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Introduction

What is Christianity?

The question matters. It matters because if Christians are right, then the way of Christ is the only way anyone can be rescued from the dangerous human condition in which we all live, and it’s the only way to experience a maximum life.

It matters in debate, too. Here at Thinking Christian, much of the discussion revolves around the truth of Christianity, or what Christians believe about various issues. It doesn’t do much good to debate Christianity’s truth if we don’t have a decent shared definition of what we’re talking about. It’s hard to fully explain Christians’ position on issues without situating those explanations on the bedrock of Christian essentials.

I’ve addressed this several times, yet still I hear the question, “What do Christians believe?” This short ebook is a compilation of several articles I’ve written in answer.

I’ve indicated the original publication date on all of these articles, and the original place of publication for those that appeared somewhere other than this blog.
Part One: What Is Christianity?

The Explanation For Everything
Newport News Daily Press Column, February 9, 2008

I recently heard Charles Colson tell of a provocative conversation he had with Christian leaders in England. He asked them, "What is Christianity?" They were a diverse group, and gave diverse answers. "Christianity is God's love expressed to humans," said one. "It's one way to understand God," said another. One said, "It's Christ's work to redeem lost people through His death and resurrection."

Colson told them they had all missed it..

Charles Colson, you may recall, was convicted of crimes related to the Watergate cover-up. While in prison this brilliant attorney, who had been "Nixon's hatchet-man," began to question his power-mongering ways. A friend led him to investigate the truth of Jesus Christ, and Colson turned his life over to faith in Christ. His turn-around was remarkable: instead of using political maneuvering to serve his own needs, he founded Prison Fellowship to serve the needs of those he once would have considered least like himself. [Since October, 2010, I have been working with him and his associated organization BreakPoint, www.breakpoint.org.]

He also applied his powerful intellect to matters of Christian thinking, and thus he raised this question with the group in England. Certainly he agreed that Christianity can be described as God's expression of love, and His redemptive work through Christ. The problem, Colson said, was that these answers did not go far enough. "Christianity," he said, "is the explanation for everything."

"The explanation for everything." Could that be true? To answer, we have to back up a step first: What would it actually mean if it were true? What could it mean for Christianity to be the explanation for everything?

Obviously it's not that we should look in the Bible for the answer to every question. The Bible doesn't tell us tomorrow's weather, how cell division happens, or how computers work. What it does instead is provide a foundation for understanding.
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

It starts with the first sentence (which Christianity of course shares with Judaism): "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Thus we know where all creation came from. That fact is certainly foundational to everything else.

The Bible further tells us that God is a rational God and that he desires to be known by His people, both through His Word and through His creation. This means we can expect the world to make sense. Don't underestimate how important that is! Historians of science tell us it is no coincidence that science only really got off the ground in Christian Europe.

Christianity teaches that God created the universe as an expression of himself, so it's worth investigating, and that it reflects his mind, which is why it exhibits the intelligible order that it does. No other culture, except those strongly influenced by Christianity, has believed the natural world to be both worthy of study and able to be understood.

The Bible teaches little by way of scientific facts, but it explains why science itself works. As physicist Paul Davies wrote in the New York Times, "the very notion of physical law is a theological one in the first place, a fact that makes many scientists squirm. Isaac Newton first got the idea of absolute, universal, perfect, immutable laws from the Christian doctrine that God created the world and ordered it in a rational way."

As the proverbial fish does not recognize what water is, we may not see how this mind set pervades our thinking. But we can see it where people deny it. I once took part in an extended online dialogue with a man named Jacob, who denied this rational and personal core to all of reality. For him, even arithmetic was up for grabs. Is $2 + 2 = 5$ wrong? Not for Jacob, who wrote:

The teacher trains the child to emit the signs that the teacher was taught to emit and their teacher was taught to emit and the people that certify teachers were taught to emit. Or said differently, of course $2 + 2 = 5$ is an illegitimate answer. The child would probably be corrected, or retrained, if they said that it equaled 5.

According to Jacob, $2 + 2 = 5$ is not false, it's socially "illegitimate." (This was truly his belief; he maintained similar positions throughout many rounds of discussion.) Such a view seems outrageous and incomprehensible to many, especially those who are about my age (50-ish) or older. It is not so strange to younger people, who have grown up with a much looser cultural connection to Christian convictions. If you cannot understand Jacob (he is admittedly an extreme case), at least take him as a demonstration of a point. One who cuts oneself free of the foundation by which the world makes sense, can easily drift off in directions where it doesn't.

This is but one brief illustration of what Colson was getting at. Much more could be added if space allowed. But was his statement true? Is Christianity really the explanation for everything?
Again, space will not allow me to address that question here the way it deserves (though I'm happy to do so at www.thinkingchristian.net).

Here I'll speak instead to fellow Christian believers. We believe that God created everything, that He is Lord of everything, and that all things are for His glory. Have we considered how this impacts everything we do and all that we are? Christ Himself is the basis, the foundation, the reality behind every reality. So Christianity should affect not just our worship or our morality, but also our professional lives, our relationships, our personal goals, families — indeed our total outlook on everything.
What Is Christianity?
September 6, 2008

Sometimes I wonder whether we have our terms defined well enough. Atheists tell me often that atheism is not a belief system (I disagree, but that’s what they say). Christianity is a belief. But just what is this belief?

Chuck Colson says “Christianity is the explanation for everything.” It’s an important kind of statement, for it reminds us how comprehensive Christ’s part is in the universe, but it’s not much help in clarifying what Christians believe. Explaining that will take some time, and what I write will be imperfect. But the answer must begin with God himself.

There are some who say God is so completely other that we cannot know anything about him. But this is not so, for he has made himself known. He is not unable to communicate with his creation. He made us in his own image (Genesis 1:27) so we could have a relationship with him, which includes knowledge of God. We cannot understand God exhaustively, but we can know at least some things truly. We understand only a fraction of God’s majesty, power, and greatness, but we can understand what he has enabled us to understand.

God stands at the center of our beliefs and of our worship. He is Creator; eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, all-loving, all-just, all-wise. He is the only God.

Before the world began there was God, and he created the universe out of nothing, by the word of his command. This speaking could not have been like ours; there was nothing physical about it, no mouth, no voice, no sound waves. Just as it is no great effort for healthy humans to speak, the Bible indicates that God’s creative word did not tax him. He spoke and it came to be.

And oh, what came out of that speaking! It was creation; it was creative. From the intricacies of the cell to the glory of the galaxies, God’s artistry and craftsmanship are displayed with great glory.

It was magnificent in its extent. Here’s a field trip you can take to your own back yard, to get a picture of this (and you really need to see this for yourself in the sky, not just in a photo). In the winter you can see the constellation Orion in the evening sky. Orion is one of the easiest of all constellations to find and identify. For centuries we’ve seen it as the Hunter with his belt and his sword. In his shoulder there is one star that is quite noticeably redder than the others (you can see this even from most city locations).
That red star is Betelgeuse (no relation to the movie of the same name). It’s just a tiny pinprick of light in the sky. Not much to look at, perhaps? But this pinprick of light is larger than our sun, which could hold 1.3 million earths. It’s larger, in fact, than the orbit of the inner planet Mercury. Larger than that, actually: it would encompass the entire orbit of Earth around the sun. But no—larger yet! Our fourth planet, Mars, has an orbit smaller than the diameter of that tiny pinprick of light. If my math is correct, Betelgeuse could contain up to 70 million of our suns, or 9 trillion earths.

And it’s just one very small point in a much, much larger universe.

God created all this out of nothing. Not to trivialize the point, but maybe you’ve heard the old joke in which the scientist challenges God, “I could make a man!” God says, “Okay, let’s put it to the test.” God reaches down and picks up a handful of dirt, and so does the scientist. God interrupts him: “Hang on there, now—get your own dirt!”

That joke has been around a while. I’ll bet you haven’t thought of creation this way, though: God didn’t take nothing and make a universe out of it. There was no nothing. There was only God, “who fills all in all.” In a sense God created nothing, for had he not created the something that is the universe, the conception of nothing would be meaningless, for God himself was everything. Has any human artist matched that? We could say the first step in God’s creative act must have been to come up with the idea of otherness, for there was no such thing as anything other than God. No human artist has ever had to take such a bold leap of creative imagination.

I realize there is ineffability here. It’s hard to speak of God’s logic, or of sequences “before” time. That does not, however, diminish the reality of God’s creative genius. His creativity is but one aspect of his multi-faceted majesty.

There’s so much more of God to explore! I strongly encourage you to continue studying God, and for that I highly recommend DiscoverGod.com.
What Is Christianity? Life in Christ

October 4, 2008

This morning, at a point of spiritual dryness, I decided to let God’s word remind me of Jesus Christ’s position at the center of everything. I turned to Ephesians 1:3-14. It begins, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. . .” It continues by listing some of those blessings: forgiveness, sharing in God’s holiness, being adopted into the family of God, knowing the mystery of his will, experiencing the promise and presence of the Holy Spirit, and more. One phrase sums it up: “the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us.”

What a refreshing passage! It’s as if Paul was tripping over his words, trying to express the inexpressible. Translators have trouble telling where one sentence ends and another begins (the original Greek had no punctuation). It’s just packed with meaning. Paul uses some rather technical language, so some readers will prefer to read Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase in The Message instead of a more literal rendering. Even there, though, Paul’s sense of praise and glory overflows; the page fairly gushes with the deluge of Paul’s gratefulness for God’s blessing.

All of it is centered in one place. Six times in this passage it says “in Christ” or the equivalent, “in him.” All the goodness we receive, we receive in Jesus Christ.

Jesus had said (John 10:10), “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly,” or to the maximum. Somehow, incomprehensibly, some people have gotten a picture that following Christ is dull, rule-bound, and restricted. Nothing could be further from the truth. My dryness of late has come from being distant from him as the source, not from following him! It’s like life without music, without trees and grass and flowers. But the closer I’m connected to him, the more alive I am!

Contemplating Christ is uplifting just because of who he is. No person in history has taught such a high standard of love and giving; and no person has so clearly lived out that standard. There is something energizing in thinking thoughts of greatness. There is more than that going on here, though. It’s not just Christ’s example, it’s his actual gift of life to us. He is not just an uplifter of life, he is the source of all true life. Fullness of life comes only in him, for he is Creator, Redeemer, the only true Son of God.

We have passages like this in God’s word to remind us of this. We grow dull, as I have, by forgetting (or rejecting) his gift of lavish love and grace, thinking that we have what it takes apart from him. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve talked to who attest to the huge, qualitative change when they have committed their lives to Christ, as if the scales fell off their eyes and they
saw and felt what’s real for the first time. I experienced the same. I continue to experience it, and I can (once again) attest to the difference it makes when I draw close to Jesus Christ as my source of life.

The truth, explained by God in his word, and demonstrated in the experience of millions of Christ-followers, is that real life is in Christ alone. And what a great life it is!
What is Christianity? A Living Hope

November 16, 2008

We are hearing increasing reports of Christians being persecuted in Sudan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Belarus, India, and elsewhere. Even in North America, signs of incipient persecution have increased of late, possibly an indicator of more to come. In light of that, let us consider the “living hope” of 1 Peter 1:3-7 (ESV).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

The passage hinges on this: “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while … you have been grieved by various trials.” Another translation uses “distressed” instead of “grieved.” Peter wanted his readers to know that no matter how bad it may get, believers in Christ can still rejoice. Jesus himself said (e.g., Matthew 5:10-12) that we can be glad in him even if it is belief in him that increases our difficulties, that is, even if we are persecuted for following him.

Following Jesus Christ may carry a cost, but the cost will always be more than worth it. The living hope that we have in Christ makes it worthwhile.

Hope, in New Testament usage, rarely (if ever) means maybe-but-I-don’t know, as for example, “I hope Michigan State wins the football game against Penn State next Saturday.” It is instead a confident expectation of a good future. It is the emotional encouragement provided by faith, the inner uplift that enables the heart to keep going.

I’ve heard it said that the greatest single predictor of suicide is hopelessness. I went through a rather profound period of depression once, lasting somewhere between six months and a year. There were times I dreaded getting up and facing the day. Yet by the grace of God I knew there was hope, and that it would get better. I cannot imagine the blackness of depression for those who have lost hope as well as joy. For that period I was certainly hindered by the depression, but I was able to keep going. That’s the emotional power of hope.
Without solid grounding, the hope of which Peter speaks would be no better than my hope that my college will win the game next week. But we have that solid assurance, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The game has already been played; the fight has already been fought. Life wins, and death is defeated.

This is reality. To rest in that reality is a matter of faith. The reality does not depend on our faith; but our confidence, our joy, our rejoicing (why is that word so out of place today?) do depend on what we believe. Peter speaks of faith’s “tested genuineness.” Most of us have faced tests of one kind or another: if not persecution—of which nothing approaching the real thing has yet reached the Western world—then health problems, economic struggles, conflict, crime, separations, war, injustice. To the extent that we continue to have joy in Christ, our faith has “tested genuineness.”

We can imagine genuine persecution, the sort that really tests us with a choice: follow Christ and face loss, death, or even death of a family member, which to me would be far worse; or else renounce him and “all will be well for you.” Peter is saying that the former is better than the latter. Trials and distress in Christ are better than apparent peace apart from him.

Many in history have had to make this kind of decision. Many still do.

Christian brothers and sisters are really choosing pain, separation from family, imprisonment, economic loss, and death, because they believe the living hope of Christ’s resurrection is real. Peter himself, who had first-hand opportunity to know whether that hope was real, made the same choice.

This is not virtual-world stuff, and (a reminder for bloggers like me) it’s not just an intellectual game to play. The living hope of Jesus Christ makes all the difference in the real world, in good times and in distress. For followers of Christ, there is “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.” We can count on it; we can live by it; we can stand firm in that good hope.
What is Christianity? Worship

September 22, 2008

At the core of Christianity—at the core of everything—there is God, uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ. From our earth-bound, human perspective, Christianity is primarily about being in a right relationship with God through Christ. This is a many-faceted relationship involving reconciliation with God, experiencing his forgiveness and intimate love, learning his character and living consistently with his ways, studying his works, reflecting his creativity through our own expressiveness, and more.

Wrapped around in all of this is worship.

Worship is a concept that likely seems foreign, even a little weird, to non-Christian readers. (It’s hard enough for us believers to grasp.) If I could present a good non-religious analogue to worship it would help, but I’m not sure there is one, especially in egalitarian America. The closest parallel I can think of is the historic honor with which kings and queens have been treated by their subjects. Even with that, though, there are problems. First, American readers usually respond with the instant gut reaction, “But all men are created equal!” (Women too, but here I was quoting the Declaration of Independence.) We can’t believe it’s right to bow the knee to another person. Second, in spite of differences in station, it’s true: we are all of equal worth, so it really isn’t right to bow before another.

So then who is God that we should bow the knee to him? Is he any different? The question is ludicrous on its face—but that hasn’t kept us from getting it wrong over and over again. The quest to be like God, to be independent of him, was the downfall of the first humans (Genesis 3; especially Genesis 3:5; see also Ezekiel 28:1-19, which most commentators believe also refers to the fall of Lucifer). This quest for independence from God has been at the core of all our problems since then.

True worship begins in seeing God for who he is and ourselves for who we are; to recognize the unfathomable distance between Creator and created, Infinite and small, Holy and sinful, Self-existent and contingent (we derive all that we are from him, while he is who he is necessarily and of himself). Worship, in other words, is a natural response to seeing the Holy One, recognizing his infinite and personal reality.

It is moreover a love response to a loving God, who gave himself for us so to bring us near to him. As we read in Colossians 1:13-14:
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

To worship is to take a stance of submission, of yieldedness to God. A professor I had in college, himself an atheist, related something an Episcopal priest had said to him. It was a cute yet very appropriate twist on a familiar phrase: “You worship God your way, and I’ll worship him his.”

For how could anyone say, “I’ll worship God my way,” and be thinking of anything remotely like real worship? It would be like saying, “God, I acknowledge your great majesty and supremacy, how marvelous and loving and awesome you are; and yet if you don’t mind, sire, I’ll decide for myself how I think I ought to follow you, because I think I can figure you out for myself.” That’s not worship, is it?

It’s not that Christians have fully figured out how to worship God in the way that pleases him most, but it is our goal, our quest, our intention. We seek to understand God for who he is, not for who any of us may think him to be. We know that our knowledge of God is given to us not through our wisdom but by his grace.

Worship, then, is based in our God’s initiative toward us, our relationship with him, and experiential knowledge of who he is. Churches often speak of having a “worship time,” meaning a time of singing and praying together. That’s fine as long as we don’t misunderstand: true worship is expressed through the whole life. We practice it through the gladness of song, yes, but also through the bodily expressions of submission (one word for worship in the Bible means literally “to bend the knee”), the intimacy of prayer, the view we have of God in fellow believers, and the regular disciplines of seeking to know him better and follow him more fully.

Back to the core again, then: God is at the center. Worship is about recognizing that reality, and expressing it through all that we are and all we do.
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

In the series on *What Is Christianity* (Part One) I gave an overview of the faith for atheists and skeptics who misunderstood it. I was also challenged once on a post I wrote about our need for Jesus Christ. That led to an entire series on *What Christ Does for Us*. It all started with “How To Keep Your New Year’s Resolutions.”

Our Roots in God’s Plan
January 2, 2008

I shouldn’t have been too surprised to discover that my post on how we need Christ (“How To Keep Your New Year’s Resolutions”) needed more explanation. An objection was raised by “doctor(logic),” a frequent commenter on Thinking Christian and a committed atheist. He began:

The thing that bugs me about this is that it’s so anti-humanistic. Humility I can understand, but, to me, this is perverse.

When people achieve difficult objectives, they ought to get credit for doing so.

I hate the way Christianity tells people they’re nothing, makes them feel bad, then offers them a convenient promise to soothe their soul. And to top it off, Christianity takes credit for any success those people have at solving their own problems.

To address this adequately we have to begin with some background on who we are and where we come from. It begins, naturally enough, in Genesis. The first mention of humans is in Genesis 1:26-31:

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock
and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God cre-
ated man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created
them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the
earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the
heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

And God said, Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all
the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every
beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the
earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food. And it
was so.

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was
evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Two initial observations: First, God is Creator. He is preeminent. God decided, and one result of
God’s decision was humankind. It’s not the other way around. To be humble before God—to
recognize that He is Master, Creator, and Lord—is to recognize reality for what it is.

Second, humans are significant nonetheless. God created us in his image. In this passage we see
him blessing the first humans and giving them significant responsibility. Later, in Genesis 2, God
gives them moral significance, by providing them with choices that matter. Going on from there,
he seems almost solicitous toward Adam’s need for a suitable companion. There is real relation-
ship between God and humans there. Even though the statement “God is love” has not yet been
articulated, his love toward humans is already evident.

Genesis 3:8-9 tells of God walking in the Garden with Adam and Eve. This is God condescending
to them, allowing himself to be apparent among them in a form or manner to which they can re-
late. It seems likely that he did this regularly, for they were expecting him. This time, though,
they hid from him. More on that in the next post, but for now we can take note again of God’s
personal interaction with them.

Is this anti-humanistic? In the Bible, humans certainly do not have the highest and most exalted
place of all. We do have the highest and most exalted place among created things, though. God is
love, and his love is especially directed towards humans. (We won’t go into it here, but in He-
brews we learn that humans’ position is even higher than angels’.)

This is just a start, but it’s a necessary one for what will follow, as we continue later to look at
what Christ does for us.
God created humans to have great dignity and superior value or worth, above every other created thing. We were in fact created for relationship with God. He has always intended to love us, and for us to love Him.

And so it was that once, at the beginning, that humans enjoyed intimate, unhindered fellowship with God. That was the design from the start. Our ancestors seriously messed it up, though, by pursuing independence from God, which separated them from him. Every one of us ratifies that decision daily through our own independent attitudes and actions. The rest of the story of what Christ does for us tells of God restoring people to that intimate, properly dependent—and at the same time highly dignified—relationship with Him.

Let’s slow down, though, and look at how our roots of relationship with God were broken. The story is in Genesis 3. The first part tells of Adam and Eve’s fateful decision.

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, You shall not eat of any tree in the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

The lie that Eve accepted was that she could achieve her own independent wisdom, apart from God’s; she wanted to “be like God” herself. Adam’s error included that as well as placing his wife ahead of God. These were moves of rebellious independence that broke their relationship with God. God had warned them that disobedience would mean death. They did not physically die that day (although it was at that time that they first became subject to death), but that day
marked their separation from God: it was an immediate spiritual death. They hid from God. We’ve been hiding ever since.

This had no effect whatever on God’s love for us. It did not decrease our worth in God’s eyes. Later we’ll see that even before the foundation of the world he knew this was coming, and he planned the sacrifice of his own Son on our behalf, even before we were created. Obviously he would not do that if we were of no value to him.

All of this supplies more background for a question doctor(logic) asked ago:

I don’t see how it can be both ways. On discussions on this blog, humans have been described as infinitely evil compared to God, worthy of suffering, death and eternal torture. How is something worth a lot, and yet worthy of death and suffering?

Aaron responded:

This is where basic philosophical categories and distinctions come in handy. Something cannot be both A and non-A in the same way and at the same time, right? Well, the sense in which humans have worth (in virtue of what they are and were created to be) is different than the sense in which they are worthy of punishment (in virtue of what they have done).

Our value in God’s eyes is undiminished. But we who were created to live in loving, close, dependent relationship with Him chose to try an independent route, and death was the natural consequence. It’s impossible to live separated from God. It’s impossible for us to be our own gods, as if we could sustain ourselves apart from his creation and provision. To cut oneself off from the only true source of life and love is to walk into one’s own death.

These first chapters of Genesis illustrate God’s holiness and justice, though without actually using those terms. The full picture of these facets of God’s character emerges later in His word.

God’s holiness speaks of his purity, his righteousness, his perfect moral character. It also connotes separateness from all that is evil or impure. Habakkuk 1:13 says God’s eyes are too pure even to look on evil. This is metaphorical, obviously—God has no literal eyes, and even if he did he could not cut himself off from awareness of evil. The point is that God cannot in any way approve evil. In Psalm 5 we read further, “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.”

God’s justice is that which demands that right be rewarded and wrong be punished, that moral actions have fitting moral consequences, that we do indeed “reap what we sow.” It is on the one
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

hand a source of tremendous hope for those who have been oppressed or wronged. On the other hand it stands ominously in front of all who have done wrong, which is each one of us.

Adam and Eve’s sin had consequences, which were dealt to them out of God’s righteous holiness and justice. Mankind has been railing against holiness and justice ever since.

This of course is not all there is to say about God’s character, for He is also a God of mercy, compassion, love, and forgiveness. How he can express both mercy and justice will be the subject of a future entry in this series. First, though, we need to take note of further results of the first humans’ rebellion against God. Not only were they separated from God, not only did they become subject to death, they also experienced the curse of their sin. We’ve all been experiencing it since.

For the woman the curse mostly had to do with pain relating to children and relationships. For the man it had to do with frustration with respect to labor and production. The world would now fight back at us, and we in our alienation would fight each other.

The tempter (who later in the Bible we understand to be Satan) was cursed, too. In that curse the first hint of a promised redemption comes to us: the woman’s offspring would “crush his head.” This offspring was quite notably not the seed of the man: he was the coming Christ, to be born of a virgin, whose work would include destroying the works of Satan.
God in his love intended that we live in close, intimate fellowship with him. He gave humans their start in conditions of harmony with the world, with genuine intellectual and moral significance, and in real, closely connected relationships with God, the environment, and each other. They were rightly dependent on God, their Creator, and they acknowledged him as their loving Master.

We are still dependent on God for every breath, for he still holds everything in his hands. We still experience God in every joy of nature and in every relationship of love. But ever since the first humans chose independence from God, we’ve lost sight of him in these things, and we’ve especially turned away from him as the one in charge of his own world.

The loss is ours. God expresses grief over our rebellion, while in his he justice expresses righteous anger over it. We experience death, distance, alienation, sweat, struggle, all the misfortunes and tragedies to which we can never seem to grow accustomed in spite of centuries of living them.

God’s purpose since then has been to restore us to the original plan: that we would rightly bow to him in worship as our Master and God, that we would experience the fullness of love in relationship with him and one another, and that our alienation from the rest of the world would be repaired. This is what Christ came to do for us. In very brief outline form:

1. It is through his sacrifice for us, his death on the cross, that we can be brought back into relationship with God, reconciled to him, forgiven for our sins, made right again in God’s eyes.

2. It is again through that sacrifice that we can recognize God’s glory, know him as worthy of our worship, and acknowledge him as Lord (Master, Chief, King).

3. It is also through the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit that we can live according to God’s plan.

4. And it is through Christ’s sufferings that the world will be repaired of the curse of sin.
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

**Who Christ Is**

January 15, 2008

It’s time now for a short detour. What Christ does for us flows out of who he is.

It’s been just a few weeks since the Christmas season, and I’m sure readers know about the baby Christ in a manger, born to a virgin. The gospel of Luke tells us he was conceived in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. In human terms he was of the lineage of David. David had been the king of Israel many years before, and to him God had made a promise that his offspring would have an eternal kingship. Jesus Christ was God’s fulfillment of that promise.

But Christ was also “conceived of the Holy Spirit,” as the Apostle’s Creed phrases it, indicating his unique divine lineage. He was and is in fact, God himself:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

The following context identifies “the Word” with Jesus Christ. He took a dispute with unbelieving religious leaders to a climax with this:

“I and the Father are one” (John 10:30)

And they understood exactly what he was getting at, even though they disagreed:

The Jews answered him, It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God. (John 10:33)

He is what no mere man could ever be, the exact representation of God. Hebrews 1:2-4 says,

In these last days he (God) has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

There we see Jesus’ greatness magnified all the more. He is “heir of all things,” meaning that all creation is to be handed over to him and put under his rule. He is the One through whom all creation was made (and “without him was not anything made that was made,” John 1:3). He “upholds the universe by the word of his power,” and he made purification for sins, a topic we’ll re-
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turn to later as we consider what Christ has done for us. He rules next to God the Father. He is far superior to the angels, with the most excellent name of all.

Paul wrote similarly in Colossians 1:15-20,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

How the superlatives run rampant! And this is barely the beginning.

I was listening yesterday to a podcast on Christ’s nature, presented by William Lane Craig. Craig was making no attempt at raising emotions; he was explaining and teaching, not stirring up anything intentionally. And yet I was moved to deep worship. This man Jesus, whom we know by his life and teachings on Earth, is also the God who holds the universe together! Theologically he is understood as being one person, having both a human and divine nature. Certainly there are mysteries there about how this can be true, but that it is true is as certain as anything the Bible teaches.

Perhaps the greatest passage of all describing the majesty, the sacrifice, and the exaltation of Jesus Christ is Philippians 2:5-11:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We will indeed all bow to Him. We will all, someday, recognize his divine majesty, and much of our worship will be based on recognizing how he sacrificed himself on our behalf. None of us sees it clearly now, but on the day of his full revealing, it will no longer be a matter for doubt or debate.
Among Us, Loving Us
January 18, 2008

The stage has been set. The human race, meant to be great under God and to live in worshipful relationship with him, has fallen mightily by rejecting that relationship. God did not reject us, though. The plan was prepared since before the foundation of the world: Jesus Christ, God himself, second Person of the Trinity, maker and sustainer of all creation, would come and provide our rescue. His coming was prophesied centuries in advance, in Isaiah 9:6, for example:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.

This glorious King and Deliverer comes and breaks into our world—helpless and tiny, lying in a feed trough in a stable.

Nobody ever said Christianity was without paradox and surprise. This is one of the greatest of them. God humbled himself to become one of us, far more truly so than anyone had ever anticipated.

Not all His greatness was darkened when He came. The angels announced his coming to the shepherds in great glory. But this, too, is a reversal. Shepherds then were not much more respected than today’s garbage collectors. Why did God grant them this great privilege?

One author called Jesus’ rule the “Upside-Down Kingdom,” where humility reigns and the proud fall. This upside-down-ness of Jesus’ way began at his own beginning on Earth. He laid aside his divine privileges and became united with humanity. His first action on our behalf in the human form of Jesus, the person who revealed God by walking among us, was to join with us.

His joining with us would extend to growing up and sharing in human joys and grief, in laughter and in pain, in weariness and refreshment, in friendship and in rejection. Ultimately it would extend to experiencing what none of us should ever face, though too many have: immense injustice, torture, and death.

What Christ does for us is to love us intimately, from nearby.
Jesus Christ had a decidedly mixed beginning, by outward appearances. He was born in a stable, but heralded by angels. His parents were obscure nobodies, but his birth aroused such fear in King Herod that the family had to escape to Egypt. Though Magi were bringing him gifts including gold and fine spices, still when it came time for his circumcision, the offering his parents provided was the one God had prescribed for the poorest people to bring. (The Magi, the ones traditionally thought of as Wise Men, arrived weeks to months later, and we have no indication the family became rich by them in any event.)

We know very little of Jesus’ youth, except that he was (Luke 2:41-52) obedient to Mary and Joseph (in spite of an apparent streak of independence), and he displayed astonishing wisdom for his age. Beyond that we know that he “grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” I have many questions I would like to ask someday about Jesus as a youth, and how others experienced life with Him.

Sometime around age 30 he was baptized by John in the Jordan River; and the Holy Spirit, symbolized by a dove, came upon him in a new way. The Father initiated Jesus’ ministry with the words, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

And the contrasts continue. Immediately after, “He was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” Newly inaugurated leaders expect a honeymoon period. Jesus was tested instead. I used to be skeptical of the forty days of fasting, doubting anyone could survive it; now I know many people, including friends of mine, who have fasted on just water and juices for that length of time. And afterward, yes, they were hungry.

Satan pounded Jesus with temptation. He tempted him with shortcuts to sustenance, with power, and with the fame accorded to one who makes himself a public spectacle. Most of all he tempted him with an easy (but false) road to glory. Jesus rebuked him with words of Scripture, and Satan left “for a more opportune time.” Jesus would bow to no one but God the Father; he would not have himself worshiped under false pretenses; he would not take shortcuts to the will of God or to honor.

Thus he began. How, now, to summarize his few years of ministry? He must have been a warm, inviting, friendly, trust-producing person: men and women dropped all and followed him with just a word of invitation. He lived compassion. Lepers of the day (and the word could denote a variety of skin conditions) were outcasts, never to be touched, but he touched and healed many;
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and of course his healing ministry was not just for lepers. He showed grace to a repentant woman of adultery. (There are cryptic notes in that John 8 passage that make me think he found a way to get the right message across to the man, too.) There was another admittedly loose woman who found grace and a changed life through Jesus, in John 4.

Jesus did astonishing things, for his day, to elevate the status of women. You can hear the surprise in the disciples’ questions in John 4—they didn’t expect him to be talking with her.

The honor given to the Virgin Mary preceded and foreshadowed what he himself did. At the end, it was the women among his followers who had the awesome, historically unique privilege of first discovering and reporting that he had risen from the dead. The story of his life is framed by women. “Just so,” you might think, “that is, after all, nothing but what might be expected.” But that was not at all what was expected in that day.

He demonstrated the peace that comes from knowing one’s God. This shines most clearly in the incident of a dark night (Matthew 8:23-27), in stormy waters on a boat piloted by fishermen who in spite of their lifelong experience were terrified of death. Jesus, unperturbed, was asleep in the stern. When they woke him he spoke a word to the weather, and all was calm.

He was a worker of miracles, and a man of great strength. “Gentle Jesus meek and mild” hardly begins to convey the way he stood up to the religious leaders of his day, men who had twisted God’s word into a means for personal prestige and pride. Read the six woes (Luke 11:37-54) Jesus pronounced on this group for their pride, and for leading many into error. He said they were no better than dead themselves: “You are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing.” They tried often to trap him, but he just out-thought them. And he made it explicit that his teaching was for those who would receive it, not for those who had false purposes (Luke 20:1-8, for example).

Oh, this is just scratching the surface! Jesus showed us how to live: with compassion, under obedience to the Father, resisting temptation, rejecting shortcuts, welcoming the outcast, being friendly, experiencing the peace that comes through trust, displaying strength against injustice and untruth. At the end of it all, when he was brought to trial by the establishment he had so offended, they were unable to find any true charges to bring against him. He bore this, too, knowing that he was fulfilling what he had come to do. He accepted the torture and death they inflicted on him, and on the cross said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

We still don’t know what we’re doing, in many ways; but to follow Jesus, this most astonishingly great man of history, is surely the right place to start.
Death and Resurrection
January 26, 2008

Jesus Christ’s life on Earth was one of perfect love, trust, and worship. His example is incomparably great—and it’s unreachable. Part of the validation of the message of Christ is in the unique combination of reality and perfection in the character he displayed. The standard he set is strongly desirable—if being a person who lives for the sake of God and others, and in great joy is attractive to you—and yet it is impossible.

The Example Was Not Enough
This takes us back to the predicament we started with at the beginning of Part Two. God created us for relationship with him, and for rich, full relationships with each other in an environment that didn’t constantly fight back. We still have a sense of how things ought to be, but we’ve certainly lost the experience of it.

We’re told (Romans 3:23) that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Sin is defined in the original context (and also in the original language) as a falling short, a failure to hit the mark. In other words, if what Jesus came for was just to teach and set an example, we might as well say, “A lot of good that did us! We can’t live up to that!”

But that’s not all he did. Again, going back to earlier in Part Two, recall that the penalty for rebelling against God was death. Jesus Christ lived to show us how to live, and then he died on the cross for us. We could speak of at least fifty reasons he suffered and died, as John Piper has done in a book on the subject, but most Christians put this one at the top of the list: he paid the death penalty on our behalf. Because he is God, and because he joined with us as a man himself, he could do that on behalf of us all.

Rescue From Something That’s Bigger Than We Are
The story is told of a drowning man, whom two men went to help. The first threw him a book on how to swim. The second pulled him out of the water. This is the difference between teaching and rescue. The analogy, like all others, is imperfect; this one understates the real value of teaching. But it does remind us that there are situations where teaching is not what we really need, and one of them is when we’re dying and cannot help ourselves. The passengers on the Titanic were in that situation: even the best and strongest of them needed rescue. The water was too cold, the shore too far.

We can easily fool ourselves about our need. Once I was chatting with a seat mate on an airplane. He said it was his first flight in over 10 years, but he was okay with that; he seemed quite at home and comfortable. I sensed he was the type who would feel quite at home and comfortable
Part Two: What Christ Does For Us

anywhere. Somehow we got to talking about Jesus Christ. He said, “I don’t need God. I’m in control of my life.” I said, “Well, I don’t see you flying this aircraft.” He responded, “Well, I could!”

Clearly he had a vastly overrated sense of himself! A friend of mine who flew F-116s and A-10s for the Air Force told me that even he wouldn’t try to fly a commercial aircraft—not unless the flight attendant said, “The cabin crew have all just had heart attacks, so could somebody please land the plane for us?” Then he might volunteer, but never otherwise. Every aircraft is different: too different to permit even a fighter pilot to think, “If I can fly one, I can fly them all!”

So I told my over-confident seat mate that day, “I understand you don’t feel a need for God right now, and in that case I can’t expect you to respond to what I’m saying about Christ. But I predict someday you’re going to run into something bigger than yourself. I urge you to keep this in the back of your mind until then.” I offered, and he accepted, a written summary of the message of Christ, similar to this.

We’re all going to run into something bigger than ourselves. (Some of us are looking that big issue down the throat today.) The one that’s most certain to come is death. That’s why we need rescue, and not just good teaching. Jesus’ death for us accomplished a rescue: not that we will never physically die, but that death will not be the end of the story.

A New Life
It certainly wasn’t the end of the story for Jesus! On the third day, he rose from the dead. He appeared first to several women, then to others of his followers, and on one occasion to more than 500 people at once (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). He defeated death for us! The rescue he accomplished was not just to pull us out of the water and into the ICU on life support, but to give us everlasting life with a full experience of love, joy, and worship.

We need his example, yes; but much more than that, we need his life in us.
Life in Christ
February 16, 2008

Jesus Christ lived to show us the way to live, died to rescue us from the trouble we have gotten into by not living right, and rose again to defeat death and to give new life. Christians believe in eternal life for those accept it from God, but just to say life never ends is not enough. Life in Christ begins the moment one receives it from him.

And this takes us back full circle to where we started with these articles on What Christ Does For Us. The question was whether we really need Christ for day-to-day living. Remember “doctor(logic)’s” objection?

The thing that bugs me about this is that it’s so anti-humanistic. Humility I can understand, but, to me, this is perverse.

When people achieve difficult objectives, they ought to get credit for doing so.

I hate the way Christianity tells people they’re nothing, makes them feel bad, then offers them a convenient promise to soothe their soul. And to top it off, Christianity takes credit for any success those people have at solving their own problems.

Sure, we can solve many of our own problems. We can (many of us) keep jobs, take care of our homes, have families and enjoy them, deal with pain in our lives, contribute to a better world.

It’s possible to make it on your own, with discipline and some good luck (your genes, your socio-educational background, and the opportunities you meet). And you can get credit for that, which I would not deny.

Credit is a key issue, though. The Bible asks, “What do you have that you were not given?” How much credit can you really take? Suppose you’re a college graduate—did you make it there because you’re smarter or better than the farmer in Thailand, or the inner-city youth with no hope of college? Even if you could say yes to that, how did you come to be smarter or better? What do you have that you were not given?

The Christian life takes a radically different stance on human accomplishment. All of it, even our own successes, is grounds for giving thanks to God. What else could it be? We understand the mess we were in. We understand the sacrifice He made for us. We know we are dependent on God.
Is this “anti-humanistic”? Well, we also know that God created us in an incredibly privileged position of relationship with Him. We hold the dignity of being in his image, dignity that far outshines what evolution would say we are. We know that we are loved, and that love has real meaning. We know that among the things God has given us, there is personal responsibility for our choices, and that our choices matter for eternity. The most basic choice of all, of course, is what will we do with what we know about God?

Sure, it’s paradoxical—it’s both humbling and exalted. The Bible even says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (James 4:10).

Yet this paradoxical life is a very good one: that humbling ourselves before Christ leads to greater emotional, relational, and spiritual health, and to success in other terms besides. Perverse? Anti-humanistic? I don’t think so. For me, it’s a matter of recognizing what is true, and enjoying the love of God as I live in his light.
Part Three: Living In Christ

This “Living In Christ” Part includes articles I’ve written on what it means to live the Christian life.

**Fallen From Grace?**

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It was more than 15 years ago, but I can still remember where I was, alone in my car by the tennis courts in back of a high school. I was really down on myself, thinking to myself over and over again, “I’m just not measuring up! I’m just not measuring up!” I had been sincerely trying to live the way I thought a Christian should, but I wasn’t succeeding. *What was wrong with me?* I wondered.

My biggest problem, I’ve realized since then, was that I *had fallen from grace*. Now, I know that’s not a concept we often apply to Christians who are trying to do their best, as I was. Usually we think of it in terms of a drunk in the gutter, or maybe a star executive who got convicted of fraud and is sitting in a jail cell. That’s how I used to think of it. I was surprised when I discovered that the Bible uses “fallen from grace” for something completely different; something still quite serious, but not at all as I had thought of it.

The term appears in Galatians 5:4 (NKJV), where Paul wrote, “You are severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.” These Galatian church members were trying to be right with God, but they had the wrong approach. And I was following the wrong approach that day, myself. I needed a much greater understanding of what it means to live by grace.

**Grace vs. Legalism**

Many Christians define grace by the acronym, “God’s Riches at Christ’s Expense.” Grace is God’s free gift to us. It’s God’s life, his love, his forgiveness and mercy extended freely to us, based entirely on the merit of Christ and not our own goodness. But this gift doesn’t come from afar, like mail-order; and it’s not a present we open and take away to enjoy on our own. God extends His grace to us through a living, close relationship with Christ. To experience His grace, we must remain tightly united with Him in a dynamic connection, closely to him, as a branch does to a vine (John 15:1-10).
In contrast to this closeness, Paul said his Galatian readers were “severed from Christ.” But they were trying so hard to be right! How could they have been cut off from him? It was in fact their trying so hard—and the way they were doing it—that was the problem. Throughout Galatians Paul says it is impossible to be right with God through works of the law. The error he addresses here is called legalism. It is the belief that one can be justified (made right with God) by following God’s rules. This issue of law versus grace is not found only in Galatians; it’s all over the New Testament, especially in Romans and Colossians, and of course, in the words of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, legalism turned out to be one of the chief heresies Christians would commit down the ages. The Reformers fought pitched battles over it. Cults and other false religions are often marked by their making works a means for salvation.

Most evangelical Christians today know enough to avoid the most basic form of this error. We know that salvation—our entrance into life in Christ—comes through faith in Christ alone, and not by works. We don’t always carry that understanding through with us into the next steps, though. Colossians 2:6-7 says as we have received Christ we should also walk in Him, rooted and grounded in faith. That is, the way we walk in Christ should be consistent with the way we received him. But is it possible that some of us fail to extend our understanding of grace and faith from the foundation of receiving Christ, to our daily lives walking in him? Even if my theology of salvation is thoroughly evangelical, I might think that the way I stay right with God is by following the right rules. I may escape the legalism trap in regard to salvation, and then fall straight into it in regard to living the Christian life. That’s what the Galatians were doing. They thought they needed to add Jewish laws to their list of ways to be justified before God. But just as we receive salvation by faith grace, not by following rules, we also walk with Christ by faith and grace, not by focusing on the law.

The Map or the Fuel?

"But wait a moment!" you say. “The commands in the Bible are there for a reason! Christians must obey these commands!"

Yes, assuredly so. God expects us to follow what He tells us to do. That puts us almost on the cliff of a contradiction: we have commands to obey, but if we seek to be right with God by following those commands, we are fallen from grace. How can this make sense? I’ve puzzled over this a great deal, and lately I’ve found it very helpful to distinguish between the picture of what is right, and the power for doing what is right. The law is the picture: it describes how God wants us to live; but if we think it delivers the power for us to live that way, we’re headed straight for failure. The power we need is the spiritual strength to make right choices in the face of temptation, or the ability to follow God’s commands even when our sinful nature tries to turn us in opposite directions. Most of us have discovered from experience (and it’s also in Scripture, espe-
cially Romans 7) that simple willpower isn’t enough for us to follow God’s ways consistently. We need God’s power.

It’s like a trip I took a few months ago. I flew to Milwaukee and rented a car to drive from there to Madison. I hadn't been to either city in decades, so I knew nothing about the route. The rental car company offered me a map, which I gratefully accepted. In fact, since the map was free with the rental, I asked for several dozen, which I took out to the car. There I opened the gas cap, unfolded the maps one by one, and stuffed them into the gas tank.

Well, no, I didn't actually do that, I'm sure you'll be relieved to know. That's a picture of living by legalism, though. We confuse the map with the fuel. Somehow we think that the law of God, the picture of the life he wants us to follow, is our power instead. We think it gives us the fuel to get to our destination; but in reality, it's just the map of what our destination looks like. So what is the power, the gas in our tank? is the grace, the direction, the empowerment we receive through our relationship with Jesus Christ. He lives in believers now, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who in Romans 8:9 is even called “the Spirit of Christ.” Walking in the Spirit, therefore, is virtually synonymous with abiding (or remaining) in Christ. The Bible speaks often of how crucial this close relationship with Christ is:

" So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16, ESV)

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.... If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." (Galatians 5:22-23, 25, ESV)

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:4,5, ESV)

“For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:3,4 ESV)

These passages, which are just a few of many like them, tell us that if we live by the Spirit we will not gratify the desires of the flesh, and the Spirit will work out his fruit through our lives. We bear fruit only by staying close to Christ. The law is weak in us—there’s no power in it—but the righteous requirements of the law are fully met in us who walk according to the Spirit.
Part Three: Living In Christ

To live out the gospel clearly means staying closely connected to Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, and letting Him guide us as we grow in that that relationship with Him. Our life and strength come from our direct, un-severed connection with him.

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**Legalism’s Alarm Bells**

It’s all too easy to get this all mixed up, isn’t it? That day by the tennis courts, I was trying to get my spiritual strength from the rules instead of my relationship with Jesus Christ. Or, to return to the rental-car image, I was trying to get my power from the picture, the map, instead of from the real source of power.

Wouldn’t it be nice if there were some kind of warning bell, some alarm to tell us we’re trying to run on the map instead of the fuel? Actually, there is. I’ve identified several signals in my own life that warn me I’m drifting toward a legalistic approach to life:

• When facing some temptation to sin, responding by telling myself, “I shouldn't do that!”—and hoping that response will give me power to resist. That’s the willpower approach to handling temptation.

• The opposite situation: when thinking about some good thing I might do, trying to motivate myself to do it "because I should." That's the duty-based approach to doing good.

• Evaluating my standing before God, based on how well I've been following the "shoulds" and the "shouldn'ts." That is, if I think I've been following all the right rules on a given day, then I'm okay before God; and if I haven't been, I’m not worth much before God that day. That’s the performance-based approach to relationship with God.

• Beating myself up over sins I feel guilty for, and thinking that being angry at myself will help me do better in the future: "You idiot, Tom! Don't you know that sin didn't do you any good? Now, just remember how bad you feel now, and let that be a lesson to you next time!" This is the anger-based approach to relationship with God—anger at ourselves, that is. Certainly we can and should learn from the negative outcomes of our poor decisions. The lesson to learn, though, is to keep drawing closer to Christ and his unconditional love; not to be ever more hard on ourselves in hopes that will make us do better.

• Hearing myself say any of these kinds of things to someone else, or paying attention to someone saying it to me. Legalism with one another is easy; demonstrating grace with each other is a fragile thing. But grace needs community to thrive.
All of these responses are rule-oriented. They assume we can live out our walk with Christ by focusing on the rules: "If I keep all the shoulds and shouldn'ts in mind strongly enough, I'll stay on the right track." It doesn't work, though, does it? Focusing on rules actually worsens our bent toward sinning:

"I would not have known what sin was except through the law.... But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire" (Romans 7:7b-8a, NKJV).

As for beating ourselves up over our sin, what was said in a different context seems to apply here as well: "The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20, NKJV). Getting angry at ourselves doesn't make us follow God more closely or successfully. If this is the way we approach our Christian lives, we’re not relying on our relationship with Christ. In a practical sense, we’re living as if severed from Christ. Like the Galatians, we’re falling from grace.

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When We’re Under the Test

If you're like me, these warning signs of falling from grace are far too familiar. It's the way many of us have become accustomed to living our "Christian" lives. What then is the alternative? It’s strengthening our connection with Jesus by living in a close, trusting, honest relationship with Him and following the leading of His Spirit. Folthe Spirit, we also follow the law, which is the message of the rest of Galatians 5.

We especially need to strengthen our relationship with God when it's most under the test. These are the times when we feel the least qualified to come to Him: when we’re tempted, or—strange as this may sound at first!—even while we’re sinning. That’s certainly not the way we usually think about sin and our relationship with God, so I’ll try to make it clear by means of an illustration. One of the temptations I’m prone to is impatience, on the highway behind a slow driver, for example. Too often I try to handle this by telling myself, "I shouldn't be feeling so impatient, I shouldn't be muttering and cussing at that driver, this isn’t the Christian thing to do..." Unfortunately, those are law-based responses—remember the warning alerts for living by legalism? Thoughts like that, filled with "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts", have no power to help me. Soon I’m heading right toward road rage.

If you’re like me, at a time like this, being open to Jesus Christ is probably the last thing on your mind. It’s painfully humbling to admit what’s going on inside. Anything less than that, though, is cutting part of ourselves off from Christ, from his grace and his power. Being superficial seems more palatable, a prayer like this: “God, help me be patient like I know I ought to be.” What I’ve
been discovering, though, is that it’s okay to tell God what’s genuinely going on inside. I can really open up, and it does me good. It might sound something like this:

"God, here I am, being tempted to be impatient. Not only am I being tempted, but right now I think I have a right to be impatient. I mean, look at all these slow cars in the way. If those jerks just knew how to drive . . . and you know what, God? I really do think they're being jerks. What do you think, God?"

A prayer like that is not pretty. There’s rebelliousness there. I don’t recommend you take my feelings as your example! But in times when temptation hits me, when I even slide into sin, a prayer like this opens my heart toward God so his Spirit can work in me. I tell Him my weakness. I admit my rebellious thoughts, even while they’re still going on. I tell him the truth about the temptation or sin, which is, honestly, that at the moment it seems attractive, even though I know it’s not right.

No, that kind of praying isn’t pretty— but who said prayer has to look good? Prayer like this is a genuine move toward connecting with God. The closing question— “What do you think, God?”—is crucial, for by it I’m opening the door to receive what God will say and do. It is saying, “God, even though I’m a mess, I’m willing to let you do what you want to do in me.” This is where we find grace: not in the rules, but in our open, living connection to God.

And it’s where we find power, too. God's consistent response to prayers like this is to remind me that He accepts me. I’m a weak, fallen sinner, but he loves to give me grace! And as He is doing this, somehow, in a way beyond explanation or description, the temptation goes away. Its strength is broken. The anger and impatience are replaced by God's peace. If I tried to work up that kind of feeling, all I would experience is the stress of "working up." But by approaching it relationally, by connecting with God in my moment of weakness, I experience both peace and victory. This is the power of God at work, through relationship, not through rules.

There is more than this to maintaining a close connection with God, including the regular disciplines of prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and so on. I’ve only tried to describe one kind of crucial moment in our relating with him. It is this kind of moment-by-moment relating with him, though, even in our most tested times, that will keep us standing in grace and not falling from it.

That day by the tennis courts, God gently reminded me to give up trying so hard to measure up to the rules, and to focus on my relationship with Christ instead. My frustration melted away, replaced by genuine peace and a rich sense of gratefulness for God’s unfailing grace. And you know what? The whole rest of the week went better, too!
Two Views of Faith
March 31, 2009

Some time ago a commenter on Thinking Christian wrote,

The core problem is that religion teaches that holding absolute beliefs without evidence (aka faith) is a virtue.

But that’s not what faith is. The other day in a Bible study at church, I noticed a great way to illustrate the difference between this and true faith. There are four different accounts of the life of Jesus Christ in the Bible, known as the four Gospels (a word whose etymological roots go back to “good news”): Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of these presents a kind of narrative biography, mostly of the last three years of Jesus’ life on earth. No biography tells every detail of its subject’s life, and no two biographies of one person cover the same details. This is true of the Gospels.

All four Gospels tell of Jesus calling Peter to be one of his followers. They are all the same in that respect. Two of the accounts are very similar:

Matthew 4:18-20:

While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him.

Mark 1:16-18:

Passing alongside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

This looks a lot like the way some people conceive of faith. You meet someone or get some kind of idea or impression, and boom! you change everything you think about the world. There’s no evidence, no logic, no background, no thinking.

Now, I do not mean to distort the purpose or message of these two accounts. If they do not teach a clear message about how faith is acquired, that is because that was not their authors’ in-
Part Three: Living In Christ

tent. I mean this instead as an illustration of how faith can be misunderstood by those who mistakenly think they have the full context. Let’s broaden our view to get a more complete picture, starting with the Gospel of John.

John 1:35-42:

The next day again John [the Baptist] was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

Here we discover that Peter’s brother had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and we know that John had been preaching about Jesus Christ (John 1:19-28). Andrew had more than just a glance from Jesus to go on, he had very strong personal references. Interestingly, there are some scholars who think this event may have been a full year before Jesus came and called Peter, as recorded in the passages quoted above. Jesus seems to have had a one-year period of ministry in Judea (where Jerusalem is) early in his time of ministry. This event with Andrew was probably before that year, and the final call to Peter was probably afterward, when Jesus traveled the 70 or so miles north to begin his Galilean ministry. If that’s true, then Peter had plenty of time to think about this great man he had met, to ponder his teachings, and to hear of his reputation.

Even if that’s not the case, the picture we have in Luke tells us even more clearly what Peter was working from when he decided to follow Christ. He had seen Christ at work (Luke 4:38-39):

And he [Jesus] arose and left the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was ill with a high fever, and they appealed to him on her behalf. And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and began to serve them.

And much more beyond that (Luke 5:1-11):

On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fisher-
men had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” And Simon answered, “Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

Peter never “left everything and followed him” until after he had had (possibly) a year to think through what he knew at first about Jesus, seen Jesus heal his wife’s mother, heard Jesus teach at least once, and seen Jesus perform the miracle of the fish. Peter’s faith in following Jesus was no blind leap. It was based on an experienced reality, on data he had had a chance to reflect upon. “If I leave everything to follow this man, will I end up a starving itinerant no-good?” he might have asked himself. But he would have known by then that Jesus was truly good, by his teaching; and that Jesus could certainly find food when he needed it!

Of course he still had to have faith to follow. He was trusting his whole life and future to this teacher Jesus, and to the God of whom Jesus taught. But it was not belief against the evidence. It was belief based on evidences and experience. God can grant a person faith by directly relating to a person’s heart, and there is always that element in any person’s coming into a faith relationship with him. Still, a tried and tested faith knows from experience also that God is real and God is good. For some of us who have the inclination to explore it, our faith also rests on the trustworthy testimony of history, where the reports of Jesus’ life can be tested like any other historical report, and on evidences from nature, human experience, and philosophical reflection.

Faith is not a leap into the dark against evidence. It’s a leap into the light of God, based on knowledge and experience.
Debunking the Resurrection Fable Fable
November 18, 2007

There is a false belief out there that says the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was just a fable. I call it the Resurrection Fable Fable.

This fable runs like this: the early church was a community of persecuted outsiders, which grew up originally out of a group of people who had followed Jesus and had been impressed with his charismatic personality and message. When he was killed, they maintained some identity as a faith community. In order to hold on to that identity and to keep their nascent faith alive, this community gradually developed a mythology around Jesus and his early followers, including the imaginative claim that he had risen from the dead. This solidified over the years into an actual belief that he rose from the dead, a powerful belief (even though false) which so strengthened them that they continued to maintain their faith identity and ultimately to change the whole world.

I think that's a fair statement of the claim. It's rather unlikely on the face of it, but it's intended to be a way to explain away another unlikely happening, the actual Resurrection of Christ. There's no disputing that members of the early church believed in the Resurrection, so this belief had to have come from somewhere, and it needs explaining.

At the National Conference on Christian Apologetics in November, 2008, Dr. Gary Habermas offered a question for those who would propose this explanation: "When did it happen? When did this belief arise?"

Obviously it was before the four Gospels, the opening books of the New Testament, were written. Consensus scholarship says the earliest of these gospels (Mark) was written no later than about 60-65 AD, possibly up to 70 AD. Those are secular scholars' dates; conservative Christians might date it earlier. So the fable had to have arisen and developed in no less than 3 to 4 decades after Jesus' death in 30 AD. Is that reasonable? Could a false story like that have come to life in less than 40 years, while some of Jesus' followers and critics were still around to tell what really happened?

Habermas says that's the wrong question.

The first New Testament mention of the Resurrection was in 1 Corinthians 15:3-6 (ESV):

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.
Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.

Here we have an eyewitness report, and a report of other eyewitnesses. But there's a phrase buried in there that we are prone to skip over: "I delivered to you ... what I also received." What follows that phrase is what Paul received. It's a creedal statement of the early church. This is something on which secular scholars generally agree, along with conservative Christians. It's in the form of an early hymn, with a rhythmic flow to it. This, according to Habermas, is relatively non-controversial among New Testament scholars. (There are a few who take exception to almost all of this, but the mainstream of scholarship is moving in a conservative direction in regard to things like these.)

Thus we have a statement that was delivered to Paul. The Pauline authorship of this letter is not disputed, by the way. So now we have to consider just when it was delivered. For this we turn to another passage that was (non-controversially, again) written by Paul. He included considerable autobiographical material in his letter to the Galatians:

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother. (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea that are in Christ. They only were hearing it said, 'He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.' And they glorified God because of me.

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain.
Paul met the risen Lord, and then spent three years in Arabia and Damascus studying and praying. But he wanted to be sure he was understanding the message correctly, that he was on the right track. He went to the leaders in Jerusalem after three years to receive what they had to say. He was playing the investigative reporter, checking his story to make sure he had it right, and he went to the original sources to find out what they had to report about the events. This letter was written at least fourteen years after that, and is conservatively dated in the late 40s; secular scholars might put it 5-7 years later. The creedal message Paul received could not have been developed any later than about 40 AD, or about ten years after the Crucifixion and Resurrection of which it speaks. Most scholars, Habermas says, are now putting it at 35-38 AD.

There's another thread to evidence on the dating of this creed. The statement he gave in 1 Corinthians 15 was something he had already told them, when he had visited them earlier. The letter was written in the mid-to late-50s; his visit was sometime prior to that, probably in 51 AD, about fifteen to twenty years earlier than the likely dates for the Gospel of Mark.

The upshot of it is that there was never a time in the early church when the death, resurrection, and deity of Christ were not reported and discussed. If there was, it would have had to have been extremely early—before 35-38 AD.

This is all based on a very liberal interpretation of the dates. But some secular scholars would even place this creed earlier. Gerd Lüdemann, atheistic German scholar, dates it at no later than 33 AD. One critical group puts it at 30 AD—the same year the events happened!

The fable theory is revealed to be a fable; for there was no time for this so-called beleaguered faith community to have come up with this story and made it counter-factually a matter of personal belief. The original witnesses were still there to say what actually happened. Fables don't grow and take root so quickly, especially in soil where the truth against them is being told.