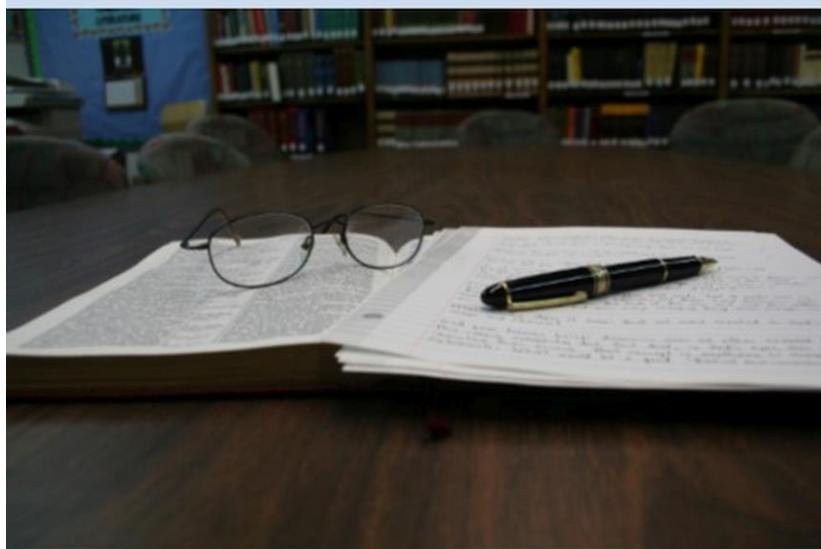


GOD'S GLASSES



DEREK THOMPSON

GOD'S GLASSES

by

Derek Thompson

B.E., Dip. Th.

Dedicated to my l-o-n-g-suffering wife,
Margaret,
and my daughters, Cally and Rhona.

Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

Bible references are given in the form: [Book Title] [Chapter#]:[Verse#].

“God’s Glasses”

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Preface

The 8th edition has improved readability, but no change to the content. Readability problems came about because this book is a compilation of material from many years of prayer journaling. I have assembled numerous journal entries into a logical order, but this process entailed a degree of awkwardness in presentation, hence the many editions trying to improve it.

I am not implying by the title “God's Glasses” that God is getting old and needing glasses, even if God is called the “Ancient of Days” in the Bible. Neither, does God need a hearing aid or a walking stick. After all, God invented eyes, ears, and legs.

However, God wants to be a part of our lives and God is not deterred by our frailties or anything else. That means, in my case, God joins me in using my glasses to read this. Moreover, God invites us to look through his glasses. It just takes a desire to see things from God’s perspective and exercise our faith. God wants to be friends with us. In the following pages, I pass on the things I have glimpsed through God’s glasses.

Derek Thompson

November 2015



Oh My God!

A friend of mine used to say “Oh my God” when surprised or dismayed, but knowing I am a Christian, she apologised so as not to offend me. This was before OMG became a common abbreviation. It occurred to me that there was an important truth in what she was saying. Everyone has at least this one thing in common – they belong to God. Of course, not everyone agrees with this. Some people doubt that God exists. Even believers disagree as to the nature of God. But if we are going to discuss God, we at least need to agree that we mean by God, the Creator of everything.

Now if God created everyone, we must be, in a sense, his children. Even among those who believe in God as the Creator of everything, many do not regard God as their divine father. God is neither male nor female but the masculine pronoun for God is normally used. What we think about God is not as important as what God thinks about us. God sees us as rebellious children who have run away from home. Of course, not everyone who has left the family home is in rebellion against their parents. But, the God of Christianity is a father who wants his rebellious children to return home. God wants a warm relationship

with his children, no matter what they have done, or the life they were living.

There are many views concerning God. Our view of God has implications for our attitudes to life. Only the Creator's view of reality is certain to be true. So God's view of things is the one that counts. Our view of reality is at best, partially true and at worst, completely wrong. Even though we may not be able to know all truth, we can know some truths, and hopefully the number is increasing. Christianity views reality as grounded in God. Reality embraces everything (personal and impersonal) but the truth regarding reality is itself, personal, because God is personal. God made us in his image, meaning he can relate to us personally. You have probably heard "the force be with you" of Star Wars, or materialistic evolution's "survival of the fittest", or Freemasonry's "Great Architect of the Universe". Such ideas as these reduce God to something less than he is. We regard ourselves as personal. We are not mere forces, or animated bodies, or grand ideas. God, our Creator, could not be less than us.

God has given us minds and spirits capable of receiving his truth. We can know something of reality and the God who created it. More importantly, we can relate to God himself. Relating to God means more than knowing things on the subject of God. We can know him and trust him. In the end, we have to trust God with our lives. In a relationship with someone, we try to understand how they see things. God is worth befriending. In relating to God, we discover just how good, loving, and trustworthy God is.



The Truth about God

There are many religions vying for our allegiance. Every religion teaches something different about God. One at most can be true. But, how can we find the truth? Sceptics doubt we can know the truth about anything. For this to be true, we must argue from a self-evident premise. For such a premise to exist defeats the sceptic's argument. This makes me sceptical about scepticism. But where can we find truth? Creation itself is a source of truth since it suggests the existence of its Creator. The trouble is that creation is an ambiguous source of truth. It is in need of interpretation, and creation is so pervaded by evil it makes the truth hard to find.

Moses wrote, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to us and to our children forever..." (Deuteronomy 29:29). "LORD" in capital letters in the Bible translates God's personal name. The ancient Hebrew scribes thought God's name was too holy to write, so they only wrote the consonants. For this reason, we cannot be certain of what God's name is, but "Yahweh" is the most common guess these days. In the past, "Jehovah" was used.

For Christians, the Bible is a source of revealed truth. It is not set out as a textbook on God or as rules for living. It is a collection of writings (called Scriptures) composed of many literary genres, written by many authors (approximately 40), over a long period (around 1,500 years). All these writings have one thing in common. They are inspired by God. As

precious gems are mined from the earth, we have to mine truth from Scripture. The Bible has two parts, the Old Testament, which comprises those Scriptures written before Christ (B.C.), and New Testament, comprising those Scriptures written in the first century (A.D.). The writers of the Old Testament wrote in the Hebrew language and the New Testament in Greek.

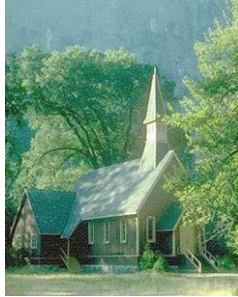
Scripture is not just information to satisfy our intellectual curiosity, nor rules to follow to win God's approval and lead a successful life. Holy Books of other religions do not rise above providing us with good advice. However, in the Bible we learn something about God that we do not learn elsewhere. We discover that God loves the people he created and wants to befriend them. This is in contrast to the gods of other religions who demand allegiance and obedience and seek control over people. The God of the Bible, seeks to love and care for his people. God does not coerce people to follow him. Nor does he want us to try to manipulate him to get our way. Loving relationships do not use force or manipulation, but need freedom to grow. Freedom and goodness are attributes of a personal God. Other attributes are omnipotence (all-powerful), omnipresence and immanence (which means he is everywhere all the time), and transcendence over creation.

God shows us something else about himself in the Bible. We discover that God is a trinity (three in unity). The word trinity does not occur in Scripture. A theologian named Tertullian (circa 160 to 225 C.E.) suggested the word trinity to describe the nature of God as revealed in the Bible. One example is found in a letter written by the apostle Peter. Peter addresses Christians "who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 1:2). Even though there is only one God, God subsists in three persons called the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three persons is distinct in his actions but one in their essence. This is difficult for us to understand being beyond human experience.

Christian theologians have sought to explain the trinity in various ways. Here is one (*The Unity of the Bible* by Daniel P. Fuller, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992). As God reflects on himself, he forms an image of himself that is itself eternal, as he is. His image is perfect as he is. In fact, the image is God. God the Father is the person who does the “begetting”, and the person who is “begotten” is God the Son. Both persons are God, and the Son proceeds or originates from the Father. The author of Hebrews said, “He [the Son] 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.” (Hebrews 1:3). The writer of Hebrews implies that the Son is God. He says, “of the Son he [God the father] says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...’” (Hebrews 1:8).

The Father and Son love one another. This spirit of loving fellowship between the Father and the Son is analogous to the spirit of fellowship we speak of as being present between friends. As for the Son, this Spirit is eternal, perfect, omnipotent and personal, and God. This is the Holy Spirit, who likewise proceeds from the Father. The Bible refers to the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of God (the Father) and the Spirit of Christ. Many theologians surmise that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. It is put this way in the Nicene Creed which is accepted by the Catholic and Protestant churches, but not the Orthodox churches, which maintain that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only. When God comes to live with his people today, he does so in the person of the Holy Spirit.

This explanation may be helpful in understanding the Bible when it says such things as, the Son of God came to dwell amongst us and that the Son is God. Scripture says that the Father and Son are one, and that God is one. God is both personal and relational in his very being.



Amazing Grace

Why does God love people? It is not because we are so cute and loveable. It is in God's nature to love. The apostle John said, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Towards his entire creation, God is gracious. His approach towards sinful humanity is one of mercy and not revenge (although a time will come for judgement, it will not be out of revenge). Every action of God is just, but in his essence, he is gracious. We should not understand grace in terms of humanity's need of forgiveness. This would limit grace to God's "undeserved favour" upon sinners. God's grace exceeds this. As the old hymn says, God's grace is amazing.

Grace is descriptive of the personality of God. His graciousness towards us does not depend on whether we deserve it. For instance, swans swimming on a lake are graceful irrespective of whether I deserve to see them, or even if I am not there to see them. God is gracious to everyone, not just Christians. Jesus said of God, "... he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). We sinners discern God's grace most strikingly in God's plan to save his lost children. But even if no one had gone astray, God is still gracious. Even if none of his rebellious children accepted his offer of reconciliation, God is still gracious.

We perceive God's grace in each of the three persons of the Trinity. God, the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit work together to rescue humanity. The Father created people he knew would rebel against him but he provided a way of reconciliation. The Son was active in carrying out the Father's plans for creation and its restoration. God the Holy Spirit enters the lives of his people to restore peace with God and empower them for service. In summary, we behold God's grace in the Father's plan for creation, Jesus implementing that plan, and in the Holy Spirit indwelling God's people. The grace of God goes beyond saving people who do not deserve it, to living with them, imparting his power and embracing them in communion with God.

Since God knows everything (omniscience is another attribute of God), we are tempted to think of God as sitting in heaven observing everything we do. Sometimes God approves, sometimes he disapproves. This picture focuses on our performance as being for our own sake, instead of being for others and for God. It pictures us as the main actor in the spotlight on centre stage performing for the approval of the audience. Before I became a Christian, I thought surely God approves of people who are doing their best to do good. Many of the world's non-Christian religions teach this. They ask, "What must I do to please God?" Christians sometimes carry over this religious mindset into the church when we focus on the church's work for God. For example, when Christians promote their church by saying how well it ministers to those in need, or how many are being added to its numbers, or how godly its members are becoming. These "religious" attitudes obscure the church's proclamation of the gospel of Jesus.

God wants to relate to people out of grace, as opposed to judgement. Forgiveness does not balance the scales of justice with our good deeds on one side and our sins on the other. "Mercy triumphs over judgement" (James 2:13). Mercy does not merely tip the scales in our favour. It casts the scales aside. God does not judge his people for the

sins from which he is saving them. There will be a Judgement Day. On that day, everyone will see God's justice in Jesus' judgement of his people as righteous. God does not keep a list of the sins of his people, but forgives them. On Judgement Day, everyone will witness God's justice when Jesus condemns those sinners who do not believe in him.

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

(Psalm 130:3 & 4)

God did not create the earth for our dominion. Everything belongs to God. God invites us into fellowship with him. When we come to know God, we discard our predilection to be at centre stage. If God sometimes places us back there, we play the role to help others. God delights in our performance when we are one with him. In a sinful world, we endure the harsh realities of life. Nevertheless, a relationship with God grounds our lives in truth and reality. The goal of our lives is not to win God's approval, or earn rewards, or seek happiness or fulfilment, or things from God. False religion approaches God in ways that cannot please him. People who are remote and independent of God do not have faith in him or enjoy communion with him. Knowing God is the purpose of our lives. It is possible because God wants to be our friend.



The View from Heaven

The Bible is the Christian's source book for meeting God. It is sometimes called "God's Word" when spoken of in the sense of God speaking or communicating to us. When reading the Bible we need to be mindful that although God inspired it (which means God breathed his truth into it), we have to interpret what it says. For instance, we cannot take everything in the Bible as instruction on how God wants us to live. The Bible includes stories of people that show their fallibility and those actions are not intended for us to emulate. Yet, God communicates with us through what is written in the Bible. He seeks to explain to us what he is doing in the world and to tell us he wants to draw us into communion with himself. The stories in the Bible of people encountering God can show us how we too, can relate to him.

The Bible is not essentially about us although it describes human nature. God gives his view of things in the Bible. We will understand the Bible better if we try to read it through God's glasses, from God's point of view. God gave us the Bible, not for our education, but so we might be saved (2 Timothy 3:15). Gospel means good news, and it is good news to God. The gospel is good news before it even gets to us and remains good news irrespective of our acceptance. It is not a

Christian sales pitch. The gospel is not sold like we sell a newspaper. It does not need a marketing strategy. Christians tell others the gospel because it is good news. Badgering or manipulating people into accepting the gospel misses the point. Christians proclaim the gospel and encourage people to accept it because for those who reject the gospel, Judgement Day will be terrible news. Jesus believed God's plan to save people and eradicate evil, is good news, good enough to die for and take back his human life. This is why St Paul calls it "the gospel of Christ" (Galatians 1:7).

God's creation of the world is described in chapters 1 and 2 of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. God made people in his own image (Genesis 1:27), which means he considers us his children. He gave humanity authority over the world and everything in it. He made us so we could relate to him as a person, even allowing the possibility of our unfaithfulness to him.

The world is out of control. We lost both our authority in the world and our privileged status as God's children when humanity broke faith with God. In Genesis, Adam and Eve, our first parents, represent humanity. They believed the lie that God was holding something back from them. They wanted to be independent of God. The result was catastrophic (and the result is the same whether you take the Adam and Eve story as myth or literal history). Humanity's relationship with God is shattered and so our relationships with God and one another are now blemished by distrust and fear. There is no point in blaming Adam and Eve; we are no different. As a result, the world has become a dangerous place and the world's understanding of truth has become a tangled mess. Yet the underlying reality, that God cares for us, is still true.

Why a powerful and good God allows evil in the world is difficult to understand. This is called the problem of evil. If God is good and omnipotent he would not allow evil, but since evil exists how can God

be altogether good or omnipotent? God's solution to the problem of evil is to destroy evil. Evil does not exist of necessity; it perverts reality. If God destroyed evil, he would destroy the human race, since no-one is righteous. God does not want to destroy us. The problem of evil is humanity. Therefore, God is patient in delaying evil's removal while he saves his lost children.

When evil manifests in the body we call it sickness; evil in the soul, the Bible calls sin. Evil is inherently irrational and we can only define it in negative terms. It is analogous to a shadow that needs both light and something of substance to exist. Whenever we move, our shadow moves. The Bible says everyone is a sinner (Romans 3:23). We find this difficult to admit, preferring to reserve the term sinner for those we consider atrocious. Heinous crimes reported in the media dismay us that people can do such evil things. But the evil we see on the TV news is also in us. The difference in the evil is in degree, not character. Evil is irrational. There is nothing to understand. Confronted by this quandary, a psalmist concluded the human heart is a mystery (Psalm 64:6).

Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3). God was not depriving them of something good. God is good. The snake lied, tempting Adam and Eve to see the fruit as good apart from God. They thought they could judge for themselves what is good. The fruit looked good and tasty. For Adam and Eve to eat fruit from the forbidden tree meant distrusting God. They wanted independence from God, they broke faith with him, and hence, experienced evil.

Every sin is ultimately directed against God. Even when we direct our sin against other people, we are sinning against God. When the restraints of society are removed, or when a society itself becomes corrupt, the sin of humanity becomes more obvious. St John says in the Bible "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). This does not define sin but describes it. Sin leads to anarchy. In sin we deny God's sovereignty and

rebel against him. Sin is more than actions. It starts with disobedience of the heart. The results of sin in the heart are sinful thoughts and sinful behaviour. The whole of our lives have become contaminated by sin. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (John 6:34.). None of us can lead a perfect life.

Sin may be seen as estrangement from God, our divine father. In this analogy, we are no longer children of God. The alternative is being children of the devil (1 John 3:8-10). Genesis 3:24 says that God sent an angel to the Garden of Eden to prevent Adam and Eve eating from the tree of life. The apostle Paul said, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). God did not allow evil to become immortalised in human beings. God's plan involved death. In contrast to those ancient Greek philosophers who taught that the human soul is immortal, the Bible teaches that God will raise humans from death. Jesus raises the dead to either everlasting life or destruction in hell (the second death, Revelation 21:8).

God does not punish as humans do, as a deterrent or payback for wrong behaviour. The death and destruction of people who oppose God is punishment for sin, but God's punishment aims to eradicate evil. The Bible says that God will throw Satan and the other fallen angels into the lake of fire for everlasting torment (Revelation 20:10). Satan is another name for the devil. Satan means adversary or enemy. The Bible calls the fallen supernatural beings that rebelled with Satan, demons and evil spirits.

Just as a human potter does not make pottery to destroy it, the divine Potter does not want to destroy us. The wicked (as the Bible calls those who prefer sin) seek independence from God and determine to go their own way. God said, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (Ezekiel 33:11). The prophet Isaiah said, "Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD,

that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:6 & 7). God wants to save everyone. Salvation in the Bible means to be reconciled with God.

Our world is another casualty of humanity's fall into sin. It is not just that our selfishness leads to pollution and destruction of our environment, which it does. Creation is of one piece from God's perspective. When humanity broke fellowship with God, our world was no longer a Garden of Eden paradise. The Bible speaks of creation as being subject to futility and decay (Romans 8:20-23). Creation has been groaning in labour pains waiting the time when God will remake the heavens and the earth. Murphy's Law (whatever can go wrong, will go wrong) and Ecclesiastes' "All is vanity" are keen observations of life. However, God's way is more optimistic.



God's Vision Statement

God tells his people many times in the Bible, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Exodus 6:7). The Bible refers to this statement as the covenant of God. In modern language, we might call it the vision or mission statement of God. It is a statement of God's intention towards us. God declares that he wants to be involved with us and care for us. The covenant expresses God's grace. God first stated his covenant to Abraham because of Abraham's faith (Genesis 15:6). God's vision statement is a constant theme throughout the Bible: Gen 17:7-9; Ex 6:7, 19:5, 29:45-46; Lev 26:12; Ps 48:14; Ps 95:7; Is 51:16; Jer 7:23; 24:7; 31:1 & 33; 32:38; Ezek 36:26-28; 37:23 & 27; Zech 2:11; 8:8; 13:9b; Jn 20:17; 2 Cor 6:16 & 18; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3 & 7.

What is a covenant? The dictionary defines it as a bond or promise between two people. It resembles a contract, an agreement between two parties enforceable by law, but a covenant goes beyond law. It is like a promise or commitment. In ancient times, kings covenanted with their subjects. Law makers, who were above the law, established covenants. There were two parties involved: the one who determines the covenant, and the one who lives under it. Today we still sometimes use this meaning of covenant. For example, in a housing estate where

there is a covenant not allowing front fences, if you want a front fence, you have to live somewhere else.

God is the higher authority who declares his covenant. It is non-negotiable. We can accept it or refuse it. God is our Creator and we depend on him for our lives and everything else. We can live under God's covenant or we live somewhere else. If you live under God's covenant you are one of his people. Many illustrations of this are given in Scripture. People are united with God, citizens of God's kingdom, born again, members of God's family, part of his body (the church), have eternal life, and live in the light.

It is because of this covenant that God revealed his name as Yahweh to his people. We say we are on first name terms with someone to indicate we know them well. God is saying he wants us to regard him as a friend. In the Bible, the meaning of names is significant. The name Yahweh means, "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14), the self-existent one. God is not dependent on anyone or anything else. We can have confidence God can and will do whatever he says.

The covenants of ancient kings with their subjects illuminate what is meant by the covenant of God. A good king ruled his kingdom with the well-being of his subjects in mind. God rules his kingdom to be a blessing to his people. He is not a king who maintains his distance from his subjects. The Holy Spirit dwells with his people. Jesus declared, "the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). This does not refer to a place or country, but the realm of God's authority. It is not distant or difficult to enter.

The alternative to living in God's kingdom is living in the kingdom of darkness. Those who spurn friendship with God are enemies of God. Sin causes death because it separates us from the source of life. "All life is upheld by covenant; and the essence of sin is breach of covenant" (Article on Sin by Kenneth Grayston in *A Theological Word Book of the*

Bible, edited by Alan Richardson, SCM Press, 1979). Rejecting God's covenant is a breach of faith with God. As Paul said, "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

Rejection of God's covenant is rebellion against goodness itself and embracing evil. Evil is destructive. It tries to destroy God, who upholds everything. To align oneself with evil reveals itself, when pressed, in hatred or contempt of God. An example of this is in Numbers 14:11 where God says Israel in its rebellion despises him. Sin breaches God's covenant with us and damages God's covenant with others. God works through his people for their mutual benefit.

God's covenant is not a passive piece of divine legislation to justify God's punishment of sinful people. It establishes our relationship with God. When we look at things from our own point of view we fail to see God's perspective. God's vision statement implies that God is actively involved in the world. God the Father's intention is the Son's motivation and the Holy Spirit's approach to ministry. He acts as God for his people. God is not dependent on humanity for anything.

God is a giver by nature. He has no ulterior motive in his dealings with us, other than to love us and take delight in his children. God saves, heals, and delivers from evil. Divine love for people is the driving force behind God's ambition to save us and, conversely, to destroy the enemies of God and his people.



Jesus the Lifesaver

Jesus said that the reason he came into the world was to save us (John 3:17). He came to save us from our sins, and not to judge us because of them. God cannot condone evil (which is a negation of God), by directly forgiving sins. However, interpersonal relationships between people provides a means for forgiveness to occur. Most of my friends are sinners. But, one friend, Jesus, is not a sinner. Humans are not responsible for the actions of others. So forgiving another person does not carry with it any sense of approving their sin. God used the only means available to fulfil his vision and be reconciled to sinful humans; he took on human form. In his human nature, Jesus was sinless, and he forgave sinners. For the Son of God, taking on human form entailed death on a cross. Jesus accepted his mission to save sinful humans because to his Father we were worth saving.

The Son of God entered human history on the first Christmas Day. His birth is called the incarnation which literally means taking on human flesh. The Son of God at the incarnation joined himself to humanity permanently, not just for 30 years. His name, "Jesus," means, "The Lord saves". His title, "Christ" (equivalent to the Hebrew word "Messiah"),

means “the anointed one”. A prophet or a religious leader anointed with oil the person chosen to be king. This ritual conferred authority, power and the status of sovereignty. Jesus is not a domineering king who rules by fear or a despotic ruler who expects to be served; he is the Lord who serves, not in the sense of doing our bidding, but in his love and care for us.

Jesus achieved his purpose in coming. We want to think of ourselves as “having arrived”, that we have made it, are in control; but no matter how hard we strive, we keep falling short of the ideal. In contrast, Jesus arrived without sin, lived his life without resorting to sin, and lives forever at God's right hand.

When the Son of God became human he proclaimed the good news that God's kingdom is near to each one of us (Mk 1:14-15). Jesus instructed his disciples to proclaim forgiveness of sins in his name (Lk 24:47). What Jesus accomplished is the important issue for us, more important than how Jesus can be both God and a man (God can do whatever he wants). The world focuses on events (the birth, life and death of Christ). God had a purpose in these events. Events slip away into history but God's purpose stands forever. No one can take your salvation from you.

The Son of God became a man to be both our Saviour and Lord. He did not teach on slavery, or women's rights, or on systems of government, not even church government. As important as these issues are, God's rescue mission for his lost people takes priority. Jesus' mission was to reunite people with God. He did this not just because of our need, but because of God the Father's longing for his children.

In Jesus, we see God the Father (John 14:9). Jesus willingly lived and died for us because of his Father's love for us. Christ could have avoided the cross. Prior to his crucifixion he could have appealed to his Father to send more than 12 legions of angels to rescue him (Matthew

26:53). What if he had? If Jesus had accepted Satan's temptation to abandon his mission, world history would have ended. God would have brought on Judgement Day because of the enormity of the sin perpetrated against his Son.

Instead, Jesus forgave those who were sinning against him and gave humanity the chance of being reconciled to God. There was a high personal cost to the Godhead in this plan of salvation. God the Father did not demand that Jesus do this. Neither did Jesus presume on the Father's goodness to save him. From the beginning, God planned to save a people for himself.

Jesus is a substitute, but not as payment for the penalty of our sin. He is comparable to a substitute in a team sport where an injured player is replaced so that the game can go ahead. Or a substitute for a broken dinner plate to allow the dinner party to go ahead. The problem for humanity was that there was no sinless person to whom God could relate. God needed another Adam (1 Cor 15:45). Jesus being both human and sinless was the perfect mediator. He knew that God cared for his lost children. God did not need Jesus' violent death on the cross, as some theologians conjecture. Sinful humanity and Satan were responsible for the violence. Jesus was a substitute for the missing righteous human. He was the perfect "lamb" the Hebrew sacrificial ritual required. God did not need the blood of animals (Hebrews 10:4), or the blood of anyone, the sacrificial system was an illustration.

Jesus made the controversial statement "I am the way" to God and there is no other alternative (John 14:6). Jesus' disciples must have proclaimed this widely because Christianity was at first known as "the Way" (Acts 9:2, 19:9 & 23, 22:4, 14 & 22). So, while Jesus' followers cannot say they have arrived, they can say they are on the way. They are still striving, but now they strive for Jesus, not to win his approval but because his Spirit is in them (2 Peter 1:4). God has come into the world. When the Son of God became human, he shared with us the

frailty of human life, so in this sense, the whole of Jesus' life was a sacrifice. Jesus trusted God the Father with his life and Jesus' resurrection from the dead justified his faith. Our faith in Jesus is justified by our salvation.

Jesus' teaching that he is the only way to God sets Christianity in opposition to other religions. It is more diplomatic to say all religions are equally valid. The salvation Jesus was talking about comes from a relationship with his Father. The only way to restore this broken relationship is through accepting Jesus' forgiveness and believing in God. Jesus embodied this way of salvation. He referred to himself as the gate, the good shepherd, and the water of life.

Allegiance to any other person or god cannot restore a relationship with God. Humanity has embraced many false religions. We cannot blame God for them. We misrepresent God so we can stay friends with the world. Religious people backed by the powers of this world crucified Christ. All power belongs to God. He does not give it away. Even when we use his power, it remains his. He is rightly angry when we use his power for evil ends. Satan tried to overcome God by killing Jesus on the cross. The forces of evil showed themselves for what they are, enemies who hate God.

All power ultimately belongs to God. On the cross, Jesus trusted in God and identified with those of sinful humanity who believed in him. The power of God seen in bringing Jesus back to life was greater than the devil's stolen power used to crucify him. Good Friday, the day Jesus died, is called good because on that day good overcame evil. Jesus' resurrection declared victory to the Lord. The love of Christ came up against the true nature of evil and overcame it. God did not use force. Evil is overcome by good (Romans 12:21). Jesus did not relinquish himself to the evil plan to kill him. He looked beyond it to the plan of God to swallow up death in resurrection life (1 Corinthians 15:54).

All three members of the trinity were involved in Jesus' resurrection: "Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Romans 6:4); Christ said he has power over death (John 10:18 and Revelations 1:18); and the Spirit raised Jesus from death (Romans 8:11). Paul said, "For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God (2 Corinthians 13:4). God exalted Jesus to the place of authority in God's kingdom.

God the Father forgives our sins through Jesus, but forgiveness is not the same thing as salvation. Not everyone alive today is saved. It is like having a signed cheque that needs to be cashed before having any value to you. When we speak of Jesus saving people from sin, we usually mean being saved from the consequences of sin: separation from God and everything it entails. Jesus saves us from the wrath of God against evil and its eternal destruction in hell.

There is an important distinction between salvation from temporal troubles and salvation from estrangement from God (which leads to eternal death). It is the difference between Jesus the helper and Jesus the lifesaver. But Christianity is not just about getting to heaven when you die. Jesus saves (with the meaning of "frees") people from subjection to particular sins during their lives on earth. He saves (in the sense of "heals") people from sickness. Through his disciples, Jesus continues to save people from persecution, poverty and suffering. Our experience is that God does not deliver everyone from every evil in this life. God does not use our ways. Nor does God want to control a still evil world.

If we confuse the different meanings of salvation from sin, it may appear to us that God has not yet fully saved us from sin. Some theologians have tried to resolve this by saying there are past, present and future aspects to salvation. I was saved when I placed my faith in Christ, I am being saved from indwelling sin and I will be completely saved when I go to heaven. One problem with this idea is it sees

salvation as an ongoing process. The Bible teaches, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36). Note the word “has” is past tense. Salvation from estrangement from God is an accomplished fact for people of faith. When we think of a lifesaver rescuing someone from drowning in the sea we do not think of the rescue activity as lifelong development. Once the person is back on the beach, we say they are saved. We do not say that any swimming instructions that follow are part of an ongoing rescue process.

There is a Bible passage that appears to support progressive salvation. In Philippians 2:12 & 13 Paul said, “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” We need to understand that just as we do not work to get our salvation, we do not contribute anything towards retaining it. Salvation is by the grace of God alone. Jesus is the Lord who saves. If our attitude is like that of Jesus, who sacrificed his life for ours, we will live like a person who Jesus has saved. We want to live as citizens of God’s kingdom, renouncing the kingdom of darkness. We exercise (work out or practise) living as people in relationship with God (i.e. as saved people).

The continuing struggle with sin is not a sign that we are not completely saved. Reconciliation with God emphasises the struggle against sin. More about that later.



Forgiven and Forgotten

When we forgive someone we let them off the hook. They do not receive the justice they deserve. As Jesus illustrated in the parable of the debtor who was forgiven much (Matthew 18:23-35), God has forgiven us much and this has implications for our relationships with other people. When we compare ourselves with others we think they are more sinful than we are. This makes us feel more secure regarding our sin. When we forgive others, we must let go of these false beliefs. God has forgiven every one of us. We have no cause to regard our sins as not as bad as the sins of others. Jesus has set us free to forgive those who have sinned against us. Forgiveness does not seek an apology. We cannot offer forgiveness based on a condition, such as the other person's apology or making restitution. This betrays our lack of forgiveness. Unforgiveness is a source of suffering to ourselves. We become bitter. If we wallow in resentment it can affect our health. The guilty party's acceptance of forgiveness is an admission of guilt and an apology opens the way for reconciliation.

It is the same with God. We need to respond to God's conciliatory approach in repentance and faith to restore our broken relationship. Scripture puts this in several ways to make the message unambiguous. One of these uses the legal system to describe how we accept God's

pardon (his forgiveness of our sins) to be saved from being punished. The following story recounted by Pastor Paul Yongi Cho illustrates that we must accept God's pardon to go free.

When Andrew Jackson was the U.S. president, a man named George Wilson spotted a thief stealing something from a post office. Wilson shot the man to death and was arrested, convicted and sentenced to die. But because of the circumstances of the crime, President Jackson signed a special pardon which acquitted and discharged Wilson. Here the story becomes unusual. Wilson refused to accept the pardon, and a legal quandary ensued. This case was eventually appealed to the Supreme Court where John Marshall, the chief judge, gave a famous decision as follows: "The letter of pardon is merely a piece of paper, but it has the power to pardon as long as the person who is the object of pardon accepts it. If the person who is the object of pardon refused to accept it, he cannot be acquitted. Therefore, the death penalty sentenced to George Wilson should be carried out."

(Praying with Jesus by Paul Y.Cho, Word Publishing, 1989.)

The Supreme Court provided the following definition of a pardon in *United States v. Wilson* (1833): "A pardon is an act of grace, proceeding from the power entrusted with the execution of the laws, which exempts the individual on whom it is bestowed from the punishment the law inflicts for a crime he has committed." A pardon does not absolve guilt and condemnation for an offence, but waives the punishment.

When we accept Jesus' forgiveness of our sins, he removes our guilt and condemnation for sin, and its consequent punishment is cancelled. Jesus' sacrifice won forgiveness for everyone. The letter of pardon is in your mailbox. What we do with the letter is our responsibility. We can

do one of four things. We can ignore it (“what letter?” I don’t know any God.), reject it (“it’s all too hard,” “Who does God think he is?”), replace it (“I’m going with another option,” “I don’t think God is like that”), or accept it (“Thank you Jesus, my Lord and saviour”).

Although we have our own reasons for making our decisions, our relationship with God is not just a product of the intellectual machinery of our minds. The apostle John said of Jesus, “... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” and that these are not born “... of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12 & 13). The path we choose is not determined by our reasoning (our minds will come up with reasons to justify our actions). When God’s Spirit witnesses to our spirit, he does not call for analytical reasoning, or a response to historical evidence or authoritative documents. The Spirit calls for a response to God’s covenant call to join his people.

The difference between pardon and absolution is illustrated by a famous Australian court case. A jury found Lindy Chamberlain guilty of murdering her baby daughter, Azaria, and Lindy went to gaol. Later, the baby’s matinee jacket was found with signs of having been chewed by a dingo which verified Lindy Chamberlain’s version of events. Lindy was pardoned and released from prison. However, the Northern Territory government did not annul the guilty verdict. Lindy protested that she did not want her record to say she murdered her baby. Similarly, we are more than pardoned by God. He keeps no record of our sin.

God’s forgiveness is so complete that he blots out our sins. He keeps no account of your offences to go back over them. God forgets them completely (Ezekiel 33:16). He will not remember the sins of his people anymore (Jeremiah 31:34 repeated in Hebrews 10:17). Our sins can be both forgiven and forgotten.

The legal system analogy is helpful but should not be taken too far. It does not explain everything about Christ's sacrifice. The atonement is not a mechanism for achieving salvation. God is gracious and willing to forgive. He does not demand a legal payment. Anyone who has ever forgiven a former friend for a hurtful offence will know that forgiveness is costly. The purpose of forgiveness is reconciliation, but we might not want to reconcile with someone who has hurt us. We are tempted to say, "I forgive you, but want nothing to do with you". In order for forgiveness to be effective in achieving reconciliation, the guilty party has to admit guilt and accept the forgiveness offered. However, everyone, apart from Jesus, is sinful, and we need to forgive one another. The high cost to us of forgiveness and repentance is why we are reluctant to embrace them.

On the positive side, when someone forgives us, there is no longer any need to justify ourselves and it is easier for us to forgive in return. For reconciliation of estranged people, both parties need to have a conciliatory attitude. This is not always forthcoming. With reconciliation, the offence that divides is removed. Every sin is ultimately against God. We cannot afford the cost of holding onto unforgiveness.

The teaching that Christ's sacrifice was for everyone has led a few people to say God will save everyone (a teaching called universalism). Paul wrote in Romans 5:18, "Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all." Justification was not a theological doctrine to Paul. Justification was the assurance that his faith in Christ had brought him into a relationship with God, which is life as God intended. Universalism overlooks the passages in the Bible that warn about judgement. God can save anyone. He does not want to destroy anyone. "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but

is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God welcomes home Jesus with his friends.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

(Romans 5:6-11)

The apostle Paul points out here that if Jesus' sacrifice for us reconciles us with God, then we are certain of salvation because we know we have the life of Christ in us. God is forgiving towards everyone because of Jesus' sacrifice for their sins. To those who believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit comes and dwells (or fellowships) with their spirits. For those who reject or ignore God's pardon, or try to justify themselves on their own merits, they remain estranged from God with everything that entails.

Jesus spoke of one unforgivable sin: "Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven" (Matthew 12:31). God forgives all of our sins, with one exception: the sin of rejecting his mercy. The Holy Spirit implores us to believe in Jesus. When we treat with contempt the witness of the Holy Spirit, we deny his divine authority and care for us. This is tantamount to blasphemy against him.

Satan is powerful, but not so powerful as to prevent us from receiving God's pardon. Satan cannot stand against the one who comes to save us. He can only try to dissuade us from wanting to know God. He tells us that there is no God or salvation. When people hear the gospel, Satan tells them they deserve punishment and that they are not good enough to deserve God's pardon. If Satan fails to keep us from believing in Jesus, he tries to make us ineffective at introducing others to God. He seeks to discourage us, telling us how sinful we are. If that does not work, he tries to drive us in the opposite direction by telling us that sin is not so dreadful in anyway.

In contrast, the Holy Spirit tells us not to dwell on how good or bad we are, but on the goodness of Jesus (see Jn 14:16 & 17; Phil 3:13b-15; 2 Tim 2:8; 1 Pet 3:15; James 1:5.). Jesus has triumphed over the enemy (Colossians 2:15) and when we resist the devil in Jesus' name, Satan will flee from us (James 4:7). When you accept God's pardon by faith, God is overjoyed and welcomes you back into his family.



You've got to Trust Someone

The central issue of the gospel is not authority (who is boss of your life, you or God?) but faith (are you a friend of God?). When authority is looked at through God's glasses, it has a different meaning to the one in common use. The people with authority in God's kingdom are those who do not follow their self-centred desires but seek to serve God and love others. They live the life of faith that frees them to be themselves as God intended. Free to love God and others, and to know Jesus as Lord. Christians position themselves under Jesus' authority and value living as loyal citizens of God's kingdom. The fear of punishment for sin melts away as we learn we are forgiven.

There is a proverb that says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). But, when we learn Jesus is for us, we move beyond fear to reverencing God in all his glory. God is for you, who can be against you?

Belief in God is not just accepting an idea or pertinent facts. Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen", is not a definition of faith but a description of how faith functions to give us certainty. Ideas convey truth but they are not truth. You are not saved by the thoughts of your mind, or by your

reasoning, or your choices regarding the truth of religious ideas or historical events. Even true ideas about Jesus only illustrate truth in the thoughts of your mind like a portrait on paper. Humanity's greatest ideas, its highest intelligence, most beautiful performers, and finest personalities can at most express things that are true, but they are not truth in themselves. Our minds receive information through our physical senses but our spirits receive truth through personal relationships of faith. Just as humans need social relationships, we need friendship with God. We can lose our mental and physical powers, especially as we grow old, but friendship with God cannot be taken from us.

We can trust Jesus; after all, he is Truth. Truth is personal and known in personal relationships. Atheists say they do not know God. They cannot find him by reason alone. Faith is not merely an intellectual decision. Human nature is more than a body and a mind. We have a spirit. God is spirit and we relate to him by our spirits through faith.

Faith influences our whole life. Jesus said, "Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness. Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness" (Luke 11:34 & 35). Jesus is saying that faith is like a healthy eye that brings the light of God's kingdom into your life. He warns us to consider where we stand with God. Everyone can believe in God.

How does one obtain faith in God? Faith is not something God gives some people and not others. Why did Jesus command us, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) if God does not give faith to everyone? Faith is not a commodity but a place in God's kingdom (metaphorically speaking). Faith is a gift in the same sense that arms and legs are gifts. How you use them is up to you. When you receive a gift, it becomes yours to do with as you please. Whether we place our faith in God or something else is up to us.

Everyone believes something. We need not deny that we are responsible for who or what we believe. Christians should not think that taking responsibility for our faith makes us responsible for our own salvation. In Ephesians 2:8 Paul said “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” Here we see that salvation, not faith, is referred to as the gift of God (the original Greek grammar supports this). The work we do concerning salvation is to believe in Jesus (John 6:29).

There is no cause for pride in our role in our salvation. Our choosing to believe in Jesus is like choosing to trust in a doctor’s diagnosis and treatment. We do not boast about our acceptance of help when we are sick, or our decision to follow a doctor’s orders. Instead, we are full of praise for the doctor. Likewise, we do not pat ourselves on the back because of our faith. It is proud and absurd to take any credit for our salvation because we placed our faith in Jesus. As Paul said, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14).

I have heard people express doubt that they have sufficient faith. The quantity of faith we have is not a consideration in our salvation. We do not have faith in faith. Faith is a faculty of the human spirit. Jesus taught that faith the size of a mustard seed could move a mountain (Matthew 17:20). Reinhard Bonnke used a more contemporary metaphor in saying faith is like a small fuse in an electric circuit that conducts large amounts of power through it (*Faith: The Link with God’s Power* by Reinhard Bonnke, Sovereign World Ltd, 1999). The important thing about faith is the one it connects you to, not its own size or strength. Your faith does not need to be strong to save you; it needs to be in Jesus. When you are with Jesus, his umbrella shelters you. Faith provides a channel of life to our spirit. Apart from faith in Jesus, we are spiritually dead because sin separates us from God. Faith is more than

an information channel, it is a salvation channel, a lifeline to God through which his Holy Spirit flows into our lives.

Every personal relationship involves faith. We need to trust people to relate to them. Just as people relate to one another by faith, we relate to God by faith. The Bible declares that God is faithful (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:9 & 10:13) and that God remains faithful to us, even when we are unfaithful to him (2 Timothy 2:13). He believes in us. He knows there is hope for us. Faith is a two-way road to God, both for God to bless us and for us to bless God. We receive by the same path as we give. By this two-way faith relationship with God, God saves us and blesses us. We give God our praise, thanksgiving, love, loyalty, and trust. If our fears come in the way of our relationship with God, he deals with them. God allows nothing to separate him from his people. The perfect love that casts out fear, spoken of in 1 John 4:18, is God. He will remove the roadblock of fear. Faith connects you to God and nothing can prevent God from coming to you.

Through the eyes of faith, we see God's ways as good and desirable. God does good things for everyone, and we can take part. James said, "In the same way, faith by itself is dead if it doesn't cause you to do good things" (James 2:17). God does not want us to do good deeds to justify ourselves to him. This is abhorrent to him. Good deeds done because of our faith in God are evidence that our faith is real. This is why Jesus could say: "Those who have done good will come back to life and live. But those who have done evil will come back to life and will be judged" (John 5:29b). In 2 Corinthians 5:10 it says that all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ to receive recompense for what we have done in this life whether good or evil. God rewards in heaven those who do the works of faith.

Faith and works go together but only when good works are motivated from our faith relationship with God do they evidence God's kingdom in us. "Whoever does what God approves of has God's approval as

Christ has God's approval" (1 John 3:7b). God's presence with us enables us to do his will.



About Turn!

Faith, like love, cannot be forced. Faith is aroused, called forth, evoked. Jesus encouraged us to “Have faith in God” (Mark 11:22). The phrase “repent and believe the gospel” was the call of both Jesus and his disciples. Luke, the author of Acts, quoted Paul as saying “God ... commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). “Repent” means to turn around. It was the command shouted by a Roman centurion to make his soldiers do an about turn and march in the opposite direction. For Christians, repentance means to turn from unbelief to belief in God, to turn from sin into a relationship with God.

Repentance is not a sentence. It does not mean you are condemned to a life of striving to be sinless to earn salvation. If you could do that, you would not need a saviour. God does more repenting in the Bible than anyone else does. On one occasion, God repented from the decision to destroy his people because of their sin (Exodus 32:14). But, God does not repent from sin as do humans (1 Samuel 15:29). The repentance we need is to turn from self-righteousness to Jesus' righteousness, trusting he will save us. In preference to doing things to justify ourselves and relying on our own efforts, we trust in Jesus. Repentance is not a good

work. It is the joyful response of God's people to Jesus' forgiveness. We could say, "Enjoy and believe the gospel".

When we repent and believe in Jesus, the Father is pleased to shower his mercy, blessings and love upon us. Repentance and faith do not elicit God's blessings. People usually think they have to repent before God will forgive them because we are used to bargaining for everything we get in this world. We demand penitence and apology from the one who wronged us before we will even consider forgiveness. God wants us to let go of that unforgiving attitude. Humanity escalated its sin against God to the extent of taking his Son's life. The Spirit of Christ, who wants to live with us forgives those who have sinned against us. God, in his grace, makes salvation available to everyone. God has forgiven us already.

Jesus taught about this using a story called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Helmut Thielicke suggested it would be better named "The Parable of the Waiting Father" (*The Waiting Father* by Helmut Thielicke, James Clarke & Sons Co. Ltd, 1978). The father in the parable was watching for his wayward son's return when saw him. The father ran to welcome his son back even before he said a word of apology (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus taught us to forgive others because this is how God has forgiven us.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it may appear that since the father forgives the son with no mention of a sacrifice for sin, that sacrifice is unnecessary. However, the father in the story had suffered much because of his son's sin. Parables are stories designed to convey a spiritual truth. We should not try to read into a parable, things beyond the parable's purpose. An all-embracing approach to the Bible's teaching guards against error. In this parable, we should not forget who is telling the story or its context. Jesus was appealing to the Pharisees and scribes, who were like the elder brother in the parable, to stop relying on their own righteousness. They were members of God's

family. Jesus is one with God, his Father. He knows God wants to welcome home his children. Jesus said he was the way to the Father (John 14:6), and he would not turn away anyone (John 6:37). The Father was in Jesus (John 10:38) who laid his life down for his followers (John 10:11).

I used a computer to search the text of the four Gospels and Acts to find what word Jesus spoke most often. This should indicate what was important to Jesus. To my surprise the most frequently recorded spoken word of Jesus was not "God" (178), "kingdom of God/heaven" (70), "heaven" (100), "believe" (56) or "love" (48). It is "Father" (226). Jesus prayed to God as his Father. He taught using stories about fathers. Jesus taught his disciples to pray "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer. God cares for his children like a father. He uses a close family relationship term. Jesus is saying we can approach God as trusting children going to their father to share whatever is on their hearts. This is not the view of God we are used to hearing. By seeing God as our heavenly Father we will not fear coming into his presence. Even our sin is not a barrier. Sinful humanity assailed Jesus during his life and death, but death did not have the final word for he took up his life again.

Repentance and belief are our responsibility. We cannot blame God for not giving us faith; it is our response to God; faith arises out of our encounter with him. You can have faith in God or continue in sin supported by your own misbeliefs. The choice is yours. Created beings that God could unmake at any time do not endanger the sovereignty of God. For God to change our hearts himself, bypassing our freedom of choice and responsibility, would override our humanity. Our free will was God's idea in the first place. This is similar to the objection that says God should have prevented us from sinning. The problem with this argument is that God would have to keep interfering in our decisions. We would have no freedom.

God has chosen all of us in Christ to have eternal life. He did not send his Son to die unnecessarily on the cross, or restrict Christ's victory to some people and not others. God's omniscience means he can predict everything that will happen, including our free will choices.

Predestination does not relieve us from our responsibility for choosing to relate to God or not. God commands obedience out of his love for us, and not because he wants to control us. It was in this vein that Jesus warned us to repent or else we would perish (Luke 13:5). Our obedience to God is not a restriction on our freedom imposed by God. We express our faith by doing the works of faith, showing love for others out of the new nature born in us by God's Spirit. As Paul says: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6b). That raises the question we shall look at in the next section: How do we understand the commandments of God given in the Bible?



Rules and Regulations

The writers of the Bible refer to the first five books of the Bible as “the Law”. These books include a record of God’s laws (commandments) which he gave to the nation of Israel after they escaped from slavery in Egypt (in about 1,445 B.C.). God intended to bring the tribes of Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan. While they were on their way, God told Moses, their leader, to climb Mount Sinai to receive the law. This is why the Bible sometimes calls the Law of God the Law of Moses. The laws governed Israel’s moral and social behaviour and established religious ritual. The law structured their society, gave them a God-centred culture, and helped form them into a nation. This was important because God planned to enter creation through this nation.

One of the law’s purposes was to restrain sin in the nation of Israel (Galatians 3:19). Unbridled sin is destructive. It would have destroyed Israel. God's gift of the law was a blessing for Israel. The moral laws expressed God’s covenant of love as it applies to human relationships. They legislated what behaviour was sinful. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) convey the core of the moral law. The first few commandments concentrate on the Israelite’s relationship with God (e.g. have no other gods; do not worship idols) and the later ones

focussed on their relationships with one another (e.g. do not murder; do not steal). Alongside the moral laws were the ceremonial laws. These set out the religious rituals representing God's plan of salvation. For example, the laws about animal sacrifice foreshadowed Jesus, the "Lamb of God", giving his life as a sacrifice for sin. The laws about ceremonially clean and unclean foods and other things reminded the Israelites of the holiness required by God.

Jesus spoke of the law of God as being good and said he would fulfil the law. The law was perfect, but it was not a means of salvation. Laws regulate actions. They taught Israel how God wanted them to live. God gave them the law for their benefit. David expressed his attitude to the law in Psalm 40:8 where he said, "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." So, Jesus obeyed God's law because he did not want to do anything else. The letter of the law (apart from the mercy of God) revealed Israel's sin, which entails death. But the Holy Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The Christian church started around 30 A.D. The first Christians were Jewish (by the time of Christ, the nation of Israel was reduced to mainly the tribe of Judah, hence the name "Jews"). It took around 7 years before Gentiles (non-Jews) started converting to Christianity. By 49 A.D., the church had to decide whether Gentiles should be required to obey the Law of Moses. This would include such things as circumcision of males, obeying the food laws, observance of the sabbath and feast days. The leaders of the church met in Jerusalem to discuss the issue. They agreed that God saved neither Jew nor Gentile because of their obedience to the law. Since the Jews themselves could not obey the law, the leaders decided not to place that burden on Gentiles (Acts 15:6-21). God was not solely the God of Jews, but of everyone. Christianity was not a sect of Judaism.

This freedom from the Law of Moses does not mean that Christians are free to sin. Jesus, in his life on earth, fulfilled the Law of Moses and led

a sinless life. Jesus summarised the laws given in the Old Testament in the rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). Jesus taught, “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). Jesus well knew that love cannot be commanded when he said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). He was not giving another law. He was saying a godly life is not about laws. Faith in God issues in love for others.

The apostle Paul repeated Jesus’ teaching when he wrote, “Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Acts 13:10). Jesus taught that both anger and murder are sinful. Similarly, anyone who looks at a woman lustfully is guilty of adultery (Matthew 5:21-28). Jesus was saying the Ten Commandments are guidelines. They do not provide the acceptable limits of good behaviour.

God exhorts both Jewish and Gentile Christians to live by a higher standard than that given by Moses. Christians led by the Holy Spirit have risen above the laws of an ancient civilisation and fought against such things as slavery and discrimination based on sex and race. Even though Christians are free from law keeping, Jewish Christians are free to continue to obey the Law of Moses as part of their Jewish culture. However, Gentile Christians are free from regulating their lives by the Law of Moses. For Gentiles to keep these Laws may be a denial of their faith in Jesus.

The Law of Moses has useful principles for Gentiles to follow. For example, the principle of setting aside a day for meeting with other Christians to worship God is recommended in the New Testament (Hebrews 10:25). Old Testament laws against involvement in astrology and other occult practices are wise warnings to avoid demonic attack and deception. On the other hand, laws concerning treatment of slaves and animal sacrifice no longer have a place in modern day life.

Did the receipt of the Law of Moses give the Jews any advantage over the Gentiles? The apostle Paul discussed this question in Romans 2 & 3. Paul said, "When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves" (Romans 2:14). Gentiles sin when they fail to live up to the standards of their own consciences. Even though God entrusted the law to the Jews, they did not keep it. Having the law of God brought with it greater responsibility. As a result, we read in the Old Testament about God judging Israel for its sins. Both Jew and Gentile need a saviour.

God does not require sinful people to live without sin before he will save them. If they were not sinful they would not need saving. God is not enamoured with our efforts at justifying ourselves. The Father wants his children to come home to him and Jesus has made this possible. God's love is not conditional on the basis of our obedience to him. Obedience is not about winning God's approval, but is characteristic of life under God's covenant, where we follow his Spirit's leading.

The predominant view of religion is one of winning God's approval by doing enough good things to balance out the bad things we do. This is religious legalism, which believes that balancing the scales of legalism decides our fate. The legalist thinks that even God has to accept the judgement of the law since he made the rules. Legalists see the law as supreme, even over God, and the gospel is a transaction. The transactional gospel says that on my side of the deal is faith, and on God's side, the sacrifice of Jesus. God has to follow the rules if he wants to save people. His love may win over judgement, but the law demands payment.

There is no legal transaction between the Father and the Son. The proposal that God the Father agreed to save sinners in return for his Son's death makes the transactional gospel deny the sovereignty and

goodness of God. There was sacrifice, but not a transaction. God is not vindictive. He did not need a violent sacrifice to appease his sense of justice. The love of God is not weighed in a balance against the judgement of God. Law is not above God. Laws do not bind God. He is free, and he is holy. Would God kill his Son to satisfy a religious sacrificial ritual? The Father was not intent on revenge, desiring a blood sacrifice to satisfy his honour. He is gracious and forgiving. Likewise, Jesus submitted to death on a cross rather than give in to Satan. Satan threw everything he could at Jesus – fear, pain, suffering, demonstrations of power (darkness covering the land), and twisting Scriptures to insinuate God had cursed him (Deuteronomy 21: 23. See how Paul used this in Galatians 3:13). God was faithful to both his covenant and his Son by raising Jesus from the dead and exalting him to the highest place of honour.

Salvation is not a deal to secure our souls, or the result of a transaction to satisfy a law, but a rescue operation. God wants everyone saved. Salvation is not a choice made by our will and reasoning powers. It is a gift to those who respond to the “Yes” of God’s promises with “Amen” (2 Corinthians 1:20). Amen means, “So may it be”. Our connection to God results in our eternal life. Salvation flows from a personal relationship with God. We unite with our Saviour through faith.

We should not understand the death of Jesus as a mere event in history. It has greater implications. Our salvation occurs in the spiritual (or heavenly) realm, where God graciously declares the righteousness of all who join with Jesus in faith. Jesus’ resurrection from death is evidence of what God will do for each one of us. Jesus’ sacrifice was not part of a deal, neither is our faith in him. It is about a relationship characterised by love and resurrection power.

Religious legalism is the sinful nature’s attempt at self-justification. The enemy tempts us to manipulate God to get our own way. Satan lies to us that we deserve God’s approval. Legalism thrives on fear (of

punishment) and pride (that we are good enough to win God's approval). It twists the law of God for self-serving ends, as opposed to embracing the "law" of love for others. Legalism is directed inward while love is directed outward.

The opposite of love is selfishness, not hate. Fear is self-protecting; humility is self-sacrificing. Legalism rises like a stench from our sinful nature. Grace descends from God like showers of blessing. If we try to pay God back, we misunderstand the grace of God. He does not want us to pay him back. He is our God, we belong to him, and he cares for us. We obey him because we are free to do so.



Let My People Go!

When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, Moses told Pharaoh of God's command: "Let my people go." Freedom for God's people is still God's intention for them. But, freedom is both an easy and difficult concept to understand. Perhaps confusion is generated by freedom's wide range of meanings. It means much more than being free from restrictions. For example, freedom means being free from the prospect of future punishment for sin; freedom to do good or evil; the legal standing of the believer before God; or freedom from the compulsion to sin.

Freedom is related to the gospel but different from it. Let me explain. The gospel is good news and it is big news. It encompasses more than our personal salvation. Similarly, freedom is bigger than our view of things. God is overcoming evil while still achieving his intention for relationship with his people. One result of this for us is personal salvation. Another result of the gospel is freedom. Paul affirmed "... the Lord Jesus Christ ... gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Galatians 1:3-4). After we are saved we live in freedom. We do not become more

saved as we become nicer people. Either God has saved you, or you are still living apart from God. But freedom is a different story.

Jesus' work on earth was, and is, both a power ministry and a truth ministry. Jesus' power sets people free from slavery to sin. He was victorious over death and Satan. Jesus gives his followers authority to continue his work on earth. His ministry of truth proclaims the forgiveness of sin and God's way of salvation.

Jesus was speaking of freedom from sin when he said, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Freedom from sin is not essentially being set free from addictive sins and their harmful effects although it may include this. As free people, God's people can participate with him in the fight for the freedom of others. Evil is overcome by good (Romans 12:21). We fight evil, not other people. They are not the enemy. We can only fight evil because God has set us free from it. Freedom, this side of the grave, is not from the junkyard of sin, but from the junkyard mentality that cannot see beyond it. Our destiny is not here on this earth, but on its re-creation.

The good news of forgiveness for sin is linked with freedom. When you forgive someone for his or her sin against you, you display your freedom and strike a blow for the other person's freedom. Consider Jesus' example. At the cross, the evil of the world sought to justify itself by putting Jesus to death. The religious legalists wanted justice. They did not want to accept Jesus as their Lord, so they denied his claim to be the Son of God. They did not want to accept grace. Jesus overcame evil by forgiving them out of his freedom and by his authority. God's Spirit in us graciously releases us from bitterness and resentment and enables us to forgive others. Our forgiveness of others is not conditional on their response. It hurts when others continue to be unforgiving towards us whether justified or not. If God cannot restore relationships with people who reject him, we should not be surprised when we cannot either.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:56 "... the power of sin is the law." Law here means "religious legalism," the attitude of justifying oneself by keeping the letter of the law. The Greek word "nomos" used in the New Testament may be translated either as "law" or as "legalism" depending on the context. Translations that always translate "nomos" as "law" sometimes sound confusing because of legalism's negative connotations. Legalism gives sin its power. Paul bluntly said that we are stupid not to take hold of the freedom we can have from the need to win the approval of God (Galatians 3:1 & 5:1). Satan points out sin in the church as evidence that Christians do not have freedom. But, this confuses adoption into God's family with being sinless. God's people are free from condemnation for sin and alienation from God: they are both forgiven and adopted.

We find freedom in the Father's house. The prodigal son first thought he would gain his freedom by leaving home. He believed the devil's lie that God was restricting his freedom. Rather, when we come back home to God we find our freedom. Jesus explained that his disciples are not like household servants, but are friends of God (John 15:15). If we commit a sin, we are still his friends, or to use another illustration, we are still members of God's family. Jesus also pictured God's people as free citizens of his kingdom. There are no boundaries to this freedom. The "law" of love is part of the environment (the spiritual atmosphere) of God's kingdom. It is not a restriction on freedom. Obedience to God's way is simply living in freedom.

Living in this world is analogous to living in a war zone. The powers of darkness seek to deceive and destroy humanity. Evil is our enemy, not just God's. The enemy is not just Satan and his demons. There is also an enemy inside us – our sinful natures' desires. Soldiers of God's kingdom are true freedom fighters, fighting for the freedom from sin of others and themselves. The fact of the ongoing internal warfare does not mean we should not continue the fight.

Freedom is not a state of independence, but of willingness to serve God. Independence from God is barrenness and weakness. Jesus is Lord regarding our freedom and Saviour regarding our sin. We have to serve someone, Satan or God; but we can enjoy serving God. Jesus is the Lord of freedom. Christians invite God to do his will in and through their lives. God does not violate their freedom. Just as repentance and faith are inseparable, and faith and the works of faith are inseparable, so are freedom and obedience.

Our freedom means we are free to do something. Faith in God and obedience to him are both things we do. What we do with our capacity for faith and service is our responsibility. Many people shrink back from taking responsibility. Fear can make people prefer slavery to liberty because with freedom comes responsibility. But we are not alone and without help. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Corinthians 3:17). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of freedom within us.



New for Old

God's covenant stands forever. God did not devise it in response to sin. It applied even before the first sin. God's plan to save people from sin came about because of his covenant. Psalm 111:5b says of God, "he is ever mindful of his covenant". God's plan of salvation unfolded in human history until it culminated in the Son of God entering our history as a human being. After Jesus had lived, died, and resurrected on earth, and returned to heaven, a new phase in history began. The Holy Spirit came to live with God's people. The implications of this are so momentous that we speak of God's covenant in terms of its two phases, the old covenant and the new covenant. New Testament writers referred to God's covenant before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the old covenant. The new covenant applies from the time the Holy Spirit first came upon the church (described in Acts 2). Jesus life described by the four Gospels was under the old covenant. Hence, the Old and New Testaments do not exactly coincide with the old and new covenant periods.

In about 600 B.C., God foretold the work of the Holy Spirit through the prophet Jeremiah:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

(Jeremiah 31:31-33 and Hebrews 8:8-10)

Under the old covenant, the Israelites had the law of God written in Scripture. Under the new covenant, the indwelling Holy Spirit writes the law of God on the hearts of all believers, as prophesied by Jeremiah. Joel 2:28 also prophesied the coming of the Holy Spirit but does not mention the new covenant.

Christians do not have to regulate their behaviour by an externally imposed law. The Spirit counsels, teaches, encourages and guides God's people. He does not give them a list of rules to tell them what they may do and what is sinful. The law written on our hearts is not a list of rules to guide behaviour. It is another way of saying we will act out of our friendship with God. This is in contrast to the ministry of the Holy Spirit towards unbelievers. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin because they have not believed in Jesus (John 16:7-11).

The old and new covenants are both expressions of God's covenant: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people". The earliest record of this in the Bible is when God spoke these words to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-9). God repeats this many times in both the Old and New Testaments, right through to the second last page of the Bible (Revelation 21:7). The old and new covenants are not opposed to each other, but rather they are two phases of the one covenant with

particular application to their setting in history. The difference highlights the different work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in God's covenant plan.

It may appear from reading the Old Testament that the Israelites under the old covenant had to keep every commandments of God to be approved by him. If this were the case, then before Christ's coming God saved people based on their obedience to the law, and not through faith. This is not so. Hebrews 11, lists many Old Testament people who had faith. The author of Hebrews says they gained eternal life together with us. He wrote, "Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:39 & 40). So, God saved people under the old covenant in the same way he saves people under the new covenant, through faith in God. The death and resurrection of Christ justifies our faith. He has saved us by grace, in the same way as he saved those of faith who lived before the promised Messiah.

The word used in the Old Testament that we translate as "law" is the Hebrew word "Torah". It has a wider meaning than rules and a legal system. It includes teaching and God's revelation of himself. Hence, God did not intend Israel to follow the Torah to win God's approval. Through the Torah they could encounter God and follow his ways. We read in the gospels, that by the time of Jesus the attitude of many Jews had become narrow and legalistic. Even many of the religious leaders tried to use the law to show everyone how good they were at obeying it.

Under the old covenant, God focused his presence in the tabernacle (the tent of meeting), and later in its replacement, the temple building in Jerusalem. Under the new covenant, the Holy Spirit comes into the lives of both Jewish and Gentile believers who no longer needed the temple building. Paul was a Jew, and he wrote to the Gentile believers

at Corinth. “But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment” (2 Corinthians 1:21 & 22). The Spirit in our hearts is a first instalment of God’s plan to be God to us.

The difference between the old and new covenants is not in the means of salvation but by the Holy Spirit’s presence in the Christian’s life. God’s people, both before and after Christ, did good works out of their faith. The law under the old covenant helped Israel know God’s will for their nation and restrain them from sin, but the law of itself saved no one. The law was not intended to save anyone. God did not make a mistake with the old covenant that he needed to correct by replacing it with the new covenant. God never made a covenant that said, “I will approve of you if you obey my law”. This is a covenant of works, which promotes the pursuit of self-righteousness. This counterfeit of God’s covenant is the basis of many of the world’s religions. They motivate people by guilt and fear and produce self-exalting works. As if God applauds the self-righteous works of humans. God only applauds to encourage. Under the new covenant, God sends the Holy Spirit to help us to live as the people of God.

The Holy Spirit desires to be our friend. He counsels, teaches, comforts, equips, and empowers us. The Spirit works in and through God’s people. God wants our relationship with him to be two-sided. Prayer is not just talking to God, but listening to him too, and speaking God’s words to others. God rarely communicates with us by an audible voice and seldom through dreams or visions. But he commonly communicates with his people in a direct way, his Spirit to our spirit. It takes time for a new Christian to learn to discern God-given thoughts from the many competing thoughts that bombard our consciousness. It becomes easier to understand what someone is saying to us as we get to know them better. We invest time with God in prayer to get to know

him, to understand how he views things, and more clearly “hear” what he is saying.



A Family Thing

God wants to be in relationship with his people. In close personal relationships, special things have a memorable meaning for those in the relationship that have no meaning for outsiders. Often these result from a shared experience recalled by a passing reference. They are evidence of friendship and intimacy. For example, the rainbow has a special meaning to God and his people (Genesis 9:8-17). To God it serves as a reminder of his promise not to deluge the earth again. For his people, the rainbow reminds us of God's grace.

Under the old covenant, there were several such signs. One of these was the sabbath day for worship and rest. Sabbaths were on the seventh day of the week, Saturday, together with other special days. God said of the sabbath, "Moreover, I gave them my sabbaths, as a sign between me and them, so that they might know that I the LORD sanctify them" (Ezekiel 20:12). Other signs were circumcision (which was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants) and the Passover (which commemorated the hastily prepared meal of unleavened bread and lamb that the Israelites ate before Moses led them out of Egypt). As discussed earlier, these signs given to Israel under the old covenant do not apply to Gentile Christians under the new covenant (Acts 15:1-29).

The signs of the new covenant are water baptism and the Lord's Supper (called Holy Communion because of the communion we share with God through faith in Christ). Jesus, at his last supper before his crucifixion, gave his disciples a new ritual. They were to share eating bread from the one loaf and drinking wine from one cup as a reminder of the fellowship they share because of his body, represented by the bread, and his blood, represented by the wine. The apostle Paul wrote, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). In proclaiming Jesus' death for our sins, by eating bread and drinking wine together, we remind ourselves of the new covenant (1 Corinthians 11:25). To those outside of God's covenant, the signs only serve to remind them of their estrangement from God.

A sign is not important in itself. Its importance is in the information it imparts. When Jesus at the last supper held a piece of bread and said "This is my body" he was speaking figuratively. Likewise, Paul wrote figuratively, "In [Christ] also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11 & 12). Paul refers to both circumcision and baptism as signs, under their respective covenants. They are signs of what God has done in setting people free from condemnation because of their sinful nature ("the flesh").

John the Baptist baptised Jesus. In submitting to baptism, Jesus was not repenting from sin, for he had none, but he identified with us sinners and confirmed our need of cleansing from sin. Baptism does not save us, for we unite with Jesus by faith, not by a sign. We can turn to Jesus as our saviour, Lord and friend, confident he will not condemn or criticise us. Our knowledge of Christianity does not need to be perfect before God will save us. God does not put us through an examination

before he will accept us. He desires to save us, and he will do so given the slightest opportunity.

The present-day church has a variety of understandings of baptism and communion. These evolved over the history of the church. In 313 A.D., Emperor Constantine decreed Christianity an official religion throughout the Roman Empire. By then, the church had translated the Bible into Latin and called the covenant signs “sacraments” after the Latin word used for them. The word “sacrament” had another connotation, which led to the notion that the sacraments convey a special “grace” or blessing from God (see entry on Sacrament by R. S. Wallace in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* Edited by E. F. Harrison, Baker Book House, 1979).

Sometimes when the sacraments are celebrated, God pours out his power for such things as blessing, healing, equipping for ministry etc. The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians that the neglect of sharing in communion in a worthy manner was the reason that “many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Corinthians 11:30). Many Christians can testify to God’s healing power ministered to them through the Lord’s Supper.

The church came to think sacraments themselves caused the blessing. Adopting this view of sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church saw that several other church rituals are sacraments. So, they instated five more sacraments: confirmation, penance, extreme unction, holy orders, and matrimony.

The Protestant churches discarded these in the period called the Reformation. The Protestant reformers recognised only baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but retained the name sacrament, together with its connotation of conveying a supernatural blessing. Many Protestant theologians define sacraments as “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” This definition uses the word “grace” to

mean something that happens in us (a blessing or favour that is undeserved). This view of the sacraments sees them as signs of what God has done for us and in us. The church could take the heat out of the disputes over sacraments by moving the focus of the sacraments from signs pointing to what God has done **in us**, to signs pointing to God's covenant **with us**.

The different understandings of the sacraments has caused divisions in the church over such things as who can be baptised, how they are to be baptised, whether the Lord's Supper should be open to Christians from other churches, and what to make of the extra five sacraments of the Catholic church. A few denominations, out of concern over the divisiveness of the sacraments, do not celebrate sacraments, and others leave it up to the individual to decide.

We need not see the signs of the covenant as signs of our response, nor approach them as rituals that convey the mystical presence or power of God (allowing that God may work through them occasionally). The variety of practices of the different churches are not important in themselves. The customary explanations of the sacraments given in sacramental services seek to justify the local practice. This distracts people from being reminded of God's vision to rescue people from sin.

Christians need not be overly concerned to justify their church's custom of baptising infants or only baptising professing adult believers, sprinkling with, or immersing in water. Signs are not important in themselves, except in as much as they faithfully point us to the desired destination. From this understanding of sacraments, individual church congregations are free to follow their denominational practice. Churches should not denounce other churches for their sacramental practices. Freedom is of the essence of life in Christ. God gave covenant signs to his people, not to tear them apart, but to remind them they are set apart as members of the one family of God.



1 + 1 = Unity

Thousands of church denominations exist in the world today. Many denominations do not recognise some others as legitimate Christian churches. So, people find it difficult to see unity in the Christian church. Yet Jesus prayed for his followers, “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Jesus knew that disunity undermines the effectiveness of the church's message.

The apostle Paul spoke of the church as the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). He wrote, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling” (Ephesians 4:4). If the church is just one body, it must have multiple personality disorder, an identity crisis. The name “church” is variously used for local congregations, for groupings of churches in a geographical region, for denominations, and for the universal, visible and invisible church. We need to clarify what the church is to understand church unity.

The church's traditional understanding of itself stated in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church,” is not a precise definition of the church. In what sense is it “one”? Can it be

“holy” when sin in the church is so obvious? Does “apostolic” mean the church is based on the apostle's teaching? Or does it mean the church has a succession of leadership from the apostles? Views on church identity range from “authoritative” (a guardian of faith and traditions, custodian of God-given Scripture) to “personal” (individual recipients of saving grace, directly relating to God). The authoritative churches are structured with a hierarchy of divine orders while the personal churches have a flat structure (*Protestantism* by J. L. Dunstan, George Braziller, New York, 1961).

The Roman Catholic Church (at the authoritative end of the spectrum) believe they, together with the orthodox churches, are the only legitimate churches. They see protestant churches as Christian communions in schism. For the Roman Catholic Church, ecumenism means inviting these other communions to join the one true church.

When churches seeks their identity in things they do, such as ordaining a priesthood, giving the sacraments, preaching, and caring ministries, disagreement between churches inevitably follows.

In the light of God’s Mission Statement, we might suspect the church's identity is a community of people in relationship with God and one another. God's Mission Statement says that God will relate to his people. But, defining the church as a community of God's people is inadequate. For example, many private Christian schools describe themselves as “Christian communities.” A Christian school is obviously not a church. But this suggests a way forward. A Christian school comprises Christians working for a particular purpose (education). So, the church can be identified jointly by its relationship with Christ (community) and by what it does (its mission).

A confusing complication in understanding church identity is that denominations refer to themselves as churches. From the protestant viewpoint, even the Roman Catholic Church, is a denomination.

Denominations are organisations serving member churches, providing them with such things as corporate structure, cohesiveness, and pooled resources. They are like para-church organisations.

Denominational organisations are not “the church” but organisations of the church serving part of “the church”. The many human institutions and structures we call denominations do not fit the picture of the church as the body of Christ or God’s family. At best, they are part of the picture.

There is one other important characteristic of the church on earth: sin. This has great influence on church unity as seen in church schisms that have occurred throughout its history. Paul said to the church “love one another with mutual affection” (Romans 12:10). However, we struggle to get along with others in the church. Churches have different historical backgrounds, different cultures, and they attract people with different personality types.

Sin is present in the church because although Christians are reconciled to God through Christ and filled with his Spirit, the sinful nature is still alive. Sin is involved on both sides of church schisms when people allow each other's sin to become a barrier to fellowship. Our sin makes it a struggle “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). The church is reluctant to acknowledge its sin, preferring to see itself as a hospital for the spiritually sick. The church is reluctant to admit its sinfulness, possibly because of fear it will undermine its witness to its victory in Christ. Yet a church that openly acknowledged that its members are sinful proclaims the need of a saviour. The church's understanding of its identity must include admission of its sinfulness.

So we can define the church as a community of sinful people saved by God, striving to continue Christ's mission in the world.

Churches have tried to improve their unity. The ecumenical movement seeks to build bridges between churches so they regard each other as authentic expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ. If we liken the church to Christ's body, we need not to see the various organisational institutions as being divisive. Yet, many Christians object to the practices and teaching of other churches. This can cause problems when, for example, a member of one church moves to a different locality and attends a church of a different denomination. Will such things as their baptism and marriage be accepted by their new church? Can people partake in Holy Communion at another church?

John Stott, in considering the diversity of opinions within the Church of England, listed three approaches: separation (pursue truth at the expense of unity), compromise (pursue unity at the expense of truth), or comprehensiveness without compromise (pursue truth and unity simultaneously). Stott recommended the third approach saying it means agreement on essentials and liberty on secondary issues. The church's efforts towards unity have not met with great success. This does not mean we should abandon the ecumenical enterprise (*The living church: convictions of a lifelong pastor* by John Stott, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, 2007).

When we see the church in terms of our proposed definition, church unity enhances the church's witness in the world. Christian unity exists in the Spirit just as Jesus and the Father were one in Spirit (John 17:21). From this unity of Spirit, the church can show its unity to the world through its mission. Doctrinal differences derive from heritage and theological reasoning whereas church unity is found in spiritual relationship with Christ. The questions we ask determine the answers we get. The church's doctrines are flawed. Church unity recognises a principle that rises above questions and answers, love of others.

Physical or structural unity of the church is only important in as much as it makes for efficient and productive mission. The large number of

denominational organisations is not necessarily a bad thing. It might make the church more effective in its mission. Combined church evangelistic campaigns, prayer and worship meetings, social welfare organisations, and missionary organisations are evidence of the essential unity of the church.

God's people are part of his family in spite of family disagreements. Every Christian has a relationship with God the Father. Church membership is not attained by any distinctive of ours. When we look for a distinguishing feature in ourselves or our church as the basis for church unity, we detract from God's gracious provision. Churches should not try to devise a minimum doctrinal statement (the lowest common denominator) as the basis of church unity. Theologians from different traditions should continue working together to seek theological truth. Meanwhile, God saves people in spite of our imperfect doctrines.

Jesus' parables of the fishing net that caught both good and bad fish (Matthew 13:47-50), and the field with weeds amongst the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43) illustrated the kingdom of God. The church also is a mixture of good and bad. If Jesus accepted that the enemy had planted weeds in his field, the church can accept this too. To walk away from the church because someone in it hurt our feelings or because we disagree with a point of doctrine is not the way of Jesus. Recognise Christians from other churches as brothers and sisters in Christ. Acknowledge that the one true church includes the other churches.

In summary, the church is one as the body of Christ is one. God adopts saved people into his family. They are not adopted because of any distinctive in themselves. Christ saved them. The church's mission is to make disciples for Jesus (Matthew 28:19). In conducting this mission, the church can display its unity.

Sin in the church is not a reason for Christians to become defensive, but a reason to praise God for saving sinners in Christ. This does not mean we should “continue in sin in order that grace may abound” (Romans 6:1). Sin is the reason behind church splits. It is not just the other person’s sin. We have a blind spot to our own sin. Everyone is in need of God's grace. There is no “us” and “them” amongst Christians, just “us sinners in need of a saviour”. As church splits are evidence of our sin, Christian unity evidences our salvation.

The differences between churches are not crucial for God. He knows who his people are. His Holy Spirit lives in each one of them. So, the differences in customs and teaching do not prevent Christians from different churches from enjoying fellowship with one another. What binds Christians together is much stronger than what tries to tear them apart.

In our pride, we are tempted to wonder why the Holy Spirit dwells in a church that is not preaching what we consider a pure gospel. We need to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit dwells in us, even though we are self-confessed sinners. This brings us to our next topic, what can we do about sin?



Rubbish Removal

A large truck backs into your driveway. On the side is written “Son of God Removal Service”. You wonder if God is calling you to go somewhere as a missionary. Jesus jumps out and says he is here to take away your rubbish, your sin and its negative consequences. “You want my rubbish?” Jesus replies, “Yes, that’s what I came for, to take away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). He helps you throw in the truck lots of rubbish, unforgiveness, bitterness, pride, anxiety, etc. You sign the paperwork and Jesus says, “See you again tomorrow.” “Tomorrow!”

Jesus prayed for God to sanctify his disciples: “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:16 & 17). Sanctify means “to separate for holy use”. Jesus was asking God the Father to set apart his followers for service to others. Some theologians see sanctification as a lifelong process whereby God makes us more and more holy as we live in obedience to him and overcome sin in our lives. This view sees sanctification as making us fit for heaven. But sanctification is not so much a process in us as the outcome of our ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit. As adopted children of God, we mirror his likeness to the world. God fights for his children and helps us remove the footholds of sin in our lives that the enemy uses to harm us. As citizens of God’s kingdom, we are his ambassadors in the world. Over time, our performance as his representatives may well improve, but we are not the focus of our life’s work. Jesus is Lord, not us.

Holiness too, is not about us, it applies to God. Holiness means to be without sin. The Lord alone is holy. He alone is good. God tells us in the Bible to “be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). This does not mean that God is imposing on people the burden of trying to meet a perfect standard. To be holy as God is holy means to have God’s Spirit and purposes in you. Our main purpose on earth is not to become sinless. We persevere against sin throughout our lives. Even after receiving the Holy Spirit, we do not become sinless. When we move the focus from ourselves to Jesus, we have God’s concerns uppermost in our hearts, not how well we are performing against an ideal standard.

We can make progress in improving our behaviour. Sinful human nature is both deceived and a deceiver, and from our hearts come lies which lead us into evil. Sinful behaviour is this deception lived out. When the Holy Spirit moves in, the sinful nature no longer gets everything its own way. Darkness must give way to light. God’s people have God on their side and many can testify to God’s light overcoming the darkness of sin in their lives. Our sin does not prevent us from coming to Jesus. He is the only one who can forgive us. Over time, we learn to avoid sin and our behaviour and thinking improve. This is good for us and everyone around us. Holiness, for humans, is not linked to what we do, but reflects the God to whom we relate. Although we can never become holy by our own efforts, the Holy Spirit’s presence with us makes us holy (Romans 1:7).

Moral perfection is not the same as holiness. The first couple, Adam and Eve, were without sin to begin with, but that fact did not make them holy. How else could two sinless people fall into sin? God desires his people to be both righteous and holy. He both clothes us with the righteousness of Christ and fills our spiritual nature with his Holy Spirit. To be human and holy is to have godliness breathed into you by the Spirit of God. The apostle John saw in a vision the saints in heaven

dressed in white robes of righteousness (Revelations 7:9, 13; 22:14). Compare this to our attempts at righteous acts, which Isaiah said were like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Even outright rebellious acts Isaiah called the filth the Lord washes away (Isaiah 4:4).

Jesus commanded his followers to love one another. Our purpose in obeying Jesus is not so we become perfect, or for any other self-centred reason, but for the benefit of other people. God wants us to love others, not primarily to make us less sinful (a good side effect), not just for our own good, but because God loves everyone. We are too individualistic and self-centred. We sometimes find relationships with others difficult because of their (and our) sin, temperament, or imperfections. I have heard it said, "I will love them but I don't have to like them." This betrays a begrudging acceptance of others, a behaviour determined by duty and not love. With the Holy Spirit's help, we seek a better way. Look for evidence of God at work in their lives. Elicit faith in them. There is a channel of faith between you and each other person. God's Spirit can join in this fellowship. Reach out to share God's love with others. The heart of communion is unity in Jesus. God's Spirit wants to love people through us. May the holy fire of God melt our icy hearts!

God wants his people to love others because they want to do so, and not because of religion, a guilty conscience, or out of a sense of duty. Jesus does not want us to pay him back for saving us. He does not expect obedience out of gratitude. Generosity does not seek gratitude. We are set free to serve him from a heart of love born in us by his Spirit. Doing religious things creates a tension in us to perform. Never labour under the belief we must serve. When we find it a burden to help others we need to consider why we are doing it.

God releases people from the heavy burden of duty and responsibility. He does not want us to serve him or anyone else out of obligation. He wants us to be his people. God does not manipulate people. God does

not seek to control us. We are not a project of God whereby he aims to make us more and more holy. God will move mountains to save his children, but he will not force himself on them. Nor will God cajole anyone to love him.

Christians are not striving to create heaven on earth. Heaven is waiting beyond this life. Christians seek happiness and prosperity for people, but regard this world as a temporary home. We seek happiness that extends beyond this life. This does not mean we are not concerned with people's welfare, but that we want God's priorities to become ours.

Our significance is not bound up in what we do (for God or anyone else), or what we are (our social position or good characters), but in what God thinks about us. God is not looking for proud servants. In fact, he does not need servants. He wants people to know that they are his children and can be one in his Spirit. We need not ask what we should do to please God. There are no "shoulds" in loving relationships. Do whatever you want in love for others. Either you are friends with God, or you are not. Where a person sets their heart, will decide their destiny. God wants to adopt wayward people into his family.

Values in God's eyes differ from those in the secular world, for example in God's kingdom:-

Obedience = Love

Freedom = Service

Truth = Jesus

In loving others, we are being truly human, for in doing so we behave as our Creator intended and display his likeness in us. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 John 5:20). God is love, and that is what he does. In one sense, we do die to enter the kingdom of God. We die to self-centredness and receive

eternal life. In loving others, we receive and impart the love of God. There is no ulterior motive in this; it is living from a relationship with a good and loving God. When we come into God's kingdom, we see other people differently, just as we see Jesus differently, as our Lord and Saviour.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

(2 Corinthians 5:16)

Unity with God involves relationships of love: the Father's love for his children, our love of God, and our love for one another. It is because of this love that God deals with the sin that harms his children. The writer of Hebrews 12:7-11 said the trials we endure can be seen as the discipline of a loving parent who wants his children to be righteous, living at peace with others.

We are often too concerned about other people's outward actions, while forgetting our own shortcomings. Jesus warned us not to judge others, but to help them (Matthew 7:1-6). He said that a good tree bears good fruit. But, if we judge others by their good works or by their devotion to God, or anything else, we are being too hard on them. Jesus said his burden was light. The church is too concerned what the world thinks. It tries to look good. We in the church need to ask ourselves what is the reason for this concern: love of the lost, or fear of being accused of sin. As we are gracious to others, we learn to be gracious to ourselves (and let go of fear and judgement). We receive of God's grace in the same measure we give to others (Luke 6:37-42). We cannot give what we have not received, but we can give out of the abundance of wealth the Lord has given us.

Just as God saves us through faith, he sanctifies us through faith too. We are made holy by being united with Jesus (Acts 26:18). The reason

for our being set apart for God is not that we become godly in the sense of attaining to a holiness of our own. We are set apart for the Holy Spirit to transform and use us.

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

(2 Corinthians 6:16b)



Vehicles of God

We live in an in-between age, when things are neither as God made them nor yet as God wants them. God's people struggle with sin and suffering in the world. Yet we are vehicles of God on earth. We have his Spirit in us. We may not be perfect, but we convey the One who is perfect. The vehicle that conveys truth is the vehicle that conveys the Spirit of Christ, for Jesus said that he is truth (John 14:6). This means more than conveying the things of God (such as prophetic messages, miracles and healing power), or ideas about him (e.g. the Doctrine of God). It means God, himself, goes with us. We do not always act as if we have God with us, but how well the vehicle performs does not detract from the goodness of the One it conveys.

Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians says that if we look through God's glasses, we can see strength in outward weakness. For example, outwardly our bodies grow old, yet inwardly our spirits are being renewed daily (2 Corinthians 4:16). The troubles we experience now are a momentary affliction compared to the eternal glory to come (2 Cor 4:17). Paul said, "Therefore, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:10).

Our bodies have terminal rust and will only support us for limited kilometres. Paul compares death with leaving the home of our bodies to go to heaven. "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him" (2 Cor 5:9).

We do not measure our success at pleasing God by the things we achieve. This is not why we strive to please God. We struggle against evil because we are God's people. No matter how successful or unsuccessful we are in this world, our salvation is assured. God is faithful and upholds his people. Christ redeems us and we do not have to rely on our own victories. The victory is the Lord's! Salvation is not a joint effort. No matter what circumstances this world brings us, the end is assured. Even when things go badly for us, we can confess our faith in God as did Job, a righteous man of God who lived many centuries before Christ. Job said, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth" (Job 19:25). Job spoke prophetically here of the coming of God at the end of history which Christians call the second coming of Christ.

Christianity is not only concerned with our future state in heaven or on the new earth. Christians receive God's help now in this world. Yes, we are guilty of sin, but Jesus atoned for our sin (atonement refers to the reconciliation we have with God in Jesus). We can have our relationship with God restored here and now. God graciously redeemed Job in his own lifetime.

The damage to our bodies we suffer because of sin's entrance into this world, needs healing. God often heals people today. He has healed me and I have seen many healed by God in answer to my prayers. These healings are tokens of God's ultimate intention to raise everyone from death. Heaven has no sickness or suffering. We will have perfect bodies.

We need to be set free from bondage to sin. Many people can testify to release from sinful habits and addictions. These are first instalments of the freedom from sin God's people will enjoy one-day.

God gives us hope he will solve the insoluble problems of this world. I heard someone who had endured much pain say that hope of being healed made it possible for him to continue. The gift of hope should not be underestimated.

God does not leave his people without help. The Bible refers to such things as teaching, healing, prophecy, ministry, leadership, and hospitality (Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12) as spiritual gifts. Both the compassion and power of God are seen in spiritual gifts. They act as signs directing the lost to the way home to God. When God's people minister in Jesus' name, his supernatural power flows through them to meet the needs of others. The gifts of power show no special favour on the one it flows through, or on the person receiving the ministry. There is no favouritism with God (Ephesians 6:9). Every Christian is anointed for service (1 John 2:20 & 27). God can use any of his vehicles to get help to someone in need.

The spiritual gifts of healing, prophecy, etc. are not gifts to help you, or to improve your ministry. They help those to whom you minister. Spiritual gifts may be described as spiritual power tools for doing God's work. Our focus should not be on the gifts themselves, but on showing the love of God. If "right doctrine" and "good practise" becomes the centre of church attention, we are left with empty religion. God calls no one to be "religious". Pursue Jesus. Do not be afraid to use the high-power tools available to the church. With the Giver of the power tools in your life, you can expect to see them in operation.

When we come up against sickness, we can call on God for the gift of healing, confident he wants to heal. Many can testify to miraculous healings, but not everyone we pray for is healed. When John Wimber

first taught the church he was pastoring to pray for healing of the sick, God healed no one. John persisted with teaching on, and prayer for, healing. He reasoned that since the gospels teach that Jesus did this, his disciples should, too. Finally a few people became so discouraged they left his church. After ten months, he begged God to heal someone. Then one-day, John visited a sick member of his church. He prayed for the woman to be healed, not expecting her to be healed, but God healed her. As John drove home, God gave him a vision of his mercy:

Suddenly in my mind's eye there appeared to be a cloud bank superimposed across the sky. But I had never seen a cloud bank like this one, so I pulled my car over to the side of the road to take a closer look. Then I realised it was not a cloud bank, it was a honeycomb with honey dripping out on to people below. The people were in a variety of postures. Some were reverent; they were weeping and holding their hands out to catch the honey and taste it, even inviting others to take some of their honey. Others acted irritated, wiping the honey off themselves, complaining about the mess. I was awestruck; not knowing what to think I prayed, "Lord, what is it?"

He said, "It's my mercy, John. For some people it's a blessing, but for others it's a hindrance. There's plenty for everyone. Don't ever beg me for healing again. The problem isn't at my end John. It's down there."

(Power Healing by John Wimber & Kevin Springer, Hodder & Stoughton, 1988.)

We might not want to acknowledge it, but we are caught up in a war on earth and we are not always successful in our use of spiritual gifts. Not everyone is healed. Sometimes we get prophecies wrong, and likewise with the other spiritual gifts. The problem is not at God's end, but in our sinful world. We may be tempted to think that God is

withholding his blessing, or we are not spiritual enough to receive it, or not gifted enough. The enemy tries to deceive people about the goodness of God and their own abilities.

God's people display different amounts of faith at different times. Paul said, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned" (Romans 12:3). Here Paul is not talking on about faith for salvation (our trust in God) but how God has given different people in the church different gifts. Everyone has different abilities, talents, spiritual gifts, strengths and weaknesses, and these may change with time. The measure of faith associated with these gifts will accord with the capacities God has assigned to us, and hence will vary between people and from time to time. For example, when Peter was walking on the water towards Jesus, he looked at the wind and waves, and his faith to walk on water faded and he sank.

Faith in Jesus for salvation does not relate to power for service or miracles, but a relationship of trust. Our inability to minister in a particular spiritual gift at a particular time does not cast doubt on our friendship with God. It is a perplexing reality in a sinful world. Disobedience to God is in the nature of evil and is reflected in our world.

God does not come along for the ride with us just for our blessing, we convey God's mercy to others (e.g. in Romans 9:23, Paul speaks of God's people as vessels of mercy). It is natural that God's people want to glorify him, please him and emulate Jesus. We do not have to worry whether our efforts at serving God and others will be good enough to please God. God is pleased with his people right now.

His burden is light (Matthew 11:30). We can rest easy in him. God is not concerned with our ministry style. Consider the wide variety of healing

ministries in the church. We can be ourselves. God does not want to restrict our freedom and individuality. What you do and where you go are not as important as whom you convey. (See *A Few Things I've Learned Since I Knew It All* by Jerry Cook, Peacemakers Ministries, 1989.)



Don't Mention the War

As we go through life, everyone meets with difficult problems without easy answers. It is not different for Christians. God's kingdom clashes with the kingdom of darkness, ensuring fireworks. There is no peace with darkness. Life is more a battleground than a fairground. But, evil never has the upper hand; it may appear that way sometimes. The background to the drama of life's battles is the love of God. The noise of the battle tries to mask the voices of the angels and God who cheer you on to victory.

When Jesus was on earth, he taught about life in the kingdom of God. God's kingdom includes people from any nation, people who give their allegiance to Jesus. There are two spiritual kingdoms in this world: the kingdom of light, belonging to God, and the kingdom of darkness, led by Satan. Both kingdoms are fighting in the same theatre of war. This includes humanity, the earth, supernatural beings, power, and time. The two kingdoms are mortal enemies and everyone is a citizen of one of them.

Faith and fear are important ingredients of the two kingdoms. Zig Ziglar observed, "Fear is faith in reverse." God's kingdom is built on relationships of faith. In Satan's kingdom, people and supernatural

beings are controlled by fear. Fear and faith are opposites. Fear is a weapon of the enemy. Anxiety is fear of what might happen, of losing control. Our weapon against fear is to trust God. He loves us, and “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31). Who can defeat God? No one! We can trust God to win over his enemies. Those who side with the enemy really have something to fear. We can place our confidence in God because he will win the victory against evil.

God helps us break through the walls of fear between people. Sin divides people and makes us suspicious, distrustful and afraid of each other. Fear can lead to violence and even result in wars. Fear makes us run away while faith frees us to run towards another person with open arms. Faith trusts and is life giving, fear eats away at life. Out of faith comes the command and disposition to love others. When we step out in faith we are not testing the water, but responding to the God of love who is calling us.

To live in fear of others is to mistrust God. What can they do to you? Laugh at you, hurt you, belittle you, steal from you, defeat you, or expose your sinfulness? They can do nothing of eternal significance. Daniel’s three friends remained faithful to God even when the king ordered them to be thrown into a furnace (Daniel 3). God saved them. But they were prepared to die, because they saw that people can only kill the body, but God can raise the dead and destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28).

As Paul points out in Ephesians 6:12, other people are not our ultimate enemy. There is a war in the heavenly (or spiritual) realm. Satan and his followers fight against God, his angels, and humanity, both saved and unsaved. Satan’s indiscriminate attacks on humanity are because God created both the saved and the unsaved intending them to be his people. Besides, unsaved people might become Satan’s enemy.

In addition to fear, Satan uses deception and lies to fight us. Satan has a foothold in our lives in the shape of our sinful human nature.

Sometimes, through our sinful natures, the Satan can trick us into siding with him. The sinful nature within each of us wars against God (Romans 7:23). Our best defence to the war within us is to trust in God. The sinful nature is guilty, condemned and defeated, but God loves us, Jesus saves us, and the Holy Spirit restores us.

Our deceived sinful natures want to be in control, believe we are okay, and live at ease. Those who are controlled by the sinful nature will fight anyone who exposes and opposes these misbeliefs. The result for Christians is that “all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). The enemies of Jesus, persecuted him during his life on earth even though he was sinless. God’s people can expect nothing less. Yet Jesus' response was to pray, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus said of Satan, “He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44).

Satan’s lies are many and various, and they may even contradict each other. You might recognise these lies: the gospel is irrelevant in today’s world; you can’t believe the Bible; God doesn’t care about you; sin isn’t so bad; sin is harmless fun; God is a kill-joy; you aren’t worth saving; you are basically good; you get what you deserve; and God wouldn't send you to hell. Why does Satan tell these lies? Jesus answered this when he said that Satan is a murderer. Satan wants us dead, both spiritually and physically.

The devil tries to deceive us, often using half-truths, but God sets us free from lies by revealing the whole truth. God does not leave us defenceless in this world. He provides the armour of truth,

righteousness, the gospel, faith, and salvation. You will find the armour of God listed in Ephesians 6:13-18. God equips us for the fight with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17b). He builds up his people by giving them spiritual gifts. These weapons do not make us invincible. The battle does not always go our way, and if we stray into the enemy’s camp, we can expect to take a beating.

In war, not everything goes the way either side wants. Even the winning side has casualties. The soldiers at the front do not always understand the reasoning behind the General’s orders, but we can trust that God knows what he is doing. We can trust him with our lives. Everyone dies in this world. We have to trust God to restore our lives. Healing is a sign of God's mercy. Yet not everyone who is miraculously healed places his or her faith in Jesus. Not everyone Jesus healed came back to thank him (see for example Luke 17:11-19). Not everyone Jesus died for reconciles with God.

When we appeal to God in a prayer of faith, out of compassion for the needs of others, God hears our prayer. Sometimes sinful motives betray our faith. God will not respond to prayers that are motivated by selfish concerns and worldly success (James 4:3). Instead, pray that God’s kingdom will be seen on earth. The world glorifies success. God glorifies the Son who took the role of a servant. Spiritual gifts belong to God. The Holy Spirit has every spiritual gift at his disposal. He does not use us because of our gifts. Our part is to be available for him to use and to be faithful in using the gifts in the service of others.

God may call a person to a special task and give them the required gifts, or tools, to carry out the task. This does not mean they are special people; someone has to do it. There is no favouritism in God, everyone is his favourite, and everyone is special to him. We need not be envious of the gifts of others. If the devil has an opportunity to tempt you to sin, he will take it. Do not despise your circumstances in life. The road you travel may sometimes be difficult or boring, but it leads to heaven.

We need whatever gifts God has given the church to use. These gifts are weapons of war. The power of God (called the anointing) is what causes the healing, imparts the prophetic message from God, shows God's love in acts of hospitality, and inspires preaching. The anointing is not our doing. As we make ourselves available to God, he gives us the ability to do his work. (*The Anointing of the Holy Spirit* by Peter Tan, Peter Tan Evangelism, 1989.)

Remember God loves you always; this is the rock we can stand firm on in a storm. We are secure in God's love. Do not focus on the wreckage of sin but on the one who saves us from it. When we become Christians we do not magically receive health, wealth, success and happiness. So why become a Christian? This is a worldly way of talking which fails to see Jesus as Lord. By faith we see that God's glasses are focused on Jesus.



Haven't got a Prayer?

Many people think they are so bad they do not have a prayer of entering God's kingdom. You might think that God would not stoop to talk to the likes of you. Jesus was not of that opinion. Relationships take time to form. It takes time to talk and do things together. Prayer is interacting with God. How we talk to God reveals how well we know him. If anyone ever knew how to pray, it was Jesus. His disciples observed how he prayed and one of them once asked him to teach them how to pray. Jesus gave them a model prayer we call "The Lord's Prayer". Jesus taught this same prayer in the Sermon on the Mount where he said the following.

"Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one."

(Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4)

This is not a prayer asking God to do what we want him to do for us. Prayer is not a push-button on a divine dispensing machine for getting what we want. Neither did Jesus intend us to recite this prayer in a mechanical way as religious ritual. Prayer is not passive. This is a prayer of commitment to God where we say to God that we are one with him and his vision for the world. Let us take a more detailed look at the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Jesus invites us to join with him in calling God "our Father." God wants us to enter that relationship with him. "Hallowed be your name," means we regard God as holy. We acknowledge God is sinless and good.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus prays for God's kingdom to influence this world to relieve suffering, for the oppressed to go free, and the spiritually lost to find God. Unlike heaven, we do not have to die before we enter the kingdom of God. The analogy of a relationship with God being like living in God's kingdom is similar to that of a child living in the Father's house. God reveals himself in his kingdom. This kingdom is wherever we participate with God's work. The reality of God's kingdom is more fundamental than the world's.

The alternative to God's kingdom is a kingdom of delusion where people try to build monuments to themselves that fall into ruin. Even lives of good works done apart from a relationship with God and celebrated in the world, leave a legacy unnoticed in God's kingdom. In God's workshop, people build lives devoted to God and his ways. They

replace selfish desires and self-centred-expression with the desire to express God's kingdom in this world.

When we pray for healing for a sick person and they are not healed, we should never think that it is because it is God's will. God does not want them to be sick for a higher purpose. God's will is not always done on earth. At least, our prayer for healing is an act of obedience to God whereby his will is displayed through us.

Give us this day our daily bread.

Here we confess our total dependence on God for our every need. It is good to remind ourselves that we only live from one moment to the next because of the grace of God. When we ask God for the things we need, we align ourselves with this truth.

Jesus taught, "...do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink ... Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matthew 6:25-26). Christians who live in poverty pray for food, but go hungry. Yet many unbelievers, who do not even ask God, have their needs met. God is gracious to everyone. He cares for those who suffer, but earth is rebel held territory.

**And forgive us our debts,
as we also forgive our debtors.**

We need God's forgiveness for our sins and, in seeking to imitate Jesus, we forgive those who sin against us. When we ask in the Lord's Prayer for God to forgive us, we are confessing our sinfulness and acknowledging our need of a saviour. We proclaim God's ultimate control over everything and confess our weakness at repelling the attacks of the enemy. In asking God for forgiveness we repent of sin and are reconciled with God.

After teaching the Lord's Prayer, Jesus expanded on this, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14 & 15). In this statement Jesus seems to say that God will not forgive you unless you first forgive everyone who has ever done any wrong to you. This would make God's forgiveness of you conditional on your becoming sinless, at least in forgiving others. Jesus came to save us from sin. Matthew 6:14 & 15 does not conform to our modern way of talking which rarely uses statements that are internally illogical, even when the intention is plain. This is not a piece of logical reasoning, but teaching on prayer. Jesus framed the statement in such a way as to provoke spiritual self-examination. Jesus meant those who have received the forgiveness of God will forgive others. A forgiving mindset is evidence of our friendship with God, and that his merciful Spirit dwells within us.

The motive for forgiving others is not so that God will answer our prayers, including the prayer for our own forgiveness. We want to be one with the Spirit of God and he seeks to forgive. Hence, Jesus taught us to forgive those who have sinned against us. Sins are always against God. We are not at centre stage, God is. We take a secondary role. God forgives people, so let us take our lead from him and learn to be merciful. In having compassion on others, we follow God's approach to people, and receive the assurance we are forgiven. (See *Ephesians 4:32* & *Colossians 3:13* by the apostle Paul.)

The Bible tells us that Jesus never rejects those seeking God but lives to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:25). Intercession is prayer on behalf of others. Jesus told a parable of a king who cancelled the huge debt of one of his servants (Matthew 18:23-35). But, the servant did not have this same forgiving disposition. Instead, he insisted that someone who owed him a relatively small debt, pay him in full. When the king found out about this, he was angry and punished his servant for his lack of

mercy. Just as God freely forgives us our sins, his Spirit motivates us to do likewise and to forgive others who sin against us. A forgiving attitude is a something we can expect to see in someone who has entered a relationship with God.

**And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.**

The last part of the Lord's Prayer addresses the problem of the evil around us and in us. Jesus refers to the evil one, Satan, as the foremost creature amongst the many forces of evil. Satan rules his kingdom by brute force and fear. His kingdom wreaks chaos and destruction on earth. God does no evil, nor tempts anyone to do evil (James 1:13). Evil is a cancer on creation. It defies God whose creation was good. "Deliver us from evil" is the cry of a heart that seeks God's ways.

The traditional version of the Lord's Prayer ends with "**For yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.**" This is reminiscent of the conclusions to a few of the apostle Peter's prayers: "... so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 4:11b); and after discussing life's trials, Peter prayed "... the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself, restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen." (1 Peter 5:10b & 11).

Prayer then, has several features. It can be thought of as:

- (1) Talking to God. God likes you talking to him.
- (2) Talking with God. God talks to us, too, so prayer becomes a dialogue. We have to get to know God's voice in our spirits to "hear" him.
- (3) Ministry in Jesus' name. We can speak on behalf of God as we do when we pray for healing. This category of prayer includes what is

called “spiritual warfare prayer”. An example of spiritual warfare prayer is when the disciples could not remove a demon and Jesus said they needed to use prayer (Mark 9:18-19). Jesus cast out the demon with a word of command, which he classed as prayer, presumably because the command was talking in the power of the Holy Spirit (Mark 9:25 & 29).

We can summarise these three aspects of prayer by saying that prayer is interacting with God. We can pray at any time and as often as we like. Paul said, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17).



Dancing with the Father

We live to enjoy God. Lovers need no other reason for enjoying each other's company. This enjoyment the Bible calls "abundant life" and "eternal life". David said, "You have turned my mourning into dancing" (Psalm 30:11). Life is sometimes likened to a dance. Christians are sometimes criticised for their poor performance with cutting comments such as "... and you call yourselves Christians". Admittedly, our dancing needs improving but look at our dancing partner! (This section title is taken from *Dancing with the Father*, a song by Wayne Drain, Kingsway, 1996.)

Who wants to live a mediocre life? Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus is not talking about giving us a life of mediocrity, but an abundant, full, exuberant, rich life. Death and suffering continue on earth, but not in heaven. For the Christian, death is when we move on to heaven. As Paul said, "Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Cor 15:55). The life we live here on earth is not one of hopelessness. When we accept God's pardon, abundant life starts at once. We can enjoy eternal life this side of heaven. Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent

me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24). Note Jesus did not say, "**will have**" but "**has** eternal life". It is a present reality.

When we place our faith in Jesus, the Father welcomes us into his kingdom. This is where we bask in his gracious, forgiving, healing, saving and glorious presence. Heaven is where God is. Matthew, in his Gospel, refers to the kingdom of God as the kingdom of heaven, which avoids using God's name but describes life with God. Happiness is abiding in God, or should that be having God's Spirit abiding in us?

Jesus said he would reveal himself to his followers but not to others. Why? He said, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Jesus is referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit into the lives of his people. The Holy Spirit is filled with joy when God's vision is accomplished in us. Since we are filled with the Holy Spirit we are also filled with his joy.

Paul said, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). Likewise, David sung of God, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God" (Psalm 40:3). We express our love and enjoyment of God in our worship of him. Worship (from "worth-ship") means to do things in an attitude of adoration, awe and reverence, declaring God's worth to us. Worship is not just something we do when we sing God's praises. Every aspect of our lives should be an act of worship of God. Paul said, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1). It is because we can worship God at all times we can speak of sacrificing our time to God. Our days on earth are numbered anyway. Who are we to limit God's access to us? This would be to treat God like a pet dog. It is better to live in God's presence always.

God does not want us to worship him because he is insecure and needs our praises. He lived perfectly well before he even created us. God is pleased when people worship him because they are breaking free from sin.

Our sacrifice of worship is acceptable to God as was the sacrifice of Jesus. As we “die to self” (renounce self-centredness and pride), we free ourselves from self-consciousness at what other people might think of our worship. The Holy Spirit sets us free to be like Jesus. Jesus was a humble man. Humility characterises the attitude of a true worshipper.

Worship arises out of our love of God. We can only worship someone we adore. The relationship between God and his people is one of love flowing in both directions. His love for us makes him want to be God to us and in us. The Holy Spirit loves the Father and the Son. The Spirit motivates people to worship and love God and want to see him working through their lives.

“As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13). The fear of the Lord that the Bible talks about is not just respect for God’s majesty. Children of God do not want to hurt their Father’s feelings. Yes, God has feelings. Reverence of God is our love, awe, and respect towards God. How can we stand by and see our God ignored and dishonoured by our generation? How can we not care about what he cares about?

Sometimes we compare ourselves to the saints of the past who achieved great things for God. We consider our own lives and think we will be fortunate to scrape into heaven. Are we being too concerned with worldly achievements? The Bible speaks of rewards in heaven, but these rewards are not like the Academy Awards that honour movie productions and actors for their performances. Rewards in heaven are not for glorifying the saints. They show the glory of God. The rewards

that God gives in heaven are not wages earned for our work on earth, but gifts from a God who loves to give. These rewards glorify God as they declare the true value of works of faith done on earth. We do these works from trusting God and following in his ways, and by allowing his Spirit to work through our lives (Galatians 2:20; 3:2-3 & 5; 5:6).

God's rewards are glorious because everything he does is glorious. His rewards are worth striving for, but are never a cause for pride in our achievements. Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." (Matthew 5:5) and, "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matthew 19:30). So those who try to inherit the earth won't. Humility is not a goal achieved by anything you do, but something that happens in you (a side effect) when you involve the Holy Spirit in your life. It is the evidence of the spirit of Jesus in you. Jesus is humble and his humility is seen in his disciples too. (*Humility* by Andrew Murray, Whitaker House, 1982.)

Humility is a servant heart. It makes no demands on God or anyone else. The opposite of humility is self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction, pride, and the longing to be in control. We cannot be both humble and proud. Even when we take pride in our work, we glory in ourselves. Our weakness is in our sinfulness. The humble depend on God and find their satisfaction in relating to him. Humility forms in us as we relate to God as the almighty, loving, and merciful Creator, and as we see ourselves as being nothing apart from him.

In humility we reach out to God. God is as far away as your need for him to touch you. We need not fear God. Fear is self-protecting, but God will not hurt us, we can trust him. The fire of God's love will melt our icy pride and self-sufficiency. Humility is self-sacrificing. The humble do not demand things of God.

The humble find freedom. The proud are driven by the desires of the sinful nature. A humble spirit is one in relationship with God “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Our pride is detrimental to us when it denies such a great God entry to our lives.

The humble are not weak people or people of low self-esteem. In fact, God entrusts his truth and spiritual gifts to the humble. The Bible speaks of violent people forcing their way into the kingdom of God (Matthew 11:12). We rarely picture humble people this way. The force spoken of here is the force to overcome the inertia to change, to repent. The cost is in spiritual currency. Take a look through God’s glasses.

The apostle Paul, who had much to say on Christian freedom, considered himself to be a slave of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1. Note the Greek word “doulos” is often translated “servant” but literally means “one born as a slave”). James, Peter, Jude and John spoke of themselves as slaves of Jesus (James 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1, and Revelations 1:1). The disciples heard Jesus say, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Paul and the others knew they were friends of God, just as Abraham was called a friend of God (Isaiah 41:8; 2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23). They were not talking about slavery as the world understood slavery. In fact, Paul said in God’s family slaves and free are equal (Galatians 3:28). They considered themselves as slaves to one another (Galatians 5:13) and refused to use their freedom for self-indulgence.

Jesus wants to save people blinded by sin, who do not know what they are doing. Jesus taught us not to judge others or criticise the downtrodden, but to help lift them up and heal them. Rather than

condemn people because of their sins, help them find forgiveness for their sins. People are not saved by Jesus because they are superior. The Bible teaches us to regard others as more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3) and decide our actions by how we can best serve others. As we do this, we serve God. Do you want to be God's? Do you want God to be yours? Answer: "Yes, Lord" to both questions.



The End is Near!

God may be omnipotent but there is one thing that God cannot do.

God cannot possibly love you any more than he already does. There is nothing you can do to make God love you any more than he does right now. Can this be true? Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). God cannot love you more than that! As gracious as our heavenly Father is, there are things he cannot give his children. God cannot give us any more love, or mercy, or forgiveness, or eternal life, than he already has.

We have a great God, everything he does is great, and he loves you greatly. God loves no other person more than he loves you. You are one of God's favourite people. You do not have to **do** anything for God to forgive you because Jesus has **done** it already. We can place our faith in God, trust in Jesus for salvation, and know that we are beloved members of God's family.

Christians want God's presence in their lives. They emulate Christ. But, godliness is a fringe benefit. It is like rearranging our home to accommodate more appropriately a very important house guest. If we

live as Jesus did, in God's covenant, we will be lights in this dark world. Although we are sinful we are forgiven and able to do good things.

Someone once said, "God loves the sinner but hates the sin." The problem with this is that sin cannot be separated from its perpetrator. God hates sin and we are sinners. But we have a more positive message. We can say, **God loves the sinner and forgives the sin through Christ Jesus.**

The choice everyone has to make is where to live: in God's kingdom (fulfilling God's vision), or in the kingdom of darkness. God is a person who loves you. Relate to him as a friend, not a doctrine or religion. Jesus ministers to you as Lord, he wants to be God to you, and for you to return home to the Father. God is love. We need not fear God, but love him.

The choice we have is to live by faith in God or reject him. We do not choose to live, but we do choose where to live, in which spiritual kingdom. It is not impossibly difficult for you to choose. God made us with a penchant to join with him in his kingdom of love. Why else do we instinctively try to defend our behaviour? Even convicted criminals want to justify their actions.

Sin leads us to place limitations on the love we will share with others. We decide that we will help this person but not that one. Jesus is not so choosy and will save anyone. Love is stronger than sin. You are born to live, to survive, to win, not maybe to win if God allows. You can repent and believe in Jesus and leave the saving to Jesus. When God liberates the heart from self-centredness, he fills us with joy and love for others. There is no formula to apply, no key to find, and no secret to know, to win victory. The door to heaven is not locked to keep you out. Jesus won the victory and gives you the keys. Jesus said, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19a).

Life is not a maze where we wander through open and closed doors. There is no chance loss or cruel fate or missed opportunities when the God of the impossible is with us. God is not seeking to control us and direct our every move. When you come to a fork in the road, choose the way you will go. God will go with you. You do not need to agonise that you might miss God's will for your life because of your choice. You are not guilty if things go wrong. Things often go wrong in a world gone wrong. Commit all your ways to God. Whatever we do shows our faith. May it express faith in God! Have courage to step out in faith. Be adventurous. Meet needs as best you can. Regard everything you do in terms of ministry (service). It is not your ministry, but the Lord's. Our lives are vehicles of God in this world. You open the door for Jesus; he does not open the door for you (he is the King). Whatever work you do for the King is important.

James, the brother of the Lord, said, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8a). Paul Cain in modern times put this in a more confronting way: "You are as close to God as you want to be." God's kingdom is not far away. There is a banquet prepared and heaven celebrates what the Lord has done. "The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous" (Psalm 146:7 & 8). God invites us to celebrate with him. He does not invite us to get religious or to join an organisation but to join him in his kingdom.

There is no ulterior motive in the One who calls you. We live in an Age of Grace that far eclipses the Age of Reason. There never was an Age of Works. Salvation is by grace alone. The reason to believe is love, God's love for us. The enemy tells us that God does not love us. But, what Satan says, or the world says, or what you or I say, is not important. It is what God says that counts. Believe him.

When the Saviour comes to rescue the captives, do not hold back. It may not be at an appropriate time, or in response to a refined gospel

presentation, but a prisoner on the lookout for opportunities to escape does not worry about escaping in style. As the Holy Spirit says in Psalm 95:8 (and again in Hebrews 3:7 and yet again in Hebrews 4:7) "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Life is not about us. Our lives belong to God and he cares for us.

Jesus gave the apostle John a vision which John recorded in the book of Revelation. It starts out with Christ discussing the state of the churches in the first century. He found qualities to both criticise and praise. Then the vision discloses the view from heaven. From heaven, the church is seen as a pure spotless bride waiting for the return of the bridegroom, Jesus. The vision ends with a glimpse through God's glasses of the future God has planned for us. This passage found at the end of the Bible recalls the Isaiah 65:17 prophecy that God will one day make a new heaven and new earth for us to live free from our former troubles.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and **I will be their God and they will be my children.**"

(Revelation 21:1-7)

Amen!





About the Author

Derek Thompson was born in Hammersmith, England in 1950 and migrated to Penrith, Australia with parents and brother in 1957. After studying electrical engineering at Sydney University, he worked for 34 years with NSW Public Works as an electrical engineer and project manager. He is married to Margaret and has two daughters and lives in Albion Park, NSW.

On retirement, he completed a Diploma in Theology with Charles Sturt University and is now busy writing and working for an ecumenical church organisation called Five Islands Christian Ministries which works to facilitate church unity in the Illawarra region.



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Five Islands Christian Ministries Inc.: www.5icm.org.au

Email address: derek@5icm.org.au