The leaders eventually had to take them aside and privately ask them to please not be so expressive, because some of the men (and probably women too) were being distracted by their actions. After making this request, we never saw those ladies again. They were probably upset, thinking - 'these people are not mature enough to realize that we are worshipping God with the freedom He has allowed us'. But what they didn't realize is that a lot of the men were weak, and because of this were unable to concentrate on God with this distraction taking place in front of them.

As mature Christians, we want to worship God in Spirit. But, we must always remember that the Spirit was sent to glorify Jesus, not to distract others from Him. The Holy Spirit never intends to draw attention to Himself. Jesus said of the Holy Spirit in [John 16:14](#): "He will glorify Me..." Also, one of the fruits of the Spirit is self control ([Galatians 5:23](#)). A mature Christian will be willing to give up some personal freedoms if it means that a weaker brother or sister can be drawn closer to Christ.

[Romans 14:21](#) "It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother

stumbles or is offended or is made weak."

Romans 14:15 "Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died."

Worshipping God in Truth

Pontius Pilate once asked Jesus, 'What is the truth?' (John 18:38) That's a relevant question for today. What is truth? Does it change over time? Is it different for different people? Can truths in one country be lies in another?

Jesus said in His prayer to the Father, "...Your Word is truth" (John 17:16). He also said in John 14:6: "...I am the way, the truth, and the life..." Jesus could call Himself the Truth, because He was in fact the Word of God (John 1:1,14)

God's Word is the truth. It is truer than even the things we may experience with our senses. The reason for this is that we all have built in biases, so we cannot be completely objective with the things that we perceive. We mentally add to or subtract from the information that our senses collect. But God is perfect, without bias, and so He is capable of declaring the truth.

God created our world, so He understands the way that it works much better than scientists do. It is intriguing to find scientific truths in Scriptures, recorded thousands of years before the world's scholars discovered and published the same truths. Isaiah 40:22, written about 700 BC, states that the earth is round. This was long before 1492, when 'Columbus sailed the ocean blue', a trip that many thought would end with his ship falling off of a flat earth. Job 26:7-8, perhaps the earliest of the Biblical books written, mentions that the earth is suspended in space, and that the clouds are made from water.

The Psalmist wrote of God: "...You have magnified Your Word above all Your Name." (Psalms 138:2). God takes His Word very seriously - it is His main form of communication with us. Everything else must be measured against the Bible, for He will never contradict His written Word. If we feel that the Spirit is telling us to do something that is not supported in Scripture, then we are not hearing God's voice.

Mature Christians can worship God in truth, by worshipping Him in ways consistent with the Scriptures. Studying God's Word with a teachable heart is a wonderful form of worship, because by doing so we are

telling God: "I want to know Your Word. I trust Your Word, and I want it to shape the way that I live my life."

I don't think that it's possible to fully worship the Lord in Spirit unless the worshipper also has a good handle on His Truth. Most of the excesses taking place in the church today would cease if we would just do things according to the Scriptures, without extrapolating beyond them. If we are born again (alive in His Spirit), sincerely studying His Word (and letting Him mold us through it), and are constantly telling Him how much we love Him, then we are worshipping in Spirit and Truth. God will show us how to worship Him in ways that are sincere and truthful, without distracting others.

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Group Discussion

(1) Read Ephesians 2:1-9. How does the Bible describe us as being before we were saved? (verses 1-3)

(2) Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Based on this passage, do you think it is possible for an unbeliever to worship God in Spirit? _____

Why? _____

(3) Read Psalm 150. Based on this psalm:

Is there anyone that should not praise God? _____

Do you think there is any musical instrument that should not be used to praise God?

Do you think that God is more concerned with the style of music used, or with the message contained in the words of the song? _____

(4) One of the difficult things about conducting church worship services is that there are many people

taking part, with many different personalities and backgrounds. In addition, there are unsaved visitors attending, who are making initial steps to reach out to God.

The challenge is to ask God - how do You want things done? How can we establish a format that will glorify You, and also bless all of Your people, from the most mature Christian to the youngest baby? How can we worship You without confusing and potentially turning off the unsaved visitors who know nothing about You?

We are a people who love our rights. And, as New Testament Christians, we are under grace, not law. When we put this all together, there is always the possibility of chaos if we are not careful.

Please read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33, and verse 40. Within the context of this passage, if you were a missionary to India, planting a new fellowship there, how would you conduct a worship service?

Prayer

An Awesome Privilege

What do you suppose would happen if you and I decided that we just had to discuss a matter with the President of the United States one afternoon? After traveling to Washington DC, we would be disappointed as we met with tall fences, secured doors, growling dogs with bared teeth, and armed guards saying "You can't come in". Even if we were determined enough to somehow sneak past the guards, outrun the dogs, and climb into the Oval Office through a side window, when the President's secretary saw us, she would immediately call in a bunch of big burly uniformed guys with big guns, and probably a few guys with white suits and straight jackets. We would spend the rest of the day (and maybe a bunch of following days) dealing with those fellows. One thing is for sure - we wouldn't see the President.

I find it amazing that while the most important people of this world are often extremely inaccessible, the most important Being - the Creator of this world - is always glad, and always waiting, to hear from us.

Hebrews 4:14-16 "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Nobody can say that God is too busy to spend time with us. Actually, He desired personal relationship so much that He rolled up His sleeves, put on a man's body, and spent 33 years on this earth, rubbing elbows with multitudes of men and women. He wasn't real picky (like you and I might become if we're not careful) - He was glad to spend time with anybody willing to approach Him. The Pharisees looked down their snoots at this - 'He hangs out with the sinners and losers', they would murmur. But, Jesus didn't see His friends in this way. He saw them as people who could (and would) become strong disciples, built up to carry the eternal, life-changing message about God's love to a lost and dying world. The Pharisees talked a lot about God's love in their synagogues - but Jesus lived it out in the streets. I'm sure that every single person who ever came into contact with Jesus was overwhelmed by God's perfect love emanating from Him, piercing their heart.

Jesus truly understands every emotion that we will ever feel. By coming to this planet, Jesus experienced first hand the deep emotions that only love can bring - joy for new converts, the thrill of watching 'losers'

blossom into 'winners'; disappointment at those refusing to grow, the hurt of betrayal by those whom He loved and worked so hard to bless.

Jesus certainly understands the injustices of this world - He was put on a cross though He had done no wrong. Jesus never sinned, because He was fully God. However, He was also fully man, and so He knows exactly what it feels like to be a human being living on a fallen planet.

God is Praying for Us

The Bible tells us that God is constantly praying for His children. If you think about it, we actually have 2/3 of the Holy Trinity praying to the other 1/3 on our behalf. When we lift a prayer to God our Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are praying for us also.

Romans 8:34 "...It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us."

Romans 8:26-27 "Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God."

Jesus and the Holy Spirit make intercession for us before the Father. In other words, they approach the Father on our behalf, and attach a high priority to our requests. We're not petitioning a distant, disinterested, distracted Being off somewhere in a far away galaxy. We're speaking instead with a loving Father. And, we have two Insiders who also love us, that are doing Their very best to facilitate our requests with the Top Guy - the Big Honcho - Numero Uno. That would be like the Vice President and Secretary of State rushing out to stop the police car just before it sped us away, taking us out, dusting us off, and saying: "Oh - we're so sorry! If we had known that it was you guys who wanted to see the President, we would have sent the 'Air Force One' to come and pick you up! We would have given you a 21 gun salute when you landed, and rolled out a big red carpet right to the President's office! We would have made sure that he cleared his calendar, so he could be waiting at his desk when you arrived. We'll tell you what - let's have a state dinner tonight in your honor, and then we'll forget that this whole thing ever happened, OK? Would you prefer prime rib or lobster tonight?" (Hey, a Pastor can dream, can't he?)

Take Advantage of the Opportunity!

If you have children that are away from home, you are always glad to receive a phone call, email, or note from them. We're never too busy to drop what we're doing at that moment to spend time with the ones whom we love so much.

In the same way, our heavenly Father is always glad to hear from us. Because He is so awesome and powerful, He can be taking care of a grave situation in Afghanistan while still fellowshipping with us. (He's really good at multi-tasking.) The most power Being in the universe is waiting to hear from you and me - the question is, what are we waiting for ??? What could be more important on our itinerary than talking with God ?

Pray Constantly

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God wants us to pray constantly, because it helps us to build our relationship with Him. If you have a friend that you talk to everyday, you are very close to him or her. If you have a friend that you rarely talk to, you are becoming more 'acquaintances' than friends, even though you may once have been very close.

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1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us that we are to "pray without ceasing".

Now, God obviously expects us to perform other activities too. We are not physically capable of constantly praying for 24 hours straight, day after day. However, He wants us to develop a habit of regular prayer, sprinkled throughout the day, so we can keep in touch with Him. If you work at an office, you may have several times during the day that you phone your spouse, just to make sure all is well. God would like us to do the same thing with Him. Regularly checking in with God puts us in a mode of continual fellowship with Him, and helps us to stay on the course that He has planned for our day.

Our prayers don't always have to take place with us on our knees, although that is a wonderful way to honor God. In order to 'pray without ceasing', we will need to be praying in the shower, in the car, walking through the supermarket, and at various intervals throughout the day. Our prayers don't need to be long and drawn out, or spoken out loud. They can be quick mental thoughts - simply touching bases with Jesus, reminding Him that we love Him, asking Him to help us or others who face difficult situations.

Pray from the heart

The most important thing about our prayers is that they come from our heart. God does not want us to mindlessly repeat phrases over and over - He wants us to speak with Him in a way which is intimate, meaningful, sincere, and natural for us.

Matthew 6:5-8 "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them..."

Persevere

Luke 18:1 "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart"

Jesus told a parable about a widow requesting justice from a crooked judge. Eventually he granted her wish, not because he was kind and just, but because she kept asking and asking - she wouldn't give up.

Jesus ended this parable by saying, "...hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily..." (Luke 18:6-8)

God wants to bless His children with good things. Therefore, we should always keep praying until we receive His answer - 'Yes', 'No', or 'Wait'.

Matthew 7:7-11 Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your

children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!"

God Already Knows

Matthew 6:8 "...For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him."

Matthew 10:29-31 "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."

Because God knows all things, He knows exactly what we need before we ask Him. He is never surprised by our prayers. He allows situations into our lives which force us to our knees, so that we will be forced to seek and depend on Him. Then, when we witness His mighty works on our behalf, we are built up. We become more mature, and more secure in our faith - more effective witnesses to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God knows that we need to know Him more than we need to receive material excesses from Him. He is more concerned with building us spiritually than in pampering us materially. He will provide for our needs, but not necessarily for our greed. We must remember that our greatest rewards await us in heaven. While we're on this earth, we're called to be soldiers, not vacationers.

The Key to Receiving 'Yes' from God

If we want our prayers to be answered 'Yes', then our prayers need to align with God's will.

1 John 5:14-15 "Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him."

If we ask according to His will, He hears us. And if He hears us, we know that He will grant us our requests.

I can guarantee that if you are praying for something that God wants to fulfill, the answer to your prayer will be 'Yes'. I can also guarantee that if your prayer is for something that God cannot fulfill (because doing so would be to harmful in the long run for you or others), that the answer will be 'No'.

This is where I think there is an imbalance in many Christian circles. There are some who claim that if you have enough faith, you can do all things regardless of what they may be; and if your prayer doesn't come to pass, it's because you don't possess enough faith. In other words, it's your fault when your sick or needy - it's your lack of faith which allows this situation to continue. They quote Matthew 17:20, which says: "...if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you."

Now, faith is important - without it we won't even approach Jesus with our requests, because we'll feel that our situation is hopeless. But, what happens if we are commanding God in faith to do something that is not in His best plan for us or others? Is He required to perform according to our will if it is not His will? Would you want God to answer 'Yes' to a prayer that He knows is really going to hurt you or others in the long run?

James 4:2-3 "...you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures."

It is interesting that Jesus began what has become known as 'The Lord's Prayer' with: "Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, **Your will be done...**" (Matthew 6:9-10). Jesus was not praying that His will would be done, but that the Father's will would be done.

I am frankly not confident enough that what I think I or others want or need is exactly what God wants to give. That is why I'll always pray - 'Lord, it seems that this could be Your will, but if it's not, please accomplish Your perfect will'. I'd rather have His perfect solution, based on His infinite knowledge and love, than my imperfect solution based on the limited information that I have. Unless the Lord absolutely shows me otherwise, I'm not going to command a mountain to move - not because I don't think that God can do it, but because I don't want to bring disrespect onto my Lord if it's in His best plan not to move it. If I in faith command a mountain to move, but it doesn't move, it's because I didn't hear God correctly. I don't want others to walk away concluding that God is a myth, or that He is too weak to move mountains. The failure was on my part, not on God's - I was asking Him to set aside His perfect will for my imperfect will. Our wills were not aligned - I was asking Him to do something outside of His plan.

Does God move mountains today? Does He perform miracles today? The answer is a resounding 'Yes'. But, to the question of whether our faith can force God to perform what we want Him to, regardless of what He wants, the answer is 'No'.

I've had people tell me, 'surely it must be God's will that this person would be healed'. My response is, 'well, it seems logical to me, but God doesn't always work according to my logic'. You see, God is more interested in molding us for eternity than in granting us all of our earthly requests. We tend to focus on short term gain, but He focuses on our long term gain.

If our suffering on this earth is going to make us stronger, more usable disciples, then He will allow us to suffer. There are many New Testament saints, including Paul, who suffered from illnesses. There were many others who were healed. In both situations, God was right in what He did. I don't need to understand it all - I just need to follow Him, and trust that His plan is the best for all of us.

I think that if we keep insisting and pleading, God will sometimes grant us a half-hearted 'Yes', even though the thing we request is really not His best plan for our life. He knows that granting it will not bring about devastating results, so He lets us have what we want. I will sometimes 'cave in' to my children if they really desire something that I know is not the best for them, as long as I feel that it won't cause them lasting harm. Because God is such a loving Father, He will treat us in the same way. However, if we're really smart, it just makes sense to wait for God's best rather than to settle for second best. And so, I often pray - 'Lord, this is what I think I want. But, I'm not smart enough to know what Your perfect plan is, so please have Your perfect way in this situation.'

Group Discussion

(1) Read Philippians 4:6-7. According to this passage,

What things should be pray about? _____

What will a benefit of praying? _____

(2) Read James 1:5-8. According to this passage,

Does God expect us to have faith when we pray? _____

Is it possible that we do not receive answers because we have no faith? _____

(3) Read Mark 9:14-27, noting verse 24. Did the fact that the father was struggling with his faith prevent Jesus from healing his son? _____

(4) Read Mark 6:1-6, noting verse 5. Why did Jesus perform few miracles in Nazareth?

(5) What is the difference you see in the account of Nazareth, versus the account of the father struggling with his faith? Why do you think that Jesus healed the son, but healed few in Nazareth?

(6) Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Did the Lord remove Paul's thorn in the flesh? _____

What purpose did it serve? _____

There are certain characteristics that no human can ever have enough of. For example, even if we are very loving people, we can always learn to love more deeply. In Philippians 1:6, Paul wrote that "...He who began a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ". In other words, until the day that we go to be with Jesus, He will be perfecting us - we'll never reach perfection in this life. Given this truth, there really can't be a person on this earth who has enough love, because then the Lord would not need to keep perfecting their love.

Likewise, we'll never have enough faith this side of heaven. However, as long as our faith is growing - being 'perfected' by the Lord - then we're right where God wants us to be.

Angels

Our Senses

A walk on a cold, crisp autumn afternoon is a delight to the senses. Imagine the trees as they proudly display their brilliant colors. The rustling breeze sends a slow, steady migration of leaves from their lofty perches, spiraling gracefully down toward the sidewalk below. Like a troupe of ballerinas, they twirl and float, but with choreography too beautiful for men to engineer.

A sudden, jolting shiver strikes as the cold breeze finds its way through your jacket. As you pull the zipper up higher, you can smell a burning fireplace in one of the nearby homes, reminding you of the warmth that the sweet-smelling wood offers. From another home comes wisps of sauce cooking on a hot stove - somebody's Italian grandmother is hard at work, creating a culinary masterpiece. If you're fortunate enough that it happens to be your Italian grandma doing the cooking, you know that simply knocking on her front door will result in a sure invitation to sit down and sample a hot meatball and sausage pulled from that delicious sauce. Italian grandmas never accept 'no' for an answer. And, they never stop at just one helping - they offer seconds and thirds. Italian grandmothers are very special people.

We experience the 'realities' of this world by collecting stimuli through our five senses - sight, sound, feel, and smell, and taste. However, the Bible tells us that there is another reality - a spiritual realm - that we must believe by faith, because it is invisible to our natural senses.

Spiritual Reality

Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My Name, I am there in the midst of them."

Jesus said that whenever two or three gather in His Name, He would be there too. (He obviously loves to be with us.) Often during our services I can feel Jesus and His Holy Spirit, so real and alive in our midst, as we collectively worship Him. I can't see Jesus with my natural eyes during these times, but I have no doubt that He is there with us, true to His Words.

Because spiritual realities cannot be perceived with our natural senses, many people are reluctant to believe that God or angels exist. There are many 'doubting Thomas' in this world, who effectively say - "I won't believe that Jesus is alive until I see Him with my own two eyes!" It is interesting, however, that these same 'doubting Thomas' don't have any trouble believing in other invisible realities that effect their daily lives - things such as the oxygen that they breathe, or the radio waves and TV signals which permeate their homes to provide entertainment for them.

Our natural senses are so limited. Our eyes can see only a narrow band of the wavelengths making up the spectrum of light. Our ears are unable to detect the pitches that cause cats and dogs to howl.

We can't see God's angelic hosts with our natural eyes. And yet, the spiritual realm is more stable than the world we can see. The Bible tells us that our physical world will someday pass away, but the angels whom we can't see right now will remain the same forever - what they are now is what they will be 100,000 years from now.

Created Beings, With Choice

The Bible doesn't tell us when the angels were created, only that they were created by God.

Colossians 1:16 "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him."

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John 1:1-3 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."

The angels were given free choice, just as all humans are, to make a decision to live for God, or to turn against Him. Unfortunately, 1/3 of the angels chose to follow God's fallen worship leader, Satan, in his rebellion. These fallen angels, and their leader, are now reserved for eternal damnation.

Revelation 12:3-4 "And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon...his tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth..."

Jude 6 "And the angels who did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode, He has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness for the judgment of the great day"

God's Purpose for Angels

God created angels to serve and worship Him, to deliver His messages to men on earth, and to execute His will on the earth. Amazingly, He also created angels to serve human beings.

Hebrews 1:14 Are they not ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"

Angels minister to, or serve, those who will inherit salvation - you and I. Angels are dispatched by God, and help us in ways which we won't fully know until we appear before Jesus in His kingdom.

Angels also seem to have a special interest in protecting little children.

Matthew 18:10 "Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven."

We are never told to pray to angels. We pray to God, and He dispatches His angels as He sees fit to help us in times of need.

Fallen Angels

There are fallen angels, who are being used by the enemy to attempt to disrupt God's work in our lives, and in this world. With every car bombing in Jerusalem, or in every drop of innocent blood shed throughout this world, you can be sure that there are fallen angels dancing with glee. However, as Christians, we don't need to dwell on the fact of their existence, nor try to fight them with our strength. We simply cling tightly to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because "...if God is for us, who can be

against us?" (Romans 8:31). Our battles are fought on our knees in prayer, speaking with the most powerful Being in the universe, Jesus Christ. He will always fight for us. Don't ever step out without Him.

Romans 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

The war is won. God is victorious, and He is faithful to protect us and to see us through the storms of this life.

What Angels Look Like

It's interesting that you will never see a female angel in Scripture. They are all male. (Knowing the nature of men and women on earth, I would have guessed otherwise.) Angels can appear exactly as human beings, or they can appear in more supernatural forms.

Hebrews 13:2 "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."

Matthew 28:2-3 "And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow."

There are different types of angels mentioned in Scripture. Daniel mentioned that Gabriel the angel appeared to him as a man. Ezekiel described 'Cherubim' as having four faces; and Isaiah mentions six-winged creatures called 'Seraphim', which means 'burning, poisonous'. Hebrews 1:7 says: "And of angels He says: 'Who makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire.'"

The Invisible Reality

2 Kings 6 tells a fascinating story of the invisible reality of the angelic realm. Elisha, a prophet of God,

and his servant, were trapped in a city surrounded by enemy forces. It was the entire Syrian army, standing against these two men. But, although the servant was panicking, Elisha was strangely calm.

2 Kings 6:15-17 "And when the servant of the man of God arose early and went out, there was an army, surrounding the city with horses and chariots. And his servant said to him, 'Alas, my master! What shall we do?' So he answered, 'Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.' And Elisha prayed and said, 'LORD, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' Then the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

No wonder Elisha was so calm. The Syrian army was totally surrounded by angels, sent by God to protect His prophet. It was a total mismatch.

Steve, and The Visitors

Every year we go to Martha's Vineyard to join my wife's family for a week of vacationing. There was one year that Chrissy and the girls had to go without me. During that trip, after spending a day at the beach, the family walked back to their vehicles. There were probably 15 people walking - aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents/grandparents - enough so that everybody was distracted. When they did arrive, and took the final count before driving off - one person was missing. It was my daughter Bethany, who was about 8 at the time. Panic struck - people began shouting her name, and some ran back to the beach to search for her. For 30 minutes, she was nowhere to be found. They were going to form a human chain to see if they could find her body in the ocean surf.

One of the aunts remained at the van. Well, Bethany showed up, walking with a guy named Steve. He appeared to be a young adult, tall and lanky, wearing a baseball cap. Bethany tends to be a deep thinker, and she had continued walking past the van, not realizing that everybody else had stopped. After a few moments she realized that she was alone, and lost. Just then, Steve approached her, and led her back to her family. When they arrived, Beth's aunt was so relieved that she spent a moment just hugging Beth, and scolding her for wandering off. When they turned to thank Steve, he was nowhere to be found.

Another story involves some friends. There was a time in their life that they were barely making ends meet, raising a young family. One day Gail had a list of grocery items that she was going to purchase after work. Her husband called and said, 'honey, things are tough this week - you'd better just buy milk and bread'. After work, she did so, but upon arriving home found bags of groceries on her kitchen table. The bags contained everything on her grocery list. This was somewhat puzzling, because nobody had

seen the list except her.

When she asked who had brought the groceries, she was told that a young boy who lived down the street had delivered them. Knowing the family, she went to thank them, assuming that they had provided the groceries out of kindness. However, the boy's mother told an interesting story - the story that her young son had told her a few hours before.

He had been walking home from school when a car pulled up with two black men in it, carrying the bags of groceries. They asked him if he would be willing to take the bags up to Gail's kitchen, which he did. There were enough bags to require two trips. After the second trip, the mysterious car had vanished.

Group Discussion

(1) Hebrews 13:2 tells us: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels." Have you ever had an experience that you suspect may have been an encounter with an angel?

(2) Our God is very creative. Cherubim - one type of angelic being which He created - are described in Ezekiel 1. Please read this chapter, and list some of their physical attributes.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(3) Read Ephesians 6:10-20.

Whom does verse 12 tell us we are fighting against?

What is contained in the full armor of God? (verses 14-17)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Based on verse 18, what should we be constantly doing during the spiritual battles that we face?

(4) We assume that world events are shaped by earthly armies and strategic alliances masterminded by shrewd political leaders. But, the Bible tells us that it is not quite that simple. Scripture occasionally offers us glimpses into the spiritual battles which rage, invisible to us, behind the world's struggles.

The book of Daniel offers us a glimpse into this spiritual warfare. Daniel had been given a vision, but after fasting and praying for 3 full weeks had still received no interpretation from God. Then, an angel finally broke thorough the spiritual battle lines to appear to him. Please read Daniel 10:12-13, 20-21, and 11:1

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According to verse 12, when was the angel dispatched to speak to Daniel?

According to verse 13,

How many days did it take the angel to reach Daniel?

Who withstood the angel?

Which angel came to help him?

(5) In Daniel 11:1, the angel mentions the he helped to establish the kingdom of Darius the Mede. The Medes and Persians formed an alliance, which had just overthrown the previous world power - Babylon. The angel mentions the 'prince of Greece' in 10:20. After the Mede / Persian empire, the next great world power would be Greece, led by Alexander the Great. So, we see this angel involved in spiritual battles determining which nations would dominate the world.

It is interesting that our world events so often focus on Israel.

Do you think that spiritual warfare is involved in the Israeli / Palestinian conflict?

In Genesis 12:3, the Lord promised Abraham that "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you..." In Zechariah 2:8 the Lord says that those who would harm Israel are touching "the apple of His eye". It is clearly Biblical, and important to our nation's survival, to support this tiny middle eastern nation. God loves all people – but He has a special love for Israel. Because of this, Satan has a special hatred for them. This has played out in world history through continual persecution of the Jews. Unfortunately, anti-Semitism has always existed, and will continue to exist until Jesus returns to institute His Kingdom, through Israel.

The Importance of Fellowship

Do you remember your best friend when you were in high school? How often do you see him or her today?

For most of us, the answer is - "Well, I actually haven't spoken with that person in years". We may be flooded with good memories about how close we were, and determine that "we really need to get it touch with them again sometime soon".

The reality is that our best friends are the ones whom we spend the most time with now. They're the ones that we feel closest to, and they're the ones that shape our lives the most. When we stop seeing a friend frequently, they quickly begin to become more of a memory - an acquaintance - and are eventually replaced by another person who is more closely involved in our life.

There is a real danger in not fellowshipping (not spending time) with other Christians on a regular basis. We become like those whom we spend the most time with. They say that couples that have been married for many years begin to look like each other. (I wonder how Chrissy feels about this?) I've seen this occur with some of my aunts and uncles. They have developed many of the mannerisms and gestures of their spouse over their decades of marriage.

The same thing happens to us - we subconsciously pick up the habits of those around us. The question is, with the short amount of time that God has given us on this earth, how much of it are we going to invest in spiritual endeavors versus worldly ones? If we choose to spend most of our time involved with worldly activities, surrounded by worldly people, then we will of course end up becoming 'worldly' Christians. This will cause us to feel more and more distant from God.

Jesus, Our Best Friend

Jesus wants to be our best friend - closer to us than any other person on this earth.

John 15:13-17 "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not

know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My Name He may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another."

Jesus said, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you..." Now, this really amazes me. You see, the way the world works, we usually pursue friendships with those who have something that we desire. They have connections. They have money and prestige. They can open doors which will further our career. Being seen with them will cause others to conclude that we too must be something special. And so, these 'beautiful people' draw friends like ants rush to picnics. But, there is another group – those whom the world labels as 'have-nots' – who don't have a long line of people waiting at their doorsteps.

Proverbs 14:20 "The poor man is hated even by his own neighbor, but the rich has many friends."

I admire Jesus, because His friendship didn't depend on what a person's standing in society was. He was seen dining at the homes of both Pharisees and tax collectors. He was willing to spend time with one of Israel's rulers (Nicodemus) at an inconvenient hour, and He was willing to help the lepers, societies most feared outcasts. Jesus didn't treat the 'haves' any differently than the 'have-nots'. He was blind to the outward things that we so concern ourselves with. He loved people, but hated the superficial things which separated them.

Jesus spent a lot of time with Israel's nobodies. If He had been interested in climbing the religious ladder as a rabbi, He would not have been able to do so, because of the company He kept. Because of His unconditional love for the downtrodden, His opponents often accused Him. 'He's a wine bibber' the Pharisees would sneer, 'He hangs out with the tax collectors and sinners'. But, Jesus' reply was, 'the sick are the ones who need a doctor'. Sadly, Jesus knew that the religious leaders suffered from the worst of all diseases – they were dying, but they thought they were well. They had everything so figured out - but their conclusions were so totally wrong. These men who knew every 'jot and tittles' of the law had so misread the Scriptures that they couldn't see God Himself as He stood before them. And so, because they refused treatment, God went to the ones who knew they were sick, and were humble enough to seek help.

Luke 14:12-14 "Then He also said to him who invited Him, 'When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.'"

Why on earth would Jesus choose you and me to be His friends? Because He doesn't really know us - He thinks we're a lot better than we are? Actually, the Bible says that He knows all of our thoughts, and the intents of our heart are clear before Him. Could it be that He needs something from us? Well, what in the world could we offer to Almighty God that He doesn't already have?

The reason that God wants to be our friend is because He loves us. He just does. I'm not sure why He loves me - do you know why He loves you?

'Agape' Love

John 15:17 "These things I command you, that you love one another."

The word used in this passage for 'love' is 'agapao', which means to 'unconditionally love'. In other words, there are no conditions that another person must meet before we love them. If we are busy rating each other using the world's scale of success, or are worried about being seen with someone who is not part of the 'in' crowd, is it possible for us to obey this command?

We Need Each Other

Next to our relationship with Jesus, there is nothing more dear than having a friend that you know you can count on. Someone who will stand up for you when others are accusing you. Someone who will lend a hand when you're in need. Someone willing to share in your good times and bad times. Someone whom you don't need to prove yourself to over and over again. Someone who will steady you when you're tottering, on the edge of despair.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up. Again, if two lie down together, they will keep warm; but how can one be warm alone? Though one may be overpowered by another, two can withstand him. And a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

If we are maturing Christian, our best friendships will occur with other believers, because we have something in common which the world cannot comprehend. We have Jesus, the third strand in that threefold cord, knitting our hearts together.

We're Weak

We all have built in biases and blind spots. If we're left to ourselves, without the help of other viewpoints from godly brothers and sisters to balance us, we will develop the weirdest habits and theologies.

I knew a guy years ago who was very 'close-minded', in that he just wouldn't receive from anybody. He was strong in his beliefs, and he loved the Lord, but was unwilling to consider that any perspectives other than his own had any validity. For example, he would not allow his family to celebrate Christmas, because he felt that it was based on a pagan holiday. So, while everybody else's kids were opening their gifts, his kids would sit there empty-handed. While everybody else was visiting relatives, and hopefully sharing their faith with unsaved family members, his family sat at home. The last I knew, they weren't attending a fellowship, but were doing 'church at home'.

I could see his points. We don't know what day Christ was born. Yes, the church under Constantine tried to meld Christian holidays in with pagan ones. But, what's so wrong with choosing one day to celebrate Christ's birth - even if it's a wrong date? Really, every day is Christmas for the children of God - every day is a special opportunity to celebrate Jesus' birth. Are the little ones not receiving Christmas gifts going to be drawn closer to Jesus? Or, are they going to resent the type of faith that is causing them to miss out on all of the excitement and fun that the other kids are having fun?

'Home church' is convenient for many, because it allows a person to believe what they want, without challenge. By insulating themselves, they won't be forced to hear other people's perspectives. But, if a person truly wants to grow in Jesus, they absolutely need to receive His Word as it is bathed with practical insights and experiences from godly teachers and other believers, whom the Lord is teaching and molding. It is vital that we study the Scriptures on our own, and it is vital that we receive teaching from others.

Refusing to learn from others is really a type of pride. If we can't learn from others, then we're not going to learn very much. We can develop a 'bunker' mentality - everybody else is wrong except for me - but doing so will result in God putting us on the shelf, and using someone who is more willing to be molded by Him.

Proverbs 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend."

Why Do I Need To Go To Church?

Hebrews 10:24-25 "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

The Bible tells us that we should meet regularly, for the following reasons:

(1) "Let us consider one another". Do you know that avoiding fellowship not only weakens you, but also weakens the church? You see, you have experiences, and insights, and skills that can help other people that are struggling. If you're not around, then that person who could have gleaned from you won't be as blessed as they could have been. What would church be like if everybody arrived ready to serve and minister to others? We'd never want to leave!

(2) "In order to stir up love and good works". Love and good works really can't happen effectively from a distance. They result naturally from the intimacy of people 'fellowshipping' with other people. If we're not willing to touch others, we're not going to grow. We'll know that the Bible says to "love one another", "to forgive", "to hold others in high regard" - but it will be a theoretical knowledge only. Theoretical knowledge is actually the weakest type, because it resides only in our mind. Practical, 'hands on' experience gives us the deepest, richest knowledge that is possible to attain, because it resides in our heart.

(3) "Exhorting one another". To exhort means to encourage. What a blessing to have people who encourage you with sincerity. Not just a quick, "Hi, how are you", but true concern. "I love you – I'm glad you're here. What can I do to help?"

What Did the Early Church Do?

Acts 2:42 "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."

Acts 2:46-47 "So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."

In the first church, immediately after Jesus' resurrection, the people lived totally for Him. They ate, breathed, and spoke Jesus. Many of the early Christians were slaves, so they had to work hard all day long to serve their masters. However, they weren't too tired or busy to make the time to gather together daily, to worship Jesus and to encourage each other.

How strong were these people? Well, it is recorded in the book of Acts that very early in church history, probably only a year or two after Christ's resurrection, that "... a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." (Acts 8:1).

Now, imagine the police knocking on your door tonight with the message: "Get out of town. You will need to find a different home, and a different job, because you are a Christian". What would you do?

Well, even though these people were separated from their leaders, they apparently went out and spread the gospel wherever they relocated. The people they touched with the gospel then touched others, who touched others, who touched others... Small home fellowships began to spring up, and they grew into larger churches. As a result, Paul would write 30 years later about "...the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven..." (Colossians 1:23) In other words, in 30 years the gospel had spread throughout the entire civilized world, despite the persecution of the church, despite their lack of satellites, TV, and radios. These believers lived their faith every day on the streets - and their sincere faith, so different than the hardened Roman philosophies, touched the world for Jesus.

The early church was to be used mightily by Jesus. They needed to be strong in the basics - the Word, prayer, and fellowship - in order to accomplish His great calling.

Why couldn't our church be used similarly today? There is no reason why it couldn't.

Group Discussion

(1) Read Luke 6:12-16

What importance did Jesus place on His selection of 12 men to form His inner circle (verse 12)?

Why do you think that Jesus selected a group of men rather than just one other individual?

What is the value of being a member of an inner circle? _____

(2) Read Acts 3:1-12, and chapter 4.

The apostles were dragged before the Sanhedrin. This was the group of the 70 wisest, most powerful scholars in Israel. They led the nation in its religious policies and decisions.

According to Acts 4:13, what were the thoughts of these learned men toward the apostles?

What did the Sanhedrin realize was the reason for the apostles' boldness?

What did the apostles do when they were released from custody? (verse 23)

What did the group of believers then do? (verse 24) _____

The apostles were able to preach the gospel with great power (verse 33). How do you think that fellowshiping with other saints helped to strengthen them? (verses 32-37)

(3) Consider your personal history as a Christian. At what times have you been the strongest in your faith, and at what times have you been the weakest? Do you see a correlation in your life, with fellowship equating to times of spiritual strength, and lack of fellowship contributing to times of spiritual weakness? _____

(4) Some people resist fellowship, because they do not want to be judged or put under a microscope by others. It is unfortunately true that once we pull out the microscopes, nobody will be unscathed.

Please read Romans 12. Based on this chapter, what are some things that should be occurring as we fellowship with other believers?

Baptism

What Baptism Means

Romans 6:1-7 (New Living Translation) "Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more kindness and forgiveness? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? Or have you forgotten that when we became Christians and were baptized to become one with Christ Jesus, we died with Him? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with Him in His death, we will also be raised as He was. Our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin.

Romans 6:11-14 (New Living Translation) "So you should consider yourselves dead to sin and able to live for the glory of God through Christ Jesus. Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to its lustful desires. Do not let any part of your body become a tool of wickedness, to be used for sinning. Instead, give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life. And use your whole body as a tool to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you are no longer subject to the law, which enslaves you to sin. Instead, you are free by God's grace."

Baptism is a public display of our commitment to leave sin behind, and to live fully for Jesus Christ. By being baptized, we are announcing to all: "I love Jesus more than anyone or anything else in this whole world, and from now I'm going to live for Him. I'm leaving my old, selfish, sinful lifestyle behind me, to begin a new life. I realize that I'm not perfect, but I want to please Jesus in all that I do. I am committing to live a life that represents and honors Him, to the best of my abilities. And if I stumble, I won't quit. I'll repent, I'll get back up, and I'll keep walking with my Lord."

Baptism symbolizes the death of our old self. As we are submerged into the water, our past, filled with sin, is being drowned. When we rise up from the water, we are a brand new person - alive to the things of Christ, dead to the things of sin.

2 Corinthians 5:17 "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

When a person dies, they attain a type of freedom, in that they can no longer be tormented by the

temptation to sin. You don't see dead men hanging out at bars because they need a drink, or robbing banks because they need extra money to put their kids through college, except maybe in some 'grade B' horror movies. The desire to sin died when the flesh died. This doesn't mean that after we are baptized that we will suddenly become 'Super Spiritual' men or women, immune to every urge and temptation to sin. Unfortunately, we, like all mankind, will struggle with our flesh for as long as we live in these bodies. But, since we died to sin, we are now like a corpse with regards to it. Our energies are being invested in moving forward with our new life, one which is now being led by the Holy Spirit. He is helping us to say 'yes' to the things of God, and 'no' to the things of the world. He is helping us to run away from the temptations, into the arms of Jesus. We're done with our former lifestyle, which was driven primarily by the desires of our flesh. And, we're not turning back.

Romans 12:1-2 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

I Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Obedience, not Requirement

Jesus wants us to be baptized.

In Matthew 28:19, He commanded His apostles to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

Because Jesus said this, we should obey Him and be baptized.

Baptism is a matter of obedience to Jesus' command, but it is not essential for salvation. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:14-17 "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel..."

If baptism was necessary for salvation, Paul would have essentially been saying, 'I thank God that none of you except Crispus and Gaius got saved...Christ did not send me to save others...' Obviously, Paul would never say such a thing.

Salvation occurs through our decision to place our faith in Jesus Christ. It's not contingent upon the addition of other requirements or formulas. If Jesus' shed blood on the cross is not enough, how can we think that a procedure performed by men will help?

We have given people certificates after they are baptized, as a reminder of their decision. I like to kid them by saying: "Make sure that you show this to Jesus when you see Him." But, I know that if they were able to do so, He would just look past the piece of paper in their hand, and peer instead into the things hidden in their heart. That's how He'll know whether or not they were truly baptized.

How We Perform Our Church Baptisms

We like to perform church baptisms in public places, where those being baptized can be fully submerged. (The word 'baptize' actually means to "make fully wet". If a person is not physically able to be fully submerged, we will sprinkle them with water instead.) Evangola State Park is a favorite location, because it's relatively close, and has a beautiful beach right on Lake Erie. We gather on the beach, and begin by briefly discussing baptism. We explain: "When a person is fully immersed into the water, it is symbolic that their 'old man' is being drowned - he's gone forever. When that person comes up from the water, they are symbolically a 'new man' in Christ. By being baptized, you are publicly committing to live a new life, sold out for Jesus Christ, to the best of your ability."

Next we'll pray together. Then, those performing the baptisms will walk out a ways until they are a little over waist deep in the water. On shore, someone will play worship songs on a guitar, and those gathered to witness the event will sing along. One by one, those desiring to be baptized will walk into the water. Out in the lake, we'll pray with the first person to arrive, and then say something to the effect of: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (in keeping with Jesus' command in [Matthew 28:19](#)). Then we dip that person into the water. When we bring him or her back up, the witnesses on shore applaud. (If you are considering being baptized, you can rest assured - we haven't lost anybody in the lake yet.) The newly baptized person then walks back to shore to be congratulated by the witnesses. This process continues until all of the people desiring baptism have received it. Because we are on a public beach, a small crowd of onlookers usually gathers to find out what's going on. This is a great opportunity to share Jesus with them.

Can A Person Be Baptized More Than Once?

There's nothing in the Bible that says a person can't be baptized again if they feel the Lord leading them to do so. Certainly those who were sprinkled as infants, and thus who never made a mature decision for baptism, should be baptized again. And, I think any Christian who feels that they have strayed from the Lord's perfect will for their life, and wants to publicly re-commit to follow Jesus as their first priority, should feel welcome to be re-baptized.

One of the great things about receiving baptism is that we make our self accountable to those witnessing the event. We are saying: 'I'm serious about living for Jesus'. And the witnesses, as brothers and sisters in Christ, are saying: "We're standing with you, and you can count on us to be there for you."

What about infants?

Infant baptism is not found in the Bible. It was not practiced in the early church. It is a tradition that became common in the 3rd century AD. Unfortunately, infant baptism is really an exercise in futility, because infants are not mentally capable of making a decision to live for Christ. Because we serve a God who desires relationship, not ritual, we believe that baptism can only be meaningful if it is a decision made by a person who is mature enough to understand the Lord's command to be baptized, and who loves Him enough to say: 'I will do it'.

In 2 Samuel 12, David was fasting and praying for his young son, who was very sick. Finally, the child died. At this point, David washed himself, put on different clothes, and went into the house of the Lord to worship. His entire countenance changed. His servants were stunned.

2 Samuel 12:21-23 "Then his servants said to him, 'What is this that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive, but when the child died, you arose and ate food.' And he said, 'While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

David knew that he would see his child again. David is in heaven today, and his son is there with him.

In Matthew 18:14, Jesus said: "Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish." We serve a God who loves children. He does not require us to perform a ritual to insure their salvation should they die at a young age - they're covered by Him until they are mature enough to decide for themselves whether or not to live for Jesus.

Baptism Opens the Doors to Serve Jesus

Chrissy and I did not make the decision to be baptized until we were over 10 years old in the Lord. It's not that we were trying to be disobedient, but we just never saw it as an immediate, burning issue. So, we kept putting it off. When I was asked to be an elder at Calvary Chapel of the West Side, the Lord showed me that I needed to take care of this before moving forward. How could I serve as a public example to others, and teach others to obey God, when I wasn't obeying Him in this area? We were baptized in Pastor Henry Tomasso's pool on a Sunday afternoon shortly thereafter. After being baptized, the Lord really began to move in my life, and began to open up many doors to serve Him, leading up to our call to plant a Calvary Chapel in Buffalo.

Jesus set the example about being baptized. All four gospels mention that his cousin John baptized him. This repetition in Scripture denotes the importance of the event. It is also interesting to note that Jesus' public ministry did not begin until after He was baptized. I can say the same thing about my ministry.

God always honors our obedience to Him, regardless if we fully understand the reason for His commands. Obeying God's Word is always the right thing to do.

I Want to Be Baptized, But I Don't Think I Can Live The Way That Christ Wants Me To

Romans 7:18-25 (New Living Translation) "I know that I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. But if I am doing what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing it; the sin within me is doing it. It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another law at work within me that is at war with my mind. This law wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see

how it is: in my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin."

Sometimes a person's sincerity may keep them away from baptism. "I know that I can't live the life that I should, and I don't want to be a hypocrite, or to insult Jesus by committing to something that I can't do." It is interesting that the great apostle Paul wrote that he too suffered from periods of weakness. If Paul struggled, I think that we probably will too. The bottom line is that if we wait until we're perfect before receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, then we'll never get saved. If we wait until we're perfect before being baptized, then we'll never be baptized. The enemy would love to condemn us, because he knows that if he can get us feeling this way, it will cause us to draw back from God. It will cause us to eliminate ourselves from the race. We will choose not to serve God, because we are unworthy. And thus, we will withdraw from the front lines, weakening the forces battling for spiritual good.

We can choose to be like some of the believers in the Middle Ages, who isolated themselves, and actually beat themselves for their unworthiness. Or, we can dedicate our selves into the Lord's hands, and say: "Jesus, I know that I'm no great prize, but I'm willing to be used by You for Your purposes, if You're willing to use a weak, fallible, unworthy person like me". Guess what? He's willing, if you are.

Group Discussion

(1) Read Matthew 28:16-20. Is baptism a commandment from Jesus? _____

(2) Read Mark 16:15-16. Does this passage state that if one is not baptized they will be condemned?

(3) Read Ephesians 2:8-9. Based on this passage, do you think that performing the act of baptism can save a person who has not yet put their faith in Jesus Christ?

(4) Read Luke 23:39-43. If baptism was required for salvation, do you think that the thief on the cross could have been assured by Jesus that they would be together in Paradise that day?

(5) In the early church, baptism was often synonymous with becoming born again. Please read the account of Philip and the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26-40.

What was the requirement for the eunuch to be baptized? (verse 37)

Verse 35 says that Philip was able to preach about Jesus from the prophecy recorded in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah (in verses 32-33). How would you use these verses to share Jesus with an unbeliever?

Another type of baptism is referred to in the Bible as the 'baptism of the Holy Spirit'. This occurs when believers have the Holy Spirit come upon them, in order to empower them to perform works for God which He desires. We will take a closer look at the baptism of the Holy Spirit in another chapter.

Communion

Why We Celebrate The Death of the One That We Love

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you; that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me'. In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

We celebrate communion to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus. It seems strange to celebrate the death of One whom we love. But because of the great victory which Jesus' resurrection brought, we are able look past our grief at His death. We find peace in knowing that God loved us so much, and wanted so much for us to spend eternity with Him, that He was willing to die the most painful, horrible death that men could devise. It is Jesus, "...who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

On the night that He was to be betrayed, as He sat around the table of the 'Last Supper' with His apostles, Jesus told them that the time had come for Him to die. His body must be brutally nailed to a cross, and His blood must be spilled from many cuts and lacerations onto the ground. This statement should not have come as a surprise to the apostles, because He had told them repeatedly during His ministry that His earthly life must end like this. However, they, like us, did not want to believe the words they dreaded to hear. Surely a loving God would not let His own Son be betrayed by unworthy, unfaithful men. Why would God allow this travesty? He could easily wipe out the evildoers with just one little finger if He wanted to.

The Bible tells us that Jesus knew that He would die from the beginning. Peter wrote that: "He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world... (1 Peter 1:20), and John referred to Him in Revelation 13:8 as "...the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." What this means is that Jesus knew in eternity past, long before the earth was created, that He would someday need to come and die at the hands of angry, rejecting men, so that those who received Him might live eternally. And so, because of His great love for us, He came, looking beyond the horrible death He knew He would endure.

Isaiah 50:6 "I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting."

Isaiah 52:14 (the New Living Translation) "Many were amazed when they saw Him – beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know He was a person."

It's sad when people think that they are good enough to go to heaven based on their works. If this is the case, Jesus was quite foolish and naive to die. He went to the cross with right intentions, but He could have lived to be a ripe old age, writing books and establishing a world-renowned ministry.

Matthew 26:39 "He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.'"

Matthew 26:42 "Again, a second time, He went away and prayed, saying, 'O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done.'"

Matthew 26:44 "So He left them, went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words."

Luke 22:43-44 "Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground."

Actually, Jesus asked the Father three times in the garden of Gethsemane to allow Him NOT to go to the cross, if there was any other way that men could be saved. If Mohammad, Buddha, or some Yogi could offer an alternative path. If men could earn their way through good works, or buy their way in. But you know what the Father's answer was. 'I'm sorry, My Beloved Son, but there is no other way for men to be saved'.

Jeremiah 17:9 says that "The heart is deceitful above all things, and dreadfully wicked..." That Hebrew word used here for 'wicked' is 'anash', number 605 in the Strong's Concordance. It means: frail, feeble, desperate, incurable, sick, woeful. It's interesting to note that while the word 'wicked' appears in the Old Testament over 200 times, only in this one instance is it based on the Hebrew word 'anash'. In other words, the human heart is so wicked that a separate, special word is needed to describe it.

Now, those of us that are born again understand this. The Holy Spirit has shown us our hearts, and we, like Paul, confess that: "...in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find." (Romans 7:18). It's funny, because before I was saved, I thought that I was a pretty good person. But now, after being saved for over 20 years, I know better. I

have a better understanding of the heart that God sees. Knowing this makes me even more thankful that Jesus was willing to go to the cross for me.

How would you like to have a big picture screen that instantaneously displayed all of your thoughts as they occurred, for all to see? You wouldn't want to see my thoughts when I'm 'boxed in' on the thruway, or crawling along at a snail's pace at one of our many frustratingly slow road construction sites. But this is what Jesus sees. He can see through our emotionless faces into our minds, and through our chests into our hearts.

Our Unexpected Phone Call

As a pastor, my home receives a lot of phone calls. But one of our most memorable was one that was actually sent from our home, not one coming in.

We seem to have a tough time choosing phones at our house. We always get really cool ones, with a million various features that I don't have time to figure out and thus never use. But the one common thread seems to be that all of our phones break after about 6 months. So, we take them back to the store, and exchange them for a new model.

Well, one evening Pastor Gary called me. It seems that our latest phone had automatically called him earlier (we had assigned him a special key for 'speed dialing'), and when he answered he heard us speaking around the dinner table. He eventually hung up, and then called me back later. My first thought when he told me what had happened was: 'Oh my God - what did I say about Gary?' But my next thought was - 'hey, I'm glad that it happened', because it reminded me that Jesus sees every thing that we do, and He hears every word that we say. He sees our every thought. Knowing this, I wouldn't dare to stand before Him in my own righteousness. Without the blood of Jesus covering me, I wouldn't have a chance.

This is why we celebrate communion. Jesus died for a bunch of people with sins that are obvious to others, and other sins hidden in their thoughts and minds, who had no other way to enter heaven. And so, we reflect on His death and thank Him constantly, grateful for His tremendous personal sacrifice, which unlocked the only door into His kingdom.

Do the Bread and Juice Actually Become Jesus' Body and Blood?

There are some who believe that the bread and juice used during communion actually become Jesus' body and blood. However, any Biblical doctrine must be consistent throughout all of the Scriptures, and this belief is not consistent.

Hebrews 9:25-28 "not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another - He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many..."

If the communion bread and juice actually become Jesus' body and blood, then He is essentially being sacrificed again and again, not just once as the Scripture says. If this is true, then the hours He spent suffering and dying on the cross weren't enough - the crucifixion needs to be repeated daily, over and over and over. This just isn't consistent with Scripture. As we read at the beginning of this chapter, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:26 "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." Notice that Paul used the words 'bread' and 'cup' - not 'body and blood'.

By concluding that Jesus' hours spent hanging on the cross were not enough in themselves to save us, we open the doors to many 'extra-Biblical' beliefs. Can I lose my salvation? What if I don't compile enough good works? Are there other ways to be saved besides through Jesus' death? What if I'm a good Muslim? Do I need to suffer in purgatory until my sins are totally paid for?

Thank God, the Bible teaches that the cross was enough. By coming to the cross, we receive forgiveness for our sins. There is no other way that we can be saved. If maintaining our salvation depends on our works rather than Jesus' shed blood, then we will surely be lost.

How We Celebrate Communion at Our Church

The Bible doesn't tell us how often we should celebrate communion, only that it should be done regularly. It appears that the early church had 'love feasts' every Sunday, which included a meal, as well as communion. Different Calvary Chapels celebrate communion at different times. At our church, we do so once a month, as part of the Sunday service. After the Bible study, we spend a few minutes reflecting on what Jesus did for us. We then have a special song as the bread and juice are passed out. When everybody has been served, we pray, thanking Jesus for His wonderful sacrifice for us. Then, we partake of the bread and juice, in honor of our Lord.

Celebrating communion is a beautiful way to remember and thank Jesus. You may want to consider doing so with your family in your home on a regular basis.

Group Discussion

(1) Please read 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Paul describes problems occurring in the Corinthian church during the Lord's supper, in verses 17-22. What are the problems that he lists?

Jesus is quoted in verses 24-25. Why does Jesus want us to celebrate communion?

What was happening to some who were taking communion without the proper reverence? (verse 30)

What does Paul say that we should do before taking communion? (verse 31)

(2) Those who claim that the bread and juice used in communion become the Lord's actual body and blood refer to John 6:51-58. Please read this passage.

If this was the only passage of Scripture pertaining to this subject, a literal interpretation might be correct. However, Jesus often referred to Himself, or was referred to by others, in figurative language. A literal interpretation in these cases does not make sense.

Please read the following Scriptures, and record what Jesus is called.

John 1:1 _____
John 1:9 _____
John 6:48 _____
John 10:9 _____
John 10:11 _____
John 15:1 _____

Do these passages mean that Jesus was literally each of these things? For example, when Jesus is referred to as 'the door', does that mean that He literally had hinges and a door knob on Him? Or, are these figurative ways of describing Jesus? Is referring to Him as a door making the point that He is the only way - the only door - to salvation? _____

(3) In a passage, a few words can make a big difference.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread."

Without the words 'communion of the', verse 16 would say that the bread and juice literally become the body and blood of Christ.

The Greek word used for 'communion' is number 2842 in the Strong's Concordance. It means: partnership, participation, fellowship. So, what this passage is saying that when we drink from the cup and eat the bread, we are partnering / participating / fellowshiping with Christ, as we reflect on His shed blood and broken body, sacrificed to pay for our sins.

Verse 17 says that: "...we all partake of that one bread." Notice that it doesn't say that we are partaking of Jesus' literal body, but of bread.

Other Bible versions record these verses as follows:

(The New International Version) "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf."

(The New Living Translation) "When we bless the cup at the Lord's Table, aren't we sharing in the benefits of the blood of Christ? And when we break the loaf of bread, aren't we sharing in the benefits of the body of Christ? And we all eat from one loaf, showing that we are one body."

(The Contemporary English Version) "When we drink from the cup that we ask God to bless, isn't that sharing in the blood of Christ? When we eat the bread that we break, isn't that sharing in the body of Christ? By sharing in the same loaf of bread, we become one body, even though there are many of us."

If you were writing a Bible commentary, how would you explain 1 Corinthians 10:16 ?

(4) Read Isaiah 53. This is an amazing prophecy of Jesus' death for us, written about 700 years before it was fulfilled. Where do you see Isaiah's prophecies literally fulfilled through Jesus?

The Bible

What the Bible Says About Itself

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

1 Thessalonians 2:13 "For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the Word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."

2 Peter 1:20-21 "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

The Bible declares that it is the written Word of God, recorded by fallible men as the infallible Holy Spirit inspired them. But how can we be sure?

Is There Proof?

If the Bible truly were God's Word, we would expect to find no errors in it, because God is perfect, and therefore does not make mistakes. He is also all-powerful, so we would expect Him to be more than able to direct imperfect men to record His Words correctly, and then to preserve those Words over thousands of years, without allowing errors to creep in.

If mistakes could be found in the Bible, it would prove that God is not as perfect or as all-powerful as we hoped. It would mean that men actually wrote or rewrote the Bible. They might have done so with devious intentions, or they might have been well meaning, but still the bottom line would be that men tainted these writings.

How would you like to take an aviation flight class using a textbook that is only 95% correct? Knowing that errors existed, but not knowing where they were located, would cause you to doubt the entire book. Worse than that, believing the 5% error could end up killing you and your passengers!

Likewise, how could you believe anything in the Bible if you knew it contained errors? If the Bible is not 100% correct, then it is robbed of its power to change lives. Rather than being God's perfect Truth, it now simply becomes a nice book containing a bunch of nice stories with good morals.

Doubting the Scriptures in their entirety is obviously problematic. If we believe that the Bible contains errors, or that only certain parts of it were divinely inspired, then the question arises, 'which parts?' Unfortunately, because of our human nature, we will conclude that the parts that we like are inspired, and the parts that we don't like couldn't possibly be.

Another big problem which arises if the Bible is not 100% true, is: Who or what then becomes the spiritual authority? Is it a church? A pastor or priest? The pope? Is it you or me? How about a yogi in India, or a bald-headed guy at the mall chanting mantras while he shops? Whose opinion is the right one - what standard do we follow?

Because God wants us to believe by faith, He hasn't actually poked His head through the clouds lately to say: 'Hey you guys - the Bible is My gift to you - My Written Word. It's here to help you - to revolutionize your lives! It's here to serve as your spiritual guide - your standard of truth'. But, thank God, He has given us much evidence that the Bible is truly His Word - completely without errors, completely inspired by Him. So, we don't need to cling to blind faith or turn off our minds to logic. God has given us such overwhelming evidence, that really any thinking, unbiased person who investigates the facts will come to conclude that this Book could not have been written by anybody other than God Himself.

Archeology supports the Bible. Many of the cities and persons mentioned have been found. They have uncovered Jericho, with its walls fallen down just as the Bible stated. They have found stones inscribed with the names of Biblical characters such as David, Hezekiah, and Pontius Pilate. The burial containers of Caiaphas' family (the high priest who ordered Christ to be killed) have been found. Coins described in the Bible have been unearthed. Records referring to Biblical kings, wars, and decrees have been discovered. Stone idols of the false gods recorded in the Bible sit on museum shelves around the world.

Coincidence? The archaeological evidence is so overwhelming that it rules coincidence totally out of the picture. Compare this with the 'book of Mormon', supposed revelations given to Joseph Smith in the 1820s, which include accounts of an ancient civilization supposedly existing in North America during the time of Christ. From the 1820's until today, not one shred of evidence has been unearthed by

archeologists to support this supposedly inspired book. No cities have been found. No coins. No records of kings. Nothing. And yet, museums around the world provide hard evidence of Biblical accuracy every day.

History supports the Bible. Many of the archaeological finds have been dated to show agreement with Biblical chronology. The weapons and tools described in the Bible fit in perfectly with the technologies available during the time periods of the various writings. Stones inscribed by other nations record battles mentioned in the Bible and verify details - times, places, people, and results. There are no historical errors or embarrassments contained in the Bible.

Prophecy supports the Bible. The book of Daniel, for example, has been under attack for many years by critics, because prophecies contained in it came literally, unmistakably true hundreds of years after the verses were written. Because of this incredible accuracy, some critics claim that Daniel was actually written after the fact, looking back on history. This of course would make it a book of deception, since the words were written as prophecy, not history. These critics were actually dealt a blow when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 1940's, because Daniel was included there with all of the other Old Testament Writings. It is likely that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written before the time of the Maccabees, when Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated the temple in Jerusalem, true to one of Daniel's recorded prophecies. Actually, Daniel is both mentioned and quoted in the Apocryphal book of 1 Maccabees, written around 110 BC, and so his writings obviously existed before the events of this time period. (1 Maccabees 1:54 & 2:59-60. More on the 'Apocrypha' comes later in this chapter.)

Another Old Testament writer, Ezekiel, prophesied around 580 BC that after being scattered across the earth, Israel would eventually be re-united to become a sovereign nation once again. This literally happened in 1948, after the Jews had maintained a national identity without a homeland since 70 AD after being dispersed by the Romans.

Science supports the Bible. Isaiah wrote in 700 BC that the earth is round (Isaiah 40:22). Job wrote that the earth is suspended in space, and that the clouds are made of water (Job 26:7-8). Compare this with an old religious belief of the Native American tribe from our area - the Seneca Indians. They believed that the earth was actually on the back of a giant turtle. Well, obviously when the men went up to the moon and looked back, they didn't see a giant turtle sitting on a lily pad floating in space. They saw a beautiful, multi-colored sphere, a glittering, precious jewel, rotating majestically in the heavens, just as God had placed it. The 1100 or so pages of the Bible, covering a span of 4,000 years, contain no scientific embarrassments.

The Bible shows the futility of the theory of evolution. It clearly states that God made each animal "according to it's kind". He didn't cause one animal type to evolve into another. He didn't cause an animal to evolve into a man.

Genesis 1:25-26 "And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness...'"

1 Corinthians 11:7 "For man...is the image and glory of God..."

Romans 1:23-24 "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man-and birds and four-footed creeping things."

The Bible clearly states that animals were made 'according to their kind', but man was made in the image of God. Some would like to link the two together, because doing so removes God from the picture. The Bible is pretty clear on how God sees those who would "change the glory of the incorruptible God" (ie, man) "into an image made like...birds and four-footed creeping things". God didn't need to start with a monkey to create a man - He created each "according to its own kind". Actually, evolution is full of holes, and today is losing popularity even among the scientific community. I'm sure that a few decades from now, if the Lord has not returned, there will be a new theory to describe the creation of man. Evolution will only be remembered as a problematic theory which was eventually disproven beyond all doubt. You can be sure that the new theory will also try to push God out of creation, but it too will be proven false over time.

There was no financial profit made from those who authored the books of the Bible. There was no material incentive to lead them to write. In fact, most of the writers were killed for their beliefs. Though many of these men were considered to be failures in their day, nobody could guess that their priceless documents would be preserved by God to minister to literally billions of people over thousands of years.

There are no contradictions in the Bible. Even though many of the writers lived in different countries during different eras, all of their recorded Words flow together in one overall message. Passages written millenniums apart fit together perfectly. Prophecies are fulfilled. This could only be possible if there was One Author, directing men to record His love letters to mankind.

This Book Will Change Your Life

The greatest proof that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God is in the effect that it has on people's lives. This Book has changed millions of lives for the better over the years. That's why the enemy will do

everything he can to cast doubt on it, and to prevent us from reading it. He'll tell us that we're too busy, or too tired. He'll tell us that we can't understand it, or that we're so smart that we know it all already and don't need to keep reading.

Genesis 3:1 "Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said...'"

It's interesting that Satan's first recorded words show him casting doubt on God's Word as he speaks with Eve. 'Has God indeed said' - was it really God speaking...couldn't it be coincidence...what does it really mean in the Greek...?' The enemy hasn't stopped challenging the validity of the Bible to this day. He has convinced many people that: 'It's a good book, but you can make it say whatever you want it to'. Now, if you read the entire Bible in context, this statement is not true. On the other hand, if you pick a sentence here, and another one there, it is true, not only of the Bible, but also of all the books that have ever been written throughout history. Books are intended to be read from cover to cover. If you are a chemistry student, reading only a sentence here and one from there from your textbook will pretty much insure that you fail the class. If you read the assigned chapters in their entirety, however, you have a much better chance to understand the material and pass. Likewise, taking a verse here and one there from the Bible will insure that we don't understand the context or intent of what is being said. It will insure that we never come to a true, mature knowledge of God.

The Lord gave us His Book to teach us about Himself. He didn't give it to us to confuse us or make us fight. He wants us to know Him. If we will only read it in its entirety, and then reread it again and again, He will draw us close to Him. By the power of His Holy Spirit, He will give us greater and greater insight into His character. It is interesting that many of the greatest 'critics' of the Bible have never bothered to read it for themselves. If they would, their opinions would change.

Why We Emphasize The Bible During Our Services

It is tragic that the enemy has pushed the Word of God out of a preeminent place in so many churches. Psychology, poetry, or philosophy has replaced the Bible in many sermons. Many churches have pushed the sharing of the Word by the pastor to the very end of the service, after Sunday School, worship, announcements, receiving gifts, missions reports, etc. are concluded. They give him 15 minutes to squeeze in a message when everybody is pretty much tired out, and attention spans are at a minimum. Then, they conclude that either the preacher is no good, or that the Word of God is passé - we need programs, action, and high tech equipment to touch the people of today.

Now, it's not that the other aspects that make up these services are necessarily bad. But, if God's Word is not the main emphasis, then I have to wonder why the people are bothering to gather in the first place.

Imagine that you and I drive to a brand new grocery store. The parking lots are clean. We walk into the new, beautifully lit building. The walls are decorated with chic posters. Flowers are everywhere. The employees, with name tags pinned to their freshly pressed company shirts are smiling as we walk by, ready to help. After a few minutes of searching, we walk up to one of them and ask: "Where do you keep the steaks?". They reply: "I'm sorry, but we don't carry steak here". As we inquire, we find out that there are no eggs, dairy, hamburger, breads, vegetables, fruits, or Dove bars either. The only thing on the shelves are pre-made TV dinners. They are packaged nicely and colorfully, and are quick and easy to make, but they contain few nutrients. Even though there's a full-sized picture of a well-chiseled body builder hanging above these dinners, implying that he eats them every night, we know better. We know that in reality a steady diet of these foods will give us strength more like the 90 pound weakling at the beach, with his face pushed in the sand.

I think a lot of churches are like this today. There are some beautiful buildings with intricate architecture and colorful, ornate windows. There is great music, and fun programs for the kids and adults. Gymnasiums contain the latest exercise equipment. There are classes on almost anything you can think of - finances, public speaking, higher self esteem. People get together to socialize, or to partake in sporting events. But the most important thing - God's Word - is either given out in stingy, tiny portions, or worse, is nowhere to be found.

We give the teaching of the Word great importance at Calvary Chapel. I think that if you had to describe what Calvary Chapel is all about in one phrase, it would be simply: "the Word, the Word, the Word".

I have been asked why we don't offer Sunday school classes before our Sunday services. The reason is that if you were to spend an hour at Sunday school first, then come to the service, you'd be pretty much pooped out by the time we get to the teaching of the Word. This would either lead to demands for a shortened time in the Word, or result in a lot of people sleeping during it. Because we value the Word of God so much, neither of these possibilities is an option for us. And so, we want to emphasize the teaching of God's Word above all else during the short time that we have to spend together in service.

We believe that the teaching of the Word of God needs to be the most fundamental, important, integral part of our services. We want to receive, and to give others, the best tools available to help them survive in this tough world. The best tools are not theories or philosophies, but God's pure Word. If I could give you each one million dollars, this would still not be better than sharing God's Word with you (although imagine how church attendance would increase). And so, we will tend not to do a lot of other things that cause our services to be lengthened, because we know that people can only sit for so long. We try to major in the majors during our services: worship, the Word, and then afterwards prayer and fellowship.

We have weekly prayer meetings for those who would like to partake as a group. We also offer 'classes' pertaining to various topics of interest. But our services are built around God's Word.

The way that I look at it is this: There is nothing more important that the church can do for its people than to teach them God's Word. Incorporating His Word into our lives gives us the tools we need to excel in this world. Not teaching the Word only leads to weakness and dependence on 'the church' or others, rather than dependence on Jesus.

We Need A Steady Diet Of The Bible In Order To Grow

Chrissy heard this great quote at a ladies study: The Bible will keep you from sin, and sin will keep you from the Bible."

This is so true. If we want to stay in our sin and not be convicted, avoiding God's Word is the best thing to do. But that's exactly why the Lord gives us His Word - to convict us that we have issues, and to teach us how to beat them Biblically. This in turn makes us better people - stronger soldiers that Jesus can work through to touch others.

Hebrews 4:12-13 "For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

God knows our hearts better than even we do. Because of this, He will really zero in on us through His Word - not to be mean, but because He wants us to grow. Men's philosophies like to create excuses for our behaviors. It's always someone else's fault. But God just wants us to face our weaknesses, give them to Him, and move on. As Christians, we need His pure Word to continue to challenge and refine us. Without it, were not going to grow spiritually, period.

What Importance Does God Place on His Word?

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...the

Word became flesh and dwelt among us..."

Probably the greatest example of the importance that God places on His Word is that He describes His Son, Jesus Christ as "the Word". Jesus is the Word. Therefore, if we don't know the Bible, we don't know Jesus. If we know our Bible a little, we'll know Jesus a little. If we study our Bible a lot, and are open to the teaching of the Holy Spirit, then we'll know Jesus a lot.

The Scriptures give us a strength and confidence for every situation that is greater than any other source. When we face life's challenges, the Holy Spirit brings to mind Scriptures that we have read. As we reflect on God's great promises to us, and His unfailing faithfulness, suddenly a great peace enters our hearts, despite the storm that is raging around us.

After 40 days of fasting, Satan himself tempted Jesus. Rather than using clever arguments to debate him, Jesus simply referred to His Word. Three times the enemy tempted Jesus, and three times He replied: "...it is written" ([Matthew 4:4,7,10](#)). The second time Satan actually quoted a Scripture to Jesus, but its meaning was twisted. This is a great danger that we face - the enemy knows the Word better than we do. Thank God that as we study our Bibles and rely on the Holy Spirit, He will fight our battles for us. We just need to do what Jesus did when facing a great trial - lean on His Word, in context.

The Bible's History

The 39 Old Testament books of our Bible were together and recognized as Scripture during the time of Christ. The New Testament writings were produced at various times after Jesus' death. The last books written were by John - his gospel, three letters, and 'The Revelation' - all probably in the 90's AD.

Due to the difficulty of travel, periodic persecution against the church, and the lack of printing presses, different churches held various New Testament writings. The original letters would be passed from church to church. Over time, the letters were reproduced by hand, allowing for multiple copies, so that different churches could each have a copy.

There were also additional writings created at this time - some by well-meaning bishops and church leaders, and other, 'spurious' writings by men pretending to be apostles of Christ. Because of all these factors, there were some differences in the collection of documents held by the various churches.

During the last great Roman persecution against the church under Emperor Diocletian (284-305), there was an attempt to literally destroy all copies of the New Testament writings.

"For ten years Christians were hunted in cave and forest; they were burned, thrown to wild beasts, put to death by every torture cruelty could devise. It was a resolute, determined, systematic effort to abolish the Christian Name." (Halley's Bible Handbook, page 762)

However, when the next Roman emperor, Constantine, came to power, he became a Christian, and desired to institute Christianity as the world religion. He ordered that 50 Bibles be created, for delivery to the major centers of his day. Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea, was given the task of putting these Bibles together. After research among the various churches, and based on the writings of early church historians, he produced Bibles which contained the exact books that we have in our Bibles today. For about 300 years the New Testament had been hidden and preserved by the church, often at the expense of brave souls' blood and lives. Now, a different era had begun. The New Testament books were formally ratified in 397 AD, at the Council of Carthage.

The 'Apocrypha'

The 'Apocrypha' is a collection of 14 books written during the period following the last Old Testament Book (Malachi), and before the New Testament writings. They were contained in the 'Septuagint', which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Septuagint was the popular Bible during Jesus' time, and so was probably used by Him. The 'Apocrypha' remains included today in the Catholic Bible.

Concerning the books of the Apocrypha, Halley's Bible Handbook records:

"They were not in the Hebrew Old Testament. They were written after Old Testament prophecy, oracles and direct revelation had ceased. Josephus rejected them as a whole. They were never recognized by the Jews as part of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were never quoted by Jesus, nor anywhere in the New Testament. They were not recognized by the Early Church as of canonical authority, nor as of divine inspiration. When the Bible was translated into Latin in the 2nd century AD, its Old Testament was translated, not from the Hebrew Old Testament, but from the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament. From the Septuagint these Apocryphal books were carried over into the Latin translation; and from thence into the Latin Vulgate, which became the common version in Western Europe till the time of the Reformation. Protestants, basing their movement on the Divine Authority of God's Word, at once rejected these Apocryphal books as being no part of God's Word, as the Early Church and ancient

Hebrews had done. Then the Roman Catholic Church, in the council of Trent, AD 1546, which was held to stop the Protestant movement, declared these books to be canonical, and they are still in the Douay Version (Roman Catholic Bible)." (Halley's Bible Handbook, pg 406-407)

While we believe that the 'Apocrypha' is useful reading for historical purposes, we do not believe that it is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. The problem with including such books in the Bible is that it casts doubt on the validity of all the information. In other words, if some parts of the Bible are incorrect, or not inspired by God, then how do we determine which portions are inspired? For the Bible to be effective in our lives, we really need to believe every word. If we can't do so, then we'll doubt every word which we disagree with or have trouble understanding. Thus, the Bible will lose its power to change our life.

Group Discussion

(1) Read Matthew 12:38-41. Based on this passage, do you think that Jesus believed that Jonah was literally swallowed by a great fish? _____

What event in Jesus' ministry did Jonah's experience in the fish's belly for 3 days point to?

(2) Read Matthew 25:15-16. Based on this passage, did Jesus believe that Daniel's prophecy was accurate? _____

Does Jesus describe Daniel as a true prophet, or as a faker who actually wrote the Words of his book after the fact? _____

(3) Read Luke 17:20-37. Based on this passage, do you think that Jesus believed that Noah and Lot were real men, and that the flood and the destruction of Sodom were true historical events?

(4) Read Luke 24:44. How seriously did Jesus consider the things written in the Bible to be?

What Biblical books did Jesus, by making this statement, declare to be His Word?

(5) Read Mark 7:1-13.

We so often can rationalize religious traditions by thinking - what does it really matter? Does Jesus really care?

Based on this passage, do you think that Jesus cares if we continue in religious traditions which are not Biblically based? _____

(6) Are you reading your Bible regularly? If so, is it changing your life? How so?

What about the gifts of the Holy Spirit ?

Are the Gifts for Today?

One of the issues hotly debated within the church is whether or not the gifts of the Holy Spirit are for today. Denominational battle lines have been drawn on this subject. Across the spectrum of beliefs, you will go from those who say: 'No, the gifts all ended with the apostles deaths', to the other extreme - people handling poisonous snakes, believing that they are entitled to immunity from possible bites.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee told the story once about a man who lived in extreme poverty. He was found one frigid winter morning in Chicago, frozen to death in front of a cheap hotel, because he didn't have enough money to enter. When they traced his records, they found that a relative had left this poor unfortunate fellow over one million dollars years before. But, because he was unaware of this gift, he never tapped into it. He was actually a millionaire, but lived as a pauper.

There are many who don't believe that the gifts of the Spirit are for today, even though the Bible never states that the gifts ceased to function. For them, their belief unfortunately becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By refusing to tap into God's supernatural power, they are really putting limits on their personal relationships and experiences with Jesus. They are preventing Him from bringing them the joy, peace, and effectiveness that He wants to. Because God is a gentleman, He won't force His way into their theologies. He will allow them to settle for less if that's what they insist on doing.

On the other end of the spectrum are those with 'hyper' faith, who claim that God works through them with showy display. They too have gone beyond what the Bible states, finding new doctrines that neither Jesus nor the apostles ever alluded to. They have turned the discipleship of servanthood and self-sacrifice into a recipe for material success. I stopped watching the so-called Christian TV a long time ago, because so much of the programming is nothing more than a glitzy show, with frequent requests for donations along the way. This totally misrepresents Jesus, who was never showy, and who never sold His gifts and services for profit.

Isaiah 42:2-3 "He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench..."

Matthew 10:8 "...Freely you have received, freely give."

When I was working at Kodak, I was once involved in a special presentation at a museum in Rochester, to showcase some of our new digital products to the public. My job was to mingle with onlookers, take their pictures and then print them out. One of the guys I was working with commented - 'I can see why you're a Pastor - you're really good at showbiz'.

His comment really bothered me, because in his mind that's what the church was all about. Women with hair piled high, makeup caked on, and eyelashes protruding out like peacock flumes. Men telling jokes, or screaming into microphones, or shedding large crocodile tears in front of TV lights. Impassioned pitches made for increased offerings, which will really turn out to be a good business deal for the senders, and without which the Lord's hand will become paralyzed.

Many innocent people are misled by these types. The tragedy is that they will never experience the full maturity that God wants to give them, unless they are willing to break away from the weird theology they receive. But, because they have learned that other sources are more important than God's written Word, many of them choose to ignore the Bible, assuming that it must mean something different than what is clearly written. Those who are willingly misleading others will give an account for their actions before God someday. And all I can say about the snake handlers mentioned previously, many whom I'm sure are very sincere in what they're doing, is that I hope their life insurance premiums are up to date.

Because the Bible nowhere says that the spiritual gifts ended when the original apostles died, we believe at Calvary Chapel that the gifts of the Spirit are for today. However, they must be used within the context of Scripture. They are never to be used for personal profit. They are given to believers as God wills, to be used to build up the body of believers, and to reach the world for God's glory.

What are the Gifts?

There are three passages which list the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills."

Romans 12:4-8 "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."

Ephesians 4:11-12 "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ"

These passages make it clear that (1) God has many spiritual gifts that He wants give to believers; (2) He gives each person at least one spiritual gift (if not more) as He determines; and (3) The gifts are to be used to glorify God, and to edify (or build up) others.

Quick definitions for each of the gifts listed are:

- (1) Word of Wisdom - supernatural wisdom given to deal with a worldly or spiritual issue
- (2) Word of Knowledge - supernatural knowledge which is factual or scientific in nature
- (3) Faith - reliance upon Christ
- (4) Healing - ability to cure a sickness or disease
- (5) Miracles - miraculous power
- (6) Prophecy - prediction of future events
- (7) Discerning of Spirits - the ability to know whether angelic or demonic spirits are behind words or events
- (8) Tongues - speaking in a language which the speaker does not know
- (9) Interpretation of Tongues - the ability to translate a language which the interpreter does not know
- (10) Ministry - the ability to serve others with pure motives, because of Jesus
- (11) Teaching - the ability to make spiritual truths clear to others

- (12) Exhortation - the ability to encourage; to stir others to action
- (13) Giving - the ability to give materially, with generosity
- (14) Leading - the gift of being a good spiritual leader
- (15) Mercy - having compassion for others
- (16) Apostles - ambassadors of the Gospel, commissioners of Christ (with miraculous powers), one that is sent out to spread the Gospel
- (17) Prophets - an inspired speaker (foretelling events, or expounding on God's Word)
- (18) Evangelist - a 'preacher' (as opposed to a 'teacher'); one who declares the Gospel in a way which stirs unbelievers to action
- (19) Pastor - a shepherd

Baptism vs. Indwelling

John 20:22 "And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Ephesians 1:13-14 "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory."

1 Corinthians 6:19 "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, Whom you have from God, and you are not your own?"

When a person becomes saved by receiving Christ as Lord and Savior, the Holy Spirit immediately takes up residence inside of him or her. The Holy Spirit will remain inside of (indwell) the believers for as long as we dwell on this earth. His purpose is to guide and teach us, and to always point us to Jesus.

The **baptism** of the Holy Spirit occurs after a person is saved. It can happen at any time (even immediately after salvation), and can happen over and over again - it is not a one time event. The

baptism of the Holy Spirit is given by God to His children as He desires, when He desires, to empower them to do mighty works which will glorify Him.

In John 20:22, we see Jesus, alive after the cross, giving the apostles His Holy Spirit to indwell them. It was at this point, under the New Testament (or new covenant between God and men) that the apostles were the first to become born again.

After His resurrection, Jesus ministered to the apostles for 40 days. His final Words to them before ascending into heaven described the baptism of the Holy Spirit - a different event than what had occurred at their salvation. "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

About one week later, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles and all of the believers (about 120) were together when they experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit for the first time.

Acts 2:1-4 "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

The baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred again a short time later, involving Peter and John, and many of the same believers.

Acts 4:31 "And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the Word of God with boldness."

These Scriptures show us that: (1) The baptism of the Holy Spirit doesn't always occur in the same way; and (2) The baptism of the Holy Spirit can occur over and over again - it is not just a one time experience, as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon salvation is.

If I'm baptized in the Spirit, Will I Speak in Tongues?

Some churches teach that you will speak in tongues if you are baptized in the Holy Spirit. However, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:29-30: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues?..." The obvious answer to his questions is 'No'. God promises to give each of His children at least one gift (1 Corinthians 12:7), but the gift of tongues is no more guaranteed than any of the other ones are.

On the day of Pentecost, all of the believers present spoke in tongues. But, in Acts 4:31, when they were baptized with the Holy Spirit, they spoke the Word of God, not tongues. The bottom line is that there is no Biblical formula for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and so if we try to create one, we are adding to God's Word.

Why Don't We See the Lord Move Like He Did In The Early Church?

Acts 5:12-16 "And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon's Porch. Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed."

If the gifts of the Spirit are for today, then why don't we see the Lord working as He did in the early church? I'm not sure, but I suspect it's due to the fact that we no longer rely on God the way that the early church did. When we're sick, we immediately reach for an aspirin or call the doctor. When we have a financial need we take out a loan, or charge up the credit card. When we don't understand a Scripture, we pull out our commentaries, rather than seeking the Lord for His revelation. When we gather together we are often more interested in having fun than in seeking God in prayer or studying His Word. At home, we are just as likely to turn on the TV as we are to open our Bibles. May God forgive us for our laziness! He has blessed us so much, that we think that we no longer need to rely on Him totally. I believe that if we did, we would see Him working again just as He did in the first century.

Group Discussion

(1) Read the following Scriptures, and determine whether they pertain to the 'indwelling', or the 'baptism', of the Holy Spirit. If the 'baptism', list which spiritual gifts were used:

Matthew 10:18-20 _____

Acts 3:1-10 _____

Acts 4:1-14 _____

Acts 10:9-20 _____

Acts 10:44-46 _____

Romans 8:11 _____

2 Corinthians 6:16 _____

Philippians 10-20 _____

(2) Describe the indwelling of the Holy Spirit _____

(3) Describe the baptism of the Holy Spirit _____

(4) Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. Based on this passage:

Why does God give a person a spiritual gift (verse 7)? _____

Who determines which person will receive which gift (verse 11)? _____

Should every person expect to exercise every spiritual gift? _____

(5) What is Paul's command to the church concerning tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:27-28?

(6) Please read Luke 11:9-13. This passage shows us that it is OK for Christians to ask their heavenly

Father to give us (baptize us in) His Holy Spirit.

Whether you have been baptized in the Holy Spirit many times in the past, or if this is your first time, ask the Father to do so now, to give you the power to glorify Him in a difficult situation that you face.

How Much Money does God want me to Give?

We Give From the Heart To Those Whom We Love

When we love someone, we want to give them special things. Things that are important to us. Things that have value. Things that clearly say: "Hey, I love you !!!"

The true value of a gift is really not contained in its price tag, but rather in how it was given. What was the intent of the heart of the giver? What was their purpose for giving? Was it simply to fulfill an obligation, or because they really wanted to bless another person?

I would never dream of giving Chrissy a plastic ring from a cracker jacks box for Christmas. As well as threatening a premature end to my ministry on this earth, this act would be sending an insulting message: 'I really don't care enough about you to give you something meaningful'. Because I love my wife, I want to give her the best that I have.

Likewise, because I love Jesus, I want to give to Him my best.

We start by giving Jesus our hearts. Then, as we grow, we learn how to bless Him by giving Him the best from our lives. Part of this includes giving Him back some of the finances that He has provided for our needs.

Taking Offerings Can Be Over Emphasized At Church

Matthew 6:1-4 "Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly."

Giving is an important aspect of our Christian walk. However, it is unfortunately too easy to begin to over-emphasize the collection of money at church meetings. Often, the first thing that is drummed into a new believers head after receiving Christ is that they must give at least 10% of their income, or be out of God's will. In many places, it literally becomes a business deal. The congregation is taught that if they give God His cut, He's guaranteed to give them back 100 times that amount.

Chrissy and I were saved at a church where the teaching about giving was way out of whack. We were taught to bring a blank check to church every Sunday, and then to let the Holy Spirit tell us how much to give.

A significant portion of the service was always spent requesting money. We heard about the many needs that the church had, and were warned that unless we gave sacrificially, God's work could not go forward. The basic message was that: (1) God could not accomplish all that He wanted to unless we gave and gave and gave; and (2) if we dared not to give, God would deal with us negatively. Because we didn't know God's Word, we were often swayed by the emotional pitches from the pulpit, and as a result gave much more money than we had intended. The leaders said that we were being led by the Holy Spirit. But we weren't - we were being coerced by them.

The result of this teaching was that we gave for the wrong reasons. We gave because we were manipulated. We gave because we felt guilty. We gave because we were afraid. We gave because we felt that we could somehow buy God's love, or lose it if we didn't give enough.

One of our closest friends at the time got very nervous one week, because he had dared not to tithe. He was sure that God was going to punish him severely for his lack of faith. This is when the Lord opened my eyes to a great truth: God is not in the mafia. He's not pounding angrily on a table in a heavenly boardroom every Monday morning, holding a list of those who aren't being generous in his clenched fist. He's not devising retaliatory strikes against the ones who aren't giving. He's just in love with us, whether we are the most generous or stingy of people.

A huge thing that drew us to Calvary Chapel was that for the first time in our saved lives, money didn't seem to be the central objective. They didn't even take an offering, which really amazed us. Some Calvary's do pass a basket, and I don't think it's wrong to do so. But, we simply sat there and received God's Word. We weren't manipulated to give. We weren't fed a topic with a few Scriptures thrown in. We were fed the pure milk of God's Word, and it began to revolutionize our lives.

I realize now that there are two ways that a church can go about teaching people about giving. One way is to set up a bunch of rules and regulations concerning how much each person should give. We could spend time every service explaining how important giving is, and reinforcing our rules and regulations.

We could try to make anybody not contributing feel that they are immature and weak. We can apply to their human nature by over-emphasizing the Scriptures which talk about God blessing those who give. We can try to marry their act of giving into the great American dream of attaining riches and success.

Or, we can simply teach God's Word in its entirety, and let the Holy Spirit change people's hearts from within. You see, giving properly is a result of spiritual maturity in many areas, such as faith and love and compassion. It is a fruit of me getting my eyes off of my small world, and onto God's big plans. As I grow in maturity, the Lord shows me how important it is to give. And He shows me how much I should give. This is the path that we choose to follow.

A great strength of going through the Bible line upon line and verse upon verse is that all issues are covered in the context and quantity that God desires. Now, if the Bible was 95% about tithing, then it should be covered every week at church. But, since it's not, we discuss this subject when the passage we are studying discusses it. In this way, we are protected from over-emphasizing any subject contained in the Bible more than God intended.

I wonder how many people stay away from church because they see it as a big, money-making scheme. I can't stand to watch much of the so-called 'Christian TV', because so many of the shows aired place commerce in the forefront.

We Bless God When We Give With the Right Heart

God wants us to give because we love Him, not because we are coerced or manipulated. Our offerings from the heart are a highly significant way that we express to Him the depth of our love.

I think that God is sad when we are selfish. By not giving, we are telling Him one of two things. We are saying that we don't trust Him enough to give - we need to keep the money for ourselves, so we can provide for our own needs. Or, we're telling Him that He's not the major One in our life - something or someone else is more worthy of our money than He is.

I also think that it makes God sad to be offered gifts with strings attached - when the major reason for giving is to receive much more from Him in return. This transforms the beautiful sacrifice of giving into a mere business deal. God wants us to give because we love Him, not because we want something back from Him. I know that if my kids only gave me gifts when they wanted something in return, it would break my heart. I'd still love them, but my heart would be cut. They wouldn't be giving simply because

they loved me, but with ulterior motives in mind.

The Lord never intended to cut business deals with us. Our giving is one of the most meaningful acts that we can do to bless Him, because it is an act of faith and sacrifice. In our world, having no money means that we will be seen as having nothing, and as being nothing. We'll be perceived to be failures. And so, to willingly give money to God is a huge thing. As David said in 2 Samuel 24:24: "...nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing..." If our gifts to God come with strings attached, I think He'd rather that we kept them.

Jesus Hated Profit-Making in the Temple

John 2:13-16 "Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business. When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, 'Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!' Then His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.'"

One of the first acts in Jesus' ministry was to overturn the money tables existing in the temple. He did this again as one of His final acts (see Matthew 21:12-13). The fact that He needed to do this twice is a sad testimony about the hearts of the men who ignored Jesus. They would rather chase earthly riches, at the expense of their own souls.

Matthew 16:26 "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Alfred Edersheim wrote a book entitled 'The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah' in 1883. Dr Edersheim was a professor at Oxford, and a born-again Jew. His book describes how the system of selling and changing money worked in Herod's temple.

The temple was set up so that a person could only proceed so far. There were a series of stairs and 'courts', and the more 'desirable' you were, the closer you could get toward the Holy of Holies (the innermost, holiest room of the temple, in which only the High Priest was allowed to enter). The outermost and lowest of these 'Courts' was the Court of the Gentiles.

"This was called the Chol, or 'profane' place to which Gentiles had access. Here must have been the market for the sale of sacrificial animals, the tables of the money-changers, and places for the sale of other needful articles. Advancing within this court, you reached a low breast-wall (the Soreg) which marked the space beyond which no Gentile, nor Levitically unclean person, might proceed - tablets, bearing inscriptions to that effect, warning them off." (Edersheim, pages 169-170)

This inscribed warning was posted in both Latin and Greek:

"Let no stranger come within the barrier and the court which surrounds the temple. Every trespasser who is caught will be himself responsible for his ensuing death." (Wycliffe Bible Dictionary, page 1677)

Imagine what it must have felt like walking into the temple as a Gentile. You're searching for God. The first thing you see as you walk in is the booths set up, with lots of noise and animation as money passes hands. And then you see a sign, telling you that advancing past your assigned area will lead to your death. What a system. The religious leaders were more than glad to take your money, but wanted nothing to do with you otherwise.

The temple had a certain coinage used. So, the money-changers would take your native currency, or your silver and gold, and give you temple coins. And oh, by the way, there was a fee for that service, so you wouldn't get quite the value in exchange that you submitted.

There were also stalls containing sheep and oxen, and cages containing doves and pigeons. Some people would purchase an animal there to be sacrificed. Others would bring their own animal, but before it could be used it had to be checked for blemishes, again for a fee. If the animal didn't pass the test, the person could purchase one of the caged animals as a substitute.

Edersheim records an added twist to the commerce taking place in the temple. It turns out that the shops and booths were owned by Annas the high priest, and his family. Annas is mentioned in [Luke 3:2](#): "while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests..." During this time, the position of high priest had become a political appointment. It was not like the Old Testament command, where one of Aaron's descendants would serve for his entire life. Annas was instituted as high priest about 6 AD, and remained officially in that position until 15 AD. After this, five of his sons became high priests at various times. Annas continued to wield great power, and is mentioned in the account of Jesus' arrest: "And they led Him away to Annas first, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas who was high priest that year." ([John 18:12](#))

Annas and his family profited greatly from the commerce taking place in God's temple. How well the Lord spoke of him and those like him, in [Ezekiel 34:2-3](#): "...Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed

themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool: you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock."

Tithing

Tithing, or giving a tenth, was part of the Old Testament law. Actually, a study of the law shows that in those days the people were apparently commanded to give two tithes (20%) per year, and three tithes (30%) every third year. So, they were not simply giving 10% (one tithe) of their increase.

The tithes required were:

- (1) One tenth of all produce (crops, fruit, oil, wine) and all animals each year (Leviticus 27:30-33).
- (2) An additional one tenth each year, for festivals (Deuteronomy 12:5-6).
- (3) An additional one tenth every third year, for the Levites, strangers, orphans, and widows. (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15)

This seems pretty steep. But, it should be remembered that these people were not paying taxes as we do. God intended that they would follow Him, as they were lead by the Levites. So, God's best plan would have been that they not have an earthly king and government to pay taxes to. However, when the people demanded a king, the Lord granted their request.

Jesus mentioned tithing only once during His ministry. It is captured by two of the Gospel writers, in Matthew 23:23, and Luke 11:42.

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisee, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Jesus was saying that it was good that the Pharisees and scribes tithed, but that it would have been more meaningful if they had added justice, mercy and faith to their giving.

Now does this mean that Jesus wants us to tithe today?

Are We Still Under the Old Testament Law in This One Area, But Under Grace in All Other Areas?

It should be remembered that when Jesus told the Pharisees that they should be tithing, they were still under the Old Testament law. It wasn't until Christ's death and resurrection that the New Testament was instituted. And so, it was important, especially for these teachers of the Old Testament law, to lead by example.

We know that the New Testament is a covenant based on grace, not the law.

Romans 6:14 "...you are not under law but under grace."

Galatians 2:21 "I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

Galatians 3:3 "...Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?"

If tithing is a requirement today, why isn't burning bulls and oxen, and obeying all of the other Old Testament laws also necessary? In other words, have we now been freed from every one of the Old Testament laws except for tithing? And, if we are still required to tithe, shouldn't we do so according to the Old Testament Scriptures - up to 30% per year?

Abraham and Jacob Gave 10% Before the Law Was Written

It is interesting that both Abraham and Jacob gave the Lord a tithe. The reason that this is significant is because it was done before the law was given to Moses. Therefore, it can be argued that giving a tithe is 'universal' - it began before the Old Testament law, and should continue in the age of grace. However, can grace truly be grace if the work of tithing is required? I don't think so.

New Testament Giving

Paul describes New Testament giving in his second letter to the Corinthians.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8 "But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

A few things become clear from this passage. First of all, if we are generous towards God, He will be generous towards us. If we are selfish, so will He be. It's not that God is being vindictive or petty, but just that He is committed to blessing those who are committed to Him. Those who are lukewarm will see little from the hand of God coming their way.

The second sentence in the passage is critical: "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity..." If tithing was a requirement for the New Testament church, then giving 10% would be a necessity - it would be required. But Paul says here that it's not.

The third sentence in the passage gives us comfort. God is going to make ALL grace, ALL sufficiency, and ALL things abound to those who give generously to Him, so they will have an abundance. God is so good to us, and He will bless us many times over when we sincerely bless Him and His children.

Don't Give God 10%, Give Him 100%

I think the bottom line is that God doesn't want us to give Him 10%. He wants us to give Him 100%. In other words, He wants us to give our all for Him. Our hearts. Our thoughts. Our energies. Our every breath. He wants us to realize that we really don't own anything - everything that we have is from Him, and is really His. And so, to conclude that 90% is really mine and only 10% is His wrong. It's all His.

Spirituality is hard to measure with human tools. However, I think that one of the best ways we can assess our own spirituality is to take a look at our check book. This will give us clear proof of how we are investing our life. How much do we give to God? How much do we spend to further His kingdom?

Are we giving regularly to Him, or only if there's a little money left over after pizza and the movies?

Jesus said: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength..." (Mark 12:30). Our check books are clear proof whether or not we are living in this way.

So, How Much Should I Give?

The Lord will show you how much you should give. If you are living for Him, I think the following guidelines will make sense:

- (1) Pray about it, then give the percentage that the Lord tells you to give.
- (2) Give to Him cheerfully and willingly.
- (3) Your regular offering should be the first part of your monthly budget, not what's left over. This honors God, by showing where it counts that He is a priority, and that you are trusting in Him to provide for your needs.

To be honest with you, I think dedicating 10% of our income to the Lord is a good rule of thumb. But again, let the Holy Spirit lead. Depending on your personal financial situation, 10% may be too much, or not enough. God will give you peace about the right amount.

From the money that you give to our church, we (the board of elders) invest at least 10% in various missions, charities, and good works. The remainder allows the church to operate, and provides for my family. As we grow, it will provide for additional staff as well.

Thank you very much for the money that you give. I want you to know that we take very seriously the stewardship that God has entrusted to us. It is His money, not ours. Our prayer is that Calvary Chapel will continue to grow, so that we have more resources to effectively touch the world for Jesus. The more resources we have to spend for God's glory, the more effective we will be able to be.

It really is a joy to give, because doing so provides us a share in the work that God is doing. Some day we'll receive crowns for the good things done by the ministries that we supported.

Group Discussion

(1) Read 2 Samuel 2:18-25. What do you notice about David's heart (verse 24)?

(2) Read Luke 18:18-30

Why do you think that Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell all that he had instead of just 10% of it?

Do you think that Jesus requires everybody to sell all that they have before following Him? Why?

Based on verses 29 & 30, are we taking a risk when we trust Jesus to provide for us?

(3) Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10.

Does this passage say that money in itself is evil?

What does verse 10 say is a root of all kinds of evil?

The word for 'love' in verse 10 is number 5365 in the Strong's Concordance. It means to have an excessive or insatiable desire for wealth or gain.

(4) Read Job 42:12-17. Can a person be extremely wealthy and still be 'sold out' for God?

(5) Read Matthew 13:3,7,& 22. Do you know people who were once "on fire" for the Lord who have been swept away by the cares or riches of this world? Can you share a story (without using names) with the group?

What can you do so this does not happen to you in the future?

What Future Events are Ahead?

The Bible mentions various ages of time which have existed, and which will exist, during the history of our earth.

The Old Testament was put into place before the birth of Christ, to show us how much we needed His grace in order to be saved. God hoped that men would take the law to heart, realize that they were powerless to fully obey it, and therefore be drawn to Jesus. The Old Testament looked forward to the cross, and was based on law.

The New Testament was given after the death of Christ. It looks back on the cross. It tells us that His shed blood offers us the only way to salvation. This testament is based on His grace. Today we live in the 'age of grace'.

There are future ages that lie ahead.

Daniel's Prophecy

Daniel 9:24 "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city..."

Around 536 BC, Daniel was given a vision by Gabriel the angel concerning the future of Israel and Jerusalem. He was told that there were 70 'sevens' (the word for 'week' is literally 'seven'), or 70 times 7, or 490 years of history remaining for the Jews.

Daniel 9:25 "...from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks..."

When Daniel wrote this, he was in Babylon, and Jerusalem lay in ruins. Seven 'sevens' (or 49 years) after the command to rebuild Jerusalem, the last Old Testament book was written. After 62 more 'sevens' (434 years), Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, a week before He would be crucified.

Daniel 9:26 "And after sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary..."

Jesus, the Messiah (or 'anointed One') was crucified for us, not for Himself. He had no sins, and without Him we have no righteousness. About 40 years after His death, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Romans ("the people of the prince who is to come").

Daniel 9:27 " Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week, but in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, even until the consummation, which is determined, is poured out on the desolate."

After the 69 'sevens' (483 years) between the command to rebuild Jerusalem and the crucifixion of Christ, there remains one more seven year period. This 'one week' or 'one seven' refers to what the Bible calls the 'great tribulation'. Today, we live in the 'age of grace'. The Bible doesn't tell us how long this age will last. The tribulation could begin at any time. The 'he' referred to above is the Anti-Christ. This is the evil man who will become a world leader, and rule with Satan's power during the great tribulation.

He will start out being perceived by the world as a good man. He will bring about an agreement between Israel and her enemies to bring a false peace. The temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and the Jews will once again worship there. But then, in the 'middle of the week' (after 3 1/2 years) he will put an end to their worship of God, and claim that he is God. The last 3 1/2 years of the tribulation period will be a living hell for the Jews, and for all of mankind.

2 Thessalonians 2:7-8 "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed..."

The Anti-Christ may well be alive today. But he will not be revealed until the Holy Spirit ("He who now restrains") is taken out of the way. This refers to the 'rapture' of the church. Jesus will call all of His children (who are all sealed with the Holy Spirit) up to heaven with Him. At this point, the Holy Spirit will have been taken out of the way, and the "lawless one" (the Anti-Christ) will come onto the world scene.

Matthew 24:40-41 "Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left."

1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."

The 'rapture', which occurs before the great tribulation, will take place suddenly and unexpectedly. There will understandably be fear and confusion among those left behind. The Anti-Christ will need to explain what happened to all of the Christians. His clever lies will help to consolidate world opinion in his favor.

2 Thessalonians 2: 8 "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth and destroy with the brightness of His coming."

At the end of the seven year tribulation, the Anti-Christ will be destroyed by the return of Christ. Jesus will bind Satan for 1,000 years, and institute the next age, the Millennial (or one thousand year) Kingdom.

Revelation 20:2-3 "He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while."

Some survivors from the tribulation period will remain on earth to enter the millennial age (Matthew 25:31-46). A temple will be built, and Old Testament worship will be reinstated. Now the way that the Old Testament sacrifices relate to Jesus' death will be fully understood. Jesus will reign and rule over the world, and the born again Christians, and the martyrs who were killed during the tribulation, will reign under Him. The world will be a very different place while Satan is bound.

Isaiah 11:6-9 "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."_

Isaiah 65:20-25 "No more shall an infant from there live but a few days, nor an old man who has not fulfilled his days; for the child shall die one hundred years old, but the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their

fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for as the days of a tree so shall be the days of My people, and My elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labor in vain, nor bring forth children for trouble; for they shall be the descendants of the blessed of the LORD, and their offspring with them. It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain', says the LORD."

The millennial reign will be a time of long life. The ferocity of the animal kingdom will cease. There will be no wars. Jesus will be known by all.

After the thousand years have passed, Satan will be released for a short time. He will again cause rebellion against the Lord, but God will destroy His enemies. At this point Satan will be cast into the lake of fire (hell) for eternity.

After this comes the 'great white throne judgment'. All of the unsaved will be judged according to their works. All of the evil bound in the hearts of unsaved men will be made clear. Because they rejected Christ as their Lord and Savior, they will be cast into the eternal lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15)

After this, a new heaven and a new earth will be created by God, replacing the former ones. This is the final state of things. The born again believers will live with God forever, reigning under Him, worshipping and serving Him.

In Summary

In summary, the events which still remain to be fulfilled, in chronological order, are:

- (1) The rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, Matthew 24:36-44)
- (2) The great tribulation (Revelation 4-19)
- (3) Christ returns to defeat the anti-Christ (Revelation 19:11-21)
- (4) Satan is bound for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-3)
- (5) Jesus judges survivors of the tribulation, allowing some to enter into His

Millennial Reign

- (6) The Millennial Reign of Christ (Revelation 20:4-6, Psalm 2)
- (7) Satan is released for a short time, and leads a final rebellion against Jesus (Revelation 20:7-9)
- (8) Satan is defeated and cast into hell for eternity (Revelation 20:10)
- (9) The judgment of the unsaved (Revelation 20:11-15)
- (10) The new heaven and new earth are created (Revelation 21:1; 2 Peter 3:10-13)
- (11) We spend eternity with Jesus (Revelation 21-22)

Group Discussion

- (1) Read Matthew 24:36-44

Does anybody know the exact time that Jesus is returning to rapture His church (verse 36)?

Do you see any parallels between our time and the events taking place in Noah's time (verses 38-39, and Genesis 6:4-8)? List some of these things.

- (2) Read 2 Peter 3:1-13

Do you know people who doubt that Christ will return? (verses 3-4)

Why has the Lord not yet raptured His church? (verse 9)

What is going to happen to our present earth? (verse 10)

Where are the born again believers going to dwell eternally? (verse 13)

(3) Read Revelation 21:1-5, 22-23; and Revelation 22:1-5. What is our eternity with Jesus going to be like?