

DARKNESS TO LIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Every person believes something about God, the after-life and the supernatural realm. Some believe that God does not exist. Others worship thousands of “gods”. There are those who claim to be on a “pathway to enlightenment”. Many worship demons, or ascribe spiritual power to objects or the forces of nature. Some even worship themselves.

Mankind is clearly spiritual. Even today, with all our modern technological advances, people still yearn to understand the basic meaning of life. Deep within, people hunger for greater purpose and understanding that goes beyond day-to-day living. People wonder, “Is there more to life than what can be seen, heard, felt, tasted or touched?”

These questions reveal how God created mankind. **We were created** (Gen 1:26, 27) **to know God and His purposes in a personal way** (Jer 29: 11- 13). Unfortunately, man’s choice to sin destroyed the innocent communion he once had with his Creator. Thus, the biblical record reveals man’s long and inevitable descent into spiritual darkness.

But the Bible reveals a profound truth as well: God is at work, drawing mankind back to Himself. God has provided a way of salvation for mankind to be restored back to Him.

However, Satan and his demons are also at work. Using deception and lies, they are ceaselessly striving to keep people from the Truth of God and His plan of salvation. Satan knows that the Truth will set humanity free from the bondage of the consequences of sin (John 8:32).

This issue of ACTS Magazine will refresh your understanding of God’s great plan of salvation. It will show the clear contrast between true, biblical Christianity and other religions active in the world today. It will expose the “*spirit of the Antichrist*” – which the Bible reveals as the controlling force behind all false religions.

The purpose of this magazine is to better equip you to lead people out of the bondage of false religions and into true, eternal salvation through Christ Jesus. This information is not intended as an attack on other religions or the people who follow them. Nor should it be used to accuse or judge others.

Our prayer is that this magazine will help you, as a church leader, understand how to:

- Confront false religions in **prayer**;
- Answer the questions of those bound in false religion who are seeking the Truth;

- Lead people out of the darkness of false religion, and into the glorious light of the Gospel of God the Son, Jesus Christ!

“For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness, is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.’” (2 Cor. 4:6 nas)

EXPOSING THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST

There are hundreds of different religions practiced in our world today. Some may appear to have strange beliefs, while other religions seem more acceptable. However, ALL except true, biblical Christianity are “false religions” – filled with error and ungodly human wisdom, and having demonic origins.

Many false religions and cults attempt to counterfeit true Christianity. They may use “Christian language” or biblical words, and may even include Jesus Christ’s name. But a closer examination reveals that false religions deny the full counsel of the Word of God and contradict Who Jesus Christ is and what He taught. The Bible identifies this as *“the spirit of the Antichrist”* (1 John 4:3). False religions have one unifying factor: they originate with, and are given power by, Satan and demonic spirits. The main strategy of the demonic realm in false religions is to lead people away from God, His truth, salvation through Jesus Christ, freedom, and eternal life; and instead lead them into deception, bondage, and eternal separation from God.

In this teaching, we will examine what the Bible reveals about the spirit of the Antichrist, its characteristics, and how it functions through false religions.

As you study, make sure you look up each Bible reference mentioned and read it carefully. The better you know and understand the Word of God – and our God Who has given us His Truth – the better equipped you will be to recognize and not be deceived by the spirit of the antichrist and false religions (Heb 4: 12)

1. THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST: AT WORK TODAY!

The “Antichrist” is commonly believed to be a specific person who will rise up in the last days and, filled with demonic power, lead the world astray (this is true, and described in the Book of Revelation).

But the Bible also reveals that there is a *“spirit of the Antichrist”* which is already at work in the world, even as it was in John the Apostle’s time (1 John 2:18- 23; 4:1-3). This demon spirit opposes the truth of Who Jesus is and what He accomplished at the Cross. Disguised to appear acceptable, this spirit works through willing vessels to lead people astray.

“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no

great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Cor 11:13-15).

KEEPING HUMANITY IN DARKNESS

The main strategy used by the spirit of the antichrist to oppose Jesus Christ is clearly identified in the Bible: The spirit of the antichrist denies the “incarnation” [God the Son taking on human flesh] of Christ.

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour ... Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:18,22,23).

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world” (1 John 4: 1-3).

In the Gospel of John (1:1-14), the Son of God is described as “the Word” Who is eternal in nature and coexistent with God. God the Son was the primary Agent in creation (v.3) and in Him is salvation (v.4). The Son of God came into our world so that mankind might be saved through Him (vs.10-13) and He took on the form of human flesh (read also Romans 8:3; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:5-8; Hebrews 2:14; 10:5). Jesus, the Son of God, was born into our world according to the plan of God (Gen 3:15; Isa 7:14; Acts 2:23; Gal 4:4,5) for the purpose of taking on our sins (Rom 5:9-11; 2 Cor 5:21) and paying for them at the Cross (1 Cor 15:3,4). By dying in our place, Jesus provided our salvation and our restoration back to God through faith in Christ (Acts 4:12; Rom 1:16,17; 1 Thess 5:9, 10).

The spirit of the Antichrist denies that Jesus was God come in the flesh, and thus attempts to remove our confidence in what Christ accomplished. *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an Antichrist” (2 John 7).* These demons deny Christ because salvation through faith in Christ, His atoning work on the Cross, and His victorious resurrection, are the very foundation of Christianity. By denying that Christ was the Son of God come in the flesh, the spirit of the Antichrist is denying that Jesus the Christ was actually God in human form. To deny this is to reject the work that Jesus Christ accomplished – the payment for our sins with His own blood, as a sinless sacrifice, through His actual death (1 Pet 1:18-21) and resurrection.

Some false religions acknowledge that Jesus was perhaps a “great prophet”. But they do NOT believe that Jesus was, and is, the only Son of God sent to earth in human form to die for the sins of

humanity and then be resurrected from the dead. Many believe that Jesus was just one more prophet in a long line of prophets.

Many acknowledge that Jesus was a “great moral teacher”. But they do not accept His very clear teachings – that Jesus is God (John 8:58; 10:30-33) and that salvation is possible ONLY through Him (John 14:6).

Demons know that God is real, that Jesus Christ is truly God (Mark 3:11; Luke 8:26-29), and that He is the sacrificial Son of God through Whom we have salvation. Therefore, demon-inspired false religions and cults fervently deny that God the Son came in the flesh and paid for our sins; they deny this in order to keep humanity in darkness regarding the true and only way of salvation (John 1:4; 8:12).

DEMONIC TACTICS

The spirit of the Antichrist is the main force promoting and empowering false religions and cults, all of which deny the deity and true work of Jesus Christ. This evil, demonic wisdom (2 Cor 11:15; 1 Tim 4:1; Jas 3:15) feeds rebellion, ignorance and deception in people to keep them from knowing the One true God and the salvation He has provided through Christ.

Satan and the demonic realm are in constant opposition to Jesus Christ and the advancing of His Kingdom through the Church. Let us examine six main manifestations of this opposition presently used by the demonic realm to oppose Christ and His Church.

1. **Deception.** All demonic spirits work through lies, half-truths, and perversions of the truth. Deception is the nature and function of the whole demonic realm- beginning with the father of lies, Satan (John 8:44).

Specifically, the spirit of the Antichrist uses – and works through – false religions and cults to sow deception and confusion among people, in order to keep them from eternal salvation through Jesus Christ and from restoration to God.

The spirit of the Antichrist will even try to deceive Christians, attempting to lead sincere but immature believers into error or destruction (2 Cor 11:3,4, 13-15; 1 Tim 4:1 -3; 1 John 2:26). That is why a thorough familiarity with, and proper understanding of, the Bible and the doctrines of Christianity are so very important.

2. **The demonic realm opposes anything that is godly, biblically moral, or righteous.** The spirit of the Antichrist works not only through false religions and cults; but also through secular means (government, institutions, and general society) to oppose Christianity. When a government allows false religions the rights and freedom to gather, yet hinders and persecutes Christians and Christianity, this is the spirit of the Antichrist at work.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 6:12, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places”*.

The demonic realm will tempt people (even Christian leaders) to use religion as a cover for fleshly activities (see 2 Peter 2:1-3, 12-22). Demonic spirits will attempt to work through other people to hide, suppress or confuse the truth about Jesus Christ (Rom 1:18, 19, 32) and the Church. This strategy is particularly seen in the news media and entertainment industries today.

The spirit of the Antichrist endeavors to intimidate or discourage Christians from ministering or sharing the Gospel. Demonic forces attempt to sow doubt and fear in the hearts of believers, to silence their witness and lead them astray. Thus, any serious, committed disciple of Jesus will have to wage spiritual war (through prayer and the truth of God’s Word) against the demonic realm.

Satan and his demons were defeated at the Cross (Col 2:15; Matt 16:18, 19). Demonic forces must bow and yield to the awesome and overcoming power of God released through prayer in Jesus’ Name. There is no name that is greater than the Name of Jesus Christ our Savior (Phil 2:9-11). At the Cross, Jesus Christ not only paid the ransom for our sins (Matt 20:28; Col 2:13, 14), but He also destroyed Satan’s control over human destiny (Col 2:15; Heb 2:14-16). The only control Satan and his demons have over Christians is what Christians will invite, accept or allow.

3. The demonic realm is divisive and seeks to separate believers in Jesus Christ from each other and the local church. Demonic spirits attempt to deceive people to form “new” doctrines or beliefs that are opposed to what the Bible teaches. Once deceived, those led by the spirit of the Antichrist will seek to separate themselves from the Body of Christ and from exclusive groups (see 1 John 2:19). This is how many false religions and cults begin. Beware of groups with new or “exclusive” revelations, especially if they claim that joining their group is the only way to be saved. Demon spirits will also attempt to divide believers in an individual church. If we succumb to this strategy – and allow our flesh, pride or weakness to create divisions, confusion and arguments – it is destructive and harmful to the church and its function (Jas 3:13-18). We must instead *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make NO provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts”* (Rom 13:14).

Unity within a local church – as well as among Bible-based Christian churches – is *essential* if believers are to please the Lord and grow into maturity (Eph 4:11-16). Jesus Himself prayed for unity among the believers: *“that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that You sent Me”* (see John 17:20-22).

Unity releases the full blessing of God, and the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit to work in and through the Church. (See Psalm 133, where oil symbolizes the Holy Spirit’s work because of unity.) Unity is a testimony to the world of genuine faith in Christ (John 12:34, 35).

Christ commanded *unity* in the Church, not *uniformity*. There *is* room for difference of *expression* within the Body of Christ and among churches. The worship styles, the type of

building, the order of the service, the name of the church, or the day of the week that the church gathers, are a few examples of acceptable differences that should not create divisions.

But there are essential doctrines and theology clearly expressed in the Bible that ALL believers must hold to and agree on; otherwise we are no longer the true Church of Jesus Christ [please see “Essential Christian Doctrines” for more information].

As a church leader, make unity a priority in your church; and reach out to other church leaders in your area. Pray together, encourage each other in sound doctrine, talk together, and make plans to reach your community for the Kingdom of God. Give NO place for the divisive spirit of the Antichrist!

4. Demon spirits promote “legalism”: holding to an outward religious form while denying the true presence, love and power of God. The devil does not care whether people act religious or not. His desire is to keep people away from a real and life-transforming relationship with the One true God through Jesus Christ, His Son.

Obviously, the spirit of the antichrist will use false religions to keep people from the truth. But another method of deception can sometimes be found within the Church – among protestants, evangelicals, charismatics, in large denominations or small ones.

This demonic strategy leads people to hold to an *outward form* of religious practice, titles or words, but deny the transforming power of God that works inward change and deliverance from our sinful nature. This is sometimes referred to as the “spirit of religion”.

This type of deception is addressed in the Bible as those “*having a form of godliness, but denying its power*” (2 Tim 3:4). These are people who may act religious and appear godly, but their hearts and actions do not reveal genuine, transforming faith in Christ or love for God. Jesus recognized and addressed this empty, outward form of religious practice (see Matthew 23).

Churches that are bound by a religious spirit are far more concerned with their “rules” and who is following them, than they are with reaching the lost and discipling believers in love. These churches often inhibit the presence and Spirit of God from being present and active in their church services or individual lives. They do not welcome the work of the Holy Spirit or teach obedience to ALL of the Scripture. They may not welcome “outsiders” in their meetings. Instead, they emphasize rules, outward forms, or traditional ceremonies and rituals, most of which are not even based on the Scriptures. This kind of manifestation is called legalism.

The Apostle Paul warned the Colossians of the dangers of legalism and religious rituals replacing true faith in Christ (Colossians chapters 2 and 3). Paul exhorted the Colossian believers to resist legalism and beware of the false teachers that promote these practices.

Paul also warned Timothy about those with the **appearance** of godliness: “But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters,

proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, ***having a form of godliness but denying its power ...*** ” (2 Tim 3:1-4).

These terrible traits are displayed by those “*having a form of godliness*” – those who only outwardly appear religious! They may be churchgoers, elders, priests or ministers. But the Bible calls them hypocrites (Matt 7:21-23). Inwardly, they have denied, resisted and rebelled against the life-changing power of the Lordship of Christ in their lives. They have an outward, spiritual “form”, but they are not allowing their hearts and minds to be transformed by Christ’s love and power (Rom 12:1,2; 2 Cor 3:18). They do not exhibit the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:15-26) or the character of Christ in their lives (Rom 12:9-21; Col 3:12-17). Paul warns: “*And from such people turn away!*” (2 Tim 3:5; also read verses 6-9).

True believers in Jesus Christ have the Spirit of God within them. The conviction and power the Holy Spirit gives can and will transform us from the inside out, if we will respond! Jesus did not come to make us outwardly “religious”, but rather to make us adopted sons and daughters (Rom 8:12-17) and to conform us into His image from the inside out (Rom 8:28-39). Christ came to set us free! Let us never deny our Lord by living unworthy of His great sacrifice (Titus 1:15,16). Do not be deceived by the spirit of the Antichrist into thinking that an outward show of spirituality is enough. “*For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*” (1 Sam 16:7).

5. The spirit of the Antichrist seeks to exalt itself and steal the worship that rightfully belongs to God. “Lucifer” was an angelic being filled with pride and rebellion who was defeated and cast out of Heaven by God. He became known as Satan (“adversary”) in Scripture (Luke 10:18). In Isaiah 14:12-14, we encounter five startling statements – each beginning with “I will” – that show his desire and intent to take the place of the Most High God and be worshipped as God. God’s response to Lucifer’s rebellious arrogance is recorded in Isaiah 14:15-20.

We encounter Satan’s same wicked desires in the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11. At one point Satan offers the “*kingdoms of the world and their glory*” if Jesus will only fall down and worship him. Jesus’ response in verse 10 lays bare Satan’s evil desire: “*Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’*”

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3,4, Paul describes “*the man of sin*”, the “*son of perdition*” who will appear at the very end of the Church Age. This will be the ultimate and final Antichrist, possessed by Satan himself, “*who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God*”. The Antichrist will attempt to lead all of humanity to worship him instead of God (Revelation 13; see also Daniel 7:25).

The spirit of the Antichrist is already working in the present Church Age to steal the glory, worship and heart-surrender of humanity away from God. This spirit obviously uses false religions and cults to lead people astray and capture their allegiance and worship. Jesus Himself warned that there

would be those who would claim to be Christ, or to be a prophet with some new and important “revelation”.

“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the *Christ*’ or ‘*There!*’ do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:23,24).

The spirit of the Antichrist desires to divert people’s attention, love, obedience and worship away from God. Millions who are bound in false religions worship dead founders of their religions, other people (living or dead), idols, objects, demon spirits – instead of worshipping the One true God, and His Son, Jesus Christ.

It is very tempting even for Christians to fall prey to this demonic strategy by striving for the praise of men (Matt 6: 1-7), or by idolizing other people and their works. This is demonically-inspired and pride-filled, and robs God and Jesus Christ of due honor. May we be diligent to **give to God and Jesus Christ the glory and the worship that are due them – and only them!**

6. The spirit of the Antichrist appeals to our sinful nature through pride and self-exaltation. The spirit of the Antichrist is marked by pride and a desire for the position and exaltation that belong only to God.

“I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another nor My praise to carved images” (Isa 42:8). It was through his own pride that Satan rebelled, attempting to overthrow God and His divine rule.

Pride is the **enemy** of every sincere disciple of Jesus Christ and a doubly dangerous foe to leaders in the Body of Christ. The love of fame or position, and the desire for the praise of men, appeal to the fleshly nature (John 12:42,43); but they are invitations for the working of the demonic.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, warns of the destructive power of pride. In discussing the qualifications for leadership, Paul declares that a leader should not be *“a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil”* (1 Tim 3:6).

Proverbs 16:18 tells us that *“pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”*. In Proverbs 6: 16,17, pride is one of the seven characteristics *“the Lord hates”*; He considers it an “abomination”.

James 3:13-4:10 condemns the attitudes that are a result of pride: *“For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there”* (Jas 3:16). This passage also reveals that those who give place to arrogance become self-deceived and so *“lie against the truth”* (Jas 3:14). Pride in the human heart is a fertile soil for the lies of Satan to flourish and grow, leading one further and further from the truth.

Satan uses people's pride, encouraging them in their "independence" to look elsewhere for answers and salvation rather than to Jesus Christ, the embodiment of Truth.

God is actively opposed to the proud (Jas 4:6). James also exhorts: *"Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you"*, and *"Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up"* (Jas 4:7,10).

THE PITFALLS OF PRIDE

Once pride is given entrance, it takes root and begins to grow. As pride grows, the things of the Spirit of God are lessened in one's life, including the humility necessary to walk uprightly before the Lord. Some doorways for pride are:

1. Seeking out position, notice or praise rather than servanthood;
2. Taking credit that others should rightfully receive;
3. Receiving flattery and vain words instead of giving thanks and credit to God;
4. Believing you are in some way superior to those you lead, and expecting privileges because of your "position";
5. Having attitudes of self-righteousness and pointing out the flaws or failures of others, while putting yourself in a good light;
6. Blaming others for problems or failures, and not taking your share of the responsibility;
7. Lying about or exaggerating your experiences, knowledge or accomplishments;
8. Becoming angry, envious or competitive when others do well or are admired; criticizing their success.

If you have found any of these wrong attitudes (or similar attitudes) in your own heart, stop right now. Take a moment to repent (turn away from such behavior and refuse to entertain it); ask Jesus to forgive you and cleanse you of sin (1 John 1:8,9); then purpose to walk in humility and servanthood before the Lord.

It is your choice alone as to whether you will cooperate with your flesh and the devil and give place to pride – or instead choose to be a servant who walks humbly before God and with others (Rom 13:14; Eph 4:27; Mic 6:8).

2. FALSE RELIGIONS AND THE SPIRIT OF THE ANTICHRIST

One of the primary means through which the spirit of the Antichrist works to oppose Jesus Christ and God's Kingdom is false religion. The major false religions of the world have certain beliefs in common:

1. The false religions of the world have other gods with other names. But the Bible teaches that there is only One God, the Lord God Most High, Yahweh (Deut 6:4,5; Mark 12:29; 1 Cor 8:6). There

is no other way to know or approach the One true God except through His Son, Jesus (John 14:6; Rom 1:16,17); there is no other name by which we can and must be saved, except the Name of Jesus (John 3:16; Acts 4:12).

2. False religions require many “works” (human effort) in order to obtain their version of salvation or heaven. False religions and cults teach that outward adherence to rules and regulations, or correct performance, will “earn” a person the right to be saved or gain him approval from his “gods”.

But we know from Scripture that God’s acceptance can **never** be earned. Our relationship with our heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, is based on **God’s love and acceptance of us**. God loves us completely, even in our sinful condition (John 3:16; Rom 5:8). Our works have nothing to do with God’s love for us.

The Bible does reveal, however, that our sin does separate us from God. Just one lie, one evil thought, one rebellious attitude, one thought of anger or lust or covetousness – any one of those is enough to condemn us before a perfect God. James 2:10 tells us, *“For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.”*

So we see that there is no one who can perform perfectly and satisfy the full Law of God (except Jesus Christ). Thus, all mankind is condemned to death and eternal separation from a holy God. BUT God, in His great love, does not leave mankind in that hopeless condition!

The eternal purpose of God the Father was to send God the Son to provide the ONLY way of salvation to all humanity by paying the penalty for our sins, which is death (Gen 2:17; Ezek 18:20; John 3:16,17; Rom 6:23; 1 Pet 1:18-21). Christ paid the penalty for all of humanity’s failure with His own spilled blood and death. Thus, all who put their faith in Jesus Christ and receive what He has done for them will be saved (Rom 10: 11-13) and restored back to a relationship with God (2 Cor 5:18; Col 1:19-23). For all believers, the past is forgiven; and they have God’s promise that He will forgive and cleanse them from any future sin they confess to Him (1 John 1:9). Hallelujah!

This overwhelming provision of God through Christ cannot be earned. It is a free gift. Jesus Christ- in His life, death on the Cross, and resurrection -provided us with eternal salvation and acceptance from God –*freely!*

It is *crucial* for every believer, especially leaders in the Church, to have a clear understanding of this essential doctrine. The central truth of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ – not by man’s works – is the heart of the Gospel; it is what separates Christianity from every other religion in the world.

Doing good works to try and be acceptable to God leads to self-righteousness. The Bible reveals that *“all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags”* (Isa 64:6). The only true righteousness we can have

that makes us acceptable to God is *given* to us freely in Christ (1 Cor 1:30; Rom 5:17-21; Titus 3:4,5).

Human works or outward performance will never transform the inward, unredeemed heart – the sin nature of mankind – which is the real source of what separates mankind from God.

Biblical Christianity starts with the human heart, which is transformed through God's power (Rom 12:1,2). This process begins at salvation, when the power of sin is broken (Col 2:13-15), a new nature is received (2 Cor 5: 17), and the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within a person (Acts 2:38).

The Spirit of God then supplies the ongoing conviction, strength and ability to obey God and do His will (John 14:26; 16:5-14; 1 Cor 12:11; Eph 2:10). Thus, as believers respond in obedience to God, the Word and the Holy Spirit, they experience a growing transformation of their heart and nature (2 Cor 3: 18). That inward change will show itself outwardly in changed behavior and attitudes.

True, we are exhorted in Scripture to *express our faith* in Christ by good works (Heb 10:24; 1 Pet 2:12). But we are not saved BY those good works; we are saved FOR good works (Eph 2:10). And even the good works we do in Christ's name are to be done through the grace, strength and wisdom of the Lord – by *His power*, not our own (Mark 10:27; John 15:5).

The Jews of Isaiah's time were rebuked for their empty religious works (Isa 1:11-15; 29:13); so were the Pharisees of Jesus' time (read Matthew chapter 23). The early Jewish disciples of Jesus were oriented toward doing works of the Law to try and obtain righteousness. They asked Jesus, "*What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*" Jesus answered and said to them, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent*" (John 6:28, 29). God has so much more for people than vain religious rituals and outward forms; He desires personal *relationship* with man, made possible by Christ's provision of salvation!

Christ's death and resurrection opened the way for salvation by grace – faith in Christ's finished work on the Cross, "*not of works lest anyone should boast*" (Eph 2:9; see also Romans 3:27,28; 4:1-8).

3. False religions teach ideas about their "gods", but only Christianity offers real relationship with the One true God. The message of the born-again Church is totally unique among all the religions of the world. "*The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (Col 1:26,27).

"Christ in you" declares what no other religion in our world can hope for: that God, by His Spirit, has come to dwell inside individual believers. We can **know God** and have a personal relationship with our heavenly Father!

All religions have their moral rules. Many have a type of "theology". Some religions even claim to have "holy writings". All religions have their ceremonial days and required rituals. **But no other**

religion but Christianity can claim God's presence through Jesus Christ! The "gods" of false religions are portrayed as being far off, unknowable and untouchable. They are angry or capricious, and must always be appeased. Or they are believed to be small – living in trees, statues, animals or even rocks.

What fundamentally separates Christianity from all the rest of the religions of the world is the true presence of God! He lives within the hearts of believers in Jesus Christ, and invites them to share relationship with Him. His glory and presence come wherever He is truly welcomed and worshipped (Matt 18:20) in spirit and in truth (John 4:23, 24).

4. False religions are Satan's tool to lead people into deception and eternal separation from God. Jesus Christ stripped all power from Satan at the Cross. Satan is only a created being whom God will throw into the lake of fire forever upon judgment day (Rev 20:10). Satan hates and opposes God, but cannot hurt Him. Therefore, Satan strikes at the object of God's love -all of humanity – using **deception** as his main weapon. False religions are riddled with demon-inspired half truths in order to confuse people and lead them away from the One True God and His plan of salvation.

THE CHURCH MUST PREVAIL!

Satan knows about God's plan to save, build and work through the Church. The living Body of Christ – the Church – is the people who have personally received Jesus Christ as Savior and who have a living, growing relationship with Him (Matt 16:18,19). These "born again" believers (John 3:3-6) are the special "tool" set apart by God for spiritual purposes. They are charged to bring His Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ to the rest of the world (Mark 16:15; Eph 3:8-12) and to make disciples (Matt 28:19).

When the Church understands this role – and is moving aggressively and obediently in the power of the Holy Spirit to fulfill this role – Satan cannot hold onto his "spiritual territory" (which is his hold on people who are in bondage to sin and deception).

Jesus declared: *"...I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it"* (Matt 16:18). The word "gates" in the Bible is symbolic of a place of authority. The *"gates of Hades"* have lost all authority (Matt 28: 18) and cannot stop the Church from reaching those who are in darkness and ringing them out into Christ's marvelous light (Matt 4:12-17; Acts 26:18). There is *only one thing* that can stop the Church from bringing Christ's salvation to those who sit in the darkness of false religions: the failure of the Church to carry out its God-appointed mission!

3. MAN'S PART IN DECEPTION

We have briefly studied the nature and function of the spirit of the Antichrist which *"is now already in the world"* (1 John 4:3). Paul exhorts us to understand our adversary in order to not be deceived, *"Lest Satan should take advantage of us; for we are not ignorant of his devices"* (2 Cor 2: 11).

It would be incorrect, however, to try and blame only the devil and demons for people's rebellion against God. Unfortunately, much of the growth of false religions and cults has to do with the selfish hearts of human beings darkened by their own sinful choices (Eph 4:18). Carefully read Romans 1:16-32 to see a clear picture of man's rebellious and resistant self-will, summarized as follows:

- Salvation is for everyone who believes in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (vs.16,17);
- Fallen, selfish humanity – in concert with the demonic realm – suppresses this truth (v.18); God's nature, attributes and power are "*clearly seen*" in creation (v.20);
- Sinful mankind is not grateful for this knowledge (v.21) and exchanges it, or trades it, for a lie (vs.23,25);
- Fallen humanity chooses to believe lies, thus "*professing to be wise, they became fools*" (v.22); they refuse to retain the knowledge of God (v.28); Mankind stubbornly resists the commands of God as found in His Word (v.25);
- Thus, God relinquishes His loving control (He bands the rebellious over to their evil desires) (vs.24,26,28);
- Then mankind, with suggestions and temptations from the prince of lies and darkness (John 8:44; Eph 6: 12), pursues:
 - perverted religions (vs.24,25),
 - perverted sexual practices (vs.26,27),
 - perverted lifestyles (vs.28-32).

Jesus Christ came to set people free from sin. But sinful humanity sometimes does not want this freedom, and in their rebellion would rather pursue darkness and their own way.

Even those who have known the Lord can choose to fall away (Heb 10:26-28) and allow demonic deception to lead them astray. "*Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times **some will depart from the faith**, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons ...*"(1 Tim 4:1).

The phrase "latter times" means that time period between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. This is the time in which we now live.

People will pursue teachers who will condone their wrong behavior and tell them what they want to hear instead of the truth of the Bible. "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables*"(2 Tim 4:3,4).

Leaders and teachers in the Body of Christ must be faithful to teach only what the Bible teaches. They must exhort others "*in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will*" (2 Tim 2:25,26).

God loves us and desires to show His mercy to us. His Word declares to us:

- We were ungodly – yet Christ died for us (Rom 5:6);
- We were sinners – yet we have been justified by His blood (Rom 5:8,9);

- We were enemies of God – but we are now reconciled to God through Christ (Rom 5: 10). Truly, this is the Good News we are called to proclaim to those bound by sin and their own rebellion! We who were dead in sin – but have believed in Jesus Christ – have now been saved, not through our own works, but by grace through faith in Christ (Eph 2:1- 10).

Christ came to set us free from our bondages to deception and sin, and to give us eternal life after physical death. But this glorious freedom comes ONLY through what Christ has done for us at the Cross. Our faithfulness to follow and obey God's ways and His Word will cause us to grow in strength, and will enable us to recognize and resist the strategies of our adversary the devil and the spirit of the Antichrist.

CONCLUSION

All false religions of the world are the inventions of men and/or demons. They are based on the false premise of earning salvation through works and coming to God apart from Christ and His work. In false religions, man is trying to reach for "god". Only in biblical Christianity is God reaching to man through His Son, Jesus Christ (Rom 5:6-10; 1 John 4:9, 10).

Only in biblical Christianity is salvation a gift offered freely by God. *"For the wages of sin is death but the [free] gift of God is eternal Life in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Rom 6:23; see also Romans 3:21-24). Only through Jesus Christ is there eternal salvation (Acts 4: 12).

THROUGH CHRIST ALONE

It is often claimed today that there are "many ways to God", or that any religion is acceptable as long as one is sincere in following it. But Jesus did not agree with this or teach this. He gave no other way to come to or know God except through salvation in Jesus Christ alone. Jesus stated very clearly: *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"* (John 14:6).

The apostles and preachers of the New Testament church also clearly taught that salvation was possible only through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12; Rom 1:16; 1 Tim 2:5,6a).

Some "religious" people might say that they know or believe in God but do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. However, the Bible makes it very clear that you cannot know the One true God without coming to Him through His Son Jesus Christ (John 2:23; see also John 5:23; 14:6; 15:23; 17:3; John 4:15).

The promise of salvation is valid for *every person* who believes (Rom 1:16). But without a personal faith in Christ, one is lost and under the judgment of God (John 3:18; John 5:11,12) and will be separated from God for eternity (Rev 20:6,11 -15; 21:8).

LET HIS LIGHT SHINE

One cannot escape the truth that the founders of false religions are dead – but Jesus Christ is alive! Since we have become the adopted sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ (Gal 4:3-7; Eph 1:3-5), we have the privilege of being God’s “*ambassadors for Christ*” (2 Cor 5:20).

We have been charged by God to lovingly share the Gospel with every person (Mark 16:15) – whatever false religion or cult that person may belong to, and whether that person is a businessman, teacher, farm worker, old or young, rich or poor, male or female! We are to be faithful to “*preach the Word*” (2 Tim 4:1,2), and the Holy Spirit will open their hearts and “*convict them of sin, righteousness and judgment to come*” (John 16:7-14). He will open their eyes to God’s great love for them and the truth that will set them free (John 8:32).

We serve a mighty God Who sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to be the Light of the world. Live in His light, walk in His light – and let His light so shine through you to the world that they, too, will glorify the Father (Matt 5:14-16).

ESSENTIAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

ALL FALSE RELIGIONS DENY ESSENTIAL CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

When Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthian church, he was aware that the forces of darkness were already sending out deceiving demon spirits to promote false doctrine.

Paul tells the young Corinthian church, “*But I fear lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted –you may well put up with it!*” (2 Cor 11:3, 4).

In this passage Paul was rebuking the Corinthian church for tolerating false teachers who were promoting error. These false teachers, motivated by the spirit of the antichrist, were preaching:

- Another “christ” – not the Christ born into our world and revealed in Scripture;
- Another “spirit” – not the Holy Spirit, Who is the third Person of the Trinity (the Holy Spirit is fully God) Who dwells within those who surrender their lives to Jesus Christ;
- Another “gospel” – not the Gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles and revealed in the Scriptures.

False religions of today are still preaching the same kind of error.

The teachings of the world’s largest false religions, various pseudo-Christian cults, and a wide variety of lesser-known religions, vary greatly in their doctrines and practices. Yet, all of them share in common the denial or distortion of foundational Christian doctrines.

CHRISTIAN DOCTRINES

It is of utmost importance that you, as a church leader, study this section and become very familiar with the basic Christian doctrines presented here. Your study and knowledge of these key doctrines will provide a solid foundation for both your faith and your ministry to others. This study will enhance your ability to discern false religions and the cults that attempt to masquerade as genuine Christianity. Knowing the truth will keep you from the bondage of error (John 8:32).

The Bible exhorts, *“be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tim 2: 15). Church leaders and other believers should become *“diligent workers”* who study the Word of God *daily* and *thoroughly*. When they are very familiar with the *real* truth, false teaching or error will be immediately recognizable.

To illustrate this concept: A bank clerk needs to know how to discern whether money is genuine or “counterfeit”. He is trained to do this by spending hours and hours handling genuine money. Then when a counterfeit bill is slipped in, the bank clerk can readily spot that it is not right. The more familiar he is with the “real thing”, the harder it is to be fooled by a fake. In a similar but much more important way, being familiar with the genuine truth of the Bible will help you more readily spot heresy and error that contradict the Bible.

SOUND DOCTRINE

Regarding sound doctrine, take special note of Paul’s exhortations to Timothy: *“Till I come, give attention to reading [the Scriptures], to exhortation, to doctrine”* and *“take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you* (1 Tim 4:13,16).

[For further study, read John 7:16,17; Acts 2:42; Romans 6:17,18; 1 Timothy 1:3-11; 4:6; 6:3; 2 Timothy 3:16; 4:2-4; Titus 2:6- 10.]

For almost two thousand years Christians have held to Bible-based, orthodox Christian beliefs which are agreed upon by believers in Jesus Christ. Though small points of difference among believers might still exist, these are insignificant compared with the extreme and heretical differences found in the false doctrines of cults and false religions.

Presented below are some biblical, foundational doctrines that conservative Christians ALL hold in common. There is not room to present every detail; neither is it possible to discuss every Christian doctrine. But this list does reflect the basic core beliefs held by and essential to historic Christianity and can be used to help compare and discern the erroneous teaching of false religions and cult groups.

1. The Doctrine of the Scriptures

The Holy Bible is the *only true revelation* given by God to the prophets and apostles of the Old and New Testaments. However, false religions and cults:

- Attempt to promote their own writings as equal or superior to the Bible
- Claim that they have a “newer revelation” that replaces the Bible
- Claim that there are errors in the Bible or that it is incomplete. They assert that their beliefs, doctrines, revelations or writings “correct” the supposed errors or add the missing parts.

The Bible (the Old Testament and New Testament) is the ultimate authority because the Scriptures were given to us by God Himself (2 Tim 3:16). The Holy Bible, the Word of God, has been revealed directly *by God* into the hearts and minds of men who faithfully and carefully recorded those words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The foundation of the Bible’s authority is *God Himself*. All true authority is ultimately based upon and derives from God (Rom 13:1). The Bible has its ultimate origin with and from God. Because God is the Author, the Bible has *authority*. It is considered to be *authoritative* (trustworthy) concerning God, salvation and the Christian life. To accept the Bible’s authority means that we should believe and practice what the Bible teaches.

There are three principles that are key to the Doctrine of the Scriptures:

1. The Inspiration of the Scriptures – All Scripture is “God-breathed” (inspired by God), given to us by God (2 Tim 3:16; read also 1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Peter 1:20, 21). The Bible is not the invention of men or a collection of men’s opinions, ideas or mythical stories
2. The Inerrancy of the Scriptures – The Bible is completely trustworthy because it is inerrant, which means the Bible contains NO mistakes or contradictions

It must be remembered that whatever God speaks is the Truth – and without error! This is because He is the “*God of truth*” (Isa 65:16) Who “*cannot lie*” (Titus 1:2; see also Numbers 23:19; Hebrews 6:18). Therefore, since God is true (John 3:33), His Word is also true (John 17:17). The Bible is a completely trust worthy guide for our faith (belief in God) and practice (life and behavior).

Jesus Christ, Who quoted from the Scriptures repeatedly throughout His ministry, bore witness to the fully divine authority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures (Matt 5:17,18; Luke 4 :4,8-10; 24:27,44,45; and many others).

3. The Infallibility of the Bible -The Bible, God’s Holy Word, is totally trustworthy for all that we need to know for doctrine, salvation and the Christian life.

This is why the Scriptures exhort us to “*be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth*” (2 Tim 2:15; read also 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:16,17).

The Word of God – the Holy Bible – is complete as it is written. Nothing is to be ADDED to the Bible. Nothing is to be REMOVED from the Bible. No part of the Bible is to be ALTERED or DISTORTED. Many historical documents have been found that clearly prove that the Bible has been preserved accurately for thousands of years. The last book of the New Testament warns of the seriousness of altering the Scriptures (Rev 22:18,19; read also Deuteronomy 4:2,12,32; Proverbs 30:6.)

Many false religions and cults have removed portions of the Bible they did not like. Some have added “new revelations” that were NOT from God, creating new “bible” texts or books.

[For more information on the authenticity and authority of the Bible over all other religious writings, please see the previously published issue of ACTS Magazine from January 2000.]

2. The Doctrine of God

God is infinite. The human mind, however, is finite and therefore cannot fully comprehend God; nor can human language adequately describe God (see Job 11:7- 9; Isaiah 55:8,9; Romans 11:33). Yet God, through His Word, has revealed to us everything we need to know in order to approach, love, worship and serve Him (see Exodus 34:6,7; John 1:18; Heb 4:14-16; 1 John 4:9,10).

Though the entire Bible is a revelation of God and Who He is, let us look at some very specific Scripture references about the nature and character of God:

a. God’s Nature

God Is:

- **All Knowing** – Isa 29:15,16; 40:27,28; 1 John 3:20
- **Everywhere-Present** – 2 Chr 6:18; Ps 139:7-10; Jer 23:24
- **All Powerful** – Jer 32: 17-18
- **Infinite** (not limited by time, space or the physical universe) – 1 Ki 8:27 ; 2 Pet 3:8
- **Eternal** (without beginning or end) – Ps 90:2; Isa 57:15; 1 Tim 1:17
- **Self-Existent** (“I AM”) – Exo 3:14; Isa 43:10-13; Rev 1:8
- **Unchanging in Character** – Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17
- **Transcendent** (apart from and above creation) – Ps 14:2; Isa 6:1, 2; Col 1:17
- **Immanent** (near and personal) – Jer 23:23,24; Ps 139:7-10; Acts 17:27,28
- **Creator of All** – Gen 1:1; Neh 9:6; Heb 11:3 The Only God – Deut 4:35,39; Ps 86: 10; Isa 44 :8; 46:9; Jer 10:10
- **Spirit** – John 4:24
- **One** (in being and substance) – Deut 6:4; Mark 12:29-32; 1 Cor 8:4
- **Three** (as Persons equally God and equally eternal) – Gen 1:26; Isa 6:8; Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14
- **God the Father** – Matt 11:25; John 6:27; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 4:6
- **God the Son** – Luke 5:17-26 ; John 1:1; 5:18; 20:28 ; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1
- **God the Holy Spirit** – Luke 1:35; Acts 5:3,4; Heb 9:14

b. God’s Character

God Is:

- **Holy** – Ex 15:11; Hab 1:13; Rev 4:8; 15:4
- **Just and righteous**– Deut 10:17; 32:4; Ps 145:17; 1 John 2:29
- **Good and merciful** – Ps 25:8-10 ; 34:8; 100:5; Matt 5:45
- **Love** – 1 John 4:8

- **Truth** – Num 23:19; Deut 32:4; Isa 65:16; John 14:6
- **Faithful** – Deut 7:9; Isa 49:7; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 10:23

3. The Doctrines of Mankind and Sin

Only the Scriptures can adequately and accurately describe who mankind is and what his current spiritual condition is. In the Genesis account of mankind's creation, Scripture states that mankind (male and female) are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26, 27).

This is not a physical "image" because God is spirit and does not have a physical body (John 4:24). This "image" can be expressed in the following characteristics of people (includes both men and women):

1. People are personal beings, just as God is (Gen 2:7).
2. People are moral beings, with an inbuilt "conscience" and sense of right and wrong. This gives them the ability and responsibility to choose between right and wrong (Amos 5:14,15; Rom 2:14,15; 12:9; Heb 9:14).
3. People were created out of the same material as the rest of creation ("*dust*", Gen 2:7); however, people are distinct from the rest of creation in that they (male and female) were created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). People have an inbuilt awareness that a "higher power" exists. They are consistently religious and will worship something – even if it is themselves.
4. People are spiritual though housed in physical bodies, they were created with the capacity for relationship with God Who is Spirit. A person's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore is not to be used for sinful purposes (Rom 6:12,13; 1 Cor 6:19,20). The physical bodies of believers in Christ will be resurrected at the Second Coming of Christ, and the mortal will take on immortality (1 Cor 15:50-54). Non believers' bodies will be resurrected for judgment at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20: 11-15)
5. People are created for rulership, with the capacity to participate in dominion over God gave people the capacity and authority to rule over creation (Gen 1:28) and sometimes over other people (Rom 13:1-7) – but they are to do so with the principle of *love* as their guide (John 13:34,35; Rom 13:8-10). Redeemed people are also destined to rule and reign with Christ (2 Tim 2:12; Rev 5:10).

God created people in His own image, and gave them the capacity to live a life of holiness, love and service. However, as a result of the sin of Adam and Eve, people have a sin nature – which gives them the capacity to choose the lowest depths of sin and depravity (Mark 7:21,22; Rom 3:10-12).

Yet, those who believe in Christ (though they are not sinless while still in this life) can be gradually restored, transformed more and more into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Sin and its effects span every barrier of race, age, language, economic status, nationally and gender. ALL people EVERYWHERE, of EVERY time in history, are sinners (Rom 3:23). The Word of God declares this to be true, and it can be easily observed by – and in- any one of us.

It is absolutely essential that we understand that God is not the originator of sin in our universe (Jas 1:13). He is the Creator of all things *created* (Rev 4:11), but He is NOT the author of sin and evil.

The Bible makes very clear that it is not possible for God to have created sin (Deut 25:16; 32:4; Job 34:10; Ps 92:15; Isa 6:3; Zech 8:17; Jas 1:13; Rev 4:8; 15:4). Scripture records that it was Satan (Lucifer) who first rebelled against God in his pride and selfish ambition (Isa 14:12-14; Ezek 28:12-17), thus bringing sin into the universe.

God, by creating humanity in His own image, gave humans the ability to make choices. God knew that it would be possible for mankind to either choose to love and walk with Him – or choose to sin and rebel against Him. This did not make sin a necessity, only a possibility.

God created mankind perfect and placed him in a perfect environment. God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed – and only the simplest of commands to obey (Gen 2:16,17).

God, in His righteousness and goodness, did not permit Satan to force Adam and Eve to sin. Nor does God permit Satan to force any born-again Christian to sin today. Satan cannot force us to sin against our will (1 Cor 10:17). Satan did, however, tempt Adam and Eve by using deception and twisting the truth to lead them astray.

Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and yield to temptation. This process of (1) temptation and (2) willful choice to give in to temptation, is still how sin is brought about today. *“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death”* (Jas 1:14,15). Satan can be blamed for tempting Adam and Eve; but they were responsible for their own choices to yield to Satan’s temptation. The same is true for us today when we face temptation. God will hold each of us responsible for the choices we make. No one else is responsible for our sinful choices (Rom 14:12; Heb 4:13). Temptation alone is not sin; but it can lead to sin and therefore must be resisted (Rom 6:12, 14; 13:14) through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The nature of sin is best described as anything that offends, violates or contradicts God’s character, or holiness. Sin is willful rebellion against God and His just and righteous commands. The Bible says this about sin: *“Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin”* (Jas 4:17). Sin is more than just a single wrong act; it is the natural disposition of the sinner (Gen 6:5; Matt 7:17,18; Rom 1:18-32). Therefore, man must be “born again”, and given a new nature (John 3:7; 2 Cor 5:17).

The penalty for sin is death (Rom 6:23). This means three kinds of death:

- Being spiritually dead while still physically alive (Eph 2: 1-5);
- A literal, physical death and then the judgment (Heb 9:27);
- Eternal death, the separation of the human spirit from God for This last death is called the *“second death ”* (Rev 21:8; read Matthew 25:41).

As already mentioned, sin is universal to all mankind (Ps 143:2; Isa 53:6; Rom 3:10-12; 1 John 1:8). *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Rom 3:23). But God, in His great mercy, is *“not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Pet 3:9). Therefore,

He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, Who “*died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again*” (2 Cor 5:15).

4. The Doctrine of Jesus Christ – His Person and Work

The Person of Jesus Christ – and the work accomplished by Him as the Founder of the Church – is central to the Christian faith. Christianity is NOT just another belief system, a list of moral codes, or a set of mysterious “revelations.” True Christian faith is based upon and inseparable from our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Therefore, having an accurate and thorough understanding of Christ’s Person and work is essential.

A. Jesus Christ’s Person

1. Jesus Christ’s Virgin Birth (Matt 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-35; John 1:14; Gal 4:4).

The virgin birth of Jesus was prophesied in the Old Testament (Isa 7:14) as a sign of the Messiah’s arrival. The virgin birth of Jesus Christ is critical and foundational to His Person and work, and therefore to all of New Testament theology.

If Jesus had been born of a natural, human father, He would have inherited the sinful Adamic nature of the human race (Rom 5:12-21). Thus, He would not have been sinless. If Christ had not been sinless, His atoning death on the Cross would have been invalid: He would have died for His own sins and thus would not have been able to be the sinless sacrifice for all humanity (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26,27; 1 Pet 1:18,19).

If Jesus did not have a virgin birth, it would mean that He is not God born in the flesh. Therefore, He could not return as the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 1:17,18; 17:14; 19:16).

Without His virgin birth, Jesus Christ could have been nothing more than a well-intended but misguided and mentally unstable religious zealot. All of His claims about His deity, His death, His subsequent resurrection from the dead, and God’s unfolding revelation as to His Kingdom, would be invalid without the fact that Jesus Christ was God born of a virgin.

2. Jesus Christ’s Humanity

Jesus shared in the burdens, weaknesses, temptations and limitations of being born “*in the likeness of men*” (Phil 2:7; read also Hebrews 2:14,17,18). He became fully human, yet was without sin (Heb 4:15).

Jesus:

- was born an infant (Luke 2:7);
- grew up after the manner of all children (Luke 2:39-51);
- grew up physically, intellectually and socially through childhood to adulthood (Luke 2:52); hungered for food and thirsted (Matt 4:2; John 4:7);
- experienced weariness (John 4:6); needed sleep (Matt 8:24);
- felt sorrow and grief; wept (Luke 19:41; John 11:35);
- physically died (John 19:33);

- was physically resurrected from the dead as the “*firstfruits*” (1 Cor 15:20-23) prefiguring the resurrection of all believers in Christ (Matt 28:1-8; Luke 24:36-43; John 20:24-29 ; 1 Cor 15:4-7).

3. Jesus Christ’s Divinity (Deity)

False religions and cults seek to deny that **Christ was and is *fully God***.

Some false religions or cults acknowledge that Christ was a real, historical person – but they deny that He is God. Other groups teach that Christ was a “spirit-being” who “worked his way” to “godhood”, and claim that other people can do the same through their “good works”. Many bound in false religions consider Jesus to be a mystic or great teacher; but they do not accept what Jesus, the Son of God, actually taught.

Any religion, person or teaching that denies that Jesus Christ is fully God is false and in error.

There can be no doubt from the biblical record that Jesus was – and is – God. By contrast, the founders of other religions are considered significant by their followers because of their teachings. However, none of them ever claimed to be God; nor did they perform the kind of works that would prove such a claim to be true. Only Jesus Christ has made this claim and proved it through His life, ministry, teachings, sacrificial death, and subsequent resurrection.

It is important to remember that Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, was not created by God. Rather, Jesus Christ:

- Is part of the Trinity, and is coeternal and coexistent with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit (John 1:1,2; Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor 3:17,18);
- Is eternal (Mic 5:2);
- Was before Abraham (John 8:58);
- Was active at the creation of the universe (John 1:1-3; Col 1:16,17; Heb 1:2,10);
- Existed before that creation (John 17:5,24);
- Continues forever (Heb 1:8,11; Isa 9:6; Rev 1:11);
- Is unchanging (Heb 13:8);
- Is ever-present with us (Matt 28:20).

Biblical Proof That Jesus Christ Is God

During His earthly ministry, Jesus Christ claimed to be God (John 5:18; 8:58; 10:30). Mark 2:5-12 reveals that Jesus forgave a paralytic’s sins; then, to prove that He had the right and power to do so as God, Jesus Christ *healed* him. Jesus Christ gives eternal life (John 10:28). He gives His disciples power to perform miracles (Matt 10:1,8). Jesus declared that He and the Father are One (John 10:30). The Jews clearly understood that Christ claimed to be God (John 10:31-33); this was the reason for their negative, hostile reaction to His claim.

Jesus Christ said that He and God the Father are identical in character, purpose and mission (John 14:9). He did the works of His Father (John 5:17; 10:37, 38) and demonstrated authority over nature (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus Christ knew the thoughts of people (Mark 2:8; Luke 6:8; John 2:23-25). He had the power of life and death (John 6:63; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44). He also taught His followers to pray in His Name (John 16:23, 24). Jesus received worship (Matt 2:2,11; 14:33;28:9,10,17; John 9:38; Heb 1:6), knowing that God alone is to be worshiped (Ex 34:14; Matt 4:10). Jesus received worship because He is truly God!

Jesus Christ: Fully God And Fully Man

The New Testament affirms that Jesus is God. Jesus is described as: *“the brightness of His [God’s] glory and the express image of His [God’s] person”* (Heb 1:3); the *“image of the invisible God”* (Col 1:15) with *“all the fullness of the Godhead bodily dwelling in Him* (Col 2:9).

Jesus and God the Father are One (John 10:30). The Greek language in this verse indicates that they are one in substance but not the same Person; this supports the theology of the Trinity.

Jesus is called *“our great God and Savior Jesus Christ”* (Titus 2:13); *“my Lord and my God”* (John 20:28); and *“God ...manifested in the flesh”* (1 Tim 3:16). Christ also possessed – and demonstrated by His life, ministry and sacrificial death – the **character of God**. Christ’s moral attributes include:

1. **Love** – John 3:16; 13:34; 15:12,13; Rom 8:35
2. **Truth** – John 8:31-36; 14:6; Rev 3:7
3. **Servanthood** – Matt 20:25-28; John 13:13-17; Phil 2:5-8
4. **Holiness** – Luke 1:35; Acts 4:27,30; Heb 7:26; Rev 3:7
5. **Righteousness** – Rom 5:17-21; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 John 2:1,29; 3:7

It is abundantly clear that the Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ was and is God. He was both fully man and fully God at the same time. Other religions acknowledge Christ’s existence, but attempt to deny His deity and do not believe what the Bible so clearly teaches about Him. Any teaching that denies Who Jesus Christ is according to the Bible is heretical – and must be rejected.

B. Jesus Christ’s Work

As stated, Jesus affirmed His Divine nature when He said, *“I and My Father are one”* (John 10:30). The Jews’ reaction clearly reveals that they understood the implications of Jesus’ statement – He was claiming to be God (10:31,33).

But Jesus did not just claim to be God, even though that was and is true. He validated (proved the reliability of) His claim by the works He did. He repeatedly told His listeners that (a) His works were of God and (b) His works proved that He was/is God. *“If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him”* (John 10:37,38; see also John 5:17,36; 9:4; 10:25; 14:10,11; 15:24).

1. His Ministry

Jesus, in His earthly ministry:

- healed the sick, blind and deaf;
- raised the dead; cast out demons;
- supernaturally fed the hungry;
- thwarted the devil;
- confronted the religiously self-righteous;
- taught repentance from sins and forgave sins;
- revealed the loving heart and character of God the Father in both His Person and His teaching.

2. The Cross

Death and eternal separation from God are the consequences of man's sin. However, Jesus Christ "*wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us ... [and has] taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross*" (Col 2:14). By dying on the Cross as a sinless sacrifice for mankind, Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sin and reconciled us back to God. [For more on the Cross, see the "Salvation" doctrine.]

3. His Resurrection

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ after His death is a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Ps 16:10; Acts 2:31). But more than that, it is foundational to faith in Christ for salvation (Rom 10:9, 10). Paul affirms that the Christian faith is based on the truth of the resurrection of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:14-19. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ were not a fact, then:

- the apostle's preaching would be in vain (v. 14);
- the faith of the believers in Corinth (and the faith of all Christians) would be in vain (v. 14);
- the apostles and others 'would be false witnesses (v.15);
- the Corinthian church (and all Christians) would still be in their sins (v.17);
- those who have died believing in Christ would be without salvation (v.18);
- Christians would be of all men the most miserable (v.19).

The literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is a key component of the Gospel (1 Cor 15:4; 2 Tim 2:8; also, see "What Is The Gospel?").

The resurrection of Christ stands alone in its importance and uniqueness in all of history.

The following scriptural facts help us understand the implications of Christ's resurrection for every believer:

1. Jesus Christ was truly and completely dead physically. He did not just faint, nor was He in a temporary coma (Mark 15:44,45; John 19:33-35; Rev 1:18).
2. Jesus Christ was bodily resurrected; the resurrected Christ was *not* a disembodied spirit or an apparition (Luke 24:36,39,41-45; Ps 16:10; Acts 2:31).
3. Jesus Christ, after His resurrection, was seen in His physical body by many witnesses (Luke 24:30-36; John 20:19,26; Acts 1:3,21,22; 1 Cor 15:3-8).

4. Jesus Christ's resurrection was unique in that He would never die again (Acts 13:34; Rom 6:9, 10; 2 Tim 1:10; Rev 1:18). There have been other people miraculously resurrected from the dead (e.g., John 11:1-44), but each of these goes on to die a physical death at the end of their life.
5. Jesus Christ's resurrection proves His claim to Deity (Matt 12:38-40; John 2:18-22; Rom 1:4).
6. Jesus Christ's resurrection shows that His sacrifice on the Cross was accepted by God the Father (Rom 4:25; Heb 9:23-28; 10:11-14).

Jesus Is Alive!

Jesus Christ died on the Cross for our sins, then was resurrected on the third day. The following facts could be true ONLY of a living Savior Who is presently and eternally reigning in power and glory:

- Christ is Head over all things to the Church (Eph 1:19-23);
- Christ is our High Priest, representing the heavenly Father to us, and representing us to God the Father (Rom 8:27; Heb 2:17; 3:1; 4:14,15; 5:5-11; 6:20; 7:25,26; 9:11);
- Christ has given spiritual gifts to the Church (Eph 4:8-13);
- Christ, as *"the first born from the dead"* (Col 1:18), guarantees for all believers a physical resurrection at His second coming, and the same for the rest of humanity at Judgment Day (Acts 17:31; 26:23; Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:20-24,50-52; Phil 3:7-11; Col 1:18; Rev 20:11-15). [For more about the final resurrections, see "Doctrine of Last Things".]

"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep (died)" (1 Cor 15:20). Hallelujah! Christ is risen! Thus, through every toil, sorrow and tribulation, believers may be confident and joyful – knowing that Christ has conquered death, we are triumphant, and we will rise and reign with Him victorious throughout eternity!

4. The Doctrine of Salvation

The Cross

Because false religions and cults deny that Christ is God, they also completely reject the fact that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross provided for mankind's full salvation.

Of all the glorious works of our Savior, **Christ's death on the Cross in mankind's place is of supreme importance.** In one single act, Christ *"wiped out the handwriting [certificate of debt] of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, **having nailed it to the cross**"* (Col 2:14). *"That through [His] death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage"* (Heb 2:14,15).

The Cross was not an accident or after thought! God purposed and foreordained His plan of salvation from the moment of man's fall in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:14,15; Acts 2:23,24). Death and eternal separation from a loving God was the consequence of man's sin. However, God, because of His great love, planned a way for the price to be paid for sin so that mankind would not be separated from Him forever.

The focus of this divine plan was in the Person of Jesus Christ and His substitutionary sacrifice of His life for ours. Christ did for us at the Cross what we could never do. By dying on the Cross for us, Jesus took on the penalty we ourselves deserve. His death paid the ransom for our sin and allowed us to be restored back to God. Hallelujah!

All other religions attempt to gain credibility by pointing to the teachings of their founders. Christianity goes well beyond, because of the supreme importance of the teachings AND the *death and resurrection* of the Founder!

Without Christ's death and resurrection as the incarnated God/man, Christianity would be nothing more than rules and rituals -just another religion. But *because of* Christ's death, we have eternal salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord! By His death on the Cross, Christ made it possible for man to be reconciled to God: "...*Who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ*" (2 Cor 5:18; see also Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:16). Christ's substitution for mankind on the Cross satisfies for all time the demands of God's justice and Law in regard to our sin. To simply illustrate this reconciliation, imagine God and man standing and facing each other at creation. When Adam sinned, he chose to turn his back toward God. Then God, Who cannot condone sin, had to turn His back to Adam. Christ's death satisfied the requirements of a holy God, so God turned back to face man. Now the choice is man's to accept Christ's sacrifice and salvation and thus "turn around" (repent) to face God again in relationship.

Jesus Christ's sacrifice was foreshadowed in type by the Levitical sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament. The animal to be sacrificed for sin had to be perfect, without blemish (Lev 9:2,3). This was a foretype of the sinless and perfect Lamb of God, Who would come to earth to give His life as a ransom for our sin (Matt 20:28; John 1:29). His death was necessary (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22) because the penalty for sin is death (Ezek 18:4, 20).

A sinner cannot be forgiven only on the basis of his or her repentance. God can forgive only when the penalty for sin has been paid and His justice has been satisfied. Christ paid that penalty for our sins at the Cross. This allowed God, Who is righteous and just, to forgive us based on our repentance *and* our faith in Christ.

Christ's death provided a covering over (or atonement) of the guilt of the sinner, making the sin invisible to the eyes of a Holy God. This concept of God no longer recognizing our sin is conveyed in Isaiah 38:17: "*For You have cast all my sins behind Your back.*" (Read also Psalm 51:9; 103:12; Isaiah 43:25; Micah 2:19.)

Jesus Christ's substitutionary atonement has satisfied God's justice, freeing God to be merciful in offering us the free gift of salvation (Rom 6:23) by grace through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8).

Why Are Not All Saved?

Scripture clearly teaches that Christ died for all humanity, not for just a privileged few (read John 1:29; 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:6; 4:10; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2). The question might then arise, "If Christ died for everyone, why then are not all saved?" The answer to this question is quite simple.

Yes, Christ died and made payment with His own blood for the sins of all mankind. But in order to receive and enjoy the benefits of this "paid-in-full" salvation, *each person* must believe in and receive Christ and His work for himself or herself *personally*.

All can be saved by Christ's sacrifice – and God desires that none would perish without salvation (2 Pet 3:9). However, in order to be saved, it requires an individual decision by each person to believe in Christ (John 3:16).

This truth is reinforced in Romans 10:9,10: *"That if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation"*. Christ's provision of salvation must be believed and received personally and individually by faith. That is why we must share the Good News of the Gospel with others (Rom 10:14; see also John 1:12; 3:16).

God's Gracious Provision

Since Christ died for all people everywhere – and since it is necessary to personally receive His salvation- what happens to those who die in infancy?

Those who die before they are mentally able to make a moral choice to either accept or reject Christ's offer of salvation are covered by Christ's atoning work at the Cross. The sin of rejecting God and His provision of salvation through Jesus Christ is not possible for an infant or a very young child. At some point in a child's mental, emotional and spiritual development, he or she becomes able to make a conscious choice to believe and receive salvation through Christ. Different children may reach this point at different ages. Therefore, it is very important that churches provide for teaching, ministry to, and even evangelism for children in a language and way they can understand. Children can be saved; they are also capable of worshipping, praying, learning Scripture, and even ministering to others. Each child should certainly be taught how to function as part of a church body and how to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ (Matt 18:1-6; 19:13- 15).

In this matter of salvation for those who are mentally unable to make the decision to receive Christ, let us give thanks that we have a merciful and loving heavenly Father, of Whom we may proclaim, *"Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"* (Gen 18:25).

5. The Doctrine of the Church

In Matthew 16:16, Peter declares that Jesus is “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” Jesus responds with, “*Blessed are you ... And I also say to you that you are Peter [Greek petros, small pebble] and on this rock [Greek petra, bedrock] I will build My Church*” (Matt 16:17,18).

With this statement, Jesus proclaims that the Church will be built upon Jesus’ Divine Person – upon the **bedrock of Peter’s confession** that Jesus is truly the Son of the Living God! The Church will not be built upon any ordinary person or system of church government. The government of the Kingdom of God, which includes the Church, is upon Jesus Christ’s shoulders (Isa 9:6-7; Mark 12:10; 1 Cor 3:11; Eph 1:22; 5:23, 24; Col 1:18).

What is “the Church”? The Greek word for “Church” is *ekklesia*, which means “the called out ones”. It describes **a group of people called out for a special purpose**. In New Testament usage, the word “church” refers to those who have been “*born again*” (John 3:3,5), those we call saved.

To better understand what the Church *is*, let us first look at some things the Church is *not*:

- The Church is not one particular denomination. Some denominational groups claim that only their members are the true Church. This is false and cannot be supported from the Bible, especially in light of how the New Testament defines “church”. Though there are various denominations with differing emphases, the Bible warns against divisiveness (1 Cor 1:11-17) and exhorts us to “*keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Eph 4:1-6). **All those who truly believe in and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are part of His Church!**
- The Church is not a social club or any other kind of civic group or organization The Church was divinely begun (Matt 16:18) and exists to fulfill the will of the Founder, Jesus Christ (Matt 28: 18-20; Acts 1:8; Eph 3:10; 1 Tim 3:15). The primary purposes of the Church are: to preach and teach the Word of God, making disciples; to exalt the Name of Jesus and God the Father through worship and in prayer; to serve the practical needs of the surrounding community; to carry out a consistent program of missions and evangelism to the whole world.
- The Church is not a building. The word *ekklesia* is always used in the New Testament to indicate people (believers). There were no special buildings for the use of Christian gatherings until three hundred years after the Church began! As time passed, it became convenient to call the buildings in which Christians gathered “churches”. But a **Church is the people who gather**, not the building they gather in.

Essentially, the true Church of Jesus Christ is the Body of His “called out” people: Those called out from a life of sinful self-service and death, to live in the blessedness of a loving relationship with God the Father both now and through eternity. The true Church is made up of those who have sincerely put their trust in Christ for salvation (John 3:3-6; 1 Cor 12:13; Heb 12:23). Just attending a church service, or holding a position or title in a church or denomination, does not make a person saved or part of the Body of Christ (His Church). Being truly born again (John 3:3, 5) – and having the transforming work of the Spirit of God active in one’s life (Titus 3:5) – is what qualifies one to be part of the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Church can be viewed in two ways:

- First, as the **universal Church**, which consists of all those who have been born again of the Spirit of God and baptized into the Body of Christ by that same Holy Spirit (John 1:13; 1 Pet 1:22-25; 1 Cor 12:13).
- Second, as the **local church**, which is any group of believers in Jesus Christ who are gathered in a local setting to celebrate their hope and salvation through Christ and to grow as disciples (Matt 18:20). Examples in Scripture include: the churches in Asia (Rev 1:4); in Galatia (Gal 1:2); in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2); in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1); at Ephesus (Acts 20:17); in homes (Acts 2:46, 47); and many more.

Each local church is to reflect the character of Christ, the Head of the Church; each local church is to mature into fulfilling all of God's will and purpose (Eph 4:1-16).

6. The Doctrine of Last Things

The "end times" is a large subject that is often controversial. There are many books, charts, plans and opinions one can study. The Bible does not tell us everything about the last days, and because of this there is much speculation about end-time events. However, the Scriptures do reveal very clearly truths that are without question, and that we know will happen.

These key truths are of great importance to us as Christians. They also have profound implications for those caught in false religions and cults.

For the purposes of this study, there are **four very important and clearly revealed scriptural truths regarding the end times that need to be understood:**

A. The Literal Return of Jesus Christ (The Second Coming)

The Bible makes very clear that Jesus Christ *will* come back to earth! Acts 1:9 records that Jesus (after His resurrection) physically went up into Heaven while His disciples watched. Suddenly, angels appeared to them and said, "*Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, Who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*" (Acts 1:10,11).

Jesus, during His earthly ministry, also promised His disciples that He would return (Matt 24:30; 26:63,64; Mark 13:33-36; Luke 19:11-27; John 14:3).

The first apostles taught extensively on the Second Coming of Christ. Peter preaches about Christ's return (Acts 3:19-21); rebukes those who scoff at it (2 Pet 3:3,4); and stresses the unexpected nature of Christ's return (2 Pet 3:8-10).

The Apostle Paul's writings are filled with references to Christ's Second Coming (1 Cor 15:51,52; Phil 3:20,21; 1 Thess 4:16,17; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Titus 2:13). James tells us to be patient for Christ's coming (Jas 5:7,8). The writer of Hebrews refers to it twice (Heb 9:28; 10:37). John gives several references to Christ's personal and public return (1 John 2:28; 3:2,3; Rev 1:7; 22: 12).

Scripture records that many events will take place in the final days. It is not stated, however, at what point during those events Jesus Christ will gloriously return to earth. Yet it is enough for us to know that Jesus Christ *will* return according to God's perfect plan (Mark 13:32; Acts 1:7). Be assured that our Savior loves us eternally and has promised, *"I will come again and receive you to Myself; that I am, there you may be also"* (John 14:3) and *"I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you"* (John 14:18)

B. The Two Resurrections

In the Gospel of John, Jesus states: *"Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation"* (John 5:28,29). In the last days, there will be two resurrections.

The First Resurrection

The first resurrection will be for those Christians who have already died. Then immediately following will be the taking up of those believers in Christ who are still alive. *"Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and thus we shall always be with the Lord"* (1Thess 4:17; see also 1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

These events are all part of the first resurrection, the first resurrection will occur at Jesus Christ's Second Coming: *"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first"* (1Thess 4:16).and will include all the saints (redeemed ones, believers) who have ever lived; this is the *"resurrection of life"* mentioned in John 5:29.

The Second Resurrection

The second resurrection will take place just before the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev 20:4-13). This second resurrection will be for all the rest of the dead who will be raised for the *"resurrection to condemnation"* (John 5:29).

C. The Judgment

Hebrews 9:27 states, *"It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment."* This and other Scripture verses (Gen 3:19; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:10; Rev 20:13) make clear that there is **one death, and then judgment for all.**

There are no endless cycles of reincarnation, no earning the way to various levels of heaven by good behavior, no “holding places” of decision. Each person will die but once; and each person will then face judgment after his or her death.

Every person will face the almighty and all-knowing Creator God, Who will judge every life on its own merit. Just as there are two resurrections, there will be two judgments:

The Judgment of Believers in Jesus Christ

Believers in Christ will NOT be judged according to their sins. The judgment for sin that believers deserve, along with its necessary punishment, *was already laid upon Christ at the Cross!* Jesus Christ fulfilled the judgment and penalty for sin that should have been ours (Isa 53:5,6,10; John 5:24; 2 Cor 5:21). Repentance from sin and belief in Jesus Christ allow believers to receive this great salvation!

For the sins we commit in this life after we have come to know Christ as our Savior, we are convicted by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:5- 13; Gal 5:16-25) and disciplined by the Lord (1 Cor 5:5; 11:32; Heb 12:7). When we repent and confess our sin to God, we are forgiven through Christ’s atoning blood – of the sins we commit (1 John 1:9).

Believers will be required to give an account for – and will be judged on – the deeds they have done or not done while on earth (1 Cor 3:12- 15; 2 Cor 5:10). We are not saved by our works, as we have already studied. However, each believer in Christ will be judged as to the use made of the life and possessions God gave him or her.

Believers will be judged in the following areas:

1. **“As stewards of the mysteries of God”** that are now revealed (which are the Gospel and the plan of salvation). What did we do with what we knew and understood of Christ? (Col 1:24-29). Were we faithful to His revelation? (1 Cor 4:1-5).
2. **The use of the gifts, talents, abilities and opportunities given by God.** Were these used to build up the Body of Christ and reach out to the world? (Matt 5:14-30; Luke 19:11-27).
3. **The use of the material resource that God gives.** Did our money and possessions help to further God’s Kingdom purposes, or were they used only for satisfying our own desires? (Matt 6:19-21; 2 Cor 8:8-15; 9:6-15).
4. **The use of every opportunity to preach the Gospel** and thereby fulfill Christ’s last command – the Great Commission. Did you freely share your faith and testimony with anyone who would listen? Did you do your best to support and assist with evangelism and missions? (Matt 28:18-20; Rom 10:14; Col 1:28; 2 Tim 4:1,2).
5. **The use of every resource available to reach out to a needy world around.** Did we: *“do good to all people”* (Gal 6:10); show hospitality (Matt 25:35; Heb 13:2); care for the sick and imprisoned

(Matt 25:34-40); take care of widows and orphans (Jas 1:27)? Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name has its reward (Matt 10:42).

6. The enduring of suffering and tribulation that comes to believers because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Did we remain faithful to Jesus Christ and His Gospel message in spite of hardship or persecution? There will be reward in this life and in eternity for those who endure and remain faithful (Matt 5:11,12; Luke 6:22,23; 2 Tim 2:3,12; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 2:20; 3:14,17; 4:15-19).

Stricter Judgment For Leaders

Leaders in the Body of Christ will receive a stricter judgment because they have a greater privilege and therefore a greater responsibility to lead the flock of God.

- A leader's teaching will be judged (Eccl 5: 1-3; Jas 3:1).
- A leader's life is to be an example of Christlikeness and godliness (Phil 3:17; 1 Tim 3:1-13; 4:12-16; Titus 2:7,8).
- A leader's obedience to the Word and to the promptings and conviction of the Holy Spirit is of utmost importance. God is not as interested in our great programs, buildings or self-efforts as He is in our obedience to all He asks and requires (1Sam 15:22,23).

This is by no means a complete list of biblical standards for church leaders. But it serves as a reminder that, as His word attests, God is VERY concerned about our character. He cares more about what we are becoming in our obedience to Him, than about any works we might do (Matt 7:22). God desires that we be shaped more and more into the image of Christ, growing in discipleship and obedience, and serving as a good example to those we lead (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:12; 2Thess 3:6-9; 1Tim 4:12; 1 Pet 5:2,3).

The Judgment of Non-Believers in Jesus Christ

Although mentioned in several places in the Bible, the judgment of non-believers in Jesus Christ is best explained in Revelation 20:11-15. This is referred to as the Great White Throne Judgment. According to Scripture, this judgment will take place after the 1000 year Millennium, following the second resurrection (Rev 20:4-13).

Those who have died in Christ (believers) will have already been resurrected at the first resurrection. This second resurrection is to bring all of those who have ever lived – and those living on earth at the time of the second resurrection – before the throne of God to receive their judgment.

There are seven principles found in Romans 2:1-16 that form the basis of this judgment upon the unbeliever. This judgment of God is:

1. according to truth (not imaginations) – 2;
2. according to accumulated guilt – 5;
3. according to their deeds (absolute justice) – v.6;
4. without partiality toward anyone – 11;

5. according to **obedience** to – and not simply the knowledge of – God and His Word – vs.12,13;
6. by Jesus Christ, Who is appointed by God to judge the world – 16 (cf. Acts 10:38-43; 17:29-31);
7. according to the Gospel of eternal salvation as a free gift by the grace of God through faith in Christ

Scripture seems to indicate that there will be degrees of punishment at the judgment (Luke 12:41-48). But regardless of the punishment, **every person** that dies without Christ will be separated from God completely. This absolute separation from the Person of God and from every trace of His great love, grace, goodness and kindness will last for an eternity (Matt 25:46; Luke 16:19-31, esp. v.26; Rev14:11); this is the worst possible consequence of non-belief in Christ.

This very fact of the **final judgment and eternal separation from God** that awaits unbelievers should stir us with compassion for those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Savior. Christ has already paid the price to save them from that dreadful judgment. This is the Good News of the Gospel message – that **all** who receive Christ and His sacrifice can be saved from eternal damnation!

All those who die without Christ are held in Hades, the place of the dead (Rev 20:13). They are kept there until the second resurrection. There *will be no more opportunity for a decision for Christ once a person has died*. At the second resurrection, the unbelieving dead will be raised to stand before the Great White Throne in the presence of God to receive their eternal judgment. They will then be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:15) along with Satan, his demon angels, the false prophet and the beast (Matt 25:41; Rev 19:20;20 :10).

D. Eternal Life

“And these [the wicked] will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous *into eternal life*” (Matt 25:46). There are many, many Bible verses about the unending duration of life after death, too many to list here.

The Greek word, *aion*, and its derivative, *aiionios*, are used almost two hundred times in the New Testament. Both of these words convey the idea of “duration without end”.

There is one eternal destiny for the *unrighteous* – those who have rejected Christ or never heard and responded to the Gospel. There is a very different eternal destiny for the *righteous* – those made righteous through faith in Christ (Eph 2:8,9), receiving the free gift of salvation made possible by His payment for sin.

1) Eternity for the Unrighteous

The eternity appointed for those who die *unsaved* (the unrighteous):

- complete separation from God (Luke 13:25,28);
- everlasting punishment (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:9);

- everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2);
- unquenchable fire (Matt 9:43,45; Jude 7; Rev 20:10);
- a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 13:42,50);
- consignment to outer darkness (Matt 8:12; 22:13; 2 Pet 2:17; Jude 13);
- the wrath of God (Rom 2:5,8-9; 1 Thess 1:10);
- everlasting torment (Rev 14: 10,11);
- punishment in accordance to their works (2 Cor 11:14,15; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 22:12);
- eternal destruction or ruin (2 Thess 1:8,9; 2 Pet 3:7);
- the second death (Rev 20:14; 21:8).

An eternity without Christ would be a terrible destiny indeed. We must heed Paul's exhortation when he declares, "*Him [Jesus Christ] we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect [complete] in Christ Jesus.* To this end I also labor striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Col 1:28,29). And to Timothy, "Preach the Word! Be ready in season *and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching*" (2 Tim 4:2).

Though all people have sinned (Rom 3:23) and deserve eternal punishment; God is "*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (2 Pet 3:9). Thank God for His indescribable free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ! (Rom 6:23). By God's grace and Christ's sacrifice, we are saved from eternal damnation and have been given this message of salvation and reconciliation to give to the world (2 Cor 5:19, 20).

2) Eternity for the Righteous

For the believer in Christ Jesus, eternity is radically different than it is for the unbeliever. The eternity appointed for those who die *saved* (the righteous):

- upon the moment of death, the believer is present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-8; Phil 1:21, 23);
- eternal life (1 John 5:11,12);
- the mortal shall put on immortality, and death shall be no more (1 Cor 15:50-58);
- full transformation into the image of Jesus (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 John 3:2);
- the end of suffering, pain, sorrow and death (Rev 21:4);
- continuance of our personal identity in Heaven:
- Our names, which are written in the Lamb's Book of Life, signify personal identity (Luke 10:20; Phil 4:3);
- Our bodies will be resurrected or raptured, signifying God's redemption of the whole person — body, soul and spirit (1 Thess 4:16,17);
- We will be recognizable in Heaven, only without sin's presence to warp Christ's image in us (1 John 3:2).

With such a glorious future ahead for the believer, let us follow the admonition of the Scriptures: "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord*" (1 Cor 15:58). Hallelujah!

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Jesus said, “*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel*” (Mark 16:15; see also Luke 24:47). This is a responsibility of every person who believes in Jesus Christ. But what is this Gospel message that believers are being asked to preach?

Many Christian groups, ministries and denominations throughout the Body of Christ have as their main goal the preaching of the Gospel. Yet, they have a wide variety of practices or special emphases that make them somewhat different from each other.

However, what unites **ALL** Christians is the shared belief in foundational biblical doctrines pertaining to the Gospel.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE GOSPEL

The core of biblical doctrine and truth regarding the Gospel is expressed most simply in the following verses:

“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas [Peter], then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles” (1 Cor 15:3-7).

Let us look briefly at the key biblical doctrines highlighted in the above verses:

- *“For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received”.*

With this phrase, Paul reminds us that he received the **revelation** of the Gospel “*through the revelation of Jesus Christ*” (Gal 1:11-17). Paul is not merely reciting historical facts (true as they are) of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. He is declaring the very heart of the Gospel given to him by **direct revelation of Jesus the Son of God**, not through the teaching of men.

- *“...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ...”*

Paul uses the term “Christ” to remind his readers of Who Jesus is – the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God, Who is fully God Himself yet born in the form of man. It is this **God-man**, Jesus, who **died**. He did not faint, go into a coma, fake death or substitute someone else in His place. Jesus the Christ *actually and truly died* (Heb 2:9). He died just as any of us would die, as His soul was separated from His body and His body ceased to function.

But His death was **different** in that it was for a **specific and uniquely divine purpose**. Jesus was killed not simply because He opposed the religious system of His day. His death was pre-planned and foreordained by God the Father, with the Son’s willing obedience to fulfill His Father’s sovereign

will (Gen 3:15; Acts 2:22,23; Phil 2:5-11; Heb 10:1-11). Even Jesus, during His earthly ministry, spoke often of His coming suffering and death (Matt 16:21; 17:22, 23; Mark 8:31; 9:30, 31; Luke 9:21, 22; 18:31-33).

Christ's death was not only pre-planned, but it accomplished a **purpose**: "*Christ died for our sins*" (1 Cor 15:3). Man is separated from God because of man's rebellion and sin, for which the just penalty is death (Ezek 18:4, 20). Christ's death **fully satisfies this penalty** and provides the way for man to be reconciled to God – which is known as the **atonement** (Rom 5: 10, 11; 2 Cor 5:18, 19; Col 1:19-23; 1 Tim 2:5,6).

Christ's substitutionary atoning death was "*according to the Scriptures*". It was prophesied: (a) from the time of the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen 3:15); (b) through Moses (Deut 18:15); (c) through the prophets (Isa 7:14; 9:1-6; Isa 53). (See also Psalm 22 and Luke 24:25-27.)

- "*...and that He was buried ...* "

This phrase continues to affirm the fact that Christ's death was indeed a **physical** reality. He was buried, just as any person is buried after that person has physically died. The importance of this is highlighted in 1 Corinthians 15. This passage reveals that those who die with a personal faith in Christ will, like Christ, one day have a physical resurrection (1 Cor 15:51-57; Col 1:18; Rev 1:5). They will, like Christ, be raised again to eternal life, where the "*mortal puts on immortality*" and death is forever conquered.

Christ's death was a literal, physical and historical fact. Without His death, there would be no payment for mankind's sins. Without His death and burial, there would be no subsequent resurrection from death to conquer death. Therefore, without Christ's death, burial and physical resurrection, our faith would be made void, we would still be in our sins, and our beliefs would be false (1 Cor 15:12-19). That is why many cults and false religions attempt to deny these important facts about Christ's life and death.

- "*...and that He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures ...* "

In the original Greek, Paul's words mean that Christ **rose** from the dead; **and** that Christ is **still** raised. Christ's one-time resurrection is joined with the fact that Christ is still raised from the dead.

This means that what was once-and-for-all accomplished **on the Cross is still as powerful today as it was thousands of years ago** when Christ died, was buried and rose again. Our Savior conquered death, and is **alive and reigning now!** He is interceding for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), and effectually mediating the "*better covenant*" of our salvation (Heb 8:6). His sacrificial death and resurrection satisfied the penalty for our sin and gave us right-standing ("justification") before God. The phrase "*on the third day*" reflects the point in time when the empty tomb was discovered and when the risen Christ began to appear to His followers. Jesus Himself prophesied that He would rise

from the dead three days after His death (Matt 16:21; John 1:18-22). There were also prophetic “fore types” of Christ’s death and resurrection on the third day (2 Ki 20:5; Hos 6:2; Matt 12:38-40).

- “...and that He was seen by Cephas [Peter], then by the twelve ... “

In this passage, Paul affirms Christ’s resurrection when he recites a list of eyewitnesses who saw Christ alive after His crucifixion and death. Christ appeared to many people in His physically resurrected body. Many of these eyewitnesses were still living when Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The Gospels record still other eyewitnesses who saw the resurrected Lord (Matt 28:1-10; Luke 24:13-35; John 20:11-18). The Word of God gives undeniable testimony to the literal, physical resurrection of Christ.

There is much more to Christianity and the Gospel (“*good news*”) than 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 reveal; yet, these verses contain the essential elements of the Gospel which distinguish Christianity from all other religions and cults of the world.

Central and **indispensable** to Christianity is **the Person of Jesus Christ** – Who died for us at the Cross to pay the penalty for our sin and reconcile us to God, and Who then rose again from death to prove He was God and to seal our eternal salvation. Mankind can never earn this free gift of salvation through good works or by any other means. It is provided **only** through God’s loving plan of salvation, made possible through Jesus Christ and His great sacrifice (John 3:16; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8,9).

Hallelujah! We serve a risen Savior Who *lives*, and is alive forevermore! The founders of the major false religions of history are all dead – but our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ lives, rules and reigns over all forever and ever (Rev 1:18; 5: 18,19).

It is **through Christ** – and ONLY through Christ – that we are restored to God; it is in Christ – and ONLY **in Christ** – that we have eternal life with Him (John 11:25, 26; 1 Cor 15:22; Eph 2: 1-10). That is the message – the Good News – of the Gospel!