

# What is Christianity?

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This document tries to summarize Christian beliefs and practices. It was originally written as part of the Frequently Asked Questions collection for the Usenet newsgroup soc.religion.christian. It is intended as an introduction to Christianity for non-Christians, and also as background for those who want to follow the discussions in soc.religion.christian. For that reason it spends more time on a few controversies that are common in online discussions than might be merited by their actual importance.

This is a snapshot of a web site. If you are interested in seeing the author's most recent thoughts, take a look at <http://geneva.rutgers.edu/src/christianity>.

If you are reading this document online, it should be possible to click on any area with a box around it.

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# Preface

Charles Hedrick (the author of these essays) is, in no particular order

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(I am not the well-known scholar, Charles W. Hedrick. I've had a few people assume that I'm the same person.)

In reading this set of essays it is probably useful to know that I place myself as part of the Reformed tradition. My views are closely based on by John Calvin's, to the extent that the position I describe as "Protestant" is typically my interpretation (or in some cases, reinterpretation) of Calvin.

In doing this reinterpretation, I have been influenced by the personalist approach of 20th Century writers such as Emil Brunner. In a number of matters of detail, I have made use of works by Alister McGrath (although he certainly isn't responsible for these essays).

I hold all of the classic Protestant doctrines, but don't necessarily express them precisely as Calvin would have.

I am not precisely a fundamentalist. I believe that the Bible is reliable, but not necessarily inerrant. That is, I believe it is the result of honest and competent human beings recording events and insights that were given by God as revelation. I do not accept the radical skepticism that seems to have overtaken much of Biblical scholarship in the 20th Century.

This set of essays was originally intended to be as unbiased a presentation of Christianity as I could arrange. It was to be modeled after C. S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity". I started it when I realized that there didn't seem to be any good introduction to Christianity available on the Internet. There are plenty of "apologetics" sites, but they all seem to be attacking some rival brand of Christianity, rather than trying to explain Christianity for non-Christians.

However in the course of writing, my purposes have changed slightly. I found that it was impossible to produce a balanced presentation of several different options, and also write something that hopes to be convincing. As a matter of practicality, I ended up presenting my own position, although in as broad a way as I can. Where there were alternatives that I considered significant, I then describe them with as little heat as possible.

I also found that I wanted to present a bit more "technical" theology than Lewis did in "Mere Christianity". This is partly because I am more interested in doctrine than I believe he was. But it is also become this document is intended as an orientation to the most important subjects that are discussed in soc.religion.christian. Those subjects are often somewhat more technical than "mere Christianity".

For someone who is willing to locate and read a book or two, I have three suggestions:

- The classic presentation of Christianity for non-Christians is still C. S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity”. It gives a good feel for what Christianity is about. However it does not emphasize theological detail.
- For an introduction to theology, I recommend Alister McGrath’s “Christian Theology: An Introduction”. This book is intended as a college text for a one-semester course in theology aimed at students who do not necessarily have any background in Christianity.
- For those who are interested in the arguments for and against Christianity, I recommend Kreeft and Tacelli, “Handbook of Christian Apologetics”. This summarizes the arguments for and against Christianity in many of the most important areas.

Of course anyone who wants to know what Christianity is about should also read at least one of the Gospels. Since Christianity is about following Jesus, there’s really no substitute for reading his life and teachings. If you want to read just one Gospel, I’m inclined to suggest Luke. If you’re willing to read a second book (“books” of the Bible aren’t very long – they’re more like chapters), I would suggest the Acts.

The treatment here is probably the most complete for the Reformed viewpoint. I believe the coverage of Catholic views is also fairly good, except for a set of issues that I’ll mention below. I have tried to describe other Protestants views, to the extent that I know them. While I know the “generic evangelical” positions fairly well, there are going to be some areas (particularly involving the Lutheran tradition) where this coverage is going to fall short. There is virtually no attempt to present the Orthodox viewpoint, because I don’t know it. The Orthodox Church in America homepage appears to contain a good presentation of the Orthodox faith.

While this document presents many of the differences between the Protestant and Catholic views, I do not currently cover the role of the saints and Mary. This is one of the areas in which Catholic / Protestant disagreement is most serious. I am considering a section dealing with it.

The presentation here is intentionally rather traditional. Recent work on the Jewish background of the New Testament is casting new light on Jesus’ intentions and the meaning of his teachings. Among this work, I particularly recommend that of N.T. Wright. Although I have added a couple of references to his work, most of this document does not reflect it.

# What are Major Christian Beliefs?

Christianity is at least three things:

- A set of beliefs
- A way of life
- A community of people

Different Christian groups place different weights on these three aspects, but they always involve all three. All three aspects are based on the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who is also known as the Christ. (“Christ” was originally a title. It is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Messiah”, meaning “anointed”.)

This section is an introduction to the beliefs. To get a reasonable picture of Christian beliefs, you should read at least this section and the next one, on the Gospel. In case you are interested in more details, there are also several sections dealing with specific beliefs: the Incarnation, the Trinity, and a set of issues involving free will and God’s overall responsibility. The latter section is called predestination.

For the role of the Christian community, see the section on the Church . For the way of life, see the sections on the Christian life, worship, the law, and expressing love.

Christianity shares a number of beliefs and practices with other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam. With Judaism and Islam, Christians believe in one God, who created the universe and all that is in it. All believe that this God is active in history, guiding and teaching his people. All three religions, including Christianity, have been called “ethical monotheism”. This term emphasizes the belief in one God, and the fact that following this God commits us to a number of specific ethical rules or principles.

Christianity originally developed as a part of Judaism. Jesus was a Jew. He lived from about 3 BC to 30 AD. He lived and taught in Palestine, primarily (although not exclusively) among fellow Jews. Christianity separated from the main body of Judaism for two major reasons:

1. Christianity came to regard Jesus as in some sense God’s presence in human form. This was unacceptable to most Jews.
2. Judaism is defined by a covenant made between God and the Jewish people. Part of this covenant is the Law, a set of religious and ethical rules and principles. Most Christians came to regard both this covenant and Law as in some sense superseded by Jesus’ teaching and the community that he established. On the night he died, Jesus talked about establishing a “new covenant” based on his death and resurrection.

These two issues continue to be among the most distinctive and controversial aspects of Christianity. They are controversial even among Christians. All Christians assign Jesus a role that would seem inappropriate to Jews. However his exact relationship with God was the source of

major disagreements among Christians as late as the 5th Century. While most modern Christians accept the standards developed in the 4th and 5th Centuries, there are small groups that do not. This aspect of Christianity is also often attacked or reinterpreted by “liberal” elements within Christianity.

The role of the Law also continues to cause controversy within Christianity. In a narrow sense this is reflected in small groups of Christians that worship on Saturday rather than Sunday, in obedience to one of the provisions of the Law. In a broader sense, the current conflict about the role of women and homosexuals in the Church involves the Christian approach to ethical and cultic standards.

### *The Role of Christian Beliefs*

Before talking about specific beliefs, it’s probably worth saying something about the role of beliefs in Christianity. Christianity tends to put more importance on proper belief than many other religions. The term “orthodox” (from roots meaning “right belief”) is used to describe beliefs that are in agreement with the standards set up by the Christian community.

When you say that someone is a Christian, you normally mean that he accepts the major Christian beliefs. That’s not the whole story, since Christianity is also a way of life and a community. But most Christians do not think it is appropriate to apply the term Christian based simply on the fact that someone has Christian parents and grew up as a Christian, or even based on the fact that they admire many of Jesus’ teachings. To be classified as a Christian, one is normally expected to accept the major Christian beliefs, to be following the way of life that Jesus taught, and to be a part of the Christian community.

Most Christian groups have standards of belief. Members are expected to accept the standards of their community. This is not to say that Christians have no questions or doubts. Most groups (even fairly rigid ones) permit members to express uncertainty and to question beliefs. However most groups expect leaders and teachers to advocate orthodox positions. Groups differ both in the way their standards are codified, and in the degree of conformity that they expect. Some have detailed formal standards of belief. Others use only the Bible, and allow a good deal of variation in interpretation.

This document will tend to emphasize beliefs. It’s worth noting that this emphasis may be misleading, both about what Jesus originally taught and about what it is like to be a Christian. The most controversial aspects of Christianity – and those that are emphasized in presentations of Christianity – tend to be beliefs, particularly beliefs about Jesus. However Jesus’ teachings were primarily about how his followers should live. It is these teachings that form the heart of Christian life for most Christians. Unfortunately they are hard to summarize. They are also less commonly talked about in Christian discussion groups, largely because they are less controversial. That’s why I have advised people who are interested in Christianity to read at least one of the Gospels in addition to (indeed before) this document. The Gospels are made up primarily of Jesus’ teachings, as well as narratives about his life.

## *God as Father and Creator*

There are several branches of Christianity, whose beliefs vary in detail. However one standard that is accepted by most of them is the “Apostles’ Creed”. I will base my discussion here on it. I will go through it section by section.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth.

Christians believe in one God, who created the universe and all that is in it. God is a person, but of a somewhat different type than human beings. While humans have both physical and spiritual elements, God is entirely spiritual. That is, he exists in a sphere outside the normal physical universe. (Since he created the universe, and existed before it, this should be fairly obvious.)

Human beings are created in the image of God. Obviously there are differences, since we are physical and God is not. What we share with God is the fact that we are rational beings, capable of making responsible decisions, and capable of relationships with each other and with him.

Religions have had very different ideas of how God interacts with the world. On one extreme, some groups found it hard to explain how God could have any dealings with the world at all. These thinkers see God as a pure One, who is not in any way dependent upon anything else.

At the other extreme we have pantheism, in which there is no real distinction between God and the world.

The Christian concept of God as creator holds a middle ground. Christianity conceives of God as One. But it is not an isolated One. Rather, God is a person, who is capable of affecting and being affected by others. This is implicit in the concept of God as Father, which is one of the most characteristic teachings of Jesus. The concept of God as personal ultimately led to the Trinity, which is surely one of the most distinctive (and controversial) ideas in Christianity. (There is a separate section discussing the Trinity.)

In contrast to pantheist and related concepts, the creation is genuinely distinct from God. The world has a genuine existence of its own. God cares about and interacts with the creation. Human beings are responsible to God. As the creator, God is responsible for the world and its history. While I have said that the world is distinct from God, it is not completely independent. God is thought of as continuously sustaining the world.

## *Christ*

And in Jesus Christ, His only son

The Creed has an overall form based on the Trinity. Thus it deals first with the Father, then the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit. I’m not going to deal with the Trinity and Incarnation in detail here because there are separate sections for each. However some minimal explanation is necessary.

While the Gospels show Jesus as having a role beyond a normal teacher, most of Jesus’ actions and teachings were appropriate for a First Century Jewish teacher. One of the major developments

in scholarship about Jesus during the last few decades has been a reassessment of his relationship to Judaism. It is now clear that Jesus was an observant Jew, as such was defined at the time. His teachings generally fit into First Century Judaism. The main exception is his own personal role. That went beyond anything that Judaism as a whole was willing to accept. Some scholars maintain that this role was not intended by Jesus himself, but developed after his death and was read back into the accounts of his life. I personally believe this is false, as I will indicate below. That is, I believe that Jesus did actually intend something like the role that Christians attribute to him.

Christians see Jesus as in some sense embodying God. This is based on his teachings and actions, as well as on further discussions within the Christian community. Every account we have of Jesus sees him as playing a role beyond that of a normal teacher. Different sources express it differently. In some of the Gospels it is implicit in the way Jesus acts: he forgives people's sins, something that only God can do. In the Gospel According to John, he says "I and the Father are one" and "he who has seen me has seen the Father". However he clearly is a normal human being, who sees God as distinct from himself.

Based on this sort of evidence, Christians developed two separate but related concepts: the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Incarnation looks at Jesus' relationship to God. There is a separate section about the incarnation . At this point, I'm simply going to quote two texts from the New Testament. These represent two ways that Jesus was understood within several decades of his death:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Heb 1:1-3a)

...his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, (Col 1:14-16, 19)

There are two things to note in these passages. The first is that Jesus is seen as a human vehicle for God to be present. Note that in these passages there is both a distinction between Jesus and God, and an identification of Jesus with God. Jesus is a human being. But he is God's way of being present as a human being. He embodies God completely.

The other thing to note is that Christ is seen as "pre-existent". That is, creation was done through him. While he was born sometime around 3 BC, there was also a sense in which that human being embodies something that was around before the world was created. The best-known treatment of this is the beginning of John's Gospel:

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 came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3a, 14)



Thus Christ is seen in two ways. In pre-existent form he is God's creative power, who was always with God and in fact part of him. As such, he is one of the Trinity. However he was born as a human being in history.

### *Jesus' life, death, and resurrection*

To continue with the Creed:

... our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended to hell. On the third day he rose again from the dead, ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

In this section the Creed talks about Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection. Christianity is based on historical events. The Creed is only a summary, so it doesn't give the entire history of God's dealings with Israel. But that is part of the basis for Christian belief.

One clarification is probably needed: non-Christians sometimes think that Jesus is like some of the pagan demigods, the result of a god having a child with a human mother. The Creed could be read that way. But that's not what it means. God is spiritual. He does not have sexual organs, and thus could not have a child in the physical sense. The Bible says that the birth was miraculous. Jesus' mother was still a virgin. Thus God was responsible for the birth. But not physically.

Jesus was executed by the Roman government, in a particularly gruesome way. However more than just the Romans were involved: he was betrayed by one of his own followers, and handed over by the Jewish authorities to the Romans.

Jesus had warned his disciples that he was going to be killed. He seems to have seen himself as carrying out a role described by the prophet Isaiah in a set of passages often calling the "Suffering Servant" passages. These passages described a person who would suffer on behalf of all of us, bearing the punishments that we deserved because of our sins. As a result, we would be reconciled to God. Jesus quoted Isaiah in discussions with his disciples. He was particularly explicit in the evening right before he was arrested, referring to his blood being shed to establish a new covenant, for the forgiveness of sins.

For a more complete discussion of this issue, please see the next section: the Gospel . It describes the reasons Christians see everyone as needing to be reconciled with God, and the way Jesus is seen as having done that. For the moment I will simply note that Jesus' death and resurrection are the key.

Jesus died, almost certainly on a Friday afternoon (although there are some oddities about the chronology as recorded in the Gospels). He was buried hastily, because the Sabbath (a holy day for the Jews) was about to start. On Sunday morning, a group of women came to the tomb, expecting to finish preparing his body. They found that it was no longer in the tomb. Jesus then began appearing to various of his followers, helping them understand the significance of his death and resurrection.

The term “resurrection” means coming to life again. Note that after the resurrection, Jesus seems to have had a somewhat transformed existence. It does not appear that his body simply came back to life. He was now able to pass through walls. However it was more than a ghost, or a vision. He ate a fish, and let someone touch him.

### *The Holy Spirit and the Christian life*

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

The Holy Spirit is the bond that unites us with God. This is not “the Force.” God is personal, so the Holy Spirit is a personal presence.

Christians live in community. Jesus described himself as a vine, with us as the branches. It is not possible to be united with him without also being united with other Christians. The motivating force behind the Christian life is love. Since love is a personal relationship, there’s no way to grow in love other than to be with others. This Christian community is called the “Church”.

The Creed speaks of the Church as holy and catholic. The term “catholic” means “universal”. Because the Church is Christ’s body, there is ultimately only one Church. While the ideal is that the Church is holy and one, the reality is that it is human. That means that it is often less than holy, and it is all too often far from one. This does not mean that we can live without it. Christian love isn’t real unless it’s willing to come to grips with real human relationships and the problems that arise with them.

The term “communion of saints” refers to the unity of all of Christ’s followers, living and dead.

Forgiveness of sins is one of the key marks of Christianity. Christ died to seal our forgiveness by God. We are expected to respond by forgiving each other, and acting as a force for reconciliation in the world.

The term “resurrection of the body” is worth a note: It’s fairly common for religions to believe that there is some existence after death. However this is often seen in ways that would be better described as “immortality of the soul”. That is, many religions believe that there is something in human beings beyond the body. This survives death, and is in some way united with God.

Christians generally believe in the immortality of the soul (though a few do not). However the characteristic Christian belief is something else: the resurrection of the body. Christianity, like Judaism, sees the body as an intrinsic part of a human being. They do not believe that the soul will exist in the long run independent of something like a body. (Some Christians do believe in an “intermediate state” between death and the final judgment. During this period, souls may temporarily exist without a body.)

For more information about this, as well as the final judgment, see the section on heaven and hell.

# What is the Gospel?

“Gospel” is from old English roots meaning “good news”. The Gospel is the heart of the Christian message: that Christ died for us, and that through him we can be reconciled to God and live in communion with him.

This section is divided into three parts, which get increasingly technical. The first part presents the basic Protestant view of the Gospel. I apologize to my Catholic and Orthodox readers. I originally tried to produce a “neutral” description, that took into account both Protestant and Catholic approaches. The result was so complex that I didn’t think anyone could make sense out of it. Thus I’m using Protestant terminology, with a note at the end on differences.

Thus the second part of this section covers differences between the Protestants and Catholic approaches to salvation. I don’t know enough about the Orthodox approach to describe it.

The third section looks at Jesus’ concept of the Gospel. Christians have tended to focus on specific aspects of what he taught.

## *The Problem of Sin*

Christians see the world as in a state of rebellion against God. Most people agree that there are problems in the world: it is full of suffering and injustice. Many diagnoses have been proposed. The primary problem may be a distorted relationship between capital and labor, unresolved conflicts from childhood, or people who are not properly educated in the human values of tolerance and cooperation. Thus attention may be focused on economic relationships, social structure, psychological therapy, or education.

Christians focus attention on the human relationship to God. They believe that the most serious problems result from the fact that human beings have lost sight of their proper relationship to God and each other. This is often expressed in moral terms. Because it is our obligation to obey God, we are currently in a situation of rebellion against him. This state is referred to as “sin”. Individual actions of disobedience are referred to as “sins”.

Although this moral perspective is correct, it should be noted that people often don’t start out intending to be evil. Typically sin consists in choosing something that appears to be an immediate benefit. Thus it may be as much short-sightedness as anything else. This short-sightedness is aided by pressures of various sorts from outside.

Unfortunately, however it starts, sin is self-perpetuating. The further we get from God, the more distracted we become by secondary concerns, and the less likely it becomes that we will be able to find a way out.

For these reasons, sin can be seen both as intentional rebellion and as analogous to a sickness. It has elements of both.

It is unlikely that Christianity will make much sense unless you accept this diagnosis. If you still believe that you’re basically OK, but just need more opportunities, or better education,

Christianity doesn't have much to offer. It's like dealing with alcoholism or any other addiction: the victim has to understand that he is addicted before much can be done to treat him. Indeed sin can be seen as an addiction.

From a Christian perspective, the 20th Century can be seen as a set of attempts to try out alternative diagnoses. We've seen attempts to fix society based on changes in economics (Marxism), and eliminating corrupting influences (Nazism). We're now seeing a massive attempt to use a model that is basically therapeutic. Christians believe that these are all different ways to avoid taking personal responsibility for decisions, and recognizing that more often than not we get things wrong.

Christians believe that God created the world with certain specific relationships in mind. These form an ordered network of relationships to God, one's family, friends, neighbors, and even enemies. Family, friends, country, business relationships, and self are all important parts of the picture. But as soon as one or more is allowed to take the place of God, the entire set of relationships becomes unbalanced, and chaos results.

### *Original Sin*

Christian theology traces this state of alienation from God back to Adam and Eve. The Bible portrays Adam and Eve as the first human beings. They were created by God. All humans are descended from them. They were originally in perfect fellowship with God and with each other, living in the Garden of Eden. However at some point they broke a command by God not to eat the fruit of a certain tree. This seems to have been symbolic of a desire to be independent of God. This constituted the first sin.

As result of this sin, Adam and Eve were ejected from the Garden of Eden, and brought into the world as we know it now. The sin affected their very nature. They became subject to death and suffering. These effects were passed on to their children, and hence to us.

The effect that is relevant to this article is "original sin". Original sin says that all human beings are incapable of following God's will, until God has regenerated us. This inability is a result of the degeneration of human nature that resulted from the first sin.

Many Christians now regard some aspects of this story as symbolic. However the basic concept that we are incapable of following God's will until we have been regenerated is essential to Christian theology. This is referred to by several terms: "original sin", "total depravity", and "total inability".

The term "total depravity" is likely to be misleading. It suggest that human beings are as evil as possible. That isn't the intent. The image of God was not wiped out by original sin. Thus people are certainly capable of doing good things. However original sin corrupted us to the extent that nothing we do is ever completely pure. Our motivations are always mixed with selfish desires. This means that nothing we do can be in the strict sense righteous or meritorious.

## *Forgiveness*

Now we're ready for good news. The good news is that God is ready to deal with sin. He is ready to forgive and to "regenerate" us.

Forgiveness is one of the major themes in Jesus' teaching. Indeed it's one of the things that got him in trouble. He was willing to forgive people who were regarded as unforgivable. The standard examples were prostitutes and tax collectors. (Tax collectors were considered sinners because they were collaborators with the Romans, and were most commonly corrupt.)

However there are several things that we need to notice about Jesus' forgiveness. The first thing to notice is that Jesus' forgiveness generally comes at the beginning of his encounter with a person. Normally people didn't come to him asking for forgiveness. Rather, Jesus called them. This is important because of the observation I made above that sin tends to paralyze us. We are incapable even of realizing our situation. Thus God must take the initiative. This is shown in the way Jesus dealt with people.

The second thing to notice is who forgiveness was given to. Jesus forgave sinners and tax collectors. However he had harsh words for many of the leaders. These harsh words seem to be based on two things: self-righteousness and abuse of power. He says on a number of occasions that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. It is fairly clear in context that what he meant by "righteous" was those who felt that they didn't need God's help. The "sinners" that he forgave were all people who knew very well that they were sinners, and in need of forgiveness.

The third thing to notice about those Jesus forgave is that they responded with repentance. "Repent" is a word meaning "turn around". When someone repents, they regret what they have done. But more importantly, they reject it, and start going in the other direction. When Jesus forgives people, they often say things like "If I have defrauded anyone, I will pay back four times as much".

Finally, notice that forgiveness is connected with Jesus personally. This is not as clear during his life, since at that point people weren't in a position to understand about his death and resurrection. But even then, Jesus tended to forgive on his own authority. The Gospels note that this caused problems: he seemed to be pronouncing forgiveness in a way that only God should do.

During his life, Jesus called people to be his followers. He talked about our goal as entry into the "Kingdom of God." He saw it as his role to provide our entrance.

After his death and resurrection, Christians said that our forgiveness is based on his death for us. This seems to be based on Jesus' own teaching. It appears that he applied the "suffering servant" passages in the prophet Isaiah to himself. In these passages, someone (or possibly some group) suffered for the whole nation. On the night before he was killed, he told his disciples that his death was "for the forgiveness of sins".

Paul's letters talk about being "in Christ". This implies that we have a continuing relationship with Christ. This relationship is based on his bearing our sins in death, and our continuing role as his disciples. The term "disciple" refers someone who follows an individual teacher. It implies a high degree of personal commitment on both sides.

To summarize, forgiveness

- Is based on Christ's death and resurrection, and our relationship with him as disciples.
- Is given by God before we are even prepared to ask for it.
- Is only possible for people who are willing to depend upon God to help them, rather than their own righteousness.
- Is accompanied by repentance, which leads to a new life.

### *One-time and Ongoing Aspects of Forgiveness*

Notice that there are both one-time and ongoing aspects to this. There is a sense in which forgiveness is a one-time event. It is given before we have done anything to deserve it. It is based on Christ's death for us. Since it happens before we are in a position to deserve it, it doesn't stop if our failures make us no longer deserve it. Since it is based on Christ's death, we could even say that our sins were all forgiven in 33 AD.

This one-time aspect of forgiveness is called "justification". The term justification is originally a legal one. It refers to "being declared innocent". This one-time aspect is reflected in Christian baptism. Baptism makes visible God's act of applying Christ's death to us, bringing us into contact with the power of God's forgiveness. It marks the beginning of our life as a disciple of Jesus.

However there is another sense in which forgiveness is an ongoing thing. God starts dealing with our sin as soon as we are "in Christ". However this process doesn't finish until we die. Thus we continue to sin, and we continue to need repentance. This ongoing process is called "sanctification", that is, "being made holy".

Jesus' life and teachings set before us a model of what life should be like. Any serious self-examination in the light of these standards will make it clear that we need to repent. I would maintain that repentance is in many ways the key to Christian life. It is the basis for real change in our lives.

Note that justification and sanctification do somewhat different things. Justification happens before we are even in a position to repent. It is based entirely on Christ's death for us, not anything we have done. This is more than just a legal fiction: Christ's righteousness is available to us because of the fact that God has established a spiritual bond between us and Christ. However it's based only on Christ, not anything in us.

Of course this isn't the end. God will not stop before we are completely healed of sin. This is sanctification. Until the end of our lives, our own situation is going to continue to be unreliable. Yes, God is dealing with our sin, and we are in the process of healing. But there are going to be periods during which we slide back. That is why we need repentance and forgiveness on an ongoing basis.

However this ongoing process happens in the context of a relationship that we can rely on. When God initially decides to forgive us and regenerate us, he unites us with Christ. This allows our relationship with God to be based on Christ's righteousness, not our own still unreliable spiritual state. Thus justification provides a reliable basis on which God can deal with us as we are slowly healed.



## *Faith*

We respond to God's initiative by trusting him and committing ourselves to his care. This response is called "faith". Note that this is a special use of the word "faith". Faith is sometimes used to mean a kind of belief. In Protestant thought it has a more personal meaning. It is our whole response to God's initiative on our behalf.

You will sometimes hear the phrases "justification by faith" and "faith alone" (or the Latin "sola fide"). Sometimes it sounds like God is rewarding us for believing in him. But that's not what the phrase means. It actually refers to the way that we receive justification, not the reason God justifies us. Faith is the way we participate in the bond that God has established between us and Christ.

Justification by faith means that we rely completely on God for help. We are grateful for what he has done for us, and trust him to heal us of sin. "Justification by faith" is really the opposite of "self-righteousness". It is the attitude that we find in those Jesus forgave.

Faith shows itself in repentance and changed lives. While we do not expect Christians to become immediately perfect, through faith we have a new life in Christ. Where there is no new life, we can reasonably conclude that justifying faith is not present. Jesus talks about knowing things by their fruit, i.e. by the results that they produce.

No matter how far we have progressed, we still live in dependence upon God. We grow in goodness by continually allowing Christ to work more completely through us. The ideal is a sort of "transparency" to God's will. That does not, of course, mean that we disappear as individuals, but that individuals find their fulfillment by focusing on God and others.

## *Christ's Role*

I'd like to focus a bit more on Christ's role in our transformation. What we are unable to do for ourselves, because of our addiction to sin, Christ can do for us. There is an underlying concept here that is somewhat foreign to many people in the 20th Century. We tend to think of individuals as independent. Ideas of spiritual community or solidarity do not come easily to us.

One of the most interesting Christian writers I've read is Charles Williams. He has written a set of novels, as well as an interpretation of church history. In these, he maintains that the basic principle of Christianity is "exchange". He believes that Jesus is speaking quite literally when he tells us to "bear each other's burdens." It is possible to share and even take from another their guilt and fear, as well as of course to share joy. Thus Christ working in us is just one example (although of course a unique example) of a kind of thing that we can do for each other.

The well-known poem by John Donne, "No man is an island", expresses much the same thing: there is a spiritual communion by which what happens to one happens to all. It is this idea of spiritual solidarity which forms the background for Christian beliefs in this area. It permits us to think of Christ as bearing our sins, us being credited with Christ's righteousness, and Christ becoming alive through us.

While God is anxious to forgive us and help us reestablish proper relationships, something has to happen to make that forgiveness and regeneration real. Christians have regarded Jesus' death as doing that.

In the first century, this didn't seem to require much explanation: the concept of sacrifice was common to all religions. Thus the idea of sacrifice for all of mankind made sense. In the 20th Cent., the concept is not so obvious. Thus I feel some need to talk about why sacrifice should be needed.

Ultimately I believe the requirement is part of the spiritual structure of the universe. I probably can't explain why it's there any more than I can explain why the physical laws are as they are. However I will try to say a few things anyway.

First, Jesus' death helps us understand the severity of our sin, and bring us into the condition where God can work with us. The fact that God's son would die for me makes it very clear how radical my need for change is.

In human relationships you will note that it is often difficult to reestablish trust once a relationship has been broken. Normally both sides have some work to do. Apologies may be needed, often on both sides. But often the person who is doing the forgiving must do something to show its reality. In many cases one can't just forget what has happened. If the break involves important or sensitive issues, reestablishing the relationship is likely to require an action that has some personal cost.

It is that way in our relationship with God. God can say that we are forgiven. But in order to reestablish the relationship, something more is needed. In this case, only God is in a position to take the necessary action. Because of the severity of the problem, it is appropriate that the cost would be in blood.

Christian theology only makes sense if you believe in the sort of spiritual relationship between people I referred to above. In particular, of a spiritual union with Christ. Redemption is a spiritual rebirth. This comes through being "in Christ" (to use Paul's favorite term).

- For those who are united to Christ, his death and resurrection become our death to sin and rebirth as his disciples.
- One of the effects of sin is to isolate us, both from each other and God. Christ joined us on our side of that wall of isolation, accepting all of its consequences. Since he is with us on our side, the wall no longer separates us from God and each other.

A balanced Christian approach should look at both Jesus' death and resurrection. It is possible to overemphasize either. If we focus just on his death, we can end up with a cult of death and suffering. We need to remember that Christ was victorious over death, and through our union with him, we will ultimately be victorious over sin and death.

However if we focus just on the victory, and forget the cost, we can end up with a Christianity that has no depth, and cannot help people cope with suffering.



## *Union with Christ*

In this section, I've repeatedly used terms such as "union with Christ". Paul's letters are full of language like this: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17) Many Christians talk about having a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

What does all of this mean? There is a range of answers. Classical Protestantism sees our relationship with Christ as primarily based on objective matters, not on private religious experience. The foundations are Christ's death for us, his call to us to be his followers, and his love for us. We participate in it by our faith and trust in him, and the fact that we are committed to him as disciples. We learn his will for us primarily from Scripture, although we are certainly guided by prayer.

However many Christians have a more experiential orientation. For them, our relationship is based on a "conversion experience." In some traditions this is followed by a "baptism in the Holy Spirit", which is evidenced by ecstatic behavior such as "speaking in tongues". Christians are expected to have a continuing experience of Jesus in our heart, loving us and guiding us. This mystical communion is described in terms that would be familiar to mystics in all religious traditions.

I'm not as familiar with Catholic piety, but I believe that it has a similar range, with the addition that Mary is also available as an object for religious experience. Of course the terminology is sometimes different.

The Church has had an ambivalent attitude towards mysticism. Its emphasis on personal experience can be valuable. Without it, Christianity can sometimes turn into a purely intellectual or legal matter, which people have a hard time getting excited about. However mysticism often pushes the boundaries of orthodox thought, and sometimes goes beyond it. In valuing individual experience, it can sometimes devalue the world and our actions in it. When it goes too far, it removes the objective criteria for right and wrong, making private religious experience the primary goal.

My personal approach is closer to the Reformers'. Among other things, I am concerned about maintaining consistency with what Jesus actually taught. Some scholars have made a case that Christianity quickly abandoned any connection with Jesus' actual message, turning him into the center of something like the "mystery cults" that centered around various mythical religious figures at the time.

Some Christian practice does go beyond anything Jesus seems to have envisioned. However I believe it is possible to base the Christian life on his teaching. Jesus called people to be his disciples. He expected them to trust in him and follow him. He spoke of the "Kingdom of God", but in a way that implied that he was empowered to bring people into it. He said he was dying to establish a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. However he also pointed away from himself to God as Father.

## 2. CATHOLIC/PROTESTANT DIFFERENCES

The explanation above is based on Protestant terminology and analysis. Catholics have a somewhat different description of the process of salvation.

Catholics and Protestants agree about many fundamental issues:

- The nature of sin
- God must initiate the process of salvation
- Salvation is based on Christ
- The Christian life requires us to continually compare our lives with Christ's standards. This requires repentance and change.

The primary differences involve the specific way justification and sanctification are thought of. First, Catholics use the term "justification" to cover both what Protestants call justification and what they call sanctification. There is also a difference in how they use "faith". For Catholics, faith tends to mean just belief. For Protestants, it is a wider term, including our trust in God and our commitment to live as his children.

These differences caused enormous confusion during the 16th Century. When Protestants talked about "justification by faith alone" they meant that we rely on God alone for salvation. However justification is always accompanied by sanctification, which is the term that covers the transformation of our lives. Because of difference in definition, Catholics took "justification by faith" to mean we could be saved just by having an intellectual belief, without any real change in our lives.

When these differences in terminology are sorted out, there are great similarities in what is being said. However there are still some differences. Protestant theology sees us as being saved by something outside of us: Christ's death and resurrection are applied to us through faith. Catholic theology sees salvation as the final result of a process of transformation that happens by God's grace.

Both of us agree that Christ's death and resurrection are applied to us, and both of us agree that our lives are transformed by God's grace. Thus it is possible to view these as complementary emphases. However they are sufficiently different that there are real implications for our lives.

Protestants see the basis of our relationship with God as being outside ourselves. All of our spiritual resources come from Christ, and are applied to us by the Holy Spirit through our union with him, making full use of tools such as the preaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. Because the basis is outside us, our status as God's children doesn't depend upon our current spiritual state. If we stumble, God is there with the appropriate mixture of discipline and encouragement. We remain his children.

Catholics see the basis of our relationship with God as being a supernatural grace that is active in us. While this grace comes from God, it is infused into our souls. Certain serious sins ("mortal sins") are incompatible with continuing to be in this state of grace. Thus reconciliation "necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1856). Because

sin has largely broken our relationship with God, we look to the Church for help in reestablishing it.

There are several emphases here, which all of us accept:

- that we are made participants in Christ's death and resurrection through the action of the Holy Spirit
- that we are renewed by the Holy Spirit, so that we are spiritually transformed, and made able to do good works
- the importance of means such as preaching and the sacraments in helping us grow in the Christian life

However Protestants make the first primarily responsible for our continuing status as God's children, while Catholics make the last two primarily responsible for this. This has both conceptual and practical implications. Protestants tend to focus on Christ for spiritual resources, and to see the relationship with him as unbreakable (even if it turns to discipline when we sin). Catholics tend to focus on a supernatural grace which is infused into us, and to the role of the Church in dispensing grace through the sacraments. That grace may no longer be active after certain kinds of sin.

### *Imputed Righteousness vs. Infused Grace*

This difference is summarized in the terms "justification by faith" and "imputed righteousness", to represent the Protestant approach, vs. "infused grace", to represent the Catholic one.

While Catholics certainly accept the importance of faith, there is no direct equivalent of Protestant "justification by faith" in Catholic theology. Catholic theology does not accept that our relationship with God continues to be in full force even after mortal sins. These are sins that are serious in themselves, and where the person committing them knowingly rejects God's will. Mortal sins involve a rejection of the supernatural grace that is established by baptism. While they do not undo baptism, they do mean that we are no longer in a state of grace. A state of grace may be reestablished by the sacrament of reconciliation. This sacrament includes confession of the sin, repentance, and forgiveness.

Their concern is that the Protestant approach (of saying that our justification establishes an unbreakable relationship with God) would tend to encourage moral and spiritual laxness, since it means that our base relationship with God is not contingent on continuing progress in the Christian life. So for Catholic theology, our relationship with God depends upon a certain level of continuing cooperation on our side.

Catholics do acknowledge a certain one-time aspect to this process. It is represented by baptism. Catholics believe that baptism places an indelible mark on the soul, and that it begins the work of regeneration with us. Baptism is not undone, no matter what we do. Thus in some sense Catholic baptism may play a role that is analogous to Protestant justification. Both are one-time things that start out our relationship with God. But for Catholics, maintaining that relationship depends upon our continuing cooperation, while for Protestants, justification is permanent.

Protestants think of God as a father, who will continue to care for them and help them even when they fall short. Like a human father, he does exercise discipline. Thus an unconditional relationship with him doesn't mean that he ignores sin. But he does not disown his children. He deals with our sins – even serious ones – in the context of an unconditional commitment to us. The point where we have committed a serious sin is precisely the place where we need God the most.

When we have committed a serious sin, we need to be reconciled with God. For Protestants, sin does not completely break our relationship with God. Thus reconciliation comes from God, working through our bond with Christ. While sin may greatly strain that bond, it does not break it. For Catholics, serious sin breaks the bond of charity between us and God, as described above. Because sin has largely broken our relationship with God, we look to the Church for help in reestablishing it. Of course Protestants also believe that God works through visible means, so the preaching of the Gospel and the sacraments are important tools that God uses to restore us.

In technical terms, this difference is referred to as “infused grace” versus “imputed” righteousness. The first represents the Catholic position. It indicates that in salvation, grace comes to be present in us. We remain in a state of grace only as long as by our continuing cooperation, this infused righteousness continues to be present. It is a supernatural gift, meaning that it's not something we could develop on our own. That's the reason that it ceases to be present after mortal sin.

The term “imputed righteousness” represents the Protestant position. It emphasizes that that our righteousness comes solely from Christ. The term “imputed” (as well as the related term “forensic justification”) suggests almost a legal fiction: that Christ's righteousness is credited to our account even though we have none of our own. While this description is correct, calling it is fiction probably is not. That fails to take into account the fact of our union with Christ. His righteousness is really present in us because we are “in Christ”. However it always remains his. In Protestant theory, we never develop any righteousness that is properly speaking our own. The goal of Protestant piety is transparency to Christ.

### 3. JESUS' PERSPECTIVE ON THE GOSPEL

Jesus uses the term “Gospel” a number of times. What he means by it is closely related to the normal Christian meaning, but his perspective is broader than many Christians'. For more information on the issues raised in this section, I strongly recommend the work of N. T. Wright. He has an excellent web page, the N. T. Wright page.

The normal Christian concept of the Gospel has to do with God's forgiveness of individual Christians, and the beginning of their transformation into the kind of people God intended. Jesus was certainly concerned with this, and spent much of his time talking about it. However he put it into a broader context, one of establishing the “Kingdom of God,” i.e. God's rule. God's rule deals not just with individuals, but all of humanity, as well as nations and institutions.

Jesus operated within Judaism, which is based on a covenant between God and the nation Israel. Jews expected God, through the Messiah, to restore the nation of Israel. The prophets expected it to act as a model and agent to restore all of humanity.

Jesus certainly spent a lot of time talking about forgiveness of individuals, and the restoration of the proper relationship between them, God, and each other. However he put this in the wider context of the restoration of the nation and humanity. Individuals were invited to be a part of this enterprise, through forgiving and loving each other, and living as he taught. Salvation is not just a matter of avoiding hell, but of “bearing fruit,” becoming part of the mission to restore humanity.

Jesus saw himself as key to this Kingdom. Not only is he the one initiating it, but the Gospels use metaphors suggesting that he is in some way a replacement for the Temple, the place where heaven and earth meet.

There has been a lot of discussion among scholars as to whether Jesus thought the Kingdom of God was present or future. Jesus certainly talked about future events, including a time when God would judge the world, and decisively establish his Kingdom. However it is clear that Jesus also saw the Kingdom as being present now, at least among his followers.

In these terms, the “Good News” is that God is establishing his Kingdom through Jesus, and that we are called to be part of this.

# What about Heaven and Hell?

## *Heaven: Our Intended Destination*

Based on Jesus' teachings and other sources of revelation, Christians believe that God created human beings to live eternally in fellowship with him. The future as described in the Bible includes the resurrection of all people, a judgment, and eternal life in either heaven or hell.

All of the descriptions of heaven and hell in the Bible are strongly metaphorical. Most Christians think of heaven as a realm of some sort out of normal space-time. However the Biblical description often suggests a renewed earth. This could either mean that the heavenly realm is separate, but with a certain degree of similarity to our current world (the most common Christian view), or that God will renew and transform the earth.

Christians are not agreed on the exact details of how this will happen. However the differences tend to involve details of timing, and other issues that don't seem worth dealing with here.

The fact that human beings are created with an eternal destiny should have a significant impact on our priorities. It often seems that governments, nations, and other institutions are the enduring feature of human history, and people are transient elements. Christianity says that this is radically wrong. One cannot treat people as disposable adjuncts to the nation or other institution: ultimately it is the people who matter.

Note that there is a subtle difference between resurrection and the existence of an eternal soul. Many religions have held that human beings have an immaterial soul, which does not die when the body does. Christians generally agree with this (although a small number do not). However the distinctive Christian doctrine is not the eternal nature of the soul, but the resurrection of the body. Humans are unified beings. The body is an essential part of the person. In heaven there will be some analog of the body.

## *Judgment*

Christians believe that there will be a judgment. In this, everyone's life will be evaluated. Those who depend upon Christ for salvation can be assured that they will pass this judgment. However the quality of their lives will still become known, and everything in their lives that was not built on Christ will be purged. The Bible talks of their work being tested with fire.

The Bible says that there are two different outcomes for eternal life: heaven and hell. There is not a precise description of either heaven or hell, nor are we told how many people will end up in each. They are described using terms that seem metaphorical: a city built of gold in heaven, a lake of fire for hell.

## *Accountability*

All major Christian traditions say that in the end everyone will end up in either heaven or hell. At first glance, it sounds like we won't be held accountable for what we did, as long as we manage to meet the minimal criteria for ending up in heaven. In fact there are several ways of maintaining some kind of accountability.

Catholics believe in something called "purgatory". This is a "place" (not necessarily an actual physical place, of course) where those who will end up in heaven are purified. Traditional Catholic theology says that when God forgives sins, he removes the guilt. However there may still be consequences. One of those consequences is that "temporal punishment" is still owed. The goal of this punishment is to be cleansed, and made fit for heaven.

Note that purgatory only applies to people who will be admitted into heaven. It is not part of hell, nor is it some kind of intermediate state between heaven and hell. It is in a sense the entranceway into heaven.

Traditionally, Catholics believe it is appropriate to pray for those that are in purgatory. These prayers, as well as masses said for them, etc, may in some way ease their process of purgation. This is one aspect of the general Catholic concept that those on earth and those in heaven retain a spiritual connection with each other. (This is called the "communion of saints".) Those on earth may ask for intercession from the saints, and may intercede for those in purgatory.

Protestants do not normally accept the concept of purgatory. There are several objections. Among the most important are

- It implies that Christ's death for us isn't enough.
- The Bible says in several places that any interaction with the dead is forbidden.

The concept was also discredited by various abuses with which it was surrounded in the 16th Cent. These made it look like the Church was selling salvation, or at least release from Purgatory.

Thus Protestants normally object to anything that looks like Purgatory, as well as prayers for the dead. It is often said that prayers for the dead suggest a lack of trust in God, since God will judge them justly.

You can see the difference clearly if you attend both Protestant and Catholic worship services. When someone in the congregation has died, Catholics will ask for prayers for them and their family, while Protestants will ask only for prayers for their family.

Despite the rejection of Purgatory, many Protestant groups are still concerned to maintain accountability for what has been done during life. Many Protestants believe that there will be different levels of honor in heaven. Many Protestants also believe that even saved people will go through a process where their entire lives are reviewed and judged, even though their final destination is not in doubt. This is sometimes described as the "bema seat judgment". As a result of it, Christ's followers will be rewarded according to the quality of their work. This is contrasted to the "great white throne" judgment, which determines whether someone will spend eternity in heaven or hell.



(I should note that the terms “bema seat judgment” and “great white throne judgment” are not standard among all Protestants. They are based on one specific eschatological system.)

Note that Protestants do believe that those who are in heaven have been freed from sin. However the way in which this happens is thought of somewhat differently. For Protestants, our righteousness comes from Christ, because we are united to him in faith. When our nature is perfected in heaven, this happens because our union with Christ is perfected, and his righteousness fills us fully.

The same difference occurs here as in the doctrine of justification: Catholic theology tends to envision the Christian life as due to the growth of grace in us, while Protestant theology tends to envision the Christian life as due to an increasing transparency to the presence of Christ. The doctrine of Purgatory seems oriented towards the Catholic description.

### *Why Does Hell Exist?*

Currently there is a good deal of discussion among Christians about the morality of hell: it is said that a good God would not condemn people to an eternity of torture. However that has been the belief of most Christians through most of Christian history. It seems to be supported by the Biblical account. The alternative seems about as bad: that God will force himself on people who do not want him.

Note that it is not necessary to say that God imposes hell as punishment. It may be the automatic (indeed logically unavoidable) consequence of rejecting God. It is not clear that God makes it intentionally unpleasant. It may be the nature of the people who are there, and the fact that they are finally given what they want: freedom from God.

Many criticisms of judgment suggest that it is arrogant to say that Christian ideas are true and others are false. “How can you be so arrogant to believe that Christians will go to heaven and everyone else will go to hell.” As we will see below, most Christians don’t believe this. However the idea that this is arrogant seems odd. We do not criticize mathematics teachers for saying that  $2 + 2$  is always 4, and that believing sincerely in 5 is not acceptable. Either there is a God or there isn’t. Either Christ died to save us or he didn’t. If he did, it’s hard to see how it can be arrogant to say so. If he didn’t, then Christians are wrong, but not arrogant.

I would say that ultimately hell is a result of the “hardness” of created reality. Let me try to explain: Christianity believes that the universe has a real existence, and that it is distinct from God. (This is a specific position, which not all religions and philosophies accept. For some, there isn’t a real distinction between God and the universe.) In order to provide us with a region in which we can make our own decisions and take our own actions, God set up a universe that operates under dependable laws. Possibly there are other ways he could have worked. But we don’t know of any other way to set things up so that we have real lives of our own.

The existence of a real universe with dependable laws has consequences. One of those consequences is the fact that people can have incorrect ideas. If they misunderstand the way the universe works, damage may result. Most of us understand this in the realm of science and engineering. There is no reason that theology should be different. If there weren’t any distinction between truth



and falsehood, nor any consequences to error, we would be living in an amorphous mess (the metaphysical equivalent of “gray goo”). There would be no way to live sensibly.

The standard Christian position is that salvation is only available through Christ. This isn’t because God is biased towards Christians. Rather, it’s a consequence of the way the universe works. Heaven is by definition eternal life with God. But Christ is God’s way of establishing relationships between human beings and himself. He is the divine logos, the agent of creation. It is inherently impossible to be with God without being in Christ. If a human being somehow managed to be in God’s presence bypassing Christ, that person would be unmade.

The only alternatives I can see to hell are for God to arrange for everyone to accept Christ, or for him to destroy everyone who does not. As you’ll see below, each of these alternatives has its supporters. However most Christians believe that if everyone ends up choosing God, human existence is a sham: God loaded the dice to such an extent that there were no real human decisions. Most Christians also believe that a part of us is immortal. For God to destroy it would be an interference in the created order that would seriously violate its integrity.

Before judging these issues, I’d ask you to look at some additional considerations.

### *Is Hell Unfair?*

The standard Christian position is that anyone who rejects Christ will end up in hell. Does this mean that only Christians can be saved? The Catholic church and many Protestant churches don’t think so. They believe it is possible that Christ can come to someone in an inward and spiritual way, even if they’ve never heard of Christ. Thus someone can be an “anonymous Christian.” That is, they can know Christ spiritually without realizing it is Christ.

Most Christians also believe that God’s judgment will take into account the sorts of opportunities a person had to learn the truth. A person who has never heard the Gospel can’t be said to have rejected Christ. An even worse situation occurs when Christians have persecuted other groups. A person who sees Christ as a persecutor has hardly had a real exposure to the Gospel.

[Historical note: It’s worth noting that two major classical Protestant writers thought it was possible for non-Christians to be saved: Zwingli and Wesley. Calvin did not.]

### *Alternatives to Hell?*

There is a substantial minority view, which says that God will find some way to reach everyone. This is called “universalism”. A few 20th Cent thinkers have also suggested that those who are not destined for heaven are simply destroyed. This is called “annihilationism”.

Most Christians think that both of these alternative views are ruled out by teachings in the Bible. Jesus himself speaks of judgment, and of “Gehenna” and “the outer darkness”.

While most Christians reject universalism and annihilationism as doctrines, many orthodox Christians hold positions that are very close. Let’s look at them briefly:

There is no statement in the Bible about how many will be damned. When someone asks Jesus this, he deflects the question. He does say that the way to salvation is narrow, and that many follow the road to destruction. However we can still hope that in the end God will deflect those on the easy road to destruction. I believe universalism as a doctrine is unorthodox, but hope for all is possible.

A number of orthodox 20th Century writers point out that those who are in hell are not the same kind of people as those in heaven. Human beings are designed to live with God. In heaven our humanity is perfected. Hell is not described in any detail in the Bible. The descriptions that most people hear are based on speculative fiction, such as Dante's. However if humanity is created to be with God, then it is reasonable to believe that those who are finally separated from God in hell are less than fully human. Several writers refer to them as equivalent to "ashes", the remnants of what used to be a human life. Thus we may not have two groups of people living next to each other, with the saved watching the damned living in torture. Hell, whatever it is, has less reality than heaven. This is suggested by Jesus' most common way of referring to it. He calls it Gehenna. This was the garbage pit outside of Jerusalem, although the term also was used in discussions of the last judgment.

### *Could Hitler end up in Heaven?*

Heaven and hell are not a matter of totaling up good deeds and bad deeds and seeing which predominates. From the Christian perspective, if it comes to merit, no one merits heaven, and we've all done enough bad for hell to be justified. However God doesn't want anyone to end up in hell. Anyone who depends upon him for rescue will be saved from hell.

There are several questions that are asked so commonly that I think they're worth looking at here. Here are two examples:

- Could Hitler end up in heaven if he repented at the last minute?
- It seems unfair for God to save people just because they are Christians. There are lots of rotten Christians and lots of good non-Christians.

I'm going to try to deal with that whole class of questions here. Note that in doing so I'm going to make my own opinions a bit more obvious than I do elsewhere in these essays. I am quite sure that there are answers from Catholic and Orthodox perspectives, but I'm not in a position to argue convincingly from those viewpoints.

First, the Bible doesn't give us precise information as to who will end up in heaven or hell. We are warned particularly not to judge other people (except to the extent that we have specific responsibilities for church discipline or as officials involved with the legal system). This means that discussing specific people such as Hitler is dangerous. We don't know what is going on with individuals. Hitler looks particularly evil. But someone completely unremarkable may be just as evil, but may not have had enough political power to have the terrible effect that Hitler did. Perhaps Hitler was completely insane, and not responsible for his actions. (I seriously doubt it, but we don't know for sure what was going on in his heart.)

However more important, I need to warn you that heaven isn't a reward for being good. The basic Protestant model for salvation is as follows:

- God chooses us
- We respond with faith, which basically means that we rely on God for salvation
- God forgives us, and simultaneously starts renewing us and getting rid of our sin

There is certainly a connection between faith and being good: Faith is our side of the bond that connects us to God. God will use that connection to regenerate us and get rid of our sin. The process isn't finished in this life, but it certainly is started. Christians should be better than if they weren't Christians. Jesus said that you will know his followers by the fruit that they bear.

It would be nice if we could say that the best half (or whatever) of mankind are Christians and the worst half are non-Christians. Unfortunately, I'm afraid it isn't going to be quite that neat. Some people become Christians late in their life, and so the process has only started when they die. Some Christians may be in more dangerous positions than non-Christians. Some Christians may have been born with really bad tempers, etc, which makes them look more evil than they actually are.

So I'd say that there should be real evidence of regeneration operating in the lives of Christians, but you shouldn't expect that all the people who look good are Christians and all those who look bad are non-Christians.

Here's one thing to think about: What happens to someone who is relatively good in this life, but who does not have faith? Unfortunately, he may end up in hell. In theory this person could be the best person who ever lived (except Jesus, who was without sin). The problem is that by not having faith, they do not have the connection through which God will take care of their remaining sin. Even though there aren't very many visible problems, they (and the underlying addiction to sin of which they are symptoms) can't be dealt with. Thus this person can't be made fit for heaven.

Now the obvious response to this is: so why shouldn't people just go ahead and be evil, if heaven isn't based on being good? While heaven isn't a reward for reaching a certain quota of good acts, you won't get in unless you have a relationship with God through which you can be renewed. Someone who says "let me be evil for my whole life, and repent at the last minute" almost certainly isn't going to be capable of repenting in any way that does him any good. In having that intention, he has already rejected the kind of faith that is needed for salvation.

Strictly speaking, heaven isn't even a reward for having faith. It's not that God is rewarding you for faith and punishing you for not having faith. Rather, it's that God uses a certain kind of relationship in order to make you fit for heaven. Faith is a key part of that relationship. If you're sloppy about building a bridge it may fall down. Nature isn't consciously punishing you. It's just the way the universe is built. In my view, one of the spiritual laws of the universe is that in order to end up in heaven, you have to have justifying faith (not just intellectual belief in the Trinity – justifying faith means that you rely on and commit yourself to God as your savior).

# Why do Christians Believe This?

Most of this section is a review of the kinds of evidence that Christians typically look to for their beliefs. The second section is more technical. It deals with the role of tradition and the Bible in the Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox branches of Christianity. This is important if you want to understand the way Christians make decisions, and the differences among the three major streams of Christian thought. It is not so important to someone who simply wants to know why people might believe in Christianity in the first place.

## *Revelation*

Christians consider Christianity to be a “revealed” religion. Various Christian traditions differ in how much they believe it is possible to know about God without some special revelation from him. But all agree that we wouldn’t have these beliefs unless God had taken actions to reveal himself to us.

## *Revelation in History*

Revelation occurs in several ways: through events in history, through messages given through specific people, and through God’s influence guiding his people in their choices.

The most visible kind of revelation involves historical events. In ancient Israel these include helping the Jews escape from captivity in Egypt, revealing laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and both the victories and defeats of the nation Israel. At the foundation of Christianity, key historical events center on Jesus’ life: his miraculous birth, the various things he did during his life, his death and resurrection.

Revelation may also take the form of God inspiring people to speak for him. In Israel these people were called “prophets”. Note that a prophet isn’t primarily someone who predicts the future, although often they did. Rather, his primary responsibility is to interpret events, and to deliver messages from God.

## *The Bible and History*

Christianity is to a large extent dependent upon historical events: Its idea of God is based on how God dealt with ancient Israel, on Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and to some extent on later happenings among Jesus’ followers. Being a Christian means (for most of us) being convinced that there really is a God who guided Israel through much of its history, that Jesus really represents him, and that Jesus was really resurrected.

The account of this revelation is contained in the Bible. The Bible is a collection of documents, including history, legends, poetry, letters, and prophecy. The first portion of the Bible is also used by Jews. Christians refer to it as the “Old Testament”. It contains documents from pre-Christian

Judaism. There are slight disagreements among Christians in which documents are included in this section. They correspond to different Jewish usage in Palestine and Greek-speaking areas. The second portion of the Bible contains narrative and letters from Jesus' first-century followers. The Bible contains quite a variety of writing, ranging from love poetry to laws. However its focus is on the story of God's relationship with Israel, on Jesus' life and teachings, and on the way the earliest Christians put them into practice.

For this reason discussions about the truth of Christianity often turn into discussions of the historical credibility of the Bible. There are other issues, of course. They include items such as the logical coherence of the idea of God, various traditional "proofs" of the existence of God, whether the Christian diagnosis of the human predicament looks right, and whether God dying for us is a plausible way out of that predicament.

### *Guidance of the Christian Community*

Revelation may take the form of God guiding the community in its decisions.

All Christians believe that God guides the community in its decisions. However the extent to which this can be said to constitute real revelation is somewhat controversial. All agree that the immediate followers of Jesus, the "Apostles", have a special position. They were taught by Jesus himself, and Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to inspire and guide them. Paul is counted as an Apostle even though he wasn't with Jesus during his ministry. Jesus appeared to him directly and commissioned him.

The New Testament writings were accepted by the early church as having the authority of the Apostles. This doesn't mean that they wrote all the documents themselves. In a number of cases it appears that Gospels, and possibly letters, were written by the next generation of Christians to record what the Apostles taught. For example, the Gospel of Mark was thought to record Peter's teachings, although he didn't actually write it.

All Christians believe that God provided special guidance to the Church during this early period, as it sorted out and recorded Jesus' teachings, the account of his life, and the basic principles for putting his teachings into practice.

In addition to this, the Catholic and Orthodox traditions (which of course cover most of Christianity through most of its history) also believe that the decisions of the Christian community throughout history have been guided by God to the extent that this may be said to constitute revelation. For example, the councils of the 4th and 5th Centuries, which formulated the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation, were guided by God in doing this. (Note however that these doctrines were not invented in the 4th and 5th Centuries. The ideas can be seen much earlier, including the New Testament.)

The writings of early Christian leaders ("the Church Fathers") play a particularly important role here. Catholics and Orthodox believe that the living tradition passed on from the Apostles to their successors contains insights in addition to what are recorded in the Bible. In particular, this living tradition contains the way the early Church interpreted the Bible. Many Protestants also consider the Fathers an important source of guidance on interpretation, but they do not give them the same weight as the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

There is a more complete discussion of these topics at the end of this section, in the parts on Tradition and the role of Scripture in the Protestant Tradition.

### *The Evidence: Historical*

Individual Christians consider different kinds of evidence important. Not all of the evidence is of the sort that would be acceptable to a scientist or historian.

Certainly historical evidence is important to many people. Because Christianity is founded on God's actions in history, it is important for the Biblical accounts to be seen as consistent with archaeological evidence and any other cross-checks that can be made.

Unfortunately the most critical events can't be cross-checked. We don't have the Egyptians' records of being drowned in the Red Sea (no surprise – ancient chronicles normally don't record defeats), nor do we have the Roman or Jewish records of Jesus' trial and the subsequent events. Thus we end up assessing the Biblical records somewhat as we would eye-witness testimony: in terms of its plausibility, whether it is the sort of thing someone would make up, etc. (Note that I am not saying that the Biblical accounts actually are eye-witness testimony. The accounts of Jesus' life appear to have been written by immediate followers of the Apostles. It is likely that they are based on information from the Apostles, but the actual authors are not witnesses.)

There is a large literature doing both of these kinds of evaluations. You'll find some of it at net sites devoted to what is called "apologetics", i.e. to justifying Christianity. Unfortunately it can be difficult from the outsider to tell what is reliable and what is self-serving. The issue is complicated by the fact that scholars within the Christian community sometimes have radical views, which would undermine many of the contents of Christianity.

My personal evaluation of the situation is that the objective evidence checks out about as well as one would expect. Archaeology changes surprisingly fast: while it is based on physical evidence, evaluating that evidence has a surprisingly large subjective component. You will find archaeologists who maintain that none of the events described in the Bible took place or could have taken place.

However I believe that the preponderance of the evidence says that the Old Testament is as reliable an account as any other chronicle from the time, and probably more so than is usual. The normal chronicles were made for a king, and thus tended to omit embarrassing events and exaggerate victories. This is not such a problem for the Bible: they saw defeats as signs of God disciplining his people. Thus they were in a position to face historical events somewhat more honestly.

Similarly, my reading of the New Testament is that the authors were honestly reporting what they believed, and that they were close enough to the events for the results to be reasonably accurate. That does not mean that I think they were perfect. There are many Christians who believe it is important to be able to show that the Bible is perfect. I don't accept that. But I think the kinds of variations we see in different accounts are about what you would expect from people writing several decades after the events, with access to at least some information going back to the participants.



### *The Evidence: Intellectual*

A second consideration that is important to many people is what I would call intellectual evidence. One traditional form is the “proof of God’s existence”. The validity of these proofs is controversial. There are some competent philosophers who believe that there are sound proofs. However I think they are best interpreted as plausibility arguments, not actual proofs.

If you are interested in this sort of thing, Kreeft and Tacelli’s “Handbook of Christian Apologetics” has a good listing of the various proofs, with some evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses. I confess to a total incompetence in philosophy. It all looks like smoke and mirrors to me. Since other smart people seem to think there’s something to them, the safest thing for me is simply to note that they exist, and refer you to other sources.

The second kind of intellectual issue is the coherence of the major doctrines, such as the Incarnation and the Trinity. A number of people, including a few within Christianity, believe that the the basic Christian concepts are incoherent. Depending upon the person, this may include the idea of a God, or specific doctrines such as the Trinity. Attacks on the possibility of God tend to depend upon philosophy. Thus I find them as incomprehensible as the proofs. My impression is that they have been properly answered, but you shouldn’t rely on me for that.

I am more competent to assess the classical doctrines. I believe that the Trinity and Incarnation are both coherent. Unfortunately many explanations you will find from Christians are not (coherent, that is). I try to outline my understanding of them in other essays here. There are more detailed defenses against specific attacks in the FAQ section of the S.R.C. archives, and in the section containing documents I have written.

### *The Evidence: Personal*

In addition to this sort of objective evidence, there is an obvious subjective component to evaluating Christianity. In the end, someone is not likely to become a Christian unless they find that it makes sense from a personal point of view. That is, a person should not become a Christian unless they become convinced that they addicted to sin, and require rescue.

Of course one does not normally reach that point without initially starting to examine Christianity for some other reason. I’ve recently read a study of why Christianity spread in the Roman empire. It appears that people became Christians because Christianity was attractive. Christians showed that they loved and cared for each other and those around them in a way that was apparently unusual for the time. There was a “power” in Christian lives that appeared to be beyond the merely human.

For most Christians, I believe the most important evidence for Christianity is this impression of being involved in something that goes beyond the merely human. For different people, different aspects of Christianity have the most weight:

For some, the history of Israel and Jesus’ life seem to show people being moved in directions that it does not appear they could reasonably have discovered for themselves.

Others see a power at work in their own lives, helping them out in situations which would otherwise be hopeless.

For many, the Christian community seems to embody a spirit that is available nowhere else. For many, this spirit is particularly experienced in Christian worship.

## 2. TRADITION AND SCRIPTURE

### *The Role of Tradition in the Church*

In principle, all important beliefs were known to the Apostles. Thus later revelation primarily takes the form of guiding the Church in its application of those ideas to new problems, and in developing their consequences. In the Catholic and Orthodox tradition, the Church (i.e. the community of believers) are considered to be protected by God against serious, prolonged error. Thus the Church can make decisions that are infallible.

For Catholics, decisions of the Church can sometimes have substantially new content. These are regarded as developments from the original “apostolic deposit of faith” (the ideas revealed to the apostles), but the developments may not be obvious ones. The clearest examples probably involve the role of Mary.

This results in somewhat different concepts of “tradition”, which some recent church historians have called “Tradition 1” and “Tradition 2”. Tradition 1 limits tradition to interpretation and application of ideas known to the Apostles (and, from a practical point of view, present in the Bible). Tradition 2 allows for more development. Tradition 1 is held by the Orthodox, and in a somewhat weaker sense, by some Protestants. Tradition 2 seems to be a development of the medieval Catholic church, and was formalized by Trent for the Catholic church in the 16th Century. Some Protestants appear to hold to “Tradition 0”, i.e. no role for tradition, though in practice almost no one actually acts on this basis.

In many cases, the Church makes decisions in “church councils”. A council is a formal gathering of Christian leaders from around the world. For Catholics, it must be presided over by the Pope, or at least have his authority.

Most Christians accept the authority of roughly the first four “ecumenical councils”. (“ecumenical” means world-wide.) These include the councils that formulated the Trinity and the Incarnation. Protestants do not regard councils as having infallible status, but believe that the early councils did reasonably reliable work.

The Orthodox accept the authority of the ecumenical councils that met before the split between the Catholic and Orthodox (i.e. Western and Eastern) churches. Orthodox generally believe that it would be possible for them alone to hold a council, and it would have the authority of an ecumenical council. However they have not done so. For Orthodox, councils are accepted as ecumenical as the Church comes to acknowledge their decisions as reliable presentations of the unchanging Christian faith. This means that the “laity” (i.e. normal Christians, non-clergy) have an important, though informal, role in determining doctrine.



Catholics have continued to have councils, which they refer to as ecumenical even though no Orthodox or Protestants participated. The most recent was Vatican II.

The Catholic tradition tends to locate the infallibility of the Church more in the hierarchy (i.e. bishops and the Pope) than the Orthodox do. Papal infallibility is the clearest example of this tendency.

The concept of papal infallibility is often misunderstood. It does not mean that everything the Pope does is perfect. Many popes have been seriously flawed. Rather, the belief is that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in such a way that when the Pope makes certain solemn pronouncements in the areas of faith and morals, those pronouncements are infallible. The Pope has this role because he is the one who speaks for the Church as a whole.

This class of pronouncement is referred to as “ex cathedra” (“from the chair”, i.e. the official bishop’s throne). All Catholic scholars agree that there have been two infallible pronouncements. Many have longer lists, up to about 20 items. (Note that there is not an infallible list of infallible pronouncements.) These are in addition to documents produced by church councils. They may also be regarded as infallible. But they are not specifically based on exercise of papal infallibility.

### *The Authority of the Bible in the Protestant tradition*

The Protestant tradition does not accept developments unless they can be traced directly to the Bible. This is referred to as the doctrine of “sola scriptura”, i.e. “the Bible alone”. This is intended as protection against “drift” – picking up ideas from the surrounding culture or from popular superstition. The Bible acts as a standard that can always be used to check any suspicious development.

Here’s a brief justification for why one might give the Bible this role: Christianity claims to be a revealed religion. Furthermore, it claims that this revelation is “public”. That is, it comes from events such as the Exodus and Jesus’ life, which were visible to the entire community and are accessible via history. I believe we can argue that the Bible is the only primary or near-primary source we have for these events of public revelation.

I think many Protestants would agree that in the first Century, one could get as good a picture of Jesus’ life and teachings from hearing the Apostles speak personally, or even those who had known the Apostles. Certainly it is possible in principle that material not present in the Bible was passed on by word of mouth. But there is a limit to how long this may plausibly continue. Do we really believe that there is some key piece of the public revelation that has been passed down secretly from bishop to bishop, and will surface only in the 20th Cent? Through the period of the Borgia popes? I doubt that anyone would seriously claim that.

I’m not sure how long I’m prepared to allow for, but when something first turns up in the 3rd Cent, and then among Gnostics, I do not find it very convincing that this thing is actually part of the original Apostolic message. (I’m thinking here of some of the Marian ideas.) There is a role for interpretation. However that’s not what I’m talking about here. The basic Protestant claim is that the Bible is for all practical purposes identical with the public revelation.

In fact many early Christian writers believed that all major Christian teachings were contained in the Bible, and that doctrine must be based on it. (The FAQ on “sola scriptura” contains a long list of citations from the Fathers supporting this.) Thus in some sense “sola scriptura” could be regarded as a traditional Christian view.

However the early writers also accepted the Church’s authority to interpret the Bible, and believed that it would do so correctly. The Reformation of the 16th Century was based on the perception that the Church had gone astray, and that many of its interpretations of the Bible were implausible and false. When the Bible is turned against tradition, the concept of “sola scriptura” takes on a different nature.

There are, of course, issues that are not dealt with directly in the Bible. These include things such as details of how worship services are conducted. Protestants are expected to follow Biblical guidance where it is available, but they are free to make their own decisions within general Biblical principles on issues not dealt with specifically in the Bible. Such issues are referred to as “adiaphora” (indifferent).

The Bible is interpreted by the community as a whole. Individuals always have a right to demand that the community justify itself in Biblical terms, but individuals are not (in most groups) expected to develop their own private understanding. This means that the term “sola scriptura” can be somewhat misleading. It indicates clearly the fact that the Bible is the final standard. However it does not indicate the role of the community in interpreting the Bible. There is clearly a tension between the individual’s responsibility for understanding the Bible himself, and the community’s role.

This tension is seen by Protestants as a productive one: Tradition and the Bible support each other, and can be used as correctives for different kinds of danger. Tradition (and the community in general) is used to guard against individuals going off the deep end with idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible. The Bible is used to call the community back if it goes adrift. Catholics believe that the second kind of corrective is not needed, because the Holy Spirit will always prevent the community from going seriously adrift.

Different Protestant groups tend to deal with this tension in slightly different ways. The Lutheran and Reformed traditions are “confessional”, meaning that there are theological standards for the church as a whole, referred to as “confessions of faith”. Baptist and most of the traditions that developed in the United States emphasize more strongly the freedom and responsibility of individuals to deal directly with the Bible. In some of these groups the term “tradition” is a dirty word. However in most of them, the community does still have some de facto role in helping individuals avoid idiosyncrasy.

Note that we have a spectrum, with Catholics on one end and Baptists on the other. (I’m using Baptists as stand-ins for the majority of Protestants: those who are outside the confessional churches.) The confessional churches are in the middle.

- The Catholic end emphasizes the value of tradition, believing that the Church can never go astray for a prolonged period on essential matters.
- The Baptist end emphasizes the role of the Bible, believing in the responsibility and freedom of individual believers to confront the Word of God personally.

- The confessional churches accept the role of both tradition and the Bible. They use tradition to restrain individuals from idiosyncrasy, and the Bible to prevent tradition from drifting in the direction of the culture or popular superstition. The Bible has priority. That's the only way it can be used to judge tradition.

### *The Interpretation of Scripture*

Because the Bible is authoritative for Protestants, it becomes important to understand how it is interpreted. Classical Protestantism holds to several basic principles involving the Bible:

- The Bible is inspired.
- The Bible is infallible.
- The Bible is to be interpreted according to its plain sense.
- The Bible interprets itself.
- The Bible is clear on all matters essential to salvation.

All of these claims have become the subject of great controversy in the 20th Century.

The traditional concept is that God inspired the authors of the Bible in such a way that God is responsible for the contents. Most people agree that this does not eliminate the human role. Different books have different styles and perspectives. However the contents are still God's word to us.

Since the Enlightenment the traditional view has come under attack. Some Christians believe that the Bible contains inconsistencies, and that it contradicts both science and history in a few places. The inconsistencies range from disagreements about numbers in parallel passages, to apparent doctrinal differences. The best-known scientific problem concerns the creation accounts. If taken as face value, these appear to contradict the current scientific understanding of origins.

There are certainly intelligent Christians who believe that all of these problems can be dealt with. Thus they continue to maintain a strong view of inspiration, and a fairly literal view of infallibility. While many scholars in both the Protestant and Catholic communities regard this position as untenable, it continues to be the official view in conservative Protestant groups, and has a surprisingly large following among ordinary members even in liberal denominations.

Some qualifications can be made without wholly abandoning the classic Protestant perspective. For example, Calvin suggested (following Augustine) that God "accommodated" his descriptions to human understanding. Thus the creation account was expressed in terms that people at the time would understand, and should not be taken as a complete, scientific description. Following this sort of understanding, many Christians believe that the 7 days of Genesis 1 do not need to be understood as a literal 7 24-hour days. Many Christians believe that it is possible to accept current scientific accounts of creation and evolution, without rejecting the inspiration of the Bible or its doctrinal authority. However this approach is hotly contested by more conservative Protestants.

It also appears that Calvin was not bothered by minor inconsistencies such as the numerical disagreements. He tended to shrug those off as being beside the point. Some Christians believe that the point of the Bible is to tell us about God's acts, and that it is sufficient if the writers were

simply accurate human witnesses. Thus minor disagreements are to be expected, just as they are in any accounts that have passed through human hands. Others maintain that the Bible is God's Word, and that God does not lie. Thus all apparent inconsistencies must have an explanation.

In some cases the explanation may be textual corruption. Those who believe in complete inerrancy generally hold that the original manuscripts were inerrant. It is clear to everyone that the copies we have now have gone through many generations of scribes. They sometimes made copying errors. Thus if one book reports 600 people as being involved in an event and another 6000 people, that is probably a simple copying error.

Now we come to issues of interpretation. The Reformers believed that there was a "plain sense" to Scripture, and that this is clear on all matters essential to salvation. You will hear conservatives saying that they interpret scripture "literally". I use the term "plain sense", because I think it captures the actual approach more accurately. Plain sense means that we look at the meaning of the original languages in the original context, and look at what the authors would reasonably have expected their readers to understand. In simple narratives this is typically a fairly literal meaning. But the Bible certainly contains poetry, metaphors, etc. When Jesus says he is the "door for the sheep", we understand that he isn't saying he is made of wood.

Because knowledge of the original language and historical context is important, Protestants have always encouraged scholarship into the Biblical languages, history, and other related disciplines.

The Reformers acknowledged that the Bible was unclear in some places. However they still believed that the key message God intended to give us was clear. They dealt with problems in several ways. One was the principle that the Bible interprets itself. By this they mean that an unclear passage should be interpreted in the light of other passages that are clearer. Thus the best Biblical exposition does not deal with isolated verses. It is based on study of the whole message and approach of each of the books, as well as studies of how major themes and key words are handled throughout the Bible. This kind of work often allows us to clarify the meaning of passages that would otherwise be mysterious.

In my opinion, much of the disagreement over Biblical interpretation comes from trying to get answers to questions that aren't answered explicitly. For example, the Bible does not tell us whether or not infants are to be baptized. The Bible says many things that are relevant to discussions of this issue, but it does not contain a direct answer to the question. Thus the fact that Protestants don't agree on this issue should not be used to cast doubt on the clarity of Scripture. I believe there is enough information in the Bible about the relationship of children to God that we can make a reasonably reliable conclusion on this topic. However it is obvious that other well-informed Christians disagree with my conclusion. Fortunately, I do not believe that this matter is essential to salvation.

Unfortunately other disagreements in Biblical interpretation seem to result from people reading their own beliefs into the Biblical text. As an example, one of the common items for discussion in [soc.religion.christian](#) is whether Christians need to worship on Saturday (the Sabbath). This is clearly answered, explicitly by Paul several places, and implicitly in Act 15. Similarly, it is clear enough what Paul's attitude towards homosexuality is.

There is one other issue that should be mentioned here, which is how we apply the Bible to our lives. When Christians say that they "take the Bible literally", they generally mean not only that

they accept the Bible as infallible, and interpret it according to its plain sense. Normally they also mean that they carry out its teachings directly.

This claim is one of the most complex to deal with. The underlying question is whether any instructions in the Bible are “culturally relative”, i.e. whether they were intended for the specific situation in the 1st Cent (or earlier times, for the Old Testament), or whether all instructions are intended to apply directly to us.

Most Christians agree that some instructions are intended for specific situations. However generally they are willing to accept such qualifications only when they are explicitly stated. The hottest issue today involving this is homosexuality. While there are debates over the meaning of some of the passages referring to homosexual behavior, I think there is little question that Paul disapproves of it. The most plausible argument for accepting it is that the homosexuality Paul knew was unhealthy. It was often associated with pagan cults, and often involved abuse of minors. Christian homosexuals will try to argue that the relationships they intend are not what Paul was judging. Conservatives are not prepared to accept such qualifications.

The problem is that similar arguments are accepted in other areas. The New Testament is clear in its condemnation of tax collectors. Nowhere is it explicitly said that this is only because they are dishonest. Yet it is clear to most Christians that the New Testament attitude towards tax collectors does not necessarily apply to all employees of modern tax collection agencies. Similarly, Biblical condemnation against taking interest on loans is no longer seen as applicable.

I believe it is possible to resolve these kinds of problems. But their resolution is going to require looking beyond the passages cited. In dealing with homosexuality, one needs to look at the general Biblical treatment of sex and marriage, as well as the status for Christians of Old Testament rules about homosexual behavior. “Taking the Bible literally” is an oversimplification.

# What is the Church?

This section has three major sections. The first two review the Catholic and then the Protestant perspectives on the Church. The third section deals with the question of why there are so many churches.

The term “Church” is used by Christians in two different, but closely related, ways. It can refer to all of Jesus’ followers, viewed as a community. It can also refer to specific institutions, either the local congregation or a national or international body. It can even be used to refer to the building in which they meet.

The Church is important, because God does not save people in isolation. An important part of what needs to be restored is our relationship with other people. That can only be done by the community as a whole.

God most often reaches us through other people. Mother Theresa’s statements about seeing God in the poor are just one example of a more general Christian principle. Because a large part of our problem is self-centeredness, a large part of the remedy is to learn to depend upon other people, to represent Christ to them and allow Christ to speak to us through them.

The Church is also the group with which we worship. As such it has the responsibility to preach the Word of God, and to administer the sacraments. (See the section on worship for a discussion of the sacraments.) These are critical elements in maintaining our fellowship with God and each other.

The Church also has a responsibility to encourage its members to make spiritual progress, and to show their faith by their behavior, both through their ethics and their good works. This responsibility includes administering brotherly correction when someone errs. Traditionally the Church has felt a responsibility to discipline, and if necessary exclude, members whose public lives are not in keeping with the message of Christianity. Not all churches are equally careful about carrying this out. It is in fact one of the more difficult responsibilities to get right. It is very, very easy for Church discipline to lead to self-righteousness and intolerance.

Jesus referred to the Christian community with several metaphors. In one he said that he was the vine, and all of his followers are the branches. In another, he referred to the church as his body. All of these images emphasized that his followers are spiritually united with him and with each other. One of the major problems today is that this union is not completely reflected in the way Christians act.

In this section, I will normally be using the term “Church” to refer to the universal Church. However I will sometimes use it to refer to individual communions such as the Catholic Church.



## I. THE CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

The Catholic and Orthodox traditions see the church as the successor to the “Apostles” (Jesus’ original followers). Jesus gave the apostles authority to lead the community and make decisions for them. He also gave an assurance that the community would be guided by the Holy Spirit, and would be protected.

### *Organization*

By the end of the 1st Century, authority in the Church centered on bishops. Bishops were seen as successors to the Apostles. Bishops are consecrated by other bishops (normally at least three). So in principle every bishop can trace their authority back through an unbroken line of consecrations to the Apostles, and then Christ. This is referred to as the “Apostolic succession”.

Currently bishops are normally responsible for a city and the surrounding territory. Of course the exact area depends upon population density and other considerations.

Bishops have several different kinds of authority and responsibility. They have the responsibility for maintaining proper doctrine in the area for which they are responsible. They are responsible for the proper conduct of the sacraments. They normally conduct certain sacraments (e.g. confirmation) personally. In other cases they delegate the authority to priests.

During the first few centuries, certain bishops developed greater prestige than others. This was often because of the history or role of their cities. The bishops of these key cities have special leadership responsibilities. In the East, they are referred to as “patriarchs”. In the West, the bishop of Rome is regarded as the preeminent bishop. He is normally referred to as the “Pope”. (Note that “pope” is another word for patriarch. In principle any patriarch can be referred to as a pope. However currently this would be so confusing that the term pope is normally reserved for the bishop of Rome.)

The Pope has two conceptually separate roles: First, he is the patriarch of the Roman Catholic Church. As such, he is ultimately responsible for everything that happens in that communion. He makes key appointments and decisions, and can review any action.

In the Catholic tradition, the Pope is also seen as the spokesman for the Church as a whole. He has a special responsibility for maintaining proper doctrine and morals. As part of this responsibility, he or his representative chairs all ecumenical councils. He may also make authoritative doctrinal decisions on his own authority. Of course this authority comes from Christ. See the discussion below of Papal infallibility.

In principle the second role gives him leadership responsibilities over churches other than the Roman Catholic Church, i.e. churches of which he is not the patriarch. In such churches the Pope would not directly govern, but they would still be subject to his overall doctrinal leadership. There are a few Eastern churches that accept this concept. (They are often referred to as “uniat” churches.) However the major Orthodox churches do not accept the Pope’s idea of universal leadership. Many of them would accept him in some role of spokesman. But generally they do not accept papal infallibility, and they also believe that he has often attempted to make decisions for other churches that are properly the responsibility of their own leadership.

The Catholic and Orthodox traditions emphasize continuity in doctrine and in worship. Please see the latter parts of *Why do Christians Believe This?* for the role of tradition in developing and stabilizing doctrine. The bishops have a primary role as carriers of the tradition. They are expected to hold to the original faith as given to the Apostles, and also to work together and with the Pope (or all the patriarchs, for the Orthodox) to maintain common doctrine and practice throughout the Church.

The office of priest developed slightly later. Originally they were seen primarily as assistants to the bishop. Priests are typically responsible for an individual congregation or church. This isn't exact: Larger churches may have more than one, and sometimes a single priest may have more than one church. The priest is responsible for guiding the life of the congregation, and for conducting most normal sacraments. Priests are ordained by bishops.

Certain of the sacraments (e.g. communion) may only be performed by a priest or bishop. This is not just an issue of who has permission to do it. At ordination, a priest receives spiritual authority. Without that authority, the transformation of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood in communion will not occur.

### *Authority*

Two distinguishing characteristics of the Catholic Church are its concept of teaching authority, and its approach to church discipline.

Catholics believe that the Church was given authority by Christ to make decisions. These include both doctrinal and moral issues. This authority is lodged primarily in the bishops and the Pope. In appropriate circumstances, their decisions can be infallible. The teaching authority of the Church is referred to as the "magisterium". Catholic writers sometimes distinguish between the "ordinary magisterium" and infallible teaching.

The ordinary magisterium is the teaching responsibility as carried out through ordinary preaching and catechesis, as well as through specific pronouncements such as encyclicals and pastoral letters. Although teachings of the ordinary magisterium are not exactly infallible, they are part of a process that is guided by the Holy Spirit. Thus it is expected that Catholics will receive such teaching as authoritative.

Catholics also believe that it is possible for the Church to make infallible decisions. There are two ways of doing this: an ecumenical council, and a direct papal decision. When an ecumenical council makes doctrinal decisions, in union with the pope, they may be infallible. In addition to this, the pope himself may make infallible decisions.

The concept of papal infallibility is often misunderstood. It does not mean that everything the Pope does is perfect. Many popes have been seriously flawed. Rather, the belief is that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in such a way that when the Pope makes certain solemn pronouncements in the areas of faith and morals, those pronouncements are infallible. The Pope has this role because he is the one who speaks for the Church as a whole.

This class of pronouncement is referred to as "ex cathedra" ("from the chair", i.e. the official bishop's throne). All Catholic scholars agree that there have been two infallible pronouncements.



Many have longer lists, up to about 20 items. (Note that there is not an infallible list of infallible pronouncements.) These are in addition to documents produced by church councils. They may also be regarded as infallible. But they are not specifically based on exercise of papal infallibility.

Historically, Catholics have been very concerned about maintaining high moral standards among their members. Members are required to confess their sins to a priest. The priest is expected to provide both spiritual and ethical guidance.

The Catholic church has a set of rules describing the way it functions. These rules also cover a variety of moral issues, as well as procedures for marriage and other church activities. This is referred to as “canon law”. The most complex and problematical parts tend to focus on sexual matters, particularly on the regulation of marriage and annulment.

### *Marks of the Church*

For the Catholic tradition the key marks of the Church are defined by four phrases used in the Apostles’ creed: It is the one, holy, Catholic, and Apostolic church.

The term “Catholic” means “universal”. The Church is universal, and it is one. Its doctrines can be traced to the Apostles.

Of course there is some question how literally the Church can be said to be one at the moment. There are at least three major branches of the Church. However both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions believe that they maintain the full continuity with the original Apostles, and thus that in some sense the entire body of Christ is centered in their community. Other Christians participate in this unity in an incomplete sense.

## II. THE PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

For Protestants, these issues are more complex, because there are more Protestant churches. See below for the question “Why are there so many Churches?”.

Protestants tend to distinguish between the Church as the universal body of Christ and individual organizations. To avoid confusion, the individual organizations are often referred to as “denominations”. Protestants also accept the Apostles’ creed, so they agree that the Church is one and universal. However they tend to see its unity and universality as being a spiritual matter. It is a consequence of our unity in Christ. It need not be reflected in a single organization.

### *Organization*

In general Protestants vary a lot in the way that their churches are organized. There is far more variation here than in beliefs and practices. Many Protestants would say that a single scheme of church organization is not described in the Bible, although certain guiding principles are given. This leaves individual churches free to adopt different patterns.

Protestant churches may be classified on a spectrum with “connectional” churches on one end and “congregational” churches on the other end. In connectional churches, there are national

and regional bodies, which have a good deal of authority. Quite often higher-level bodies review what lower bodies do, and can take action to overrule them. In the Presbyterian Church, it is possible for a Presbytery to unseat the Session (governing board) of a local church, and appoint its own governing board. This is typically done in a situation where there is a conflict within the local church that it does not appear the church can handle for itself. In some connectional churches (e.g. the Methodists), pastors are assigned to local churches by a central authority (in this case the bishop).

In congregational churches, each congregation is independent. They call their own pastor and make their own decisions. No higher level body can intervene. Many congregational churches still have national and regional organizations. They coordinate programs that require cooperation beyond a single congregation, e.g. sending missionaries, preparing Sunday School curriculum material, and running seminaries (colleges for training pastors). However a few traditions (particularly more conservative portions of the Church of Christ) do not believe that any higher level body is permissible, even for voluntary cooperation.

There is quite a variety of patterns between these two extremes.

Protestant Churches base their organization on a few common patterns. Many Protestant churches have bishops. Except in a few cases (Anglicans, Lutherans in Scandinavia), these bishops do not have the Apostolic succession. They are simply elected by the church as leaders. Thus these bishops are sometimes called “titular bishops”, to distinguish them from canonical bishops that do have the Apostolic succession. In general the Lutheran and Methodist traditions include bishops. Since the Pentecostal and Holiness churches are developments from the Methodists, they often have bishops as well.

Almost all Protestant churches have elected leaders. Normally there is a governing board of some sort for the local church. For connectional denominations, the national and regional levels also have elected groups that function more or less as legislatures. (The U.S. government is modeled after Presbyterian church government.) Clergy and bishops (if any) normally serve in these bodies, either as part of a single body or (in a few churches) as a separate “house”, like the Senate and House of Representatives.

Protestant Churches try to base their church organization on the Bible. While the Bible doesn’t give a specific plan of government, several offices are referred to. These include deacon, elder, bishop, and apostle. Not all churches use all offices. Most churches believe that the office of apostle applied only to Christ’s followers, and that there are no longer apostles. Some identify two offices, or split a single office into two variants.

In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, there is a clear distinction between “lay people” and “clergy”: clergy have been ordained. Ordination is a sacrament, which imparts a permanent metaphysical mark on the soul. Clergy include bishops and priests, and in some sense also permanent deacons.

For Protestants, this sort of distinction is not as clear. Protestants do have leaders that more or less correspond to priests. They are commonly called pastors or ministers, though a few Protestant groups use the term “priest”. Pastors commonly have special education, either a graduate degree or training at a Bible college. They are commonly full-time. They are normally ordained. That

means that they are set apart in a special ceremony, and that they have the authority to celebrate baptism and communion.

However for Protestants, ordination doesn't confer any special metaphysical powers. The fact that only pastors lead in a communion service is a matter of church order. It is not – as in the Catholic tradition – that only they have the power to make bread and wine change into Christ's body and blood.

Protestants often use the term “lay” to refer to everyone other than pastors, although it's not clear to me that the lay/clergy distinction is actually consistent with Protestant theory. In all Protestant churches that I know, each congregation has lay leaders that serve alongside the pastors. Their exact relationship varies by denomination. However the lay leadership tends to have a stronger role for Protestant churches than for Catholic ones.

The exact set of lay leaders varies. However one common pattern has deacons and elders. In this pattern the deacons are typically responsible for charitable activities, and elders for policy decisions. However not all churches use both deacons and elders.

In the Reformed tradition (which includes Presbyterians), all leaders are ordained. Since the distinction between lay and clergy was traditionally ordination, in some sense this means that Reformed churches have no lay leadership. However for most purposes Reformed deacons and elders are thought of as lay: they are not full-time positions. The positions tend to rotate among the active members of the congregation.

### *Authority*

Protestants do not believe that the Church is infallible. Indeed they believe that it has made errors. They do accept that the Holy Spirit guides it. However since the Church is made up of human beings, it may take wrong turns and have to be corrected or renewed.

Since they believe that organizations and leaders may go astray, organizational continuity is not as important. Protestants are primarily concerned with whether a group's views and practices are consistent with the Bible, and to a lesser extent with the early Church. This has more importance than whether a group can show that its leaders trace their pedigrees back through a continuous set of bishops to the Apostles.

Protestants do not place as much emphasis on either the Church as an organization or on the authority of its leaders. They see the Christian community as important. But they are not convinced that the sort of authority Catholics and Orthodox lodge in the leadership has justification in the Bible, nor that it has worked out well. Indeed Protestants tend to see the Catholic hierarchy and canon law as being very similar to the Jewish leaders and legal tradition which Jesus opposed.

Protestants do not normally confess their sins directly to a pastor. This means that they do not have the same kind of detailed supervision of their lives that Catholics do. This is one reason that there is no need for canon law: the moral components of canon law evolved to guide priests as they supervised their members' lives.

There are clearly advantages and disadvantages to each approach. At its worst, the Catholic approach can turn into barren legalism. Personal reports from Catholic friends suggest that it may also lead to dishonesty. (I'm told that it is very naive for me to assume that all Catholics confess to the priest honestly.) However Protestant practice runs the risk of encouraging members to be morally lax. The detailed supervision provided by regular confession is one of the primary methods of accountability. To replace this, many Protestant groups encourage members to meet together in small groups or as partners. In these groups they are expected to share enough about their lives that they can hold each other accountable before God.

### *Marks of the Church*

Protestants also accept the characterization of the Church as one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic. However when Protestants say they believe in the holy catholic Church, they are using the term "catholic" in its original meaning of "universal". That is, they are pointing to the fact that all Christians are united because of our common relationship with Christ. Protestants do not identify the unity of the Church with a single organization such as the Catholic Church. Indeed they find that whole approach odd, given that there are now at least two major groups claiming to be identical with the universal church: the Catholics and the Orthodox. (Some other groups make this claim as well, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses.)

Protestants traditionally have identified two or three key marks of a true church. Most Protestant writers believe that in order to have a true church, the Gospel must be properly proclaimed, and the sacraments properly administered. By proper, it is normally meant that all the essential Scriptural aspects of the Gospel are preached, and that it is not adulterated by other things. Similarly, the sacraments are administered as they are defined in the Bible, and they are not combined with superstitions or other improper additions. Some writers identify church discipline as a third essential mark of a true church. However others regard it as important but not essential. That is, they would not reject a church as being a true church because it has not managing to maintain discipline among all its members.

### III. WHY ARE THERE SO MANY CHURCHES?

Because people are imperfect. The ideal that Jesus taught was very clear: All of his followers were to form a single community, united in him. He used the image of a vine and its branches.

Unfortunately Christians have often been unable to agree on matters of belief and practice. In many cases the disagreements have been serious enough that it would be difficult for both approaches to coexist. Thus it has often been necessary for the groups to separate.

### *Multiple Churches Do Not Always Reflect Serious Disagreements*

The differences are often exaggerated. The first thing to note is that not all churches were founded because of disagreement. Many Christians consider the basic unit of Christian action to be the individual congregation. Larger bodies, such as national churches, exist as a matter of convenience, to help congregations do things that require cooperation. Thus many Protestants do not particularly want a single, huge organization that includes all Christians. For those who

take this approach, the unity of that Jesus was talking about is a spiritual one, not a bureaucratic one.

The second thing to note is that disagreements among Christians are usually over details of how we go about implementing Jesus' teachings. There is agreement about many beliefs and practice. Thus books such as C. S. Lewis' "Mere Christianity", or Kreeft and Tacelli's "Handbook of Christian Apologetics" can contain fairly substantial presentations of Christian beliefs that would be acceptable to just about all Christians.

In my opinion the most significant differences within Christianity fall into three categories: marginal groups; the long-standing differences among Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox; and the reaction to liberalism.

### *Marginal Groups*

This document tries to present a "generic" Christian viewpoint, which would be acceptable to most Christians. However there are a few groups whose ideas are far enough away from the mainstream that it is nearly impossible to include them and still say anything of substance. In general I classify a group as "marginal" when it rejects major doctrines such as the Trinity or Incarnation. As far as I know, all groups that do this also differ from the mainstream in significant issues of practice as well.

The best-known groups of this sort are the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. Both of them differ significantly with the mainstream on the nature of God and Jesus. The Mormons are large enough (and are growing fast enough) to be a significant force. There are a number of smaller groups with similar properties. A number of people who reject the Trinity are active on the Internet. This tends to make it appear that there is more opposition to common doctrines such as the Trinity than actually exists.

### *The Major Groupings: Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox*

The second major division in Christianity involves the three major groupings: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. As the Roman empire disintegrated, the Church divided into Eastern and Western portions. In my opinion, this was a consequence of the difficulty in communication and transportation. There simply wasn't good enough coordination to deal with differences as they began to develop. Although there were few major differences in theology, there were differences in emphasis. The East also objected to the growing power of the Pope. As a result, Eastern and Western Christianity split into what is now referred as Orthodox (Eastern) and Catholic (Western) branches. These groups are still separate, although generally they acknowledge the validity of each other's sacraments, and agree on most of the key doctrines.

In the 16th Century, the Western church split further into Catholic and Protestant streams. Protestants believed that the church had slowly drifted from Jesus' intentions. Major issues involved the nature and authority of the hierarchy, the differences in role between clergy and ordinary Christians, and what Protestants saw as superstitious or unjustified practices in worship. The Anglicans could be regarded as a separate stream. They combine some of the emphases of Catholic and Protestant thought, and sometimes try to mediate between them.

The Protestant branch has further fragmented, with a dozen or so significant schools of thought, and innumerable individual churches. The peak of this fragmentation seems to have been in the 19th Century. Most of the current schools of thought appeared then, and there have been few major new ones in the 20th Cent. In the 20th Century, a few of the larger groups have reunited. There is also a growing degree of cooperation among the different groups. As mentioned above, many Protestants do not regard it as important to create a single organization. They see that as likely to create a hierarchy that is out of touch with the needs of the people, and as requiring compromises that would result in a watered-down, “lowest-common denominator” theology. Thus most Protestants now see Christian unity as being founded in a common relationship in Christ, and expressed in mutual respect and cooperative activity, but not in a single organization.

For Catholics and Orthodox, this situation is a serious problem. They see the Church as an organic whole, with an organizational unity that reflects our spiritual union in Christ.

### *Controversies over Liberalism*

The third major division is over what I am calling “liberalism”. The church has been challenged by a number of different trends, all of which could lead to major changes in belief and practice. Among these are

- Scholarship that challenges traditional assertions about the Bible. This includes attacks on its consistency, authorship, and accuracy.
- Attacks on the coherence of major Christian doctrines such as the Trinity and Incarnation, and claims that these doctrines are not properly grounded on Biblical or other evidence.
- Demands to relax ethical standards, particularly in the area of sexual ethics.

These attacks tend to go together. While it is not always the case, those that maintain a high concept of the Bible tend also to hold to the traditional doctrines and ethics.

It is beyond the scope of this document to deal with these in detail. I will observe that these issues tend to cut across the historical lines. There are liberals and conservatives among both Protestants and Catholics. Individual Protestant groups tend to have a specific place in the liberal/conservative spectrum. Indeed many of the groups have been created by disagreement over these issues. However as new issues come up, there is normally a significant spread of opinion within each group.

Almost all Christian groups have rejected the extremes of liberalism. There is a fairly clear pattern that the more liberal groups are unable to retain their members. There is a fairly consistent tendency for members to be more moderate than their leaders, in both directions. In the more liberal Protestant groups, members tend to be upset about the attitudes of leaders towards the Bible and ethics. In the more conservative groups, survey results suggest that members have a tendency to ignore some of the more strict positions on ethics, and to be skeptical of theological positions such as those that condemn all non-Christians to hell.



# The Christian Life

In this section I am going to attempt to describe the day to day Christian life. Aspects are dealt with in other sections, such as ethics (“the Law”) and the showing of love. The section on worship describes a key public element of the Christian life. The focus here will be on the personal aspects. It is clearly a hopeless task to give a complete treatment in a single section. There is simply more material than I can possibly do justice to. But I hope I can give you at least a taste of what is involved.

The Christian life involves a number of different aspects. Among the key ones are

- Fellowship with God
- Our relationships with others
- Obedience to God’s commands
- Discipline

Many of these things are less visible and harder to talk about than other topics in these essays. However for most Christians they are most important. It is easy to talk about the Trinity, the appropriateness of baptizing infants, Catholic/Protestant differences about justification, and all the rest. The religion newsgroups are filled with such discussion. More conventional news is full of the political side, such as abortion and the rights of homosexuals.

But being a disciple of Jesus is primarily shown in less exciting and visible things, such as learning to live with others, the discipline of daily prayer life, fighting urges for anger, and maintaining sexual purity. These things are largely common to Christians from all traditions.

## *The Goal*

Christianity is about personal relationships: with God and with others. When Jesus was asked to summarize his religion, he said that it was loving God and our neighbor. Everything else is a means to that end.

This section will discuss a number of specific techniques, including difficult practices such as repentance and self-discipline. I am concerned that the overall impact may be to make Christianity look like an unpleasant or dreary religion. It is not. The techniques I discuss here are means to an end. They are intended to promote growth, healing, and reconciliation. However the reason we discipline ourselves and all the rest is to improve the quality of our relationships with God and with other people.

This issue is dealt with clearly in the following passage from one of Paul’s letters in the Bible:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.



One of the most important terms for Christians is “fellowship”. This term covers our life together as Christians. This means first of all that we spend time together, in worship, educational activities, service to others, and just having fun. In addition to their primary goal, these activities help us get to know each other, and to develop into a community. The Bible refers to the Christian community using organic metaphors, such as a vine and a body. It talks about us sharing with each other and supporting each other.

When people think of Christianity they sometimes think of it as a set of prohibitions: “Why do Baptists not have sex standing up? Because it might lead to dancing.” Fortunately, this is a joke. However sometimes Christians actually have gotten carried away with rules. Rules of behavior have turned into an end in themselves, rather than ways of protecting us so that we can develop better relationships. However good sense normally prevails in the end.

While rules should never be the focus of Christian life, they do exist. Many people find it hard to understand any kind of self-discipline and any kind of limits on behavior. But Christians do avoid some things in order to allow a deeper and more joyful kind of fellowship. The specific things they avoid will tend to vary over time, depending upon the circumstances. The joke above refers to the fact that at one time a number of Christian groups were opposed to dancing. At that time, the dances had become very sexually suggestive. Thus some Christians saw dancing as an occasion for men to see women as sex objects, rather than an opportunity to develop the sort of fellowship Christians want.

### *The Challenge of Sin*

I believe that we would be involved in a process of growth and discovery even in a world without sin. However this is not such a world. Because of our inborn tendencies to sin, this process is also one of recovery from sin. As such it involves repentance (acknowledge of sin and turning away from it), healing, and reconciliation with both God and those around us. In Protestant theology this process is known as “sanctification”, which means a growth in holiness.

The dangers of sin cause the whole process to be both more difficult and more dangerous than it otherwise would be. Because sin is deeply rooted, a growth in holiness involves a complete reorientation of our selves. Christian teaching and experience both see this process as like death and rebirth. In defeating sin, we are killing a part of ourselves, which the Bible calls the “old man”.

This means that the process must be a disciplined one. I do not want to imply that it is unpleasant to be a Christian. There are many joys to be found. However like training to be an athlete (an analogy used in the New Testament, by the way), there is “no gain without pain”. We have a regular job of looking at the messes we’ve made recently, and getting God’s help to do something about them. This is a process that almost no one can maintain without discipline: regular scheduling, and some method of accountability.

Catholic tradition identifies seven particularly troublesome classes of sins (the “seven deadly sins”): They are pride, covetousness, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and sloth. While no one is safe from any of these, those that pose the greatest challenge to the disciplined Christian life are almost certainly pride and sloth.

## MAJOR COMPONENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

### *Prayer*

Among the major components of the Christian life are prayer, repentance, discipline, study, service, and evangelism.

Jesus' life and teachings make it clear how important prayer is. In the Gospels, he is continually described as praying, particularly when things got difficult. Among the things Jesus said about prayer:

- It should be from the heart. God isn't impressed by long-winded or impressive prayers.
- Personal prayers should be in secret.
- Prayer is the necessary preparation for just about everything else.
- Your prayer won't be heard unless you've forgiven those who have wronged you.

Christianity is about personal relationships: with God as our father, with Jesus, with our family and friends, and even with enemies. Relationships are based on communication. Since prayer is the primary means of communicating with God, it is the basis for our relationship with him.

There are several kinds of prayer. One classification is by where they are done: public, family, and personal. All are important. In the section on worship I discuss prayers as part of worship. Jesus characterized the Jerusalem temple as a house of prayer. This shows the importance of prayer in worship. However Jesus also prayed with his disciples, and he often withdrew to a private place for personal prayer.

For Christians, the prototypical prayer is the Lord's prayer. Jesus taught this in response to a question from his disciples about how to pray. Here it is in the King James version:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

The last clause ("for thine is the kingdom...") is not present in the earliest manuscripts, and thus is omitted in more recent translations.

This prayer is used commonly both in public worship and in private prayer. It has the key elements of prayer, which are summarized by the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. I have commented on these elements already in the section on worship.

People will sometimes ask why we need to pray, since God knows everything about us already. That might be true if the only purpose of prayer was to get God to do what we want. But it isn't. Sometimes what we want isn't quite right. In that case prayer may help us come to understand what God's will is. Sometimes we need guidance.

There is a difference between God simply doing something, and doing it in the context of prayer. Doing it when we have asked for it makes it part of our relationship with him. This is true even when dealing with other people. Often we can see something about a friend. But until they're willing to talk with us about it, anything we do is going to be somewhat impersonal, and not part of our relationship with them.

I believe it is for reasons like this that God often will not act until we've asked him for something. In fact prayer is a great privilege. It allows us to be part of God's work.

Of course prayer is not always a request for God to do something. Its most important effect is generally on us. Prayer is a way for God to lead us to understanding and to change.

### *Repentance*

The term "repent" means "to turn around". It is our response when we realize that we have done something wrong, or when we recognize an attitude or approach that is not in line with what God would have.

Repentance is important because we are imperfect. One of the major goals for Christian life is to weaken the hold of sin on us, and to bring our lives into line with God's will for us. It would be wonderful to think that we make regular progress, without setbacks. But much of our growth occurs when we realize we've done something wrong, or that there is something that we need to change.

In repentance, we evaluate our lives in light of God's standards, and take the necessary action. In different Christian traditions, there are somewhat different ways of doing this. For Catholics, the sacrament of penance (or in more modern language: reconciliation) provides a structured environment where a priest helps us review our actions and motivations. For Protestants, repentance is often done in the context of private reflection and prayer, although many also use small groups or partners to help provide some structure.

Whatever method is used, we must do our best to bring to mind everything we have done wrong. This includes both things we did that we shouldn't have, and things we should have done and didn't. As Jesus pointed out, these include not just physical actions, but attitudes. Seeing another person as a sex object can be just as harmful to us as actually having illicit sex.

These sins create problems both in our relationship with God and with anyone else who is involved. Thus we have to deal with both aspects. This means that we are expected to confess all of our sins to God, ask for his forgiveness, and also request his help in avoiding the same sin in the future. We will also need to ask for forgiveness from anyone we have harmed, and make whatever amends we can.

Avoiding the sin in the future is likely to require change. It may be changes in attitude, in approach, in behavior, or simply avoiding certain kinds of situations where we know we are likely to fall into old patterns of behavior.

## *Discipline*

Christian life doesn't happen by accident. It requires planning and a consistent approach. Repentance is particularly difficult for most of us. We find it difficult to face our faults, and also to admit them to others. This means that if we don't take specific precautions, we're likely to "forget" to do it. These precautions are referred to as "discipline". In this section I'm speaking of self-discipline, not disciplinary action which a church may take against an offending member.

There are a number of different approaches to discipline. Most of them are based on regular scheduling. Christians generally set aside specific times each day for prayer and study, both individually and as a family. These times should include a serious review of our lives, so that we can recognize when we need to repent. They should include prayer. They should normally include some kind of study or opportunity for growth. For Protestants this normally means systematic Bible study, and often some other kind of devotional reading. There are a number of publications (including web pages) intended to provide daily devotional readings for this purpose.

Many Christian groups advocate practices aimed at something I'm going to call "accountability". The concern is that it is easy to become lax in carrying out the sort of pattern described above. Or we may not be sufficiently critical in our self-review. Thus it is often best to provide some objective control on the process.

The traditional Catholic approach to accountability is individual confession to a priest. By involving another person, we make it less likely that we'll slack off. Priests are also trained as spiritual counselors. Thus they may provide guidance in dealing with any problems, and in deciding how to carry out the necessary changes. Like any other method, this may work well or poorly, depending upon how it is done. It will work well if it is done regularly, with a well-trained priest, and if there is honesty on both sides. If it is done just a couple of times a year, and if the approach is superficial, it is probably not sufficient to create accountability.

Protestants typically do not use formal confession, for historical reasons that are beyond the scope of this section. However Protestant pastors are still available as counselors. Thus they may play some of the same role as a Catholic priest. I know of two major tools used by Protestants for accountability. One is a journal. The other is prayer groups and partnerships.

Spiritual journals seem to have been a specialty of the Puritans. However they are used by others as well. They can be a significant help in maintaining discipline and consistency.

The other major tool is prayer groups and partnerships. As with other tools, the key is meeting regularly, and sharing enough about your spiritual progress that each of you can gauge what is really going on, and help each other. This means that you will need to talk about your prayer life, your failures and successes, and generally what is happening in your life. It will require openness, honesty, and a willingness to probe enough to get the necessary detail. The term "accountability partner" is currently being used to describe this sort of relationship.

There is one other aspect to discipline: ascetic disciplines such as fasting. Most traditions have recommended voluntarily abstaining from certain kinds of pleasure. This is done because Christians recognize that the desire for ease or pleasure is one of the things that often leads to sin. Periodically refusing some particular pleasure can be useful as a technique to avoid falling into this kind of sin.

The most common ascetic discipline is fasting. Strictly speaking, fasting means abstaining from all food. However more commonly fasts are partial. They involve abstaining from meat, or eating less than usual. There are specific periods of the year when fasting is traditionally done. The most important is Lent, the period of time before Easter. Originally Advent, the period before Christmas, was also a period of fasting. Fridays have often been observed as partial fasts.

While fasting is the most common ascetic discipline, Christians may also abstain from other kinds of pleasure. In addition to the periods of fasting listed above, other fasts or types of abstinence may be used by individuals, communities, or nations. Often this is done as a way to help deal with a particular sin, either personal or communal.

## *Study*

Study is a part of Christian life, because spiritual growth is one of the main goals. This study can take a number of forms.

For Protestants, the most visible study has always been Bible study. This includes both individual reading of the Bible, and group studies. Bible study is often done using some systematic plan, that guarantees coverage of the whole Biblical message. While there can certainly be academic study of the Bible, the sort of Bible study I'm talking about here is primarily devotional. An individual or group will take a passage from the Bible, look at its meaning in the original context, and then see how it might apply to them. This sort of devotional Bible study has been one of the major tools for growth and change. I've often heard it said that one of the best ways to get a church moving is to do a serious study of the Acts.

Of course other sorts of study are also possible. It's common for individuals and groups to study particular books, or to look at topical issues.

In addition to this sort of study, which is primarily devotional, it's worth mentioning Christian education and new member education.

"Christian education" refers to education done by churches about the Christian faith, Church history, ethics, and other topics which are important for Christians. In principle all Christians should be involved in Christian education. However it is most consistently done for children, particularly before "confirmation" or its equivalent. In the 20th Century, this education is commonly done on Sunday, in conjunction with the regular worship service. This is called "Sunday school". Of course where children attend schools run by the church, Christian education should be integrated into the normal curriculum.

There is a specific responsibility to educate new members. The term "catechesis" is used to refer to the education of new members. Similarly, the course of study for new members is often called a "catechism". In most churches, when an adult wishes to join the church, they are first asked to attend a set of classes covering basics of the Christian faith, as well as practical matters about how the particular church operates. The Roman Catholic Church has a particularly rigorous process of education for adult converts.

In most churches, children growing up in the church are at some point asked to make a commitment. Catholics regard this as the sacrament of "confirmation". This term is often used

by Protestants, even when they don't regard it as a sacrament. For Baptist churches, baptism plays a similar role. In preparation for making this commitment, children are normally involved in special education. In many traditions this is referred to as "confirmation class".

### *Service*

The discussion so far has focused inward, on actions that are primarily concerned with the spiritual life of an individual or group. However Christians are also committed to serving others. Jesus indicated that the primary way of judging someone's spiritual state was by looking at what they did.

This section is somewhat abbreviated, because Christian service is dealt with in two other sections, on the Law and showing love.

Those sections deal primarily with individual ethics and behavior. It's worth noting here that the Christian life includes everything that a Christian does. There are certain aspects of life that are specifically Christians, such as worship and prayer. However the Christian life also includes the way you do your job, and the way you treat your friends and family.

The term "vocation" is used to refer to your "job". This term has become watered down by overuse. Now that secular schools have "vocational guidance", people have come to think of the term vocation as meaning simply the work you do for a living.

However originally it was a theological term. Vocation comes from the Latin word meaning "call". Christians believe that God has a plan for each of us. This includes our daily work. Thus that work is seen as a calling from God. At least in Protestant theory, all honest work is an opportunity to serve God and our fellows. Being a humble laborer is just as much a vocation as being a pastor.

God knows what is best for us. Indeed most Christians believe that he has a specific intention for our lives. This means that when we have significant decisions to make, Christians will try to find God's will. Two of the most important places where we try to find God's will are in choice of husband or wife, and choice of vocation (except in cultures where they are chosen by parents). Christians will pray carefully about decisions of this kind. They will also consult with those who know them well (e.g. parents, friends, and pastor).

### *Evangelism*

Jesus commanded his disciples to spread his message to the entire world. This is referred to as "evangelism". Christians practice evangelism in many different ways, ranging from "friendship evangelism" to sending missionaries to other countries. Evangelism is commonly combined with service. For example, missionaries often run medical facilities and teach.

People sometimes believe that Christians practice evangelism because they think all non-Christians are damned. That is not always the case. Many Christians believe that non-Christians will have an opportunity to be saved. There are effective missionaries who believe this. We do evangelism for the same reason that we sponsor famine relief and projects to help prevent hunger: we do it



because we care about other people. Christians believe that being Christian makes a difference, both to individuals and to cultures or nations.

In order to be effective in evangelism, Christians need to have our own house in order. The most effective kinds of local evangelism are based on individual Christians providing attractive examples, and churches being welcoming and friendly. There are certainly groups that go around from door to door or preach in public. However Christianity normally spreads to friends and family. This kind of evangelism is based on Christians having lives that show God's love, and on finding ways to talk about what we believe in without being obnoxious.

Foreign missions has taken on a somewhat different style in the 20th Century. Missionaries sometimes thought of themselves as bringing the light to savages. The result could be a somewhat one-sided effort, which taught and preached, but didn't learn. It sometimes tried to turn other people into Americans or Europeans. In fact this stereotype was always a bit of an exaggeration. Missionaries always made an attempt to learn about the culture they were working in, and often acted as advocates for that culture. However 20th Century practice does its best to avoid any sort of one-sided "cultural imperialism". The goal is normally to establish a self-supporting indigenous Christian community, and to help them develop patterns of Christian life appropriate for their situation. Where local churches have developed, missionary activity, as well as humanitarian aid, is done cooperatively with them. One of the interesting results is that some former mission fields are now sending missionaries to the United States and Europe.

There is currently an effort to establish self-sustaining indigenous Christian churches in every cultural group by 2000. I don't expect to see complete success, but there is good progress.

Many of the remaining groups are in areas where evangelism is dangerous. People sometimes think that only the ancient Romans killed Christians. In fact the 20th Century has had more martyrs (people who died for their faith) than any other century. Estimates are that there are about 150,000 Christians being killed each year for their faith. This is a hard estimate to make, because sometimes deaths are part of conflicts that are partly religious and partly ethnic or tribal. However there are a number of areas where being or becoming Christian is dangerous.

The most consistent problems seem to be in Moslem cultures and in Communist or former Communist areas. Many Moslems regard conversion to another religion as an offense worthy of death. In some countries, the laws reflect this. Where people are actually killed, it is often the actions of extremists, without government involvement. But not always. In Communist China, the government insists on churches registering. Many Christian groups are unwilling to register, because it will result in State control. There are reports of varying levels of persecution for those that do not register. In a few former Communist areas, there appear to be attempts to establish the Orthodox church, with a resulting interference with Protestants.



# What is Christian Worship?

## *Worship: At the Heart of Our Relationship with God*

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins as follows:

1. What is the chief end [i.e. goal] of man?

A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

This reflects a common Christian perspective that all of Christian life is focused on God and on our fellowship with him and other people. Our care for others is in this context. That doesn't mean that others are only side-issues: loving others means that we genuinely care about them. However Christian experience is that our relationships with other people must be put into the context of a relationship with God, or those relationships will start to become unbalanced.

For many Christians, worship is at the heart of our relationship with God, both as individuals and a community. In worship we focus on God: on hearing a message based on the Bible, on prayer, and on the sacraments. Of course individual Christians can do many of these things in private. However in worship we ground our life as a community in a corporate experience of God.

## *The Content of Christian Worship*

It is not possible to give a complete description of Christian worship. Congregations worship in quite different ways. Worship services vary from formal services with wonderful classical music and well-planned liturgical actions, to a small group gathering around a table and using an impromptu service with rock music.

Worship tends to have two major centers: the Word and the Sacraments. The Protestant tradition tends to emphasize the proclamation of the Word. This includes readings from the Bible, and a sermon, which will normally help the congregation understand the reading and apply it to them. Historically, the sermon was a major means of conducting adult Christian education, and of spurring both individuals and congregations to make necessary changes. Protestant worshippers had a surprising appetite for sermons: three-hour sermons were not uncommon. (This appetite does not seem to have survived into the 20th Century.)

Of course Catholic worship also includes readings from the Bible and some exposition. This is normally referred to as a "homily", rather than a sermon. However the center of worship in the Catholic church, as well as other "liturgical" churches, is the sacrament of Communion, which will be discussed below. For them it is normally celebrated at every regular service. The elaboration and formality tends to be greater than it is in Protestant churches. Protestants normally celebrate communion either 4 times a year or once a month.

In addition to the Word and sacraments, services of all groups include prayers and singing. One analysis of the prayers classifies them according to the acronym ACTS: Adoration,

Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Another variant is ACTIS, with the I standing for Intercession.

Services often begin with a combination of prayer, responsive readings and music which simply celebrate being in God's presence. This is adoration.

Fairly early in the service there is normally a prayer of confession. In confession we express both our individual faults and those of the community. We ask God to help us to amend them, and receive assurance (normally in words taken from the Bible) of God's willingness to do so.

Thanksgiving acknowledges God's goodness to us. Thanksgiving is important in the Christian life. As we thank God for things, we put those things into the context of our relationship with God.

In Supplication we ask God for what we need. In worship, this supplication normally includes the needs of the congregation, nation, and world. Intercession is a specific kind of request, directed towards the needs of others. Intercession is particularly important to Christian life, because it is one of the key elements in the pattern of "exchange" that I referred to in a previous article. Through intercession we bear each other's burdens, and join the other members of the community in putting their requests before God.

### *The Sacraments*

The one aspect of worship which is most specific to Christianity is the sacraments. This is also the element that is the most dangerous to describe in a document such as this, which is intended to describe Christianity in general. That's because the definition of sacrament is somewhat different among different groups. However a good general definition is that a sacrament is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace" (from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer). The sacraments each involve a specific symbolic action (the "sign") that make visible God's action for us. For Protestant theologians, this must be connected with a specific promise of God, as recorded in Scripture.

It's probably best to think of a range of actions that can be described as sacraments. At the center we have Baptism and Communion, which are practiced by all Christian groups (although some call them "ordinances" rather than "sacraments"). These are actions that were specifically commanded by Jesus.

Next, there is a group of additional ceremonies that are regarded as sacraments by the Catholic and Orthodox tradition. Initially, there wasn't an exact list of these. One medieval writer identified 30. However in the Catholic tradition, a standard list of seven was identified in the 12th Century. That list includes Baptism, Communion, Confirmation, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Marriage. While Protestants generally consider only Baptism and Communion to be formal sacraments, there is some flexibility. Luther was willing to accept Penance, if properly understood. Calvin considered the laying on of hands in ordination to have a sacramental quality.

Finally, note that many other activities have at least some sacramental character: for Christians, the whole world, and our own activities, should all serve to make visible God's activity with us.

As an example, Calvin identified the rainbow as having a certain sacramental quality: it is a visible sign of a promise of God.

### *Baptism*

Baptism marks a person's entry into the Christian community. It involves water: depending upon the group, it may be anything from a symbolic sprinkling to complete immersion. The water symbolizes being cleansed from sin. More specifically, it symbolizes dying with Christ and being raised with him. This symbolism is clearest when immersion is used: being lowered into the water reminds us of Christ's death, and being raised from the water, of his resurrection. This understanding is used even among those who don't literally immerse the candidates.

### *Communion*

Communion is a symbolic meal, involving bread and wine. It commemorates Jesus' last meal, which he ate with his followers the night before he was killed. This meal seems to have been a Jewish Passover Seder, in which bread and wine are key elements. Jesus gave them a new significance, as symbols of his body and blood, which he was about to sacrifice in his death. Jesus commanded his followers to remember his death for them by eating bread and drinking wine in his name. He promised that he would be present with them as they did so, in a very direct way.

Different Christian groups understand Christ's presence in communion differently. When he instituted communion, Jesus said of the bread "This is my body". While some Protestants understand this as purely metaphorical, most Christians believe that Jesus is in some way present in communion. Many Christian traditions believe that in some sense the bread and wine used in communion become Jesus' body and blood. This is referred to as Christ's "Real Presence". Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and Reformed all hold some variant of this concept.

For Catholics this involves an actual metaphysical change in the bread and wine. While the physical properties of bread and wine remain, the metaphysical identity is changed to Christ's body and blood. Lutherans and Reformed do not accept this metaphysical change. For Reformed theology, Christ's body remains physically in heaven. In communion we truly eat his body and drink his blood, but this is a spiritual matter mediated by the Holy Spirit. Lutherans believe that there is an actual identification of bread and wine with Christ's body and blood. Other Protestants take a more metaphorical approach.

In the Catholic tradition, the consecrated elements are treated with the same respect that Jesus would be if he were physically present. That is because they are actually Jesus' body and blood, so Jesus really is physically present. For that reason, it is perfectly appropriate to worship the consecrated elements. Most Protestants regard this with something between disbelief and horror.

# How do Christians Act?

## Part I. Law

### *Law and Grace*

There are two different emphases in the way God deals with us, which are in some ways in tension with each other. They are often referred to as “law” and “grace”. I have already spoken of grace in other sections, particularly in the discussion of the Gospel. In this section I look at law.

Christianity has inherited from Judaism a set of laws that Christians believe were given by God to govern Israel. The exact role of these laws in Christianity has been a matter of some debate. The laws were given to Israel as part of an agreement (“covenant”) between God and the Jewish people. As such, they were not regarded by Jews as being directly applicable to non-Jews. Jewish rabbis developed a smaller set of rules that they believed applied to all human beings.

For the first few years, Christianity was a subset of Judaism. However as non-Jews started becoming interesting in Christianity, it was necessary to decide what rules applied to them. The decision was that only a few of the rules applied directly. The set was similar to those that the rabbis regarded as applying to non-Jews.

However the term “law” (particularly in Protestant theology) reflects not just these specific rules, but all of the ways in which God demands obedience of us, and all of the standards that he has given us. In Reformed theology, the preaching of God’s Word must always hold together both law and gospel. Law without Gospel becomes moralism: the concept that if we just try hard enough we can save ourselves. Gospel without law tends to present forgiveness without repentance, and therefore without genuine transformation.

The distinction between Law and Gospel is important, particularly in Protestant theology. The Gospel describes what God does to forgive us and make us his own, independent of anything we have done. Thus our status as God’s children does not depend upon our carrying out the requirements of the Law. However Christians are expected to respond to God with obedience. While disobedience may not end our status as God’s children, it will subject us to his discipline. Furthermore, for many (though not all) Christian traditions, serious or habitual disobedience may reflect a more definitive rejection of God’s grace, which can result in a loss of our status as God’s children. These issues are explored in the sections on the Gospel and Predestination.

### *The Ten Commandments: Summary of the Moral Law*

When looking at the laws given to the Jews, Christian writers often try to distinguish between the “moral” law and the “ceremonial” law. Christians do not normally follow dietary laws, such as those prohibiting pork, nor laws establishing specific Jewish holidays. These are considered to be specific to God’s covenant with the Jews. In addition, a portion of the Jewish law can be regarded as the civil law of the Jewish state. It cannot necessarily be applied to the modern situation without change. However Christians generally believe that the moral content of the Jewish law

is based on God's character and the basic spiritual or moral principles on which the universe was founded. This still applies to Christians.

It is worth noting that the classification of the Jewish law into moral, ceremonial and civil is somewhat artificial. Laws are not labeled this way when they appear in the Old Testament. However some such distinction seems inevitable for Christians, whether it is stated in these terms or not. Almost all Christians agree that many of the provisions of Jewish law do not apply to Christians. Yet Jesus' teachings and other provisions of the New Testament do contain principles that Christians are obligated to follow. These principles have significant similarities to the moral principles embodied in the Jewish law. Thus we can regard the term "moral law" as referring, not so much to a clearly labeled subset of the Old Testament law, as to a continuity between the moral principles taught in the New Testament and those underlying the laws of the Old Testament.

This moral law is often summarized in the "Ten Commandments", which the Bible says were given by God to Moses. They are, in somewhat abbreviated form:

- You shall have no other Gods.
- You shall not worship (or use in worship) images of anything in heaven or on earth.
- You shall not misuse God's name.
- Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- You shall not kill.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- You shall not covet (i.e. envy, particularly with an eye to taking) your neighbor's house, wife, or anything else.

There are actually two different ways to divide the content into 10 commandments. This is the Protestant version.

There are controversies over the interpretations of two of the commandments. Protestants believe that the second commandment prohibits any use of statues or pictures in any context that would suggest worship, veneration, or giving any kind of honor to them. Catholics and Orthodox take a narrow view of what is prohibited, and make wide use of images in worship.

The term "Sabbath" refers to Saturday. This day was set apart among Jews for worship. Generally Christians regard that particular choice of day as part of the "ceremonial law", which does not apply to Christians. Thus Christians are free to worship on any day. However most still regard it as important to worship regularly. Christians commonly worship on Sunday, in commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. In Christian contexts, Sunday is referred to as "the Lord's Day".

A very small number of Christians do not take this interpretation. They believe that Christians are also required to worship on Saturday. Be aware that this group is more visible in Internet discussions than they are in the Christian community as a whole.

## *The Spirit of the Law*

Based on certain statements in the New Testament, a few Christians deny that any of the Old Testament law (and in some cases, any law at all) is binding on Christians. For them, Jesus' teachings and Paul's letters suggest that God is primarily concerned about our intent, and the quality of our relationships. Jesus said that the entire law was based on two principles: loving God and loving others. Some believe that as long as we do this, we are not bound by any specific legal code. Rather, we are called to a free, non-legal approach to following Christ.

Ideally, a Christian who is following Christ perfectly should not need a legal code. His heart should be so filled with love, and his mind should be so in tune with God that he would do the right thing naturally. This is always the Christian ideal. However because we remain imperfect in this life, most Christians would say that law has a role to play, even if it isn't precisely the same as it was for the Jews. 20th Century experience has convinced most Christians that some objective standards are needed to guide behavior. It is too easy to be led into dangerous actions by short-term considerations and emotions.

I'm going to use the Lutheran tradition as an example of the role that Christians see for the Law, because Lutherans have tended to be among the most wary of law. For Lutheran tradition, "the believer without any coercion and with a willing spirit, in so far as he is reborn, does what no threat of the law could ever have wrung from him." Thus for the Lutheran tradition, Christians obey God freely, and not as a result of legal compulsion. However law still has a role to play. Lutheran (as well as Reformed) tradition identifies three uses of the law: (1) as an external discipline, necessary to restrain those who are not saved (and in some cases those who are saved, because of their remaining temptation to sin), (2) as a standard that convicts us of sin, and makes us realize our need of God's grace, and (3) as a standard for those who are saved, to help them in living in accordance with God's will. It is the third use that is most controversial. Ideally Christians act freely, from love. However in doing so, they need objective standards. Thus the law applies to them, but as standards accepted in response to God's grace, and not as legal constraint.

In accordance with this approach, Christians interpret the ten commandments very broadly. Based on Jesus' teachings, they look for the intent behind the commandments, and the attitudes that they suggest. As an example, the prohibition against killing is seen as reflecting a requirement to respect our neighbor's life and safety. It prohibits anything that would harm someone around us. It requires us to help those that are in danger or otherwise at risk.

Similarly, the prohibition against stealing is seen as reflecting a requirement for fair dealing. It prohibits any kind of "sharp practice", and requires us to respect our neighbor's property, and help protect it.

The prohibition of false witness originally referred to lying in court. However Christians extend it to include any statements that would damage another person, and any actions that tend to compromise the truth, such as gossip. Under normal circumstances, Christians are required to tell the truth, even when it would get them in trouble.

This document quotes the 10 commandments, because they form a brief summary that is widely accepted and used. However these are by no means the only standards used by Christians. Jesus' teachings include both general standards and examples of how people should behave in specific



situations. There are further details given in other sections of the New Testament. While these are not always expressed formally as laws, they are included in the broad category of “law,” i.e. as part of what God demands of us.

### *Sexual Ethics*

One of the most visible characteristics of Christian ethics is its treatment of sexual relationships. This is reflected in the commandment against adultery. However there are additional influences, including Jesus’ teachings, and early Christian practice.

Generally Christians restrict sexual intercourse to married couples. Sex is seen as something intended by God to be part of marriage. For many Christians marriage is a sacrament. The sexual relationship is symbolic of God’s relationship with the Christian community. Its misuse is a serious matter. This means that intercourse before marriage is prohibited, as well as sexual patterns other than marriage between one man and one woman.

Jesus prohibited divorce, although it is possible that he allowed for some exceptions. Christians vary in how literally they take this prohibition. All regard divorce as a serious matter, but some believe that there are situations where it is the lesser evil.

### *Current Controversies*

The description I have given so far applies to what I will call “traditional Christian ethics”. A number of Christian writers have advocated relaxing certain of these ethics, particularly in the sexual area. A few churches have formally accepted these proposals. Others have not, but do not enforce the rules strictly.

There has always been flexibility in their application. These rules are intended to protect human life and relationships. However recent experience makes most Christians believe that it is dangerous to go very far in relaxing them. This is a matter in which there is a good deal of ongoing discussion.

One particular area of controversy at the moment is homosexuality. This is a violation of the rule restricting sex to marriage, with marriage defined as involving one man and one woman. There are specific prohibitions against homosexual practice, both in the Jewish laws and in early Christian teachings included in the Bible. However some Christians are prepared to argue that these teachings do not apply to the sexual relationships that modern Christian homosexuals wish to establish. This argument has so far not persuaded very many Christians. However there is also fairly widespread sympathy for the problems of homosexuals. This is an unsolved issue.



# How do Christians Act?

## Part II. Showing Love

### *Love: the Foundation for all Relationships*

There is a certain anti-legal strain in Christian thought. Jesus accepted the validity of the Jewish laws. However he encouraged people to emphasize the intent behind the law, and to focus on their motivations. He summarized the law as love for God and for our neighbor. Thus much of Christian practice is focused on finding ways to show love for our fellows.

At its best, Christianity has been characterized by helping people. This ranges from the personal to the institutional. At the personal level, Christians should help others. This includes direct help for friends, and participation in more organized activities such as soup kitchens and help for the homeless. At the institutional level, Christians have been active in creating hospitals, schools, and other institutions to help people.

### *What is Christian love?*

The term “love” in English covers many things, including erotic love, love between parent and child, brotherly love, etc. Christian love can be modeled on love between parent and child and brotherly love.

We are told to love everyone, particularly enemies. It’s useful to start by looking at what this does NOT mean. It does not mean that we will like everyone. Love is not primarily an emotion, although it often involves the emotions, and is supported by them. It is primarily a commitment to care about someone.

Jesus’ teachings are largely a description of what love means. However the briefest description is from one of Paul’s letters:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love is based on our status as fellow children of God. This means that there is at least potentially a close spiritual bond between all of us. It is a reflection of the fact that God loves us, and is an expression of Christ’s love active in us.

It is also based on honesty and justice. While Christians are eager to forgive, Christian parents are called on to exercise discipline, and Christian churches to first counsel with and then if necessary exclude those who are openly immoral. These requirements call for a balance that it is often hard to achieve.

## *Forgiveness*

One of the strongest themes in Jesus' teaching is forgiveness. He certainly intends us to forgive each other as individuals. But he was often speaking of the community. In his community there were a number of people who were looked down upon. These included tax collectors, who were regarded as collaborators with the Romans, and prostitutes, whose sin is obvious, but apparently also many ordinary people who didn't have the time and resources to carry out all of the commandments that some considered essential. Jesus spent much of his time with these people, reassuring them of God's love. However the people who are shown as responding to him are also shown as repenting of their sins. A tax collector who followed him vowed to return anything he had fraudulently taken fourfold.

Jesus seems to have accomplished what most of us find nearly impossible: He seems to have accepted everyone on their own terms, but also inspired people to change their lives for the better, without appearing to be judgmental in the process. Christians try to capture this with concepts such as "hate the sin but love the sinner", and "tough love". A more traditional description is to say that Christianity must balance Law and Gospel. I'm afraid that these attempts are not always successful.

Christians are called on to forgive enemies, both Christian and non-Christian. This forgiveness is intended to benefit both parties. In many cases it may win over the other person, and restore (or establish) a relationship with them. However even when it does not, forgiveness is important. Bitterness and resentment are two of the more destructive emotions.

A number of Christians believe that this requirement prohibits all war. Christians should be able to come up with better ways to deal with conflict. Most Christians agree with this in principle, but feel that there are times when they don't know any other way to defend innocent lives against attack. At any rate, peacemaking is a priority among Christians. A number of groups are now starting to encourage members to study conflict resolution and peacemaking techniques explicitly. The "peace churches" such as the Mennonites and Quakers have been among the leaders in developing or documenting these techniques.

## *Deeds and Rules*

All Christians acknowledge that Christian ethics should be founded on love. However there have been a number of debates about the best way to do this. One of the best-known disagreements in this Century is over "situation ethics". A number of people argued that Christians should not become tied up in rules. Instead, they should act in any given situation as love would dictate. A number of examples were given of difficult situations in which traditional ethical rules would produce the wrong decisions. A more recent version of this approach was a document on sexual ethics produced for (but rejected by) the Presbyterian Church (USA). It suggested relaxing most of the traditional sexual rules, in favor of a standard that they called "justice love", which seems to have been a somewhat revamped situation ethics.

This approach has not been well received. There are two reasons. The first is grounded in basic Christian realism about human psychology. Difficult ethical decisions, particularly in sexual matters, tend to occur at times when people are not in a position to make carefully considered

choices. It is far too easy for situation ethics to become license to be motivated only by immediate feelings.

There is also a realization that love can be shown in structures as well as in individual decisions. The commitment between husband and wife, parent and child, friend and friend establish the contexts in which we work. They allow us to share confidences, and bare our selves. Decisions can't be made from moment to moment in isolation.

However if this is to happen, rules must be used properly. Rules are intended to protect people, not to make life miserable.

[The title of this section, and some aspects of the discussion, are based on Paul Ramsey, Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics.]

# More About Christian Beliefs:

## The Incarnation

Much of Christian theology has been focused on defining the relationship between God and Jesus. These issues are dealt with in two Christian doctrines, called the Trinity and the Incarnation. These doctrines were formulated during the 4th and 5th Century (with some discussion continuing at least as the 9th), in reaction to teachings that most Christians regarded as incorrect and dangerous. While the detailed definitions were new, they are more precise expressions of ideas that had been around from the beginning of Christianity.

The Incarnation deals with the relationship between Jesus and God. This doctrine tries to walk a narrow line. On the one side, Christians are committed to monotheism: there is only one God. Jesus is not to be seen as a second God. However, from the earliest days, Jesus was seen as somehow being God's presence on earth. Based on the accounts in the Bible, it is clear that his followers had the experience that in Jesus they were encountering God. This is expressed in the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.

In the following discussion, I will use the term Logos to refer to God the Son, who is one of the Trinity. The terms "Christ" and "Son" can also be used of Jesus viewed as a human being, so Logos is the clearest term when it is necessary to refer to the God the Son.

("logos" is Greek for "Word". It is used in the New Testament to refer to Christ as God's word personified. Logos has a wider range of meanings than the English "word", including also such concepts as wisdom and creative power. It has a background in Greek philosophy, and is used by both Jewish and Christian writers at times when they are trying to explain the faith to those with a background in philosophy. However the immediate background of the term for New Testament writers is as a translation of "Wisdom" in the Old Testament book of Proverbs. In that book, "Wisdom" is used as an attribute of God which is at least partially personified. In Christian theology, "logos" is used to refer to God's creative power, embodied in Christ.)

### *Christ: God and Man*

Jesus said many times that he came to save us, and in particular that he came to reconcile us to God. Christian theology understands him as acting in effect as a bridge between God and humanity. By spiritual union with him we are united with God. Through this union we are regenerated, becoming humans of the sort that God originally intended.

In Eastern Christianity it is said that we are "divinized," although that term could be misleading. (It is not meant that we actually become God, of course.) In Protestant thought, Calvin said that faith is based on a mystical union with Christ. It creates a "community of righteousness" through which Christ's righteousness is initially credited to us and over time transforms us.

Christian theology said from the earliest days that in order for these things to happen, Christ must be both God and man. In order to function as the bridge, he has to have common ground with both parties. Otherwise he can't effectively unite us with God.

One widely referenced comment is from Irenaeus, shortly before 200 AD:

For He came to save all through means of Himself – all, I say, who through Him are born again to God – infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise He was an old man for old men, that He might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise. Then, at last, He came on to death itself, that He might be “the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence,” the Prince of life, existing before all, and going before all.

Christians also believe that Christ died for us. This isn't the place to discuss why that death matters, but it is relevant here because the explanation again requires Christ to be both God and man. He has to be man in order for him truly to die on our behalf. He has to be God in order to turn that death to victory.

While there are several understandings of how Christ could be both God and man, the most common explanation speaks of the Logos, who is God taking on (“assuming”) human nature. In this understanding, Jesus is a true human being, however his humanity is not “self-contained.”

All Christians are called to have their lives centered on God. However Jesus is the prototype and source of that kind of life. As such he is the “natural” son of God, while we are “adopted” through our relationship to him. What occurs with us over time and incompletely is basic to Christ's existence. Thus Christ's personhood comes from the Logos.

Basic to this analysis is separating the concept of human nature, and human beings, from personhood. In all cases except Christ's, human beings are independent persons. However Christ is not self-contained in this way: This human being was a vehicle for the Logos to join us in human life, in order to connect us to God. Thus Christian theology says that Christ's very existence as a person is rooted in God. Or equivalently, in Christ there is a single person, the Logos, who lives both eternally as God and as a human being.

It is important to note that Jesus as a human being has nothing missing: Christ has a human soul, and a human will which is distinct from God's will. He is really a human being. The difference is that he is not complete in himself, but takes his personal existence from the Logos.

There were a number of discussions among medieval theologians about the difference between a human being and a human person. While the details get complex, a simple summary is that the only thing that being a person adds to a human being is completeness. So when we say that Christ is a human being, but that his existence as a person is the Logos, we are saying that this human being is not complete in himself. To understand who is really is, we have to look at the Logos. However he is truly a human being.

### *How this is formulated in Christian theology*

There are several different ways of talking about the relation between God and humanity in Christ. Some of them have been judged as being “heretical.” Most commonly this is because they overemphasize one aspect of the situation, thus obscuring key elements. For example, the “monophysites” (the term means “one nature”) emphasized the unity between God and humanity to the extent that Jesus was no longer really a human being. On the other end, the “Nestorians” (supposedly) emphasized the distinction between God and humanity to such an extent that the Logos was no longer seen as the true subject of Jesus’ actions.

These matters were complicated by differences in the way key terms were used. Thus modern descendants of the monophysites are considered by many to hold an understanding that is orthodox, even though it is expressed differently. There are some scholars that are prepared to say that most of those considered to be Nestorians really were not.

This section will describe the standard defined at the Council of Chalcedon, in 451. This took into account a variety of views, including major writers such as Athanasius (c. 296-373 AD), who is considered to be representative of a view that was common in Alexandria, and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who was a key figure in another major center of Christian thought, Antioch.

[The historical situation is complicated by the fact that the writings of both Theodore and another important theologian, Nestorius, were not well preserved. Based on documents discovered in the 20th Century, It now seems almost certain that both Theodore and Nestorius held views quite similar to Athanasius. Many treatments of this period speak of Alexandrian and Antiochene theology, with Athanasius representing Alexandria and Theodore and Nestorius Antioch. However it’s no longer clear how significant this difference actually was. The problems leading to Nestorius and Theodore being considered heretical may have been a combination of misunderstanding and Church politics.]

The language adopted at Chalcedon speaks of the relationship between man and God in Christ as a “hypostatic union”, because the basic concept is a union of natures in one “hypostasis,” or person. This one hypostasis is spoken of as having two “natures,” God and human nature. There is one person, one subject, in Christ. However he is both God and a human being.

This explains that somewhat odd pattern seen in the Gospels, where Jesus acts as God, doing miracles, forgiving sins, but also experiences pain and has other human weaknesses. Christ – being the eternal Logos – has all the powers of God. But because he has taken on humanity, he also suffers hunger and can die.

Note that the intent is not that Christ is a compromise between divine and human, but that he has both natures complete and unmodified. Some acts reflect one nature more than the other. However because these two natures are associated with a single person, everything he does can be viewed as both the action of God and of a human. He is a single God-man, who acts as a single subject.

Because of Christ’s unity, there is a “communication of properties.” That is, “we may truly say that God was seen and heard and touched, that God suffered and died. Thus when Christ walked on the water this was neither a human action, since it is not human to walk on water, nor was it divine, since it is not of God to walk, but it is an evidence of the union of humanity and Divinity,

without confusion such that we see always One Christ and not God and a man with him.” [<http://www.orthodoxunity.org/article03.html>] Of course the communication doesn’t go to the extent of modifying the natures themselves: God’s nature doesn’t actually become mortal.

At times discussions made it seem that Christ’s humanity is somewhat truncated: he had a human body with the usual human weaknesses, but that body was really manipulated by the Logos, in a way that made one wonder whether there is actually a human being there. However the Church eventually rejected this kind of presentation – as it clearly must. In order to act as mediator connecting us with God, he must be a full human being, not just a human body animated by the Logos.

In order to reflect his full humanity, orthodox doctrine says that in Christ there isn’t just a human body, but a separate human will, as well as a human soul, human mind, etc. This human nature took its own human actions.

The term “nature” has a long history in philosophical thought. One might think of “humanity” as being simply a set of attributes, such as being a featherless biped. Thus it sounds like we are saying that a single person (the Logos) has contradictory properties, immortality from his divine nature and mortality from his human nature. In fact, “nature” was being used in a sense where it represents an actual thing (a “substance”). It is this nature that is mortal. The only difference between Christ’s “human nature” and a person is that a person is complete in itself. Christ’s humanity is not complete: its personal existence is the Logos. (The standard terminology speaks of the Logos as “assuming” humanity.)

When Christian writers talk about Christ, they don’t speak of the Logos and a human being as separate individuals doing thing own thing. Rather, they speak of the Logos as being the subject of both divine and human actions. In taking human actions, the Logos acts through the human nature which he has assumed.

While there were continuing developments later, the standard explanation of the hypostatic union was set out in the Council of Chalcedon, in 451:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul {meaning human soul} and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these “last days,” for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ – Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one “person” and in one reality {hypostasis}. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word {Logos} of God, the Lord Jesus



Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers {the Nicene Creed} has handed down to us.

[Definition of the Council of Chalcedon, from <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/chalcedon.htm>.]

The Council approved a number of other documents, but for a more detailed explanation of their view, the best reference is probably a letter from Pope Leo I, called the Tome of Leo. A good translation is available at [http://www.monachos.net/patristics/christology/leo\\_tome.shtml](http://www.monachos.net/patristics/christology/leo_tome.shtml). Should that link be broken, consult [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org).

### *Discussion*

So far, I've done my best to give an orthodox explanation. This section contains my personal reflections. I need to warn you that not everyone will consider them to be orthodox.

This doctrine has been criticized, both in ancient and modern times, on several grounds, including coherence (does it make any sense?) and consistency with the Bible.

The most obvious question is whether we can make sense of a single person with two natures. It's unusual, but since God is a different type of being from anyone we meet in human life, it's not altogether surprising that descriptions of him are unusual.

It seems odd to add human weakness to someone who is all-powerful. This is answered to some extent by the concept of "kenosis," that the Logos voluntarily accepts the limitations of human life. The classical text would be Philippians 2:6-8:

6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

I see nothing inherently contradictory about God voluntarily accepting the human condition. Since the divine nature is unchangeable, in doing so he wouldn't abandon his divinity, but would accept human limitation.

The more serious question is whether it is consistent with Jesus as he is portrayed in the New Testament. The criticism that concerns me the most is that in the Gospels Jesus looks like a normal human being who depends upon his Father for his power to do miracles, rather than an entity who has both human and divine powers bundled together. The orthodox explanation deals with this by saying that Christ has a separate human nature, which is complete, with a normal human will, and that Christ acts as a human being, with human actions.

The Chalcedonian language is accepted by virtually all Christian bodies, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. However a few theologians have developed alternative approaches. A number of these can be looked at as attempts to rehabilitate Nestorian theology. This alternative stresses the concept of "indwelling".

Modern attempts to use this approach are not necessarily identical to the original theology of Nestorius. There is an attempt to deal with the concerns that caused him to be rejected.

These theologians took as their primary understanding the concept of “indwelling.” Several New Testament texts seem to point in this direction:

2 Corinthians 5:18-19: 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Colossians 1:15-20: Col. 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

These suggest not that Christ was God in a direct way, but that God was working through him. In the second passage, he is the human “image” of God. In this concept, there is a more complete distinction between Jesus and the Logos than in the standard doctrine. Jesus is not God directly, but is the incarnation of God, i.e. a human form or image of God.

There’s a danger here: Some people understand this as describing a human being who is simply inspired by God. The usual concept of salvation is based on God himself being united to us through Christ. Jesus as an inspired man won’t do the job. Note that the quotation above ascribes the blood of the cross to God, not just to a human being. Christians have since early times seen God himself dying for us, though obviously that death is only possible because of the fact that God assumed human nature. (Deity can’t die.)

The basic concept here is that God works through Jesus, being present in and through him in a special way that differs in kind from the way he is present in everyone else. Jesus is special because God has chosen him as his Son, seeing to it that Jesus’ character and life reveals God, and acting through Jesus to the extent that Jesus’ actions are also God’s.

However the question is whether this is enough to support the rest of Christian theology. That depends upon Christ as a link between us and God.

One approach used by modern writers speaks of the incarnation as being based on a “functional” union between God and Jesus: that is, Jesus is God in the sense that he acts for and as God, and that God is present in him so intimately that what happens to Jesus actually happens to God. So Jesus is God in the sense that he functions as God for us. While the term “function union” is a modern one, some writers from the corresponding school in the early church used a related concept: that Jesus and the Logos worked with a single action.

In this presentation, Jesus’ miracles would be seen as actions which Jesus performs through God’s power. While dependent up God’s power, they do not require a separate divine nature, since any human being can be used by God in this way. In fact Christ promises that his followers will be able to do similar things. Thus in this model every action of Jesus is seen at the same time as an action by a human being and an action of God who is working through the human being. There

is no need to explain different actions by reference to two different natures. It is precisely Jesus' human life and character in which God is active and which shows us God.

One example of this approach is John A. T. Robinson, in *The Human Face of God*. J.A.T. Robinson was a New Testament scholar. He was particularly concerned to develop a theological understanding of Christ that reflects the current critical assessment of the New Testament.

A related approach is described in D.M. Baillie's well-known book *God was in Christ*. Baillie does not explicitly reference Theodore, nor use the term "functional union." However his idea is similar. He also sees Jesus as a full human being. He connects Jesus with the Logos using an analogy based on God's grace. Due to God's grace, we are enabled to live as God's children. Our actions under the influence of grace are both our own and God's. Similarly, Jesus' actions are both the actions of him as a human being and God's.

Most ancient Christian writers would not regard these presentations as being good enough. Classical theology insists on an "ontological" identification of Jesus with God, i.e. an identification based on what Christ is, not just how he functions.

The Definition of Chalcedon is broad enough that it can probably be stretched to include at least some approaches of this kind. For political reasons, Chalcedon was intended to be acceptable to moderate followers who tended in the Nestorian direction, as well as moderate followers of the hypostatic union.

My personal preferences is to use functional union to explain the way in which Jesus has his personhood in the Logos. Thus my intention is to use ideas along the lines of J.A.T. Robinson or Baillie, but as an explanation for orthodox theology. However most theologians, even among modern Protestants, would not consider this orthodox.

It is worth noting that some medieval approaches to the Incarnation come very close to a functional view. In this analysis, the difference between Jesus and other human beings is that Jesus is not a self-contained human person. He has an individual human nature, just as we all do. That nature includes all of the standard things one thinks of as being associated with a human: intelligence, will, etc. In the case of Jesus, these things are just as human as ours. He is a real human being, whose acts must be intelligible as the acts of a human being (although one who is so closely united with God that he does things that we can't). The difference is that there is no separate human "person". While there are two natures in Christ, human and divine, there is only one person (Greek: hypostasis), and that person is the second person of the Trinity.

The question is what the difference is between a human nature and a "person." Recall that in this context, it is the nature that is the "substance." The only thing being a "person" adds to a human being is completeness. That is, all humans other than Jesus are self-contained. Jesus, seen as a human being, is not.

Several medieval writers asked hypothetically what would happen if God decided to make someone other than Jesus the Messiah. (I should note that not all writers thought this train of thought makes sense. E.g. Aquinas did not.) At that point Jesus would no longer be the incarnation of God. Therefore he would be complete as a human being, and he would immediately become a human person.

At first glance, the orthodox doctrine looks like it is based on ontology, i.e. the metaphysical makeup of Christ. This contrasts with roles such as king or prophet, which are “offices” that do not make the person different metaphysically. However the strain of thought just mentioned seems to be pushing Jesus’ role very close to being an office. However it’s an office that is different than that of prophet or king, because the specific function of this office is that of being God’s presence in human life. Thus it is not possible to understand Jesus purely in human terms. Everything he is and does is true both of a human being and of the eternal Logos. Thus his human nature alone is not complete. The Logos is the subject of all of Jesus’ attributes and actions. But the difference between Jesus and us is not in his makeup (except that he is perfect and without sin), but in the way that he reflects and embodies God.

# More about Christian Beliefs:

## The Trinity

In order to understand the Trinity, it is important to understand what it is not. The Trinity does not deal with the relationship between humanity and God in Jesus. If you are interested in knowing why Christians consider Jesus to be (in some sense) God, please see the section on the Incarnation. Many (perhaps most) criticisms of the Trinity really involve issues that the Incarnation deals with.

Historically, the Trinity came before the Incarnation. It was originally an attempt to deal with a group of people who saw Jesus as a supernatural entity somewhere above a human being but below God. At the council of Nicea, it was decided that this was wrong. In response, Nicea formulated a concept that has come to be called the Trinity.

However the decision at Nicea was only the beginning of a century-long process that ended in the doctrine of the Incarnation. You should be aware that I'm going to discuss the Trinity as it finally came to be understood in the West at the end of this process. Some of this was only implicit in the original formulation, and the Eastern church has somewhat different ways of talking about it.

### *The Trinity as Foundation of our Concept of God*

The Trinity is not about the number 3. It most specifically isn't about trying to believe that 3 = 1.

The Trinity results from the following question: If (as Christians believe) Jesus shows us what God is like, what kind of God does he show us?

Christians believe that when humans needed help, the way God chose to do it was to join us as a human being. Because this human being was God's presence, he was able both to live as humans are intended to, and to pass this ability on to others around him through spiritual union with him.

So what Christianity says is that God is inviting us to join him in his way of living, his love.

But what does that show us about God? In unitarian religions such as Islam and Judaism, God is outside us. He is the creator, father, and lawgiver. He loves us, but he experiences love only from one side: the side of the father. But Christianity says that God also experiences the other side: the obedient son who dies for his friends. A unitarian God asks of us a loving obedience, but that kind of love is one he hasn't experienced himself. The Christian God invites us to join him in a relationship between Father and Son that started with God.

So what the Trinity says is that God is both Father and Son. This doesn't make him two Gods: these are two separate ways in which God experiences love, two roles or two "modes of being".

Because the Bible speaks equally of the Holy Spirit as God's way of being present with us, the Holy Spirit is included in the Trinity, representing the presence of the Father with the Son and with us. God's presence is always personal, so it is best expressed as a person in the Trinity, rather than simply as something impersonal like "God's power." (Contrast the personal presence of the Holy Spirit with a concept like "the Force", which is essentially impersonal.)

There is some debate among Christians whether one should think of the Trinity as three persons as we currently use the term "person". The danger in doing this is that we think of people as being essentially separate individuals. Thus calling God three persons would effectively lead to three Gods.

However many writers argue that this is a sign that our concept of person is deficient. In the context of the Trinity, "person" refers to a center of relationship. In effect the persons are constituted by their relationship to each other. The persons of the Trinity are not individuals that then decide to love each other: the relationship of love is what defines them. However they act as such a tight unity that we need to think of them as one.

Many believe that this should be seen as the ideal for human persons as well, although it is one that we don't currently conform to very completely. Being a person isn't about being something independent of everything else. A person is constituted by relationships with others. For human beings, a person is always a separate individual. But it need not be so. God shows us a model of persons whose love is so complete that their unity of action makes it appropriate to see them as a single actor.

### *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*

The Trinity deals with the relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Be aware that the term Son is used in several different ways in Christian theology. When we're talking about the Trinity, the term "Son" refers to the eternal Logos, God's creative power, not primarily to Jesus as a human being. (Of course it's impossible to completely separate them.)

Jesus and early Christians often referred to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This terminology is used both in the Bible and in other early Christian writings. At a minimum, they can be understood as referring to different ways in which God works. The Father typically refers to God's role as creator and father. The Logos refers to God's word, his creative power. The Holy Spirit refers to God's presence with us and the rest of his creation.

As used in the Bible and other writings, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit seem to have a certain distinction among them. That is, they seem to be more than just different ways in which God works with us. Rather, each seems to have a distinct personal existence. Nevertheless, it is clear that they are intended to be distinct roles of a single God, and not separate gods. The Latin term used is "persona". This originally referred to a theatrical role, and the mask used to define it.

In fact there are at least two slightly different ways of speaking of the Trinity. In the West, theology tends to start with God as One, and see the persons as being distinguished only to the extent necessary for a personal relationship to exist. The Father is the source of the love, and the Son its recipient. The Holy Spirit can be understood as the presence of the Father with the Son. Thus these are separate personal roles within a single God.

In Eastern theology the distinction is often described as a different in “origin.” That is, the Father is the source of the Trinity. This single source is the basis of God’s unity. The Son is begotten from him and the Spirit proceeds from him. A few Eastern writers tend to speak of the three persons more as individuals. Thus at times God starts to look like a community. However there’s a limit to how far this can go, because all of Eastern theology is clear that God is a single “actor,” with a single will. Everything God does is an act of the entire Trinity, acting as one, not as a committee.

Gregory of Nyssa, in *To Ablabius*, looks at whether to say there is one God or three. One of his major arguments is that God has a single activity. Every action “starts off from the Father as from a spring; it is effected by the Son, and by the power of the Spirit it completes its grace. All providence, care, and attention of all ... and the preservation of what exists, ... is one and not three.”

### *God praying to himself?*

You’ll often hear people say something like this: “The Bible shows Jesus praying to God. If Jesus is God, that would mean that God was praying to himself.”

But Christ is God incarnate, i.e. God and man. Christ prayed to his Father because he is a human being, and the way humans communicate with God is by prayer.

However there’s more to it than that. In Christian theology, Jesus is seen specifically as the incarnation of the Logos. While Jesus shows us all of God, he shows God specifically from the perspective of the Logos. But the Logos is the obedient Son, the recipient of the Father’s love.

The second person of the Trinity is the Son of God, his “Word” or Logos. To speak in this way of God as Son and Father is at once to imply a movement of mutual love, such as we indicated earlier. It is to imply that from all eternity God himself, as Son, in filial obedience and love renders back to God the Father the being which the Father by paternal self-giving eternally generates in him.

Kallistos Ware, in *The Orthodox Way*, quoted at <http://agrino.org/cyberdesert/kallistos.htm>. I strongly recommend looking at this link for a good presentation of the Trinity from an Orthodox viewpoint.

I don’t know what sort of communication occurs within God, but a personal relationship implies some kind of communication. Thus we have to assume that there is something like communication between the Father and the Logos. Jesus’ prayer to his Father is the human image of the communication between the Logos and the Father.

### *What do we mean by Son?*

When we’re talking about God, the term “Son” is somewhat metaphorical. This shouldn’t be a surprise. God is rather different from human beings. When we use human language in talking about him, we’re always straining the limits of language.



With human beings, father and son are completely separate people, who come into existence at different times. This is not true of God. The relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is part of what God is. Father and Son aren't exactly separate people in the usual sense. They are equally eternal, because they are both essential to God's being what he is. You can't have a Father without a Son. The term "Son" is used because the relationship between Father and Son in the Trinity has close analogies to the relationship among human fathers and sons. Indeed the human relationship is modeled after God's. But it is an analogy. It shouldn't be pushed farther than makes sense.

Christian language sometimes talks about the Son being "begotten" by the Father. A few people (primarily Moslems) have taken this to mean that the Son is the result of a sexual relationship between God and Mary. That's impossible, since God is a purely spiritual being. The term "begotten" was used to emphasize that the Son is just as much God as the Father is. Just as human beings beget other human beings, the Father begets a Son who is just as much God as he is. But you shouldn't push the language any further than that. It doesn't mean that God reproduces in the same way that human beings do. In fact the son is "eternally begotten". That is, he isn't born at one time, as a human child is. The Father is the source of the Son continuously, as a spring is the source of a river.

### *Terminology*

I have avoided the traditional terminology of "person" and "substance" because I don't think it's likely to be meaningful to the people who are reading this document. However if you're going to understand Christian theology, you need to know about them.

The Trinity says that there is one God, existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In order to talk about this, we need a word to refer to God "as a whole", and a word to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit individually. Traditionally Christian theology talks about three "Persons" with one "substance" (or possibly "essence"). You will often see the Greek word "hypostasis" instead of Person, because many people think Person is a potentially misleading translation.

While these basic terms are common, the East and West tend to speak of them in different ways. The West typically starts with the concept of one substance. While the term "substance" is open to different understandings, in the typical Western understanding, God is thought of as one "thing." [The following discussion, through the quote below, is largely based on the treatment in the Catholic Encyclopedia.] We can classify properties into properties of a thing itself (size, color, etc), and relational properties (e.g. one thing is to the left of another). God is considered to be one in all respects except a couple of relational properties: begotten and proceeding. His power, eternity, etc, are all one. If you try to count God, you end up with only one: none of the distinctions that would allow you to identify separate entities apply to God.

The only distinctions within God are the relations "begotten" (the relation between Father and Son) and "proceeding" (the relation between Father and Holy Spirit). Initially one might think that a relation implies at least two different things. However that's not necessarily the case. There are relations such as "identity" that apply to just one thing. Thus begotten and proceeding are not seen as relations that result in multiple gods. Rather, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are different ways in which God exists, i.e. different personal roles. But they are not separate things.

The Catholic Encyclopedia gives the following answer to the question of whether there are three self-consciousnesses in God:

Neither person nor mind is self-consciousness; though a person must needs possess self-consciousness, and consciousness attests the existence of mind (see PERSONALITY). Granted that in the infinite mind, in which the categories are transcended, there are three relations which are subsistent realities, distinguished one from another in virtue of their relative opposition then it will follow that the same mind will have a three-fold consciousness, knowing itself in three ways in accordance with its three modes of existence. It is impossible to establish that, in regard of the infinite mind, such a supposition involves a contradiction.

The East tends to start with persons. The Trinity is the model for personal existence. Several Greek writers saw the key to God's unity as being unity of action. The three persons aren't a committee, each acting separately but in a coordinated way. Rather, they are so closely tied together that they act with a single action. Furthermore, all the things that make God God are only one. The three persons act together as a single authority. So there is one ultimate authority, one God.

As a result of discussions about the Incarnation, the Church came to an agreement that Christ had two wills, the will of God and a human will. Technically, this associated wills and action with the nature (of which there are two in Christ) rather than the person (of which there is one). This pushed discussions about the Trinity to be clear that God has a single will, since the Trinity has only one nature.

It's worth noting that the terms "substance" and "person" came to be technical terms with specific theological definitions. They were originally taken from Greek philosophy, although in the context of the Trinity and Incarnation they don't necessarily mean exactly what they meant in general philosophical usage. In common English usage, talking of three persons with one nature could mean three separate people who are alike in many ways. However in this context, nature is an actual thing. I am tempted to say that God is thought of as a single "thing", who however knows himself and relates to himself in three ways. That would probably be true for the West. It may not be precisely accurate for the Eastern model.

One key difference between East and West focuses on a change made to the Nicene Creed in the West. The Western Church added the Latin word *filioque* ("and the Son"), so that instead of saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, in the West it says "from the Father and the Son."

From the Eastern point of view, this is a big problem, because the unity of God depends upon the fact that there is only one uncreated, the Father, who is the source of the entire Trinity. However many Western writers seemed to be thinking of the relationship between God and us here. Jesus talks about sending the Holy Spirit to us. Hence from our point of view the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, although probably "through the Son" would be better language. If "and the Son" is simply referring to Christ's role in sending the Spirit to us, it's not a problem. However the context in the Creed is one that is describing the relationship among the Persons. In that context, "and the Son" is questionable.

### *Critical Comments*

I think the Bible commits us to think of God as a Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are described as distinct. They are all described as God. But there is one God. So we need to see a single God, with a distinction within him.

I am completely unimpressed by arguments that the Trinity is incoherent because there's no way three persons can constitute one God. Either he's one or he's three. These arguments are based on knowing just human beings. But the moment we move beyond that into science fiction or computer science, people have no problem conceiving of separate entities tied so tightly together that they form a single being (colonial telepathy and distributed systems). Computer science also gives us examples of a single entity that interacts with the world as multiple actors (a multiprocessor). I am not suggesting that God is actually a computer. I am simply indicating that once you start thinking more broadly than human beings, it's easy enough to conceive of all kinds of other ways of being. In fact even among human beings, marriage may be taken as an example of two persons becoming one actor. With us this is largely a metaphor. However in some particularly successful marriages it begins to go beyond just the metaphorical. The Trinity provides us with a model for ways in which persons can relate that avoids the opposite problems of a tyranny and a committee.

# Predestination and Free Will

This section discusses the way in which human responsibility interacts with God's responsibility. A proper balance here is critical to the Christian life. If human responsibility is overemphasized, Christianity turns into legalism, without an appreciation for God's power active in our lives. If God's responsibility is overemphasized, Christianity turns into fatalism, losing the emphasis on obedience to God and service to others. Both of these problems have occurred at times.

The orthodox position maintains both of the following:

- God is in charge both of history in general and of our lives. We are unable to come to know and serve him on our own. We are completely dependent upon his decision to save us, and his work in our lives to transform us.
- Humans make responsible decisions. We will be judged by God for how we respond to him, and how we deal with each other.

As we'll see, there are different approaches to these issues. Some emphasize either God's responsibility or ours. As long as they manage somehow to do justice to both, I would consider them orthodox. However there are positions that are clearly unorthodox:

- Sometimes Christians so emphasize human decision that they lose sight of our dependence upon God. Christianity then becomes a demanding moral code, but it loses contact with Christ's work to redeem people who are unworthy of it. This tendency is called "Pelagian", after Pelagius, a monk who was thought to have taught this position.
- Sometimes Christians so emphasize God's responsibility that they lose sight of the need for our lives to be transformed, and for us to be active in working with others. I will call this tendency "fatalism", although Catholics often refer to it (incorrectly) as Calvinism.

Since about the 5th Cent (when Pelagius was condemned), almost no one intentionally holds either of these extreme positions. However they can easily occur in practice, whenever Christians lose track of the fullness of the Gospel.

This dual emphasis presents an obvious problem: How can our decisions be responsible if we are completely dependent upon God's decision? Christians have taken two approaches to this:

- In some way we share responsibility with God. We would be hopeless without God's initiative; he must initiate our relationship with him. But his work in our hearts enables us to respond. This is a free response, although our ability to make it is dependent upon his work with us. Thus it is possible for us not to respond, or to respond initially and then reject God. I will refer to this approach as "synergism". I include it in Arminianism and one end of the Catholic spectrum. (This is a slightly non-standard use of the term "synergism", as I will note below.)

- God's decision and ours occur on two different levels. Thus it is possible for God to be completely responsible for us, but also for us to make responsible choices. I will refer to this position as Calvinist, although the most general description is probably Augustinian. (I am not a scholar of Augustine. There are aspects of his teaching that suggest the other approach. I am not passing judgment on his actual intent.)

It's worth noting that there is a spectrum of acceptable views within the Catholic Church. Two of the major Catholic theologians (Augustine and Aquinas) held views very close to the one I describe here as Calvinist. Historically it might be better to call the position Augustinian. However as a Protestant, I am in a better position to describe Calvin's version. Other Catholics hold a position very similar to Arminius. It's my impression that this is the more common Catholic position.

This area is a difficult one in Protestant/Catholic relations. By the 16th Cent, doctrine in this area had become quite confused. Unfortunately no ecumenical council had clarified this area, so there were no unambiguous standards. The closest was probably the Council of Orange, in 529. Unfortunately it appears that the results of Orange had become almost completely lost by the 16th Cent. By the late medieval period, some Catholic theologians were holding positions that appeared to be for all practical purposes Pelagian.

The Protestant reformers thought that many of the things they objected to in current practice could be traced to this de facto Pelagianism. As a corrective, they adopted an aggressive form of Augustinianism, which I'm calling Calvinism.

On the Catholic side, the Council of Trent adopted reforms in this area, which rejected overt Pelagianism. On the Protestant side, views in this area moderated over time. Indeed in some cases they eventually became effectively identical to Catholic ones. Even in their original form, Protestants were never actually fatalists.

However much of the 16th Cent rhetoric involved Protestants accusing Catholics of being Pelagian and Catholics accusing Protestants of being fatalists or of failing to require Christians to obey God's requirements.

While some of the causes have been eliminated, these accusations have never completely died down. Synergists and Calvinists often do not see their positions as being two different orthodox approaches. For example, while Trent did rule out Pelagianism for Catholics, it also ruled out Calvinism and other Protestant positions. Protestants have generally returned the favor.

Indeed even those who hold variants within the synergist family commonly do not acknowledge any connection with other views that I classify as belonging to the same family.

This section is organized as follows:

- Introduction (this section)
- Calvinism
  - Predestination and Responsibility
  - When are people responsible?
  - Summary
- Synergism
  - Arminianism

- A Common Catholic Position
- Lutheranism
- Special Issues:
  - Can you be sure?
  - Once Saved, Always Saved
  - How can you preach the Gospel if you believe in Predestination?

## CALVINISM

I'm now going to review the major positions. I'm going to spend the most time with Calvinism. That is largely because many of the ideas involved in Calvinism are the most foreign to 20th Cent Christians, and thus require the most explanation. I am largely a Calvinist, in the sense described here.

In the classical Protestant approach, justification is a permanent thing. It establishes (or is part of) a reliable relationship within which our sin can be dealt with. Note that at no point does God require our consent. Justification is given before we are in any position to respond to God. It continues even during times when by our sin we have rejected God. Since it does not require our consent, it would appear that God determines who is going to be saved when he chooses whom to justify.

This is in fact what the Reformers intended to say. It is based on a viewpoint going back to Augustine. He believed that the addictive effect of sin is so serious that we are unable even to give consent for God to save us. We certainly might say that we want to be in heaven rather than hell. But we would not seriously desire to give up our sin, without God already working in us to begin healing us.

Once God has justified us, i.e. forgiven us and grafted us into Christ, we are on the path of salvation. In some synergist models, it takes our continuing cooperation to remain in our saving relationship with God. This is not true of the Reformers. As explained in the section on the Gospel, in the Protestant model, all the resources needed to save us come from Christ. Thus any "cooperation" is a result of God's justification and sanctifying grace, not a precondition for it to continue.

The Reformers were unwilling to acknowledge that any part of our salvation depends upon something in us. This is due to their concept of the seriousness of sin. Suppose God required our free consent before proceeding. In order to give that consent, some part of our will has to be free from the effects of sin. [If that part of the will needs renewal first, then it's not our choice. Our decision depends upon whether God renews that part of our will.]

This is not just pessimism. It results from serious concerns about the nature of the Christian life. Protestant piety focuses entirely upon Christ. He is the source of our strength. All the resources for salvation are in him. As soon as we make salvation dependent upon our continued cooperation or consent, we are back with the Catholic model in which our relationship with God is dissolved by sin. At the time we most need his help, direct access to his grace is no longer available.

The Reformers saw Biblical support for these concepts in Romans (particularly chapters 9 through 11) and Galatians. One could also cite various passages in John where Jesus speaks of his

followers as if they were a predetermined set of people given to Christ as his sheep. (This is not intended as a complete review of Scriptural evidence. It is clear that there is extensive evidence for human responsibility as well, and alternative exegeses of Romans 9-11 are possible.)

### *Calvinism: Predestination and Responsibility*

There are several obvious issues raised by the Reformers' idea. One is called "predestination". If justification does not require our consent either to establish or maintain, that seems to mean that God decides who is going to be saved. Anyone that he justifies will end up saved. If people are not saved, it must be that he didn't decide to justify them.

This is an issue because Christians believe in human responsibility. This belief is based on many passages in the Bible, including Jesus' teachings and other documents. If God decides who is going to be saved, how can there be any real human responsibility?

Of the things I've seen from the 16th Century, Calvin dealt with this the most clearly. He maintained that predestination does not remove human responsibility. In effect, he suggested that there are two different accounts for the same event, one in human terms and one in God's terms. God has a plan for our individual lives and history as a whole. Everything that happens fits into that plan. However he normally works through secondary causes. When someone does something, it is because they make a decision to do so. God knew what that decision would be. Indeed because the person's character, motivations, and situation is under God's control, there's a sense in which we can say that God determined the action. But his plan is carried out by the working out of human decisions and other historical causes.

Calvin looks at the example of the Sabeans' violence against Job's household near the beginning of Job. There are three levels of responsibility here. The Sabeans are responsible for the violence, motivated by whatever motivates vandals, presumably a desire for loot. But they are also acting as Satan's agents to test Job. Thus in another sense Satan is responsible. His goal is to show up Job. He somehow moved the Sabeans to attack Job's family. However even Satan is acting accordance with God's plan. God's intention is to vindicate Job's character and his own justice. The event is completely intelligible on any of these three levels: human, Satan's plan, and God's plan. In fact all three accounts are true.

Calvin also points out that God carries out his plan differently when dealing with people who have faith in him and those who do not. Everyone ends up acting in accordance with his plans. But with those who have faith, there is a conscious collaboration. God works with them through the Holy Spirit, and moves them directly in the way he intends. The ungodly do not intentionally cooperate with God. They still do his will, but they do it because he has set up the situation so that they end up doing what he wants.

Luther expresses this difference by a variant of predestination that is often called "single predestination". He says that God is responsible for the salvation of those that he chooses. Those that he does not choose are responsible for their own damnation. Calvin's language is more symmetrical. He says that God chooses both those he will save and those that will not be saved. He intends both results and is responsible for both. This is called "double predestination." However there is still a difference in how he works with those who are saved and those who are not.



I believe “single predestination” and “double predestination” are different perspectives on the same thing. Single predestination emphasizes the fact that God regenerates those whom he elects, and is present with them. He does not have this direct involvement with others. Double predestination emphasizes the fact that God chooses both results equally, even though he is involved differently with those he elects and those he does not.

[Note: while Calvin did in fact say the things I attribute to him, there are places where he seems to lose sight of the balance described here. At times he does appear to emphasize God’s sovereignty in ways that would remove human responsibility.]

### *Calvinism: When are people responsible?*

You will often hear arguments that we can’t hold people responsible for what they do if what they do is determined by their heredity or environment. This is the basis for a lot of the criticism directed against predestination. If God knows that someone is going to sin, and in fact if God has overall responsibility for the history of which this action is a part, then it’s God’s fault. The person is being forced to sin, so he is not responsible.

This is probably dealt with most clearly in later writers. Jonathan Edwards’ book “Freedom of the Will” is a classic here. Edwards points out that there is a confusion here. There are two ways in which a person’s actions can be known in advance. One way is real force: we threaten to kill them if they do something else, or in some other way we compel them. The other way is that we know their character and motivations so well that we can be sure what they are going to do.

In the first case, we rightly say that the person is not responsible. Their actions do not reflect their nature, so we can’t reasonably draw any conclusions about them from what they did. In the second case it’s not so clear. The person is not being forced to make a specific decision. It’s just that their nature leads them into doing it.

Edwards identifies actions as responsible as long as they properly reflect the person’s character and goals. In this case it is quite possible for a person to be responsible for their actions even though God is responsible for the history that leads them to be the kind of person they are.

Edwards’s opponents were primarily Arminian. (This viewpoint will be described below.) The Arminians had a different idea of what makes an action responsible. They felt that we couldn’t say a person was free (and thus responsible) unless there was something intrinsically unpredictable in their decision. As long as the decision could be predicted, they were being forced into it by their background, and it wasn’t free.

Edwards points out that this doesn’t make any sense. When people’s actions don’t reflect their character and motivations, we don’t call it freedom, we call it insanity.

Christian theology maintains that God can be relied on. We know that he will always act on the basis of his character and his covenants with us. Does this mean that he isn’t free? I would maintain that as we become closer to God, we become easier to predict. Our characters and motivations become more coherent, and our decision-making more disciplined. Christians historically have seen this as a growth of freedom.

Since the time Edwards wrote (around the American revolution), we've had a chance to see the consequences of the two approaches. In general our culture now accepts the Arminian definition of responsibility. There is a growing tendency not to hold people responsible if we can see how their environment affected them. People can almost always find some way of blaming what they are on something else. Thus the concept of responsibility is quickly vanishing altogether, or being applied in incoherent ways. Even Arminians see this and are disturbed by it. What they don't see is that this general cultural tendency is a direct consequence of Arminian ideas.

I maintain that we need to return to the concept that people are responsible as long as their decision properly reflects who they are. External force or constraint diminishes responsibility. So do medical conditions that make the decision process not work properly. But the fact that we know some of the things that made the person who they are does not reduce their responsibility.

### *Calvinism: Summary*

In summary: Calvinism says that God is wholly responsible for salvation. God forgives us, engrafts us into Christ, regenerates us, and moves us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

However this is looking at things from God's perspective. There is another account, that looks at things from a human perspective. God normally operates through historical causes. These various influences shape our character and our goals. However we still make decisions, for which we are properly held responsible.

The balance of responsibility is somewhat different with those who are God's children and those who are not. With those who are saved, God operates in a personal way, through the presence of the Holy Spirit and our union with Christ. While we make responsible choices, the basic decision to save us is God's. There is no equivalent for those who reject God. While their rejection is part of an overall history for which God is responsible, God does not take specific actions to make them reject him, as he takes actions to redeem his children.

## SYNERGISM

In this section I'm going to describe two different traditions: Arminianism and one common Catholic position. I believe they share one characteristic: In one way or another they share responsibility for our ultimate salvation between God's decisions and ours.

### *Synergism: Arminianism*

The most common alternative among Protestants today is Arminianism. Most modern Protestants are Arminian. The most prominent source of Arminian influence (at least in the U.S.) was John Wesley. A large fraction of the Protestant churches outside the Lutheran and Reformed tradition have Wesleyan roots.

Arminians typically use the classical Protestant language, including justification by faith, imputed righteousness, and the distinction between justification and sanctification. They differ from Calvinists primarily in that they believe (1) that God seriously calls everyone, and (2) that we may refuse grace.

Arminius talks of grace and free will cooperating. But the cooperation is a result of renewal by grace. Cooperation has sometimes been used to imply that the fall is not complete, and thus that man can still contribute something to his salvation. Arminius uses the term to refer to a response, which can exist only because of grace.

He seems to use the term because he does not want to refer salvation either entirely to grace or entirely to man. He does not want to refer it entirely to grace, because it requires our response. God deals with us as people, not as an irresistible force. Carl Bangs summarizes: "Man in sin is unable to exercise his will to do any good at all except he be regenerated and continually aided by grace. The grace of God is a gratuitous affection, infusion of the gifts of the Spirit, and perpetual assistance which is "the commencement, the continuance, and the consummation of all good," but it is not an "irresistible force"'". ("Arminius", p 313)

Arminius believed that grace can be resisted. "Whomsoever God calls, he calls them seriously, with a will desirous of their repentance and salvation." Thus God does not predestine some to destruction. "The whole controversy reduces itself to this question, 'Is the grace of God a certain irresistible force?' ... I believe that many persons resist the Holy Spirit and reject the grace that is offered." Bangs comments "For him grace is not a force; it is a Person, the Holy Spirit, and in personal relationships there cannot be the sheer overpowering of one person by another."

All variants of Arminianism would be unacceptable to the Reformers. Indeed one of Luther's best works was written against Erasmus, who maintained a position much like Arminius'. Under Arminianism, humans determine who is saved and who is not, by the way that they respond to God's grace. This was not acceptable to the Reformers, because it seemed to ignore the seriousness of sin. They thought it left a tiny corner of our will that did not need to be renewed: the corner that decided whether or not to accept God's grace.

Aside from this theoretical concern, they believed that there are practical problems with Arminianism. The whole Protestant concept of justification is based on predestination. Recall that in the classical Protestant position, justification is a permanent thing. It establishes a relationship with God that continues even through serious sin. But this only makes sense if the relationship with God is established unilaterally by God. If we can reject it, then the key to salvation is within us. It's whatever motivates us to continue cooperating with God's grace.

### *Synergism: a Common Catholic Position*

Catholics all accept predestination, in one form or another. However there is a range of permissible positions. Aquinas held a position that seems to me identical to Calvin's. Other Catholics hold positions that seem to me rather similar to Arminius'. The official standard in this area is the Council of Trent. The canons from Trent include a couple of statements that seem unambiguously Arminian. E.g. it is stated both that God does not predestine anyone to damnation, and that the operation of grace can be resisted. However it is possible to understand these in a sense that is compatible with Aquinas (and Calvin).

Aquinas uses the term "predestine" to refer to God's action in moving people to salvation. For those who are not saved, he uses the term "reprobation." As described above, these are not completely symmetrical. God does not move people to damnation in the way that he moves them to salvation. He simply leaves them alone. To say that God works the same way in both cases

would be making God the source of sin, which no Christian would want to do. Thus one can read Trent as saying simply that God does not predestine anyone to damnation in the same sense as he predestines people to salvation. Such an interpretation is consistent with Aquinas/Calvin.

The statement that the operation of grace can be resisted can be taken in such a sense as well. It can be taken as a description on the human level. Calvin certainly agrees that people act as intelligent beings, with a will. There are people to whom the Gospel is preached, but they reject it. On the human level, we can say that they have rejected grace. However when you look at things from the point of view of God's plan, God's plan included that rejection, as well as the factors that led the person to reject the Gospel. Calvin tends to use the term grace only for God's actions to save the elect. In that use, grace can't be successfully resisted, since when God chooses to save someone, he makes sure that what he does is sufficient to overcome any obstacles.

Catholic theology tends to use the term "cooperation" to describe the human reaction to grace. For many Catholics, this represents a reaction to God's grace that accepts it, and results in justification. As a result, whether a person is justified is not solely up to God, but requires also this cooperation. However the term cooperation can also be understood in a sense compatible with Aquinas or Calvin. In this sense it refers to the fact that human beings are not machines. When God gives grace, he does it in a manner that results in a real change in the human will, such that the person responds to God. The elect do God's will intentionally, while those who are not do it unintentionally. I should note that from Calvin's point of view, this is part of sanctification, not justification. But Catholic theology doesn't distinguish these as consistently as Protestant theology.

The 1908 Catholic Encyclopedia reviews the range of Catholic views in its article on predestination. While this is an oversimplification, it describes two major types of approach. All Catholics accept predestination, in that there is a fixed number of people who will be saved, which God knew from creation. However there are two different ways God can know it. One is that he first decided to save a specific set of people, and took the necessary steps. The other is that he knows how any individual will respond in any circumstances. So those who are predestined are those who God has foreseen will respond to grace.

The first position is that of Aquinas and Calvin. The second is very close to Arminius (at least with respect to predestination; as a Protestant theologian, he disagrees with Catholics on many other issues). Arminius was willing to use the term predestination, but for him, predestination was in Christ. That is, God predestined all who would have faith in Christ to be saved. The Catholic Encyclopedia regards the second (Arminian) approach as superior, although it acknowledges that both are acceptable. (Of course it rejects Calvin's presentation of predestination, but I think there's good reason to believe that this is a misunderstanding.) My sense is that the great majority of Catholics take a position that I would classify as Arminian in terms of its approach to predestination.

So how do Catholics differ from actual Arminians? One major difference is in the role they attributed to baptism. In baptism, we are freed from the effects of original sin. Formally, it is baptism that makes it possible for us to respond to God's grace. This is referred to as "baptismal regeneration".

With infants this appears to be literally true. With adults, I would say that there is some qualification. Trent describes the process of that goes before baptism in terms that are consistent

with Arminianism: God initiates, and we respond. It is expected that the adult candidate for baptism will have faith and will have repented of his sins. Thus by the time the act of baptism is performed, it would appear that at least some of the effects of original sin have already been overcome.

Thus it is probably best to say that the “grace of baptism” may to some extent be present before the actual action is performed. This is supported by the fact that someone who dies while in the process of preparing for baptism is considered to have the “baptism of intent”.

I believe Catholics also differ from Arminians and Lutherans (i.e. those Protestants who think it is possible to lose salvation) in the way they think of “mortal sin”. But agree that it is possible for someone who is saved to reject salvation. For Catholics this happens primarily through mortal sin. Protestants normally do not use this concept.

Arminius was guarded in the way he answered questions in this area. However he seems to have held that it is possible for someone who has been justified to reject salvation. I believe such a person would be considered to have rejected the faith, and no longer to be a Christian.

So how does this differ from the Catholic idea of mortal sin? The objection in the Lutheran documents seems to be that Catholics separate faith from our relationship to God. Thus mortal sin breaks our relationship to God, but faith may continue. (If we lost faith as well, we would have lost the ability to make use of the sacrament of reconciliation.) This is partly due to the usual difference in how Protestants and Catholics use the term “faith”. For Catholics it has tended to mean intellectual belief. For Protestants it refers to our trust in and reliance on God. Protestants don’t believe that purely intellectual faith – separated from an active trust in God – has any religious value.

I am going to have to confess some uncertainty here. However I think that Arminians and Lutherans tend to differ from Catholics in that the only sin that they see as truly mortal (i.e. fatal) is essentially apostasy: a rejection of Christ. As long as faith remains, it does not matter how serious our sin is: any sin represents a rejection of God’s command, and is sufficient to condemn us; but Christ’s death is sufficient to deal with even the most serious sin. However at a certain point we may presume that someone has rejected the faith completely.

### *The Lutheran Position*

I am least certain about this section of the document, because I find it hard to make sense of the Lutheran position. Note by the way that I’m speaking of the Lutheran confessional documents, not Luther personally. Luther was close to Calvin on the topic of predestination. There are some differences between Luther and later Lutherans.

The main problem is that the Lutheran confessional documents make assertions that appear to be in conflict. Furthermore, they do not try to resolve the conflict, because they believe that doing so would require going beyond what God has revealed to us.

The starting perspective is similar to Calvinism. Due to the fall, we are powerless to do anything related to salvation. It’s not enough for God to offer us salvation. He has to work in us even to get to the point where we can listen to the offer. Just as Calvin, the Formula of Concord says

that those who are saved are elected by God. God establishes all the means needed to redeem the elect. He doesn't just foresee their decision, but does what is needed to bring about their salvation. This is done primarily through preaching the Gospel and the sacraments. "In this his eternal counsel, purpose, and ordinance, God has not only prepared salvation in general, but he has also graciously considered and elected to salvation each and every individual among the elect who are to be saved through Christ, and also ordained that ... he wills by his grace, gifts, and effective working to bring them to salvation, and to help, further, strengthen and preserve them to this end."

God only foresees the fate of the rest. There is no negative election. Those who reject the Gospel are responsible for their own fate.

God wants all to be saved. The offer of the Gospel is seriously made to all.

Before justification, we do not have the ability to do anything towards our salvation. Justification is done entirely by God, through his election of us in Christ. However justification renews our will. At this point the possibility exists either to continue in faith or to reject it. That is, it is possible to be justified and then fall away.

God does foreknow who of those called will believe, who will persevere, and of those who fall away, who will return. In sum, God knows who will be saved and who will not. However he has not revealed this to us, and we are not free to speculate on it.

There are some logical problems in maintaining all of these at the same time. Lutherans are aware of this. They feel bound to assert that election is only positive, that God wants everyone to be saved, but that God's plan includes everything that happens, good and bad.

I believe that Calvinism properly explained is consistent with many of these points. Calvin also acknowledges that God works differently with the elect and others. There's no negative form of regeneration. So on the level of how God works with people, he regenerates those who he will save; the rest are lost because of their own sin. God becomes equally responsible for both only when you look at his plan. But that's the level that the Lutherans consider God's secret counsel and refuse to talk about. Thus the emphasis on predestination being entirely positive makes sense.

I think the idea that some may fall away after justification can be understood as well. Calvin maintains that election is irreversible. You can't fall away from being elect. Yet he recognizes that on a human level there are people who give every appearance of being saved, but fall away. He would maintain that they weren't really elect, nor were they actually justified. They had the appearance of faith but not its reality. But this distinction is really on the level of God's plan. He knows who the real elect are. The Lutherans refuse to talk on that level. If you look at things in visible terms, such people believe the Gospel, and then later fall away. So as long as we are explicitly not dealing with God's secret plan, it may make sense to speak of them as being justified and then lost.

However there may be at least some theological difference here. The Lutheran position would seem to attribute more power to human will after justification than Calvin would. (Both agree that before justification, the will is completely in bondage to sin. Thus it is basically powerless as far as doing anything involving God.)



The statement that God wants everyone to be saved seems harder to deal with though. In an Arminian this makes sense. But for Lutherans, people are saved only when God elects them and sets up the means to bring them to faith. So what can it mean to say that God actually wants everyone to be saved? If he wants everyone to be saved, and salvation is entirely up to his election, why isn't everyone saved? The Lutheran answer is clearly: this is part of the God's hidden counsel, so we can have nothing to say.

At the start of this section I said that there are two approaches to reconciling human responsibility with God's overall responsibility for history. One approach sees these two issues as being on two different levels. This is the approach of Calvin and Aquinas. The other approach sees God's grace and human will as combining to produce a result. This is the approach of Arminius and many Catholics.

In terms of this dichotomy, I think the Lutherans are on the side of Calvin and Aquinas. Indeed they separate the levels of explanation more radically even than Calvin would, to the point of basically refusing to talk about God's eternal plan.

## ANALYSIS: GOD AS AUTHOR

So far I've tried to explain the most common positions, but I haven't given you my evaluation of them.

My basic position is the Calvinist one. I don't see any way to maintain the standard Christian idea that God is in charge without saying that ultimately he is responsible for both salvation and damnation. However I think it's important to realize that this does not remove human responsibility.

Calvin's discussion goes a long way towards reconciling God's election and human responsibility. However there's an additional set of ideas that I'd like to look at. I think it's important how we think of God's relationship to the world. If we think of predestination being carried out in a mechanical way, there is little room for human freedom or responsibility in any but the most abstract sense. However if we think of God as being more an author than a watchmaker, I believe it is possible to reconcile God's responsibility and human responsibility.

When human authors describe their work, it seems clear that they have to deal with the same sort of issue. They have a story they want to tell. But the characters take on a life of their own. A good author will manage to say what they want to say, but also respect the integrity of their characters.

Thus I suggest that God tells the story that he wants to tell in the way he wants to tell it, but that he also maintains human responsibility. Thus the problem of reconciling God's election with human responsibility is not primarily a doctrinal issue. Rather it is a matter of a master artist at work.

While I believe God is completely responsible for his story, I also think that there is room for traditional Christian ideas about free will. There are things that God will not do, because they would violate the integrity of one of his characters. It is not that he is unable to do it, but that



as an artist he has chosen to create a certain kind of story, and that commits him not to write in certain ways. Yet it remains his story.

Double predestination in its purest form bothers me. Calvin sometimes gives the impression that God starts out with a list of people whom he sets out to save and another list of people that he sets out to damn. This seems to be an oversimplification of his task as an artist (and a violation of the Scriptural assurance that God wants all to come to him). That does not mean that I want to save God from taking responsibility for salvation and damnation – Like Calvin, I think God is responsible for both. With the Reformed tradition in general, I affirm that Christ died, not just to set up the possibility that some might be saved, but actually to save people. But the two classic choices for God: that his goal in creation was to save specific people, or that he simply foresees what choices we will make, do not either seem to do justice to his artistry.

To return to Calvin's analysis, I'm suggesting that we need to look at things on two different levels. On the human level (from inside the story) things make sense on their own. People make decisions for which they are really responsible. But God is still responsible for the situation as a whole, and for the overall story. These two kinds of responsibility are not in competition with each other. Every action makes sense both in terms of the motivations of the people involved, and in terms of God's overall plan.

Let's look at situation when someone does something evil. I believe we need to look primarily to the person who does it. Christians have sometimes thought that everything bad is a punishment from God, and have tried to identify something wrong that we did. I believe this approach was rejected in the book of Job.

However the evil act is also part of a history over which God has overall control. God brings good out of evil, and will see to it that the ultimate result is what he wants, not what the evil person wants. "God writes straight with crooked lines" (a saying that I've seen attributed to several different sources). Thus I believe that even evil actions are part of God's plan. Not that God intended the evil or its results in themselves, but that he chose to use characters who he knew would do those things.

I would also suggest that God has two different kinds of responsibility. One is this general responsibility for history, which is analogous to the responsibility of an author for his story. The other is the more direct and personal responsibility which he takes for those he justifies. Justification is God's decision to engraft us into Christ and to work within us to regenerate us. Thus his connection in the lives of his people is direct and personal.

By contrast, his responsibility for the damned is that of the author. But it does not involve this direct, personal component. God does not directly inspire people to be evil.

Thus I would suggest that both single and double predestination are appropriate ways to look at things, but in slightly different areas. Single predestination reflects the way God works with people: he works directly with those who are justified, but simply passes over the rest. There is an asymmetry here. Double predestination reflects God's responsibility as an author: he is responsible for the final results. Even the evil end up doing his will, although not intentionally.

## SPECIAL ISSUES:

### *Can You Be Sure?*

Some of the major debates about salvation center around the question “Can I be sure I’m saved?” First, some caveats. The question is about me, not anyone else. All Christians agree that it’s impossible to be sure whether someone else is saved. You may have fairly good evidence. Christ said you will know his followers by the fruit that they bear. In a few cases there may be essentially no doubt. But most commonly, we simply can’t be sure. And we should be happy to leave such decisions up to God.

Second, note that the question is about me, not about God. Everyone agrees that when we accept Christ as Lord, we will be saved. There are some practical issues, as we’ll see. But the question is never about whether God will accept us.

Finally, let me note that this is primarily an issue for Protestants. One can ask the question of Catholic theology, but it isn’t a major theme of Catholic theology, and Catholics don’t generally seem to have worried about it seriously. So for the purposes of this section I’m writing primarily from a Protestant perspective.

OK, now let’s look at the question in more detail.

From the Catholic perspective, it should be possible to tell that you’re saved now, but probably not whether you will end up in heaven. Catholic doctrine is fairly straightforward about what you need to do to be saved. There are additional opportunities, so that it is possible that a pagan might be saved. But for a normal Christian there are pretty clear sufficient conditions: be baptized, make use of the means of grace supplied by the Church (e.g. going to Mass regularly), and use the sacrament of reconciliation to receive forgiveness for sins when you fall back.

Protestants often attack this answer, based on Luther’s experience. He could never get any peace, because he could never be sure he had met the requirements. Did he remember every sin he had committed? Was he sufficiently sincere in repenting them? But his confessor thought he was being unreasonable in this, and I think that’s the typical Catholic reaction. God never required absolute perfection, but primarily required the proper intention and doing whatever was reasonably possible.

The more serious problem from a Catholic point of view is whether we can now be confident that we are going to be saved in the end. The answer to that is no. We can’t be certain now that we won’t at some time in the future commit a mortal sin and die before we can repent, or even that we won’t completely abandon the faith. Thus Trent is very clear: we can’t be sure we will finally be saved, without some special revelation from God.

For classical Protestantism things are more interesting. One of the standard doctrines is “perseverance of the saints”. That is, if someone is truly justified, they will stay that way. This is an obvious result of the Protestant idea of justification, as explained above. God justifies us before we are able to respond. Justification is a permanent relationship.

Luther and Calvin both accepted predestination. (Note however that modern Lutherans accept it only in a very qualified sense.) Thus God “elected” certain people to be saved, and justified

them, engrafting them into Christ and starting the process of sanctifying them. Their status before God rested on God's decision to save them, not on anything they did. Thus justification and salvation are permanent.

It seemed to Luther and Calvin that this was a major source of assurance to Christians. Because salvation depended entirely upon God, we did not have to worry whether we had been sufficiently complete or sincere in our response. Because of their understanding of the severity of sin, the Reformers felt that no one could rely on salvation if it depended upon us. They felt safe in relying on God.

Unfortunately there's a practical problem. You can be sure that if you have ever been justified, you will continue to be. But there's no entirely safe way to know whether you are justified in the first place, i.e. whether you are one of the elect that God has chosen to save. Certainly anyone who has a real faith will in fact be saved. But we know from practical experience that people may appear to have saving faith when in fact they don't. They may have been carried away by some religious enthusiasm, or they may only have the appearance of justifying faith, without the reality. A real justifying faith is only possible as a gift from God, and there's no clear way to tell whether this has happened.

These issues did not seem to bother either Luther or Calvin. They acknowledged the possibility of illusory faith, but they and most of their followers did not seem overly bothered by that possibility.

However their later followers were not so fortunate. Particularly in Calvinism, developing confidence that you are among the "elect" became one of the biggest practical problems for Protestants. This was the Protestant equivalent of Luther's uncertainty.

If you ask for evidence that you're saved, the only sensible answer was the one that Jesus gave: you could tell that you were one of Jesus' followers because of the fruit you bore. While this didn't exactly make salvation dependent upon good works, it made any confidence in salvation dependent upon good works. The result was that from a practical point of view people focused their attention on their own works, not on Christ. The Reformation ideas had thus been turned on their head.

Assurance of salvation is an important Reformation idea. But the original point was that assurance came from our confidence in God. Justification by faith made sense existentially because the Reformers felt they could have confidence in God's intention to save them, where they couldn't have confidence in their own proper performance of what the Catholic system required of them.

My conclusion from all of this is that assurance of salvation is real, but somewhat elusive. It doesn't appear to be something that we can go after independently. That is, there is no test for being saved that will always give the right answer, even when employed by those who are not saved. This should not be a surprise: without God's help we are unable to understand our spiritual situation accurately. We need his assistance even to grasp the reality of sin. So those who don't have this help are going to assess their condition incorrectly. There is no test we can set up that will prevent that.

I believe assurance is real, but that valid assurance occurs only in the context of an ongoing relationship with God. Consider a normal human relationship. When I love someone, whether a parent or spouse, I am willing to rely on that person. My confidence in them is a basic part of my relationship with them. However it would be very hard to prove in any objective way that the confidence is justified. People do sometimes love people who do not return their commitment. Furthermore, requiring external proofs would be a sure way to poison the relationship.

Thus I believe the Reformers were right that in our relationship with God we can trust him to save us. We should be able to have confidence in this. But we have to realize that others may have a similar confidence and be wrong. Any attempt to produce proofs of our salvation is likely to be self-defeating.

Assurance in our relationship with God is just like trust in a human relationship. You can trust God for your salvation. As long as you do this in the context of a relationship with God, the result is helpful. As soon as you ask for objective proofs, outside of your personal relationship, the question becomes self-defeating.

### *Can You Be Sure?: Once Saved, always Saved*

The discussion so far has applied to the Calvinist position, and possibly with some qualifications to Lutherans. However some Baptists also hold a variant of this. It's often called "Once saved, always saved".

Baptists were originally Calvinists. However most modern Baptists (at least in the U.S.) are not. It seems likely that "once saved, always saved" entered the Baptist tradition through Calvinism. However it continues even among Baptists who are Arminian.

"Once saved, always saved" has a rather different implication in an Arminian setting than in a Calvinist setting. For Calvinists, assurance of salvation is one implication of the doctrine of election. God chooses people to be saved. He sees to it that their faith perseveres to the end. For a Calvinist, it makes no sense to talk about someone who has rejected Christ being saved. If someone has rejected Christ, then they are not one of God's children. They may have appeared to be saved, but it was just religious enthusiasm.

But for non-Calvinist Baptists, "once saved, always saved" is quite different. It means that once you have met the minimal requirements for salvation, you are in, no matter what you do. A prototypical presentation of this position is given by Charles Stanley (a well-known Southern Baptist writer), in "Eternal Security: Can you be Sure?" In the book, he includes a brief prayer turning your life over to God. If you pray it sincerely, you are guaranteed to be saved, no matter what happens with your life later.

This seems appalling to most other Christians, because it seems to say that God isn't serious about requiring a transformation of our lives. To avoid this, he maintains that there are levels of honor in heaven. It is true that you will end up in heaven if you pray his prayer and do nothing else. But you may find yourself in a very remote part of heaven, with a very small crown and a very skimpy robe. You will be eternally frustrated that you didn't take God's demands more seriously.

*How can you preach the Gospel if you believe in predestination?*

Predestination means that ultimately God is responsible for who is saved. While God's grace is offered to everyone, only those who he regenerates are able to take advantage of it. So how can you honestly say to someone: "Have faith, repent of your sins, and you will be saved" when you don't know whether God has chosen him or not?

First, we have an explicit authorization from Jesus to preach to everyone. So there is no question that we are permitted to offer salvation to everyone. (Indeed we are required to do so.)

Second, when preaching the Gospel it is not necessary to tell each individual that God has definitely chosen them. All that we need to say is that Christ has died for his people, and that if the person repents of his sins and responds in faith, he will be saved.

The fact that God is responsible for the overall story does not change the fact that people are saved through faith and repentance. Yes, God knows who will be saved, and at one level he is responsible for it. He works in us to regenerate us. But God commonly works through human agents, and the result of his work is human response and change. It is a privilege to be invited to participate in God's work of regeneration.

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus uses a metaphor that may be helpful here. Several times he speaks of himself as a shepherd calling his sheep. But it's clear that not everyone belongs to his flock. His sheep recognize his voice. Others do not. When we preach the Gospel, we are calling in Jesus' name. Those who are Jesus' sheep will respond. We don't need to know in advance who they are, or how many they are. We can hope for everyone.

In fact I think it can cause problems if we assume too much responsibility for the salvation of others. In I Cor 3:6-7, Paul discusses a similar issue. He points out that he simply sows seeds. God makes them grow. If we assume that we are responsible for saving people, we may be led into using overly emotional or coercive approaches. These can lead to the appearance of success, but their long-range effect is questionable.