

Our Christian Faith

**The non-negotiable
Truths of the Gospel
– proclaimed by Christians
of all Traditions**

Published by the Maranatha Community ©
Maranatha is a movement of Christians in all the churches.
Committed to Christian healing
Christian unity and Christian renewal.
Maranatha UK office
102 Irlam Road, Flixton, Manchester M41 6JT
Tel: 0161 748 4858 Fax: 0161 747 7379
email: info@maranathacommunity.org.uk
www.maranathacommunity.org.uk

OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH

**The Non-Negotiable Truths of the Gospel
- proclaimed by Christians of all Traditions**

The Purpose of these Prime Truths

1. A Defining of the Basis of our Fellowship.

It is helpful to have a summary of what Christians hold as Prime or Foundational Truths. **These are not open to negotiation**, but are the essentials that we hold in common. There are other Secondary Truths, insights and traditions within the Christian community, of which we say - *"hold to what you find a blessing, but **recognise the primary truths** which we all hold and don't use **secondary** issues to judge or divide the body of Christ."*

2. A Celebration of our common faith.

The Prime Truths are a **useful summary** of what we **celebrate and hold in common**. We demonstrate **unity through our love for one another - not through our uniformity**. So nothing should be produced which looks as if it is placing conditions and hurdles in the path of fellowship. But it is good to affirm that what unites us is overwhelmingly greater than what could divide us.

3. A Defence for truth in an age of compromise.

God is calling us to be his people and to **proclaim his truth uncompromisingly** in an increasingly secular society. Many Christians are unsure of their faith, think the Bible is not reliable, feel Jesus may not be the only way to God and that his teaching may not be the final truth. We **need to know what we believe and contend for the truth**.

*1 Peter 3:15 - Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,
Jude 3 - I felt I had to write and urge you **to contend for the faith** that was once for all entrusted to the saints.*

The Non-Negotiable Truths of the Gospel - proclaimed by Christians of all Traditions

This outline covers the **non-negotiable elements** of the Christian faith. These Prime Truths are what unite us as Christians, and what distinguish orthodox traditions from other groups whom we are unable to recognise as fully Christian. The Prime Truths are derived from the Scriptures and the Creeds of the Church. The cults and heresies are defined by the way they reject some or many of these fundamental beliefs.

Creeds

Creeds have been used from the earliest days of the Christian community. They are memorable summaries of the basics of the faith. One can trace their origin back to the Old Testament – *Deut. 6:4-5*

The principle of having Creeds was endorsed by Jesus – *Mark 12:29-31*

The New Testament and the first Christians used creeds. Examples are - *Romans 10: 1*
Tim. 3:16

The Constantinople - Nicene Creed encapsulates the Basic Biblical Beliefs and is a Christian statement of faith that is the only ecumenical creed because it is accepted as authoritative by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant churches.¹

This creed is the basis for this outline.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son.) With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

¹ "Nicene Creed." [Encyclopædia Britannica](#) 2007.

* We have quoted the version that appears in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. We are aware that this is the western form which includes the words “*and the Son*”. These words were not included in the original version agreed at the Council of Constantinople - the form used by our Orthodox brethren. We have therefore put “*and the Son*” in brackets and do not base any of what follows on this phrase.

We find 12 Prime Truths of the Creed that form the Non-negotiables of the Gospel.

1. God is trinity
2. God is the sole creator of all things
3. The Bible is God's inspired Word, and authoritative for faith and conduct.
4. Humanity was created by God for relationship, with Himself and with one another
5. Christ born of a virgin birth
6. Christ is both God and Man
7. Christ's death is the Atonement for the sins of the whole world
8. Salvation is by Grace through faith
9. Christ underwent a bodily resurrection
10. Christ will return in bodily form
11. The Holy Spirit is God and his life giving power sustains all things
12. The Church is the Body of Christ - seen in its ministry and sacraments.

1. GOD IS TRINITY

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty

This is belief in **one personal God**. This God is both immanent – i.e. involved with his creation – and transcendent – i.e. distinct from and beyond his creation.

The Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople produced the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the fourth century. The councils did not invent the doctrine of the Trinity, but were meetings of the great leaders of the Church to clarify, explain and assert the doctrine of the Trinity. The Church has always taught the doctrine of the Trinity.

Isaiah declares that there is only one God and that he is eternal. *Isaiah 43:10*.

The word “trinity” is not found in the Bible, but the doctrine is clearly taught.

The Trinity is defined as --

- There is one God
- The Father is God
- Jesus is God
- The Holy Spirit is God
- The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are equal and separate persons.
There is unity and equality in diversity.

ONE God

The Bible describes God as one. The Old Testament teaches that there is only one God or, better, that **God is one**. We need only look at *Deut. 6:4*, “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*” What is more, the New Testament also affirms the same doctrine. For example, *James 2:19* reads, “*You believe that there is one God.*” - an even better translation would be, “*You believe that God is one.*”

Christians believe just as strongly as Jews and Muslims, that there is one God. The word that is used is the Hebrew word *echad*, which does not mean a stark singularity, but **oneness in unity** - so it is used to describe one bunch of grapes, or how a husband and wife become one flesh, and the whole of the people of Israel are described as One people. A helpful illustration is an egg: – it is one, but is made up of three distinct elements – shell, white and yolk.

So **God is ONE unity in fellowship and love.** Yet within this fellowship, which is God, are the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Three PERSONS

Matthew describes each of the three members of the Trinity to be present and active at the same time. *Matt. 3:16-17* **The distinctions within the Godhead of Father, Son and Spirit are real, not simply different aspects of God.** They are inherent in the very life and nature of God himself. They are not the same person.

Each member of the Trinity is identified by Jesus. *John 14:16,26; 15:26*

A person is someone who has a **mind, a will, and emotions; and is active and responsive to their environment.** That is, they are able to think, remember and reason. They are able to make decisions and commitments and they are able to experience feelings – pain, pleasure etc.

When **we apply this description to God the Father** we find that he has a mind and infinite understanding, he makes decisions and sticks to them, and he is able to care and feel deeply – so that he loved the world and took action to reach out to his created people.

Jesus too is a person, for we can see from the Bible record of his life on this earth that he was a real person. He understood and reasoned, he entered into commitments and made decisions, he cared deeply and was known to weep as well as rejoice.

To the surprise of some – **the same is true of the Holy Spirit.** He is capable of understanding and reasoning, he is able to exercise his will and choose what he will do and how he will work in our lives today, to help us follow Christ. He is also capable of deep feeling and so we read that it is possible to grieve and cause deep hurt to the Holy Spirit. *Ephes. 4:30 do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

The Old Testament hints at there being more than one person in the Godhead. In Genesis chapter one God is recorded as saying, “let us make man in our image”. Isaiah speaks of “God and his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts”, *Isaiah 44:6* See also *Isaiah 46:9; 43:10; 1 Tim. 2:5*

1. The Father is God

St Paul speaks of God the Father and says that God the Father is God. *Gal. 1:1*
St Peter speaks of God the Father and says that God the Father is God *1 Peter 1:3*

2. Jesus is God

St Paul says that Jesus is God *Titus 2:10-14*
St Peter says that Jesus is God *2 Peter 1:1 (cf. Isaiah 45:2)*
St John says that Jesus is God and was with God. *John 1:1, 14*
Jesus claimed to be God *John 8:23-24, 58 – 59; John 10:30*
Jesus was put to death because he claimed to be God. *John 5:16-18*

He is the Son of God by NATURE; we are children of God by adoption.

Isaiah says that the Messiah who will be born will be **the MIGHTY GOD**. *Isaiah 9:6*

3. The Holy Spirit is God

St Peter says that the Holy Spirit is God. *Acts 5:3-4*
St Paul says that the Holy Spirit is God. *1 Cor. 3:16*
The writer to the Hebrews says the Holy Spirit is God. *Heb 9:14*

This explains our experience

God has shown us that it was **a decision of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to come into history** and effect a rescue for the whole of creation and particularly for humanity. The Father planned it; Jesus laid aside his rights as God and lived in our world in submission to his Father, giving his life for us on the cross, and being raised from death. The Holy Spirit comes to live within each believer and imparts the very forgiveness and life of God to humans here and now.

We are also encouraged to worship the fullness of the character of God, and to find delight and security in the God who is Holy Trinity.

So St Paul writes - *2 Cor.13:14* ***The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, The Love of God the Father and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us evermore.*** This is one of the earliest Christian writings and it shows the doctrine of the Trinity was established (as each person of the Trinity is referred to), even though the word TRINITY is not in the Bible.

Why does it matter?

- The God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ is unique.
- He is not the same as any god as found in another religion.
- Other religions do not offer different means of worship of the true God.

- Other religions do not offer alternative means of salvation – if there were other means of salvation then the death of Christ would have been unnecessary.
 - When a person says that they believe in God, we should not assume that they believe in the Christian God. We should ask them to explain what they mean – as they could mean almost anything.
 - There is only one God.
-

2. GOD IS THE SOLE CREATOR OF ALL THINGS

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

The worldview that today informs Western civilisation asserts that there is no God and that everything has a natural cause. Because many think this is an issue of science and factually proven, they are willing to go along with the crowd. You will see this in the media condemnation of the teaching of creationism and the promotion of secular naturalistic humanism.

Again we have the benefit of the creed and it is so helpful to use it in public worship – because it causes each person to confront the issue of his or her personal belief. Can they say –

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life.

All three members of the Trinity are described as active in creation.

In saying the creed - We are not asserting that we know how God made and created everything. Science may tell us how things were ever further back in time, but still has no answer to ultimate origin. We do want to go with the evidence, but not be bullied into going with the crowd. As there is clear evidence of design, for example in the beauty of the physical laws of nature, we should take seriously the concept of a designer.

God is creator of the heavens and earth. *Gen. 1:1*

Jesus is described as the creator and sustainer of the universe. He was actively involved in its beginning and is actively involved in its present state. *John 1:1-3: Col. 1:15-17* He loves his creation. *John 3:16*

The evidence for the creator is seen in creation. *Romans 1: 18-20,25*

St Paul also goes on to explain that God as creator is rejected very often because people either are immoral and reject God's standards or they are wilful and want their own way. The rejection is then a matter of resisting God's holiness or his authority. In most cases today, it's because people follow the "spirit of the age", usually without thought or question.

We are created beings and God is our good Creator.

The first chapter of Genesis, when God is creating, repeatedly states that, once he had created a type of thing, he declared it "good". God freely created **everything**, in His creative wisdom and love. It all therefore has **value**. In this we find the **meaning** of all creation and our own purpose and value as human beings. This is so, even if humankind and society have been distorted by sin. The universe and our world therefore belong to God, not us, and we must live and act within our world in accordance with its creators' will and design. We are its stewards, managing it on its owner's behalf; we are not its owners. We are neither to neglect it nor pillage it. This has consequences for environmentalism.

Why does it matter?

- To say that God is creator is to challenge atheistic naturalism – the basis of secular humanism.
- To say that God is creator is to challenge all pantheism, the basis of New Age worldviews and much eastern thought.
- Both the above views are strongly held today, but God is creator and not part of creation.

3. THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD AND AUTHORITATIVE FOR FAITH AND CONDUCT

In fulfilment of the Scriptures

The whole teaching of the creed is based on the authority of Scripture. The creed does not point to itself as – “self authenticating”, but rather claims to express the truth as found in the Scriptures.

There are four elemental teachings which the Bible gives about itself -- that it is Inspired, Reliable, Self Defining regarding its Content and carries the Authority of God.

1. Inspiration

Inspiration means that God inspired human authors to record his word without error. Most of the Bible was not dictated but inspired. As a result the personality of the authors comes through in their writings. St Paul describes the Scriptures as God-breathed, from which we get the word *inspired*. And because it is God's word, it is profitable. *2 Tim. 3:16-17*

St Peter says that men who were moved by the Spirit of God spoke with the authority of God. *2 Peter 1:20-21*

2. Reliability.

There are some who claim the inerrancy of the Bible. By this they mean that the original manuscripts in the original languages were without any error of any kind. We do not have the original manuscripts, though we have many early fragments and quotes from which it is possible to reconstruct an authoritative document. These fragments are much greater in number and much closer in date to the original than for other writings which are never doubted, such as the Greek playwrights and philosophers. Any discrepancies are of little importance and do not affect the main message of salvation. Translation into English and other languages is not an exact science but the “message” can still be conveyed accurately.

What the Bible does claim is that it is truth from God and therefore reliable.

Proverbs states that every word of God is flawless. *Prov. 30:5-6*

Jesus prays that his disciples may be sanctified by the truth and that God's word is truth. *John 17:17* And again Jesus says that scripture cannot be broken. *John 10:35*

3. The Self Defining of Scripture as the basis of the canon.

The canon is the rule or standard by which books are determined to belong within the Bible. It is the standard by which the books, more than 60 and having about 40 authors, written over 1500 years, are each affirmed to be God's word.

The tests used for each book were—

- a) Was this written by a qualified, authorised spokesman of God, for example, a prophet or an apostle? Or someone writing with the authority of an apostle approving their work?**

For example Mark and Luke both write with the authority of Peter and Paul, whose sermons and teachings they record.

Ephesians explains how the foundation of God's message to mankind has been laid by prophets and apostles. *Ephes. 2:19-20*

John records Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would come and guard and guide the disciples into truth and a true record of his teaching. *John 14:26*

Jesus says that the apostles are authorised because they are eyewitnesses, they have been taught by him, they have been chosen, they have been appointed by him, and have been with him from the beginning. *John 15:26-27*

Jesus makes the promise that his words will not pass away -- they will be preserved. *Mark 13:31*

The Second Letter of Peter explains that St Paul was writing scripture and that his words had the authority of Jesus. In saying this Peter affirms that Paul had met Jesus, was taught by him and that Peter as a foundational apostle recognised the authority conferred by Jesus upon Paul. *2 Peter 3:14-16*

The second test is –

- b) Does this word agree with previously recognised and used revelation that God has given?**

For example the Book of Mormon does not agree with what has already been revealed. The Bible is clearly monotheistic but the book of Mormon is polytheistic.

However this test could not be applied to the first books in the Bible. So God authorised the Torah, the first five books, with signs and wonders and affirmed the authority of his servant Moses by punishing anyone who resisted his teaching. These signs and wonders included the 10 plagues in Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea.

After the closing of the Old Testament, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The living Word was dwelling among men. He himself promised that there would be new writings and that the Holy Spirit would guide his apostles to record his words and to impart his teaching. So it was that the first of the new writings, which we call the New Testament, were affirmed in the same way as the Torah and the apostles and their teaching were affirmed with signs and wonders at Pentecost and other miracles recorded in the book of Acts.

As a result, Jude is able to tell us to test all teaching with what has already been given. Here he implies that the New Testament is consistent with the promises of the Old Testament. *Jude 1:3*

In Galatians, Paul invites the Galatians to substantiate what he says, and if what he says does not agree with what has already been given then reject it'. *Gal. 1:8-9*

In Acts, the Bereans were commended because they checked the teaching of St Paul concerning the Messiah with what had already been given as revealed Scripture. *Acts 17:11*

To the Corinthians, St Paul describes the signs of the true apostle and states that those signs had been demonstrated to the people of Corinth as the proof of his authority. *2 Cor. 12:12*

The third test is

c) Was it widely accepted by the people of God, - as they applied the two tests already mentioned above?

All Christian Churches accept the 66 books of the Bible (counting Samuel, Kings and Chronicles as two books each). Some traditions also give a special place to the 'Apocrypha' - a small collection of books that were mainly written during the time between the Old and New Testaments.

4. Authority

The law of the Lord is the source of blessing. *Psalms 1:1-2*

Because the Bible is inspired as the Word of God and reliable truth then it carries ultimate authority. *Prov. 3:5-7: Ephes. 6:17: Heb. 4:12: 1 Peter 1:23*

How can I tell what the Bible means?

The Bible is like a map. Many people have got lost following a map. The fault lies not in the map – accurate maps are not dangerous. The fault is in the reader of the map. Christians HAVE A DUTY not only to read but also to be careful in their study of the Bible. There are some rules to follow to get it right.

Remember its purpose

It was written to reveal the nature of God and his love for you and all creation, and his desire to restore the relationship with himself that had been broken by sin. So wherever you read you can ask 'what does this tell me about God and what he is doing to bring people like me into relationship with himself?' Jesus and his rescue mission occupy the centre of this purpose.

Try to discover the message intended for the first readers

For example, it is impossible to understand the book of Revelation until you realise it was written to a group of persecuted and discouraged Christians. Its purpose was to

strengthen and equip them for the ordeal they faced, although it is relevant and prophetic for the church and world today.

Get the Context

It is not proper to take a sentence out of the middle of a chapter and then ignore everything else – that way we can make it mean anything. For example - a Christmas card had this Bible verse: "***They exchanged gifts and made merry ... (Rev. 11:10).***" – But these words are not about Christmas – they are about evil people rejoicing because they have killed two of God's servants!

Recognise the style of writing

Usually the type of material is clear and helps us to know what can be taken literally!

- In Poetry we must be aware of word pictures as a key part of the material. When it says God will cover us with his wings – it does not mean he is a bird!
- In Parables we have stories used to teach some truth, without the story having to be a true record of a real incident – for example the Good Samaritan.
- In Historical material the detail is given as fact.
- The book of Proverbs is made of Truisms. Truisms state something that is *generally* true. But they are not guarantees, nor promises. For example it is written, 'train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it'. This is good advice but, as a truism, it will be possible to find exceptions to this advice, where a child has still gone astray.

The Old Testament has equal authority to the New Testament, but must be explained by the New Testament and by the life and teaching of Jesus.

The prophecies are about him. The leaders God uses are used to raise expectation for the coming great leader – Jesus. Even the laws and detail are about how God will act to bring salvation and how great is our need of Jesus' love and mercy.

What you do understand should be by using the parts that are absolutely clear, to understand the more complicated parts.

Submit to the Holy Spirit as your guide and teacher

The first priority is not to know and understand everything in the Bible on a purely intellectual level – but to hear God's word for you for today. It is that word which will sustain and protect you. If you don't have that word from him, then you are like a soldier without a sword. ***Ephes. 6:17 Take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.***

Why does it matter?

- Because many today feel that the Church wrote the Bible and so the present-day Church has the right to edit and change its teaching. But it is God's book – not men's collected ideas. The church's job is merely to RECOGNISE when God has spoken.

- Because many today have not checked out the evidence and so assume that the Bible is full of errors and contradictions. In so doing they miss discovering the unique nature and reliability of the Bible.
- The notion that the Bible is simply one set of sacred books among many, began when theologians and philosophers in the late 19th Century came to believe that everything has a purely natural explanation. God might have created the world, but now it is self explained and natural laws mean that it is impossible for God to intervene. So, for example, they said that miracles were impossible and prophecy that foretold the future was not credible. This meant that the miracles described in the Bible were reclassified as myths and all prophecy was written after the event.
- The idea that the Bible only “contains” the “word of God” leaves us with our confidence in the Scriptures shaken and there is uncertainty about what parts we can accept as ultimately authoritative and from God himself.

4. HUMANITY WAS CREATED BY GOD FOR RELATIONSHIP, WITH HIMSELF AND WITH ONE ANOTHER

Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

Men and women are God's highest creation, made in His own image. The Bible states that God made us by an act of distinct creation.

We're all created in God's image

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Gen. 1:26-28.

Our distinctively Christian understanding of human life stems from our belief about God in creation.

At the heart of our Christian Faith is the utter conviction that each human person is created by God in his likeness and image. This likeness to God allows personal relationship with him, and God sought a relation of love. The initiative has come from God our creator. We don't “assign people” their humanity, nor can they “earn it”. God has made them human by his own free gift of creation. This truth is found especially in *Gen 1:26-31* and *2:7-25*.

Humans are more than “things”.

Human beings as persons are more important than “things”. Therefore, anything that treats human beings as objects or simply a means to others’ ends is intrinsically evil, for example

- slavery
- racism
- bonded labour
- pornography
- child labour
- ethnic cleansing
- use of the human foetus for experiments or commercial purposes
- creation of human-animal hybrids.

Human-beings are free

Because God created us in his own image, he created us truly free. But our freedom is inherently limited by our

- finite nature: we are creatures **not** the Creator and
- the moral law: we are bound by morality, whether we like it or not.

Faithfulness, wisdom and responsibility are essential to true freedom. True freedom is to know that I’m not God and therefore to recognise

- my limitations
- what the right choice is, and
- be able to make that choice.

This freedom has been seriously marred by the intrusion of sin into the world, but is fully restored by Christ’s death and resurrection.

The equal dignity of all

Our dignity before God is the basis of our dignity before each other. Each of us has different gifts and abilities, but all of us are of **equal, intrinsic value**. Men and women are equal before God, but complement each other. *Acts 17.26 "From one man (some Mss ‘blood’) he made every nation of men".*

Humans are social creatures

God created us in community, reflecting the unity in diversity of the Trinity. So we have an inbuilt disposition to live in community. The family unit is a God-appointed form of community.

The makeup of men and women.

Some believe men and women are composed of two or more components - made up of body and soul. Others, basing their argument on *1 Thess. 5:23*, see three parts – body, soul and spirit. More recently, biblical scholarship has returned to the earliest Hebrew belief and declared man to be more of a unity. The actions of a man are not pictured as issuing from his body, soul, or spirit, but from the whole person.

The Role of Men and Women.

Men and women were created for fellowship or communion with God. Unlike any of the other creatures, we have a fundamental likeness to God: created in the "image of God" *Gen 1:26-27*. Man meets and talks with God in the Garden of Eden *Gen 2:15-17*. This was the original intention of God for men and women. It also becomes God's continuing intention, as He repeatedly intervenes to draw men and women back to Himself. Men and women are not only to have fellowship with God; we are to glorify Him, by what we are and do *1 Cor. 10:31; Ephes. 1:12*.

When the first humans sinned and disobeyed God, of their own free choice, they not only rejected God but destroyed their innocent nature. So sin entered into the nature and make up of every person. They were free to choose to sin, just as we are free to repent and turn to Christ.

The Restoration of Men and Women.

God has acted to restore men and women to his original state of innocence and fellowship with God. He has done this by sending His Son to die for men and women so that we might be reconciled to God and be renewed or "born again" *John 3:3,7*. God's aim is to restore us to a dynamic, vital relationship with himself. *Rom 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:20*

Men and women are most fully human when fulfilling the intention of God for them: worshiping, serving, and loving God.

Marriage and family life

From this we can also see the fundamental importance that marriage and family life has in the Christian vision for humankind. In *Gen. 1:27-28*, it says that God created human beings "male and female", to "be fruitful and multiply"; and *Gen. 2:24* says that "therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh".

We affirm as Christians that marriage and family life is fundamental to God's order in creation; and we affirm that sex between a man and a woman is good, as it is created by God, within its only proper place, which is within marriage. The Bible, as understood and lived by the Church from the very beginning, only knows of marriage as a commitment in love between a man and a woman. The New Testament enhances the dignity of marriage even further by using it as an analogy of Christ as husband and his Church as wife, with new converts as children; see *Ephes. 5*.

Why does it matter?

- It is the fact that we have been created by God and belong to him, that gives every human worth and dignity. We are made in his image.
- Because of God's ownership and purpose for each person, we cannot view an embryo as simply a collection of cells, a sibling as a bank for body parts, an adult as expendable, or the elderly and sick as encumbrances which may be disposed of.

- Because God created all of us there is a sense in which we are inter-related and owe compassion and care to our neighbours.
- Human rights are not based on the pressure and influence of the majority. Human rights are given by God and include freedom of will, the dignity of being creatures with a capacity for love, morality, rationality, artistic creation, and all other uniquely human qualities.
- God has created us to live in families, where men and women commit themselves to each other in love and are open to the blessing of children.

5. CHRIST WAS BORN OF A VIRGIN

by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

The New Testament, Luke and Matthew in particular, present the details of the virgin birth in a form which is factual narrative and not clothed in symbolism. *Matt. 1:18-25* Mary, was an important witness in the early Church (*Acts 1:14*); as the Mother of Jesus, it is unlikely that the evangelists would have told her (staggering) story as they did, unless it was true.

Nowhere does the Bible say that belief in the virgin birth is essential for salvation. However those who reject this doctrine usually go on to reject other primary salvation doctrines.

The testimony of Mary herself that she was a virgin. *Luke 1:34-35*

Why would Jesus need to be born of the virgin?

1. It was predicted that he would be born of a virgin and that this would be a sign.
Isaiah 7:14
2. If he had two human parents he would have been only human and not the incarnate God.
3. The virgin birth was the only way to preserve the sinless nature of Christ. In Psalm 51 humans are described as sinful from conception – sin is part of our nature.
Psalm 51:5

Many theologians have taken a position against the possibility of the Virgin Birth. Basically the argument goes like this –

Isaiah is the one who uses a word translated in our Bibles as 'virgin'. Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. In the Hebrew this word can mean a young woman as well as virgin. Young woman was what Isaiah meant

and the child born was King Hezekiah. Only two gospels mention the birth of Jesus at all, because his birth was not important, and they get it wrong by saying Jesus was born of a virgin. The gospel writers knew that Jesus was not really born of a virgin – but they felt it was good to say that he was because it was a customary thing to say about special nationalist figures.

If the Critics are right

The implication is that Mary was telling a lie, and Jesus' father was some lad from Nazareth, or Joseph was telling a lie and he was the father, or the whole church was in on the scam and made it up. But that is not quite the story.

The Church did not make up the idea.

The writings of Isaiah were popular among the Jews who were scattered over the world, following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Many of them were Greek speaking and decided to translate the Old Testament – their Bible – into Greek. This was called the Septuagint. As they translated this verse of Isaiah, they realised that Isaiah was speaking about the Messiah – not just about King Hezekiah. There was no way they would describe Hezekiah like this - *And he will be called **Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.** Isaiah 9:6.* So these scholars, translating into Greek – a very precise language, knew to interpret Isaiah as speaking of a virgin and of the Messiah. They chose the Greek word *PARTHENOS* – which means virgin. This belief was current at least 250 years before Jesus was born or the Church was formed.

The evidence for the Virgin Birth

First, don't be put off by any theologian who tells you that the birth of Jesus is only mentioned in two gospels and therefore is not important. This is a trick of rhetoric and needs to be exposed. In a court of law when the truth is sought they WEIGH the evidence, not count it. The evidence is well placed and documented.

Prophetic Sign

As mentioned earlier, Isaiah's prophecy was linked with Jewish belief concerning the coming Messiah. Their way of interpretation meant that the birth of the Messiah would be a SIGN – or a distinguishing mark. The fact that a young woman had a child, would not be a distinguishing mark - but a virgin birth would be.

The Scriptures and prophecy are consistent – regarding his birth.

Even God's first promise of a saviour in *Gen. 3:15* refers to him being the seed of the woman, not of the seed of a man.

Jesus was called "*Son of Mary*" *Mark 6:3*, a strange title to Jewish ears as the custom was, almost invariably, to refer to a son of a father, not mother.

Eyewitness accounts.

Mary was an eyewitness – the very mother who gave her story to Luke to record. Luke is an expert witness, who is exact and carefully in his writing of history. He was also a doctor and knew what a virgin was and all about delivering babies. So he

records (*Luke 1:26-35*) that the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will give birth to a son to be called, "*the Son of the Most High.*" "*How will this be,*" Mary asked, "*since I am a virgin?*" The angel answered, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*"

The child would be conceived, not by the normal means of male sperm fertilizing a female egg, but by the very Spirit of the Most High God. *Matt. 1:18* affirms this, "*Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together [prior to any sexual union] she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit*". When Joseph intended to divorce her, the angel of the Lord spoke to him in a dream, *Matt. 1:23*

Jesus own teaching.

Jesus died because he claimed he was the Son of God, and throughout his teaching he affirmed that God was his father.

The teaching of the Apostles and Creeds.

The writings of the Apostles all affirm that Christ existed before the birth in Bethlehem. They assert that he was active at the creation. So it was not a 'normal' birth, but a means chosen by God to become one with humanity. This teaching is explicit in all our creeds - Jesus Christ was "*born of the virgin Mary*".

The issue of the virgin birth is important for Jesus, rather than for Mary his mother. It means **He was the earthly child of a Heavenly Father and the heavenly child of an earthly mother!** He was not half and half - half man/half God - He was fully God and fully man, and He was like no other man who ever lived - because His birth was not like any other birth!

Conclusion

Our main reason for believing is the answer Mary was given when she questioned the idea - *Luke 1:37* "*nothing is impossible with God.*" Why should we reject a "miraculous" birth when the Incarnation itself and the Resurrection are also divine interventions?

So, if you want a God who is worthy of worship, let us commend – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has demonstrated humility, love, self-sacrifice and holiness in the virgin birth of his son.

Why does it matter?

- If the Virgin Birth is NOT true – THEN the Word of God is unreliable.
- If Jesus was not virgin-born then he was mistaken about his father.
- If Jesus was not born of a virgin, then He was not the Son of God, but the illegitimate child of a Jewish girl and an unknown man.
- If Jesus was not virgin-born then He would not be the Messiah and fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

- If Jesus was not virgin-born then He could not be sinless – and he himself would need a Saviour just like us. The sacrifice for sin had to be perfect and sinless, and yet one with us to be our representative. If Jesus were not virgin born, we have no Saviour.
- If Jesus was not virgin born, then we are without forgiveness and still in our sins, with no hope after death. But if he was, then it was God himself who died for us on the cross and guarantees our faith.

6. CHRIST IS BOTH GOD AND MAN

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

The Deity of Christ

Jesus from his conception in the womb of Mary, was fully man and fully God. The technical term to describe his nature is *hypostatic union* and indicates one person with two natures. As the Council of Chalcedon stated in AD451, he was fully God without in any way compromising his humanity and fully human without in any way diminishing his Divinity. So, as well as being fully God, he was fully human, with a fully human body, mind, will and spirit.

Jesus claimed to be God. CS Lewis stated that when confronting the claim of Christ to be God, there are only three choices open to us in response to the claim. Either it is true that he is God, or he is mad or bad. All the testimony of his friends and even of his enemies asserts that Jesus was not bad, but was good. He is acclaimed as a great teacher and astounded people by his wisdom.

His family did once claim that he was mad, but this was just an expression of their misunderstanding of him. *Mark 3:21* Later they came to faith in him and gave their lives to serve him. An examination of the evidence shows that Jesus is who he claimed to be.

1. The apostles called him God.

His closest friends recognised him as God and referred to him as God. His disciple John describes Jesus as being God and being always God. *John 1:1*

- John proves that he is referring to Jesus (the Word who is God) as God coming to be among us. *John 1:14*
Again in his letter he asserts that Jesus is God. *1 John 5:20*

- Peter, his disciple, describes him as our God and Saviour Jesus Christ. *2 Peter 1:1*
- Paul in his letter to the Romans says that Christ is God and over all. *Romans 9:5*
Then he goes into further details in his letter to the Philippians to say that Jesus had the essence and form of God. When he became man he did not become less than God but freely chose to veil his glory and take up the role of a servant. *Philip. 2:5-7* Paul calls Jesus '*our great God and saviour Jesus Christ*'. *Titus 2:10-14*
- Thomas, the apostle, refers to Jesus as *my Lord and my God*. Here we see both Thomas saying what he believed and also Jesus accepting the worship that was offered to him as God. *John 20:28-29*

Jesus was God and not just a child of his age.

Jesus is described as Immanuel, which means **God** with us. *Matt. 1:20-23*. Take the example of a world champion boxer. If he deliberately had an arm amputated and then went into the boxing ring with self-imposed limitations - **he would be less than the real champion that he had been**. But, alternatively, he could retain all of his faculties and choose to box with one arm behind his back. In the second option, he would be **constantly choosing a way of being** and behaving that was **not less than his true nature**. While being fully himself, he would be accepting and choosing to act in a limited way.

So it is with Christ. His nature was truly that of God. If any part of his nature as God were removed he would no longer be true to his divine character. The reason he lived day by day choosing to act with limitations was to enable him to become a true servant of God and to win for us our salvation. In particular, he could effortlessly have destroyed those who flogged and crucified him, but he chose not to.

This means that he was not stumbling through life trying to discover whom he was and what he was supposed to do. It means he was not just a child of his day with the limited knowledge and understanding of the people of his day.

2. The Old Testament prophets referred to the Messiah who will come, as God.

In Isaiah the Messiah is described as the mighty God, the eternal Father, (here the word Father refers to a *founder* rather than to one who is a Father by relationship with a son). *Isaiah 9:6-7*

Jesus is the Father of creation or Father of our salvation. The reference is not to God the Father but rather to Jesus as a pioneer.

The prophet Micah describes Jesus as one who will be born in Bethlehem but who has always existed and is therefore God. *Micah 5:2*. The Messiah at the time of his second coming is prophetically referred to as God. *Zech. 14:5*

God invites people to worship Jesus. Quoting the Old Testament the Father is declared to proclaim - *Thy throne O God is eternal*. This is a remarkable verse where God the Father calls God the son, - God!

Heb. 1:8 But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom.

3. Jesus Called himself God.

Jesus claims to be equal with God and the Jews recognised his claim for what it was worth. We are sons of God by adoption – but he is the Son of God by nature. *John 5:17-18*

Jesus claims the honour that belongs to God and explains that no one can even claim to worship God if they do not recognise and worship him. *John 5:22-23*

Jesus claims to be part of the trinity and that he has “All Authority”. Such authority is only available to one who is God, for God is the final authority. Note also that there is a single name for the Trinity – there is unity. It is not in the “names” of ... *Matt. 28:18-20*

The claims of Jesus, such as “I am the bread of Life” are asserting his divine nature. In reality he is saying, “If you are hungry for God, then feed on me.” He is also saying there is no salvation or forgiveness outside of his offer. *John 8:23-24*

Jesus uses the divine name for himself – *ego eimi* (Greek for “I AM”) – and claims that as God he is the only source of salvation. *John 8:58-59*

Again the Jews understood clearly that Jesus was claiming to be God. There was no symbolism or room for misunderstanding. This is why we read so often that they took up stones to kill him as punishment for his blasphemy. *John 10:30-33*

Jesus claims identity with God and says that no one is big enough to take on the power of God the Father – nor his power. This is because the Father and Son are one in power and purpose So again they take up stones to kill him, because they understand his claim. *John 10:28-29*

Jesus claims that those who have seen him have looked into the face of God and that he is the unique truth about the way to the life of God. *John 14:1-6*

Jesus claims to be pre-existent and not just born at Bethlehem. He claims to be eternal – as only God is. *John 17:5*

Jesus claims to be the one who died and is alive for evermore and that he is able to take the titles of God by right – he is the First and the Last, Alpha and Omega. This is a direct quote from the claims of God recorded in the prophet Isaiah. *Rev. 1:8, 17-18; Isaiah 44:6; Rev. 22:13*

4. Jesus acted as God

From birth, he received honour and worship due to God. *Matt. 2:11*. He received the worship of the disciples – knowing that if he were not God, then he would be deceiving his friends and speaking blasphemy. Their worship was focussed on him not merely as a good man – but as God. *Matt. 14:33*

After his resurrection their first response is worship. *Matt. 28:9*

Jesus welcomed the worship of the man he had healed. *John 9:38-39*

Thomas is recorded as wanting absolute certainty before committing himself anew to the Christ who had been crucified. Now after the resurrection, meeting Jesus, he declares that Jesus is “My Lord and My God”. Jesus responds both by accepting his worship as God, and commends him for his discovery and faith. *John 20:28-29*

Jesus consistently encouraged, received and welcomed worship – as God. He also forgave sins. All sin is against God and so ultimately only God can forgive sin. Jesus acts as God in declaring sins forgiven. *Mark 2:5-7*

The Jews recognized the claim that Christ was making. Eventually his considered blasphemy became the grounds for him being put to death. *Mark 14:64*

To avoid the death penalty all Jesus would have needed to do would have been to apologise, and explain that either he was mistaken or they had misunderstood. But he never took a word back – he accepted the consequences of his claims. (When the Jewish leaders took Jesus to Pilate they could not expect the Romans to put Jesus to death for blasphemy as that carried little importance for them. So they suggested to Pilate that Jesus was a threat to Rome because he was seeking to overthrow Rome and set up a new kingdom and that he claimed to be the King of the Jews. It was this charge that was written up over the cross.)

Jesus was also active in Creation – a work of God in eternity past. *John 1:1-3 Col. 1:15-17*

Not only has he created, but also sustains and holds creation in the present. He is the master of the universe – Lord of ALL. *Acts 10:36*

In the Old Testament, God the Father declares that those who wish to be saved need to come to him and bend the knee to him. *Isaiah 45:22-23*

But in the New Testament we are told that it will bring glory to the Father, if we will bend the knee to Jesus – as LORD. *Philip. 2:5-11*

You can bow down now, or you can bow down later – but someday you will acknowledge that Christ is Lord. (This is why we cannot have any compromise in the area of religious pluralism.)

Why does it matter?

- It is essential that we get our understanding of Jesus from the Scriptures because many want to place upon him their own pet philosophies – so he becomes an icon for freedom fighters, pacifists, revolutionaries, etc. Who he is should be affirmed on the basis of his own claims.
- The idea that Jesus was a “child of his age” with limited knowledge and understanding means that anything he taught would be open to question. Whenever he claimed to be teaching the truth, and claimed to be truth – he did not add – “as far as I have been able to discover it so far”.

7. THE DEATH OF CHRIST IS ATONEMENT FOR THE SINS OF THE WHOLE WORLD

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father

The Atonement and sacrificial death of Christ

The apostle Paul said that the atonement was his number one topic. *1 Cor. 1:17- 24*. Without it there can be no Christianity.

Atonement means ‘to be made one again’. It refers to the intimate relationship of God the Father with his human children. That relationship was lost and broken. The death of Christ restored the relationship and we can now be at one with the Father again. Jesus achieved our salvation by taking our place and offering himself as a sacrifice in our place. Peter tells us that it was to take the penalty for our sin, *1 Peter 2:24; 1 Peter 3:18*

Isaiah, Matthew, Paul and the writer to the Hebrews explain that Jesus fulfilled the demands of God’s holiness that we could not possibly meet. As our saviour he took our sin upon himself, and in amazing grace granted his righteousness to us, so that we might be regarded as justified, *Isaiah 53:5-7; Matt. 1:21; 2 Cor. 5:14- 21; Heb. 10: 8- 14*

We need to recognise that there is mystery here and come with a sense of wonder, but also of humility.

Charles Wesley sums this up beautifully in one of his hymns.

*'Tis mystery all the immortal dies, who can explore its strange design,
in vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depth of love divine.*

'Tis mercy all, let earth adore and let angel minds enquire no more.'

Multi-faceted truth

To expose the brilliance of a gemstone, for example a diamond, many facets (sides or faces) are created. The more facets the greater is the brilliance. In a similar way, the death of Christ is multi-faceted. There are many ways of appreciating what he achieved.

The Bible **uses several images** in its explanation of its significance.

It is helpful to take the blessing of each image but to avoid pushing any image to an extreme, or regard it as the only image or most important image. For example, St Mark (10:45) says that Jesus gave his life as a ransom. We understand from this that our salvation involved a real cost (ransom) to him. But it becomes unhelpful to push this image to the point where we are left wondering whether the ransom was paid to the Father, or to the devil, or to whom?

Failure to take this approach has caused some to strongly disagree about the death of Christ, rather than to celebrate, give thanks and worship.

The True Purpose of the Death of Christ is Atonement by Sacrifice

- Christ really died; he did not pretend to die or “swoon and then be taken down alive in secret by his followers”.
- His death was an essential part of God’s plan for the whole human race as the fulfilment of Scripture and all salvation history, not an afterthought or accident, or incidental to it.
- In John chapter 1, Jesus is spoken of as the Lamb of God, referring back to the Passover where a sacrificial lamb was prepared, killed, and its blood spread on the lintel and doorposts of the home of those seeking salvation and protection. The lamb had to be without blemish if its blood was to offer full protection. Jesus is our Passover lamb. We are healed by his wounds. He died for us, once for all. *John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18*
- The justice of God means that he cannot forgive sin unless it has been paid for in full. Jesus has paid in full and satisfied the standards of God's justice and the requirements of a holy God. God can therefore act in love towards us and in doing so he lovingly offers us salvation. He also offers us the gift of freedom, which allows us to accept or reject his offer of salvation. Jesus, being fully human and fully God, was the only one who could do and has done what we should and yet can't possibly do for ourselves, that is, put right our separation from God which is caused by our sin, whether it be collective, social and individual, and restore us to fellowship and unity with God our Creator. He is unblemished and therefore a sufficient sacrifice, and he is human and therefore a suitable sacrifice for human sin.

- His death is the only true, eternal and perfect sacrifice of the perfectly innocent victim to God on our behalf, which is once-and-for-all, and cannot, need not and will not be repeated.
- In his death on the cross, Jesus definitively and completely defeated death itself, the powers of Satan and darkness, and the world of sin. Satan's ultimate banishment is now only a matter of time
- In his sacrificial, atoning death, Jesus takes on all of our sin and cancels it out, as an entirely free gift and act of pure love. And we receive the benefits of this, namely the forgiveness of all our sins, through our repentance and acceptance by faith into our whole being, of what he has already done for us.
- God did all of this out of pure, perfect, self-giving love for us; *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* John 3:16.

Salvation is available to all. Scripture is quite clear that the worth of the Sacrifice of Jesus was of infinite consequence and that he dealt with all evil and the sin which had entered creation. *John 1:29; 1 John 2:1-2; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:1-6*

God's justice and holiness were satisfied and now the offer of salvation can be made to all people.

Why does it matter?

The Results of the Death of Christ mean –

1. God's justice and holiness are satisfied. Sin has not been put under the carpet – but under the blood of Christ.
2. Believers are saved and forgiven. *John 3:16-18*
3. Satan is defeated
4. God's righteousness is demonstrated – the high price was paid. High treason results in a high penalty.
5. God's love was demonstrated in that the Father sent the Son and the Son laid down his life – not for friends, but for sinners.
6. Believers are now a new creation and in a new relationship to God. We are reconciled by Christ dwelling within us. *John 17:21; 2 Peter 1:4; Ephes.5:30; Col.2: 6; 3:3.* His life is also the source of our power for living holy lives.

8. SALVATION IS BY GRACE, THROUGH FAITH

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father

God's free gift of grace

Like the atonement, the doctrine of grace is at the heart of Christianity. Without it, one's beliefs cease to be fully Christian. It teaches that God enters into a relationship with us, and has saved us from our sins and restored us to his fellowship and friendship, entirely by his own initiative and as an entirely free gift of love. God calls us and we respond.

It means that Christians reject any concept of us "earning" our salvation, or salvation as of right. Our 'good works' are an outworking of our faith.

Salvation by grace

One of the best ways to discover the Bible's teaching on salvation is to read the book of Romans. Here St Paul sets out the systematic definition of the Gospel. He explains that salvation is entirely a free gift of God's love, which we make our own by faith in Christ on the following terms -

1. All are sinners

He describes sin as robbing God of his glory. The word for sin means missing the mark and failing to reach the standard that God has declared for mankind. This is a condition and the failure is common to all humankind. *Romans 3:10 23*

2. Sin results in death.

There are consequences for sin and these are described as wages, which have been earned or deserved. The wages of sin is death. *Romans 6:23.*

3. God is the God of love as well as the God of Justice.

God is unable to pass judgment on mankind in some cold and calculating manner. He is the God of love and in his love he wants to save us from the consequences of our sin.

4. We cannot save ourselves.

It is impossible for man to save himself. *Matt. 19:25-26*

Trying to overcome sin and judgment through works or by keeping the law is impossible and provides no hope. The law shows us that we need a saviour and confirms that we are sinners. *Romans 3:20-22*

Galatians is another letter by St Paul, where he explains that if we could have saved ourselves by our own actions then Christ would have died for no purpose. *Gal. 2:21*

5. God has revealed his way of salvation

John records Jesus teaching his disciples that he is the way the truth and the life and that no one can come to the Father except through him. *John 14:6*

The unique character of Jesus is expressed in this quotation from Dr. Phil Fernandes - "*if Socrates walked into a room we would stand in respect for him, but if Jesus walked into a room we would kneel.*" This is because Jesus is not just a great teacher but God himself coming to us our saviour.

John's gospel and Acts explain that there is no other name in which we can find salvation. *Acts 4:12 John 1:12*

6. Jesus has won salvation for us by his death

This is described in the section above on the Atonement.

7. We must trust in Jesus alone for salvation

He did not come to condemn and judge; he came to save. *John 3:16-18*

We need to believe and trust in him. *Romans 10:9*

The word *believe* comes from the Greek, *pistis* and means to trust and rely upon. It is not just intellectual belief that he is a saviour but personal reliance and trust in him as **my** saviour. *John 11:25-26 Romans 3:28*

We are saved by grace and salvation is not available by works *Ephes. 2:8-9*

There are those who say they believe in God but do not believe in Jesus. But if Jesus is rejected so is the Father. The God in whom they trust is not the God of the Bible. Some Buddhists for example, will say they believe in God, but they do not come to him through his son Jesus. *Luke 10:16; 1 John 2:23*

- Those who trust in Christ are described as new creatures or a new creation. 2 *Cor. 5:17*
- They are slaves to righteousness – *Romans 6:17-18*.
- They have been freed to serve – *John 8:34-36*

Jesus deals with the penalty and the power of sin.

8. Judgment

Jesus saves us to Eternal Life, but he also saves us FROM condemnation and hell.

Judgment is Inescapable. *'It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this—judgment'* Heb 9: 27

Jesus not only proclaimed and achieved our salvation, he also announced judgment, and cried out in warning about the consequences of rejecting God's salvation. The tender Lord Jesus spoke more about hell than about heaven, and when he did, he spoke with urgency.

This area of Jesus' teaching is distasteful for many today and so it is disregarded – even though it means deliberate rejection of much of the New Testament. This narrow reading leads to a lack of emphasis on people being accountable to God, and a rejection of the idea that eternal consequences hang on their response to the claims of God upon them.

Throughout the Bible it is accepted that people are accountable to God. Good deeds are commended and evil deeds are blamed. The Day of Judgment is the culmination of the whole process. At the end of this world order God will judge all people and all deeds. Nothing will be excepted; every secret thing, good or bad, will be brought into judgment

We must not think of God's mercy pulling Him in one direction and His justice in another in a way that would make him unpredictable. He acts in accordance with His consistent purpose. And this purpose is one of merciful justice. Judgment and the love of God' are closely linked *Luke 11: 2,4*.

It is a blasphemy when people feel that if judgment were left to them, then they would certainly order things better and they would be kinder and more merciful than God. So it has been that out of a false and misleading sense of kindness that Hell has been taught as unreal and not possible as the creation of a loving God.

It is precisely in the context of judgment that the atonement is to be understood. And if Christ bore such a heavy judgment 'how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?' *Heb. 2:3*.

The Bible has several pictures of hell.

What they all have in common is that

- There will be a separation process – eg Wheat and tares, sheep and goats.
- That hell is eternal, and it is real. *Matt 25:46 Heb 6:2 Matt 18:8*
- It was not created for humans (*Matt 25:41*) but for the destruction of all evil and corruption.
- No one will arrive there without rejecting God and choosing the evil of their own rebellion against his love. *Romans 2:14-16*

Why does it matter?

- All people are living in peril of judgment, because sin has consequences. This means that we are not free to tell people they can continue to live as they do – because God loves them. A loving God calls them to repentance and change. As they do he imparts to them the forgiveness and new life made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus for us. Whether or not they accept God's offer of salvation is the central choice of their lives and is a real and ultimately everlasting choice, of fellowship with God or endless darkness and separation from him.

9. CHRIST UNDERWENT A BODILY RESURRECTION

On the third day he rose again in fulfilment of the Scriptures

The Bodily Resurrection of Christ

This basic belief has come under attack both from within and outside of the Christian community. There is, however, nothing new in this, and there is evidence from the New Testament itself that even St. Paul and St. John found it necessary to combat this profound error of denying the bodily resurrection of Christ

The characteristics of the resurrection of Christ.

- **It was an historic event.**

It was not just a spiritual experience as if he only came alive in the hearts of the first disciples. CS Lewis, who was a professional literary critic, said that before he became a Christian he was aware that the New Testament was not written like mythology. He said it was written in the style and tone of eyewitnesses of historical events.

Matt. 28:1-9; Acts 1:1-3; 2:32; 1 Cor. 15:3-8

Note that this passage from Corinthians was written within about 20 years of the resurrection. The eyewitnesses were willing to die for their belief in his resurrection. They knew that they were not putting forward what was a lie.

- **The resurrection was a bodily resurrection.**

Jesus said his bodily resurrection would be the proof of his authority. *John 2:19-21; John 20:24-29; Luke 24:36-43*

Some confusion has arisen through the teaching of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. The word for body is *soma* – body. When Paul refers to the body as spiritual, he does not mean non-physical, but that it will have transformed qualities. It would be better translated – *it is sown a natural body and raised as a supernatural body. 1 Cor. 15:42-44*

Why does it matter?

The Resurrection of Jesus is an absolute necessity for faith.

St Paul described it as a prime truth – if it is not true then there is no basis to our faith. Not only that we are still in sin and condemned to hell. *1 Cor. 15:14, 17, 56–57*

The resurrection proved Christ's claims.

Jesus said his resurrection would be the key proof of his authority – no other sign would be as great or final as this. He is virtually saying “If you want a sign, kill me, and after three days I will rise to life”. *Matt. 12:38-40*

This sign distinguishes Christ from all other religious leaders or people who have made claims about their powers or identity, as something special. No one else is in this category.

The Resurrection of Christ is fundamental to salvation.

Anyone who denies the resurrection has denied the basis for their salvation. *Romans 10:9; 1 Cor. 15:1-4*, The belief of the sinner needs to be in Jesus – not only in his death for them, but also in his resurrection.

Jesus' resurrection guarantees our resurrection: *John 11:25; 14:19; 1 Cor. 15:22,23.*

10. CHRIST WILL RETURN IN BODILY FORM

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. Creed

The Return of Christ

Peter in his Epistle prophesies that a feature of the last days will be that the return of Christ will be denied, *2 Peter 3:2-10*, even though the teaching of the New Testament concerning the return of Christ is clear and fundamental to the gospel.

He will return to this earth, bodily and visibly so that people will know and be aware. *Acts 1:11*

Christ promised that he would return, and that his departure was to prepare a place for his people – he would then return to take them to be with himself, forever. *John 14:1-5*

The fact of his return is the basis for hope and a comfort for believers who have been through suffering or bereavement. *1 Thess. 4:14-18*

His return will be of a different nature and purpose to his first coming. This time he will not come to die for sinners, but to gather his redeemed. *Heb. 9:28*

His second coming will be open and recognised – with every eye able to see his visible return. *Rev. 1:7*

In a way that we can't yet fully understand, it will involve the transformation of all creation in and through him, cf *Col 1:15-20*, we will then be part of "a new heavens and a new earth" *2 Pet 3:13*

The nature and purpose are seen in the descriptions of Christ. At his first coming he was seen as the Lamb of God, but at his second coming he is described as a Lion. And as a king to reign *Rev. 5: 5 – 6*

WHEN? - No one knows the hour or the day.

Be cautious of schemes and dates –

Acts 1:7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

Mark 13:32 "No-one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

All Christians holding the Apostolic faith believe that he will come Visibly and Bodily.

But believers do differ over details and interpretation of the prophecies and promises. Some believe in the rapture of the saints, which is when believers on the earth are supernaturally taken to heaven, as an event before a time of tribulation. Others believe that the rapture coincides with Christ's universally visible return, after the tribulation.

Christians also differ over their understanding of references to the Millennium reign of Christ. Some see a reign of Christ in the flesh on earth for a period of 1000 years, followed by judgment, while others see references to the reign of Christ as in and from heaven alone and perhaps through the church, so that his return is immediately followed by judgment.

Why does His bodily return matter?

Jesus is coming back as KING.

- The New Testament mentions this on average every 15 verses, while only mentioning Holy Communion in four places.
- It is the major theme of teaching of Jesus, Apostles and Angels.
- It is in our creeds
- It is in the words of Jesus, which we use at Communion.. '*Until I come.*'
- It is first petition of Lord's Prayer. '*Thy Kingdom Come.*'
- It reminds us Christians are accountable to the Lord for what they have done in their lives.

Whatever your conclusions, you should make sure you stay absolutely in love and fellowship with other Christians who think differently.

And what really matters is the wonderful and true hope that Christ's Second Coming gives us; this age of sin, suffering and death is, for the believer, only temporary, will come to an end and is an all-but-brief interlude before the everlasting glory that is to come.

11. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GOD AND HIS LIFE GIVING POWER SUSTAINS ALL THINGS

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

The Holy Spirit is God – Eternal – All knowing – All present – All powerful – Active. He is the third person of the eternal Trinity, one with the Father and with the Son. His name appears as equal with the Father and the Son in the formula for baptism and in some of the New Testament prayers - *Matt 28:19; 2 Cor.13:14*

As the Creed says, He is the "the Lord, the giver of Life". He is the Father's instrument of all creation. He comes to us through his Son Jesus.

You cannot be a Christian without receiving the Holy Spirit.

Romans 8:9-11 And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit, who lives within every Christian, is a Person.

What does the Holy Spirit do?

In the Old Testament

- He was involved in creation - *Gen 1:2*
- He is the source of life *Job 33:4*
- He empowered particular people for particular purposes: Artists, Prophets, Kings, Leaders

But a promise was made of a new experience.

*"I will pour out my Spirit on **all people**." Joel 2:28*

In the New Testament

The Holy Spirit was very active around the birth and in the life of Jesus. He promised that the Holy Spirit would come in a new way. But, still the Spirit empowered only a few particular people – until the Day of Pentecost when the promise of the Spirit was extended to ALL believers.

The Holy Spirit at Pentecost (A special Holy Spirit Day) The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and received:

- New languages, speaking in tongues. *Acts 2: 4-12*
- New courage, shown by Peter. *Acts 2:14*
- New power in preaching and miracles *Acts 2:37-41*

The Holy Spirit today.

1. He will be with us forever - *John 14:16*
2. He lives with us and in us - *John 14:17*
3. He teaches us - *John 14:26; 15:26*
4. He convicts us of what is wrong – *John 16:8*
5. He guides us - *John 16:13*
6. He brings glory to Christ - *John 16:14*
7. He creates fellowship – *Acts 9:13; 1 Cor.12:13; Ephes. 4:3*
8. He helps us pray – *Romans 8:26-27*
9. He brings people to faith – *John 16:12-15; Romans 8:14; 1 Cor. 2:10-14; 12:3*
10. He inspired the Bible - *2 Tim. 3:16*
11. He guides the church - *Acts 13:2,4; 1 Cor. 12:4-11*
12. He security-marks every believer *2 Cor. 1:22*

THE GOLDEN RULES TO REMEMBER

- All Christians **have received** the Holy Spirit
- Not all Christians have been filled with the Holy Spirit. Even so there are no first and second class Christians.
- Receiving or being filled is **significant** - Simon Magus was a magician who saw something significant happen to those who received the Holy Spirit. When Peter and John arrived, they placed their hands on the new converts, and Simon witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit. "Give me this ability!" Simon pleaded, and he offered the apostles money for what he had seen. So significant he offered cash!
- You can be filled with the Holy Spirit at conversion, but for many it is something that happens later after specific prayer.
- The evidences are: The fruit of the Spirit and The gifts of the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. *Gal. 5: 22-23a; Romans 12: 6a*
- The gifts of the Holy Spirit are special gifts for the good of the Church, the body of Christ: *Romans 12.4-8; 1 Cor. 12.1-11; Ephes. 4.11-13.*"
- We can be filled more than once - and we are actually commanded to be filled continuously.

Why does it matter?

Today the Holy Spirit is often ignored, or he is regarded as an impersonal force and not as God. This means some are able to claim some funny internal feeling that they may have is the Holy Spirit at work within them – regardless of what teaching or behaviour they may be claiming to be from the Spirit. We need to establish that He is God, and that he is the Spirit of Truth and Holiness, who delights to bring glory to Jesus.

So we are called to “test the spirits” and only obey the Holy Spirit. *1 John 4:1; 1 Thess 5:21*

12. THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST – SEEN IN ITS MINISTRY AND SACRAMENTS

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Church - *The called out ones*

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

It is the company of all believers in Jesus, and you cannot join it of your own choosing - it is a company of people that God binds together and he adds every Christian to the Church and there are no Christians outside of the Church. *Acts 2:47*

What people describe as the Church is often a building, but the Church is people - the people who belong to Jesus.

1. The Church is PEOPLE WHO BELONG TO A FAMILY.

God has created the Church as a family. We belong to God our father, rather than to buildings.

2. The Church is PEOPLE WHO WORSHIP.

This is something we need, and not a need that God has. He doesn't need people to continuously be telling him what a good person he is. He is not insecure, nor vain. We need to worship to build up our confidence in him and to have a means of enjoying him. It is reminding ourselves of how good and great He is, saying thanks and being glad that we belong to Him.

3. The Church is PEOPLE WHO LEARN.

We need to know about life and death, God and people. We need authoritative answers. We need to have the authority of the Bible simply explained and applied to our daily lives. Jesus says he wants us not to live by opinions but by the TRUTH, and it will set us free.

4. The Church is PEOPLE WHO RECEIVE.

We receive from God in the sacraments. The local church is the place where I can receive and share in Holy Communion, Baptism, Fellowship and the other sacramental signs and means of grace. That means experiencing the love of God in action by sharing in particular events. Besides being a means of receiving, it can also be a means of expressing my love for Jesus. For example in the Communion he says 'do this in remembrance of me'.

5. The Church is PEOPLE WHO OBEY.

Jesus speaking to his church says, 'If you love me, obey my instructions.' We are to be a people who listen to God, discern his will, make decisions and ACT on them. This is the area for faith and obedience. As an individual, I must also be open to God

speaking to me and giving me directions for my life, through the teaching of the local church.

A key point is that the gifts of the spirit need to be coordinated together – nobody except Jesus had them all at once.

6. In the New Testament the CHURCH HAD LEADERSHIP.

There is evidence of local leadership and different styles of administration in the New Testament Churches. Leadership roles included Bishops (Overseers), Elders (Presbyters) and Deacons (Ministers), as well as prophets, apostles, teachers.

7. The Church is not yet perfect.

No member of the Church on earth, nor individual congregation is perfect and in the centre of God's will, because each is made up of forgiven but sinful people. The New Testament Churches had so many problems that most of the New Testament is written to deal with the issues.

8. The Church is the Body of Christ

The Church is the Body of Christ and his major tool or means for bringing in his kingdom. *Ephes. 1:22,23*

9. The Church's mission is to:

- Present the gospel to the world. *Matt.28:18-20*
- Guard the truth *2 Tim. 2:1,2*
- Establish believers as disciples *Ephes. 4:11-16*
- Guard the Fellowship *2 Cor. 13:1-10*

10. The Church is – ONE, HOLY and APOSTOLIC

Jesus prayed that his people might be one. The Church is one and our need is to express that unity – **we are all one in Christ.**

Why does it matter?

- WE NEED to BELONG. If you were to step out of the Church for a period you would discover a cold draft as you were removed from the warmth of the fellowship, and lost any sense of "belonging".
- WE NEED to WORSHIP. Worship is a group activity. God has designed that worship comes alive as we share together. He has also ordered that the sacraments may only be celebrated within the fellowship of the Church.

- WE NEED to LEARN. We learn and are challenged by the preaching and teaching of the Bible, by the life and experience of the local Church and by the seasons of the Christian year.
 - WE NEED to OBEY. It is more difficult to discern God's will on your own. It is also possible to go off at a tangent without the checks and discernment of the local church. Outside of the Church community we can avoid many challenges God brings and thus the need to obey.
 - WE NEED to RECEIVE. We have been able to receive the sacraments, but God has also given us wonderful friends and fellowship to meet our need for reassurance and strength.
 - The Church is itself a sacrament - a means of God being actively involved in our lives, - loving, building and blessing.
 - It is God's Church and NOT ours. (*On this rock I will build **MY** church - Matt 16:18*)
-

THE IMPORTANT IMPLICATIONS of the non negotiables

Belief and Behaviour – Creed and Conduct

The Apostles never give teaching on what we are to believe without also giving instruction about how we are to behave. The implications of the creeds are to be lived out in every day life in the world.

Conclusions Regarding the Unity of the Church.

The Church is meant to reflect the harmony of the Trinity, complete in unity, rich in diversity. Yet soon after the beginning of the Church's growth, divisions began to appear within its ranks. Jesus' prayer for the unity of his followers, *"that they may be completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me"* John 17:21 has never since the very earliest days been fully realised.

The primary truths held in common by the three great Christian traditions (Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism), are:

- **Personal faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.**
- **Submission to the Scriptures as the supreme authority for faith and conduct.**
- **Confession of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381AD.**

1. Organic Unity

- Does not seem possible
- Does not seem desirable - Unity is not uniformity which would mean the loss of many insights and truths
- What is desirable is unity in diversity

2. Unity is Expressed and Experienced

- at grassroots level
- in para church organisations and gatherings
- in enlightened attitudes as people recognise other Christians of different traditions as brothers and sisters
- in enlightened attitudes as people recognise that the truths and insights that have sustained other traditions can have value and meaning for all
- in enlightened attitudes as people avoid false polarisation over paradoxical issues.

3. What has not worked in the past

- forming new "Confessions of faith"
- forming "pure" churches

4. What has worked in the past to further unity

The insight of Anthony Norris Groves was that the basis of fellowship is “Life not Light”. The unity of the church is not something we are trying to create, but something we are trying to express. God has already gifted unity to all his people. Recognising the life of Christ in the fellowship and in the believer should be key.

Though the life of the believer is the key to this recognition there has always been a need to define “what is the nature of the Christian family?” and this requires some creedal statement of primary truths, which are held in common.

5. The Possible ways forward

- There is the possibility of a fresh move of the Spirit through the ministry of Christians of the global south and Asia.
- Christians should have some awareness of how to pray for and work for unity supported by para-church organisations such as Maranatha.
- Christians should continue to work together in social action, in witness to the Gospel and in studying the doctrines of the faith and in Bible Study
- Christians should take the initiative into their own hands at local grass roots level, working towards the interdependence of Churches.
- Recognition that continuity with the past is vital to the Church’s welfare and that changes in the expression of the Christian faith should illuminate and not distort past revelation. *Jude 1: I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.*
- Christians should not only accept one another but also love one another deeply – as Christ commanded. This involves “preferring one another in love” – for example, praying, “Lord bless me, but only if you will bless my brother more.”
- There should be a steady progression from Recognising other Christians in other traditions, through Acceptance, to Fellowship, then Love, and Partnership, to eventually Honouring one another by putting others in first place and desiring their blessing and success before one’s own.

*Romans 12:10 Love each other with genuine affection, **and take delight in honouring each other.***

The Maranatha Community is a movement of Christians drawn from all the major Christian traditions. We include Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and members of the Salvation Army and the United Reformed and Orthodox Churches. We speak for ourselves, but are representative of the views and feelings of many thousands of Christians.

Maranatha Community, 102 Irlam Road, Flixton, Manchester M41 6JT
Tel: 0161 748 4858 Fax: 0161 747 7379 www.maranathacommunity.org.uk