

An Overview of Christian Church History

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FORWARD BY WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM

I originally wrote this document when I was diligently studying church history several years ago. I was intrigued with church history because I wanted to know how the church developed into what we see today. It is during these studies that I realized that church history and Christian history are different. Church history deals with the progression of the Christian church from a religious or organizational perspective. The history of the Christian faith deals with the realization and progressive revelation of God to humans through Jesus Christ.

I am reviewing this study now because I just realized today (May 16, 2011) that I had not posted this on the Pursuing the Truth website. I think that the information in this document can be useful for theological studies as well as church history studies. Besides, it was a lot of work and I figured that I should make it available to others.

- William R. Cunningham

May 16, 2011

INTRODUCTION

What is Christianity? What is promoted and taught in normal church services and Bible studies that are consistent with the truth of the Christian faith? I believe that in order to get a firm understanding of the Christian faith, we need to analyze its history. Why? The history of the Christian faith will reveal the purpose of the church and the true Christian doctrine as taught by those closest to Jesus Christ.

It is true that Christianity is a developing religion. This development, however is more of an acclamation to the times and regions in which it exists. The basic truths of Christianity do not change nor can they. The fundamentals of the Christian faith are the same today, as it was almost 2000 years ago. To illustrate this point consider a typical house. Homeowners may remodel the inside, add components to the house, or fix things up. However, the foundation of that house remains the same. Basic structural components of the house remain the same else it would be a different house. Christianity is similar. The foundation of Christianity is sure though the applications of such changes.

We need to know what the foundation of the Christian faith really is since there are so many variations of the Christian belief. There are many denominations and groups all claiming to be Christians in one way or another. One group claims the others are wrong and vice versa. What is the truth? There are also organizations that are Christian based or have a Christian-like component or feel to them such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholicism, and Free Masons. What is the truth?

The purpose of this study is to paint a picture of the foundation of the Christian faith. I hope that the information presented within will help you to understand the Christian faith and to encourage you to seek for truth even more. I pray that this study will be a blessing to you as it was to me when I learned these things and wrote this document.

I have also included a cursory study of 1 John since it gives us much information about the fundamentals of Christianity. First, however we will begin with a discussion of the church since this is what most people are familiar with. Many Christians know more about the church life than they do of the Christian life. They know more about their church doctrines than they do of true Christian doctrine. The fundamentals of Christianity is foreign to many Christians based on those that I have talked to. It is time that we learn what Christianity is and what it is all about because there, in my opinion, is a move to secularize Christianity and dilute it of its true power and force in the world.

Consider some of the Christian music today. Some are ambiguous perhaps in an attempt to attract both the secular and Christian audience. Though there is nothing wrong with a musician doing

secular music, there is a crossover or gray line where Christianity meets secularism. What used to be considered purely religious music is not so clear anymore when listening to it.

The idea of a Christian sports figure is one who dances in the isles in his or her church and do good things. Many of the church services that are shown on television mimic concerts in the secular community. The point is not that a church service should be one way or another because sometimes people just want to let loose and enjoy themselves even in a Christian gathering. That I believe is fine. The problem comes when Christianity cannot be distinguished from the world. This distinction is not necessarily based on the music, the type of service, or the charisma of a church service. It is however based on the emphasis of the teachings and the service itself. A service that emphasizes "having church" or having a good time is not consistent with the thrust of Christianity. The emphasis should be Jesus Christ and therefore the fundamentals of Christianity, which we will discuss in this document.

THE CHURCH DEFINED

The word church only appears twice in the four Gospels (see **Matthew 16:18, 18:17**)

(Mat 16:18 NIV) And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

The word church in the above scripture comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*. It means a consecrated gathering (calling out), a congregation. In our case it refers to the gathering of Christians.

(Mat 18:17 NIV) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

The word church in this scripture is the same as in the previous.

We should note that the concept of church in these scriptures is not the same as we are familiar with. Recall that there were no Christians at this time, though there were believers (those who believed in Christ as the Messiah). There were no buildings that they met in each Sunday morning to go through various rituals that the typical church goes through today. **The church at the time of these scriptures were simply gatherings or congregations of believers.**

The local church was also thought of as the visible operation of the "church general" in a given time and place. Therefore, the local church (gathering of Christians) is a kind of representation of the entire sanctified body of Christ.

THE CHURCH'S COMMISSION

The great commission of the church is as follows.

(Mat 28:18-20 NIV) Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. {19} Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, {20} and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The commission can be dissected as follows.

1. Make disciples of all nations
2. Baptizing the disciples
3. Teaching the disciples to obey what Jesus commanded the original disciples (the eleven)

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

Look at the following scripture.

(John 8:31 NIV) To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

The word disciple here comes from the Greek word *mathetes*. It means a learner (pupil). Therefore, Jesus instructed the eleven to make students out of every nation (students of the word of God and of God himself in a sense). This discipleship will result in liberty as we learn in **John 8:31-32**.

The first commission means that the disciples of Christ are to spread the gospel message throughout the entire world and to make more people to become followers of Jesus. The disciples are to continue and perpetuate the way of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is a means of identification. A person ceremonially buried with Christ and then raised with Christ. This was demonstrated by the baptism ceremony. Baptism is a rite involving water. It comes from a Greek word that means to immerse in water.

ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

The basic structure of the early church can be traced to the structure of the Jewish synagogue. This is evident especially since the original disciples/apostles were Jews themselves and were accustomed to the synagogue worship service structure. There were some differences that were particular to the Christian faith, as we will see later in this study.

SYNAGOGUE

The synagogue was a congregation of Jews for worship or religious study. The word *synagogue* comes from the Greek word *sunagoge* (an assembly of people). It referred to any assembly or gathering of people for secular or religious purposes. Eventually, however, it came to be specifically associated with Jewish gatherings.

The synagogue was a place where the people gathered for prayer and for the reading and explanation of the sacred Jewish scriptures. The emphasis of the synagogue was on instruction in the Law of Moses. The synagogue was also a place where elementary school children learned to read.

SYNAGOGUE OFFICIALS

There must be ten Jewish men within a community in order to form a synagogue. The following are the officials of the Jewish synagogue.

- **Elders:** devout and respected men of the community who regulated the policies of the synagogue.
- **Ruler of the synagogue:** Attended to matters concerning the building and the planning of the services.
- **Minister:** (chazzan) He had charge of the sacred scrolls that were kept in the Ark; he attended to the lamps; and he kept the building clean. He also administered the number of lashes prescribed for the scourging of someone found guilty by the council of elders. During the week the chazzan taught elementary children how to read.
- **Delegate of the congregation:** This was a capable person, chosen by the ruler before each service, to read the scripture lesson, lead in prayer, and to comment (preach—proclaim) on the scripture. Jesus was a delegate of the congregation in **Luke 4:16-20**.
- **Interpreter:** Interpreted the ancient Hebrew scriptures so that the Aramaic speaking Jews would understand fully.
- **Almoners:** Two or three people who received money or other necessities to distribute to the poor.

ORDER OF SYNAGOGUE SERVICES

The order of the synagogue service was as follows:

1. The reading of the Shema (**Numbers 15:37-41, Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21**)
2. Congregational prayer (led by the speaker). The people stood facing Jerusalem with their hands stretched out. At the close of the prayer the people said "Amen."
3. The reading of the scripture lesson
4. Benediction (if a priest was present) or a closing prayer if no priest was present

THE EARLY CHURCH

The early church met in the Temple and Jewish synagogues, as well as private homes of believers (Acts 5:42).

The early church soon began to meet on the first day of the week in recognition of the "Day of the Lord" (the resurrection of Christ). Note that the early Christians met on the first day of the week and not the seventh as with the Sabbath.

From the above we see that the Sabbath did not carry over to Christianity. Therefore, anyone quoting the Sabbath law in order to force someone to attend church every Sunday is wrong¹.

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE EARLY CHURCH

1. Prayer
2. Scripture readings
3. Breaking of Bread and the sharing of the cup of the Lord's Day (communion)
4. Offerings for the needy were received.

The organization of the church was flexible in the beginning to meet changing needs. After a while, church officers came into existence to facilitate the great commission of the church. These officers included apostles, prophets, evangelists, elders, bishops, deacons, etc.

INSIGHT INTO THE EARLY CHURCH

Let's examine two of the most important scriptures that reveal early church attitude².

(Acts 2:42-47 NIV) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. {43} Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. {44} All the believers were together and had everything in common. {45} Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. {46} Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, {47} praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

¹ This also negates the work of Christ when someone tries to promote the following of the law instead of the Spirit.

² I believe these are two of the most important scriptures revealing early church attitude.

(Acts 4:33-35 NIV) With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. {34} There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales {35} and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

These two scriptures say much about the attitude of the early church people. We can take example from these scriptures and apply it to our lives and our church involvement. It would be a great thing if the church of today was moved as the early church was and focused on accomplishing the great commission.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Church government refers to the organization pattern by which a church governs itself. The early church's government was flexible in the beginning to meet the changing needs of the church. However, as the church became more established, attention was given to specific procedures that would help in accomplishing its mission.

The apostle directed the work of the church in the beginning. Soon seven men were chosen to help in meeting the needs of the people (**Acts 6**). Later, prophets, evangelists, elders, bishops, and deacons were chosen for various functions. Again, all of these were to facilitate in the accomplishment of the great commission to the church.

No single pattern of church government is found in the New Testament scriptures. Therefore, there are many governing methods used by many churches today. These many methods can be grouped into six forms.

1. **Congregational:** The local congregation has the freedom to determine what it considers the will of Christ is. Each congregation governs its own affairs. This does not imply self-governing congregations apart from the Lordship of Christ. Members have the right to determine what they consider to be the will of Christ. This implies a knowledgeable congregation.
2. **Presbyterian:** Recognizes that Christ alone is Head of the Church and that he rules His church by His Word and Spirit. The church officials do not have legislative powers over the church. They declare, explain, and apply Christ's will as the Spirit clarifies the scriptures to their understanding. They do not make new laws for the church.
3. **Episcopalian:** The bishop is the principle officer of the church. Decisions are made at a higher level than the local church.
4. **Roman Catholic:** The clergy form a hierarchy that governs the church with the pope as the highest authority. The pope is the "bishop" of Rome; his decisions are authoritative for the entire church.
5. **National Church Government:** The supreme authority for church matters rests with the state and not the church itself.
6. **Quakers:** reject any type of church ruler or official and almost every form of physical organization. Everything depends on the Inner Light that any believer has the right and power to receive directly from God. They have no specific rules for receiving members. Decisions are made by mutual agreement of the members.

The important thing to remember is that there is no specific New Testament approved church government. The primary objective is to accomplish the great church commission. These forms of government supposedly help to accomplish this.

What are you doing to accomplish the great commission? What is your local church doing to accomplish the great commission? The answer to these questions will give you insight of what you should do next.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

What is the purpose of the church? The purpose of the church is to teach and to make learners of all people. Church was not developed to be a place where people just gather and follow certain rituals as we do today. The church of today, I believe, is far removed from its original purpose. Church is becoming big business where ministers can make lots of money, buy the best cars, homes, and other luxuries at the expense of the congregation.

We have to step up and become Disciples of Christ. We have to take a stand and learn as the early church people learned. We have to know why we believe what we believe and be able to intelligently explain it to others.

Above all, the church has the responsibility of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ so that others can be born again and reconciled to God.

PENTECOST

The church really started at Pentecost. See Acts chapter 2. Recall that Jesus Christ told His disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait there until they were endued with power.

(Luke 24:49 KJV) And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.

Then we find that this actually happened as recorded in Acts chapter 2. The word spread quickly among the Jews gathered for the feast of Pentecost concerning the disciples' experience (the tongues, etc.). Peter preached after some stood marveling and some stood accusing the disciples of being drunk. Three thousand people believed and were saved as a result of Peter's preaching. **The church was born.**

The early church had the following simple activity.

1. **Held to the apostle's teaching** – Thus fulfilling Jesus' commandment to make disciples of all nations. The apostles taught what Jesus taught them, therefore holding the apostles' teaching was the same as heeding Jesus' teaching which liberates because of discipleship (See **John 8:31-32**).
2. **They were faithful in prayer**
3. **Partook frequently of the "Lord's Supper"** – This shouldn't be construed as a rule that all Christians must follow. We should consider that the partaking of the Lord's supper was a way that the early Christians remembered the Lord's suffering and death.
4. **Enjoyed each other's fellowship**
5. **Were on one accord**

Many believed daily (**Acts 4:42-47**). This implies that the Gospel spread. In a short time the church grew to five thousand men (not including women and children).

PERSECUTIONS

The church was soon persecuted for their actions. This persecution started as a personal contempt between people and not necessarily the nation against Christianity (Ex. Rome against Christianity). However, this persecution resulted in the further spread of Christianity to surrounding areas as Christians scattered all over Judea and Samaria.

There were several reasons why the early church was persecuted. Some are listed below.

1. **Jewish Fears** – The growth of Christianity raised fears that this new and rapidly growing movement would wipe out their constituency (following). Some, such as Saul of Tarsus,

honestly thought that Christianity was a perversion of Judaism and opposed Christianity in the name of God.

2. **Roman Political Suspicions** – Some materialistic Romans thought that the Christians speaking of a Kingdom where Christ is the head and rules referred to an overthrow of the Roman government. We must also note that there was a union of religion and state. Therefore, refusing to worship the Roman God's (Caesar for example) constituted treason.
3. **Social Reasons** – Most of the early Christians came from the lower class of society. Therefore they would not participate in much of the social life at that time. Consider that much of the social life in Rome was associated one way or another with some type of idol worship or the like. For example, they wouldn't participate in games where gladiators fought to the death or prisoners being thrown to wild beasts for the entertainment of the crowd. So many early Christians were ostracized socially.
4. **Economic Reasons** – The religious priests (Not to be confused with Aaron and his lineage), idol makers and vested religious interest, could not just stand by while Christianity caused their income to dwindle as people moved away from idol worship to the worship of God. See **Acts 19:22-41** for an example of this.
5. **Religious Reasons** – Christianity was exclusive. It did not tolerate other religions and claimed that there was only one way to salvation, namely Jesus Christ. Christians were also very active in converting people from other religions to Christianity. Also, Christianity was the victim of many rumors since it was secretive (to avoid persecution). Some rumors were that they were cannibals (referring to the communion--eating the body and drinking the blood of Christ), and that they were homosexuals (because of the love they had for each other).

The persecution of the Christians by Rome is probably the best known. Roman persecution occurred in periods of time. Many Christians and Christian leaders died at the hands of the Roman Empire. Some were killed by wild beasts in the theatre at the excitement of an entertained crowd, some were burned, and some were beaten and boiled alive. There were some hideous persecution imposed on Christians but all of this did not stop Christianity from growing. There are some good and bad effects of the Christians' persecution.

EFFECTS OF PERSECUTION

The good outcomes of Christian persecution are:

1. It was believed that it kept Christianity pure because people wouldn't become a Christian simply for economic reasons or status knowing that they would be persecuted or lose their life for their believe or profession.
2. It forced Christians to flee to areas that they probably would not have gone
3. It helped to settle the question of what to include in the canon (the New Testament). Christians would be reluctant to die for something if it were not scriptural. Also, Christians wouldn't waste time in copying or preserving writings that had no value.
4. The apologists developed out of a need to defend Christianity against its accusers and opposers. The apologists produced reasoned defense for the Christian claims.

The bad effects of persecution are:

1. The Christians did not leave many records of their thoughts on the Christian faith or what was going on because they were too busy being persecuted and defending themselves.
2. A major problem arose when those who had gone back on their profession because of persecution, wanted to be reinstated into the fellowship. Some believed that they could

be reinstated into the fellowship while others did not. Some churches were divided because of this issue.

3. Martyrdom began to be thought of as having special atoning merit.

DURING THE FIRST CENTURY

Many events help to shape the early Church and put it on a path to the present age (as far as accomplishing God's will). Some of these events are listed below:

1. Paul begins his ministry preaching especially to the gentiles.
2. The council of Jerusalem established guidelines for gentile converts. See **Acts 15:6-8** for the details of this.
3. Tradition holds that the Apostle Bartholomew preached in Armenia
4. Tradition holds that Andrew preached in the southern steppes of Russia and the Ukraine.
5. Tradition holds that Thomas preached in Persia and India
6. Tradition holds that Matthew preached in Ethiopia
7. Tradition holds that James the younger preached in Egypt
8. Tradition holds that Jude preached in Assyria and Persia.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

Others rose to prominence after the original apostles passed away. These leaders (elders or bishops) are called Fathers ("Fathers in God") because of their esteem that they were held in by the church members. The apostolic fathers were those early Christian writers believed to have known the original apostles or otherwise lived immediately after them. The Fathers can be divided into groups. One such grouping is:

- **Apostolic or Post-Apostolic (AD 95-150)**
- **Apologists (AD 140-200)**
- **Polemicists (AD 180-225)**
- **Scientific Theologians (AD 225-460)**

The fathers can also be grouped as follows:

- Apostolic fathers (2nd century)
- Ante-Nicene fathers (2nd and 3rd centuries)
- Nicene fathers (4th century)
- Post Nicene fathers (5th century)

There are five writings that appear in the original seventeenth century Apostolic Father list.

1. The epistle of Barnabas
2. The 1 epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians
3. Epistles of Ignatius
4. Polycarp
5. Hermas

In addition to these are also the *Didache and Papias*. All of these writings were written before AD 156. These writings are great resources to understanding early Christian thought and practices. It

should be noted however that the apostolic fathers' writings were different from the New Testament writings in that they stressed ethics and not doctrine. They did recognize the authority of scripture and used it extensively in their writings. However, some doctrinal errors did arise even at this early date in Christian history.

CLEMENT

The First epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians was written to give advice on restoring harmony in the church. It was written about AD 95 or 96. It is the oldest extra-biblical writing. There is a second writing that was been attributed to Clement but is commonly believed that Clement did not write it. The writing is called 2 Epistle of Clement.

HERMAS, SHEPHERD OF

These writings, written about AD 140-145, consist of five visions, twelve mandates, and ten similitudes³. These were purportedly revelations.

- **Visions**—Deals with the last days
- **Mandates and Similitudes**—teachings on Christian behavior and principles.

A major theme of the book dealt with a second repentance for sins (after baptism). There was a direct association between repentance and forgiveness of sins and baptism.

IGNATIUS

Ignatius was bishop of Antioch. He wrote letters to various churches concerning unity by:

1. Rooting out heresies that denied the full divine/human personality of Jesus Christ
2. Subjection of church leaders to a bishop

These letters were written about AD 110.

POLYCARP

Polycarp was a disciple of the apostle John. His letter to the Ephesians was the only writing of his that has survived. His emphasis was faith in Jesus Christ. He was not so concerned with church organization as his friend Ignatius.

His church in the writing called "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" recorded the events of his martyrdom. It was written about a year after his death.

PAPIAS

Papias wrote "The Interpretations of the Saying" which is now lost. It was meant to preserve the information obtained from those who had known Christ. Only fragments of his writings appear in the writings of others. These were written at about AD 125.

BARNABAS

The writing attributed to Barnabas stressed that Christians must keep the law. This writing was also very allegorical in nature. It is commonly believed that the Apostle Barnabas (who traveled with Paul) did not author these writings. These writings were penned at about AD 70 and 132.

³ This refers to allegorical writings.

DIDACHE (TEACHINGS OF THE TWELVE)

The didache was a church manual dealing with the following.

1. Christian ethics
2. Baptism, fasting, the Eucharist, etc.
3. Ministry and church government
4. The second coming of Christ

These were written at about AD 110.

USE OF THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The purpose of the apostolic fathers was to exhort and edify the church. They are criticized for not seeming to grasp the New Testament's concept of salvation by faith among other things. We must take note that theirs was not a systematic theology. They dealt with problems that were specific to their day. Their emphasis was ethical and not doctrinal. They do sometimes place much emphasis on baptism, martyrdom, and celibacy as having atoning power.

Use the apostolic fathers' with caution. They provide a minimal sampling of Christian thought at that time. We must also realize that their ideas and thoughts may not have represented that of the majority.

THE APOLOGISTS

People with higher social status began to be converted into Christianity. Notable of this group were educated people in the area of philosophy. Early Christianity was bombarded with many accusations. The apologists rose to the occasion by defending the faith against accusations as well as seeking legal recognition for Christianity.

The apologists used two literary forms in use in the Roman world at that time.

1. **The Legal Speech (apologia)**—delivered before judicial authorities.
2. **The literary dialogue**

The apologists argued that Christianity was superior over paganism and they defended it against various charges.

APOLOGETICS

I think it fitting that I briefly discuss apologetics. Apologetics deals with the defense of the faith. It deals with using reason along with the facts of scriptures to bring someone to Christ. Apologetics attempts to get people past the things that keep them from accepting Jesus Christ.

The significance of apologetics is that it uses reason to show someone the truths of the Christians claims. It does not rely on some mystical faith but on facts. A person is therefore left in a position where they either accept or reject the facts that is placed before them. This is the power of apologetics. It deals with normal human reason to verify the Christian claims.

CHARGES AGAINST CHRISTIANITY

The following are some of the charges against the early Christian church.

1. **Atheism**—Christians refused to worship the Emperor or the Greco-Roman gods. Therefore, the pagan community perceived the Christians as not believing in god (their false gods).

2. **Cannibalism**—This charge resulted from the misunderstanding of the Lord’s Supper. People focused on the fact that the people “ate the flesh and drank the blood of Jesus.”
3. **Immorality**—This charge resulted from the fact that religious services were conducted in secret or after dark and because they demonstrated great love for one another.
4. **Antisocial Action**—Christians had to retire from much of the public life because many public activities were linked to the worship of an idol god. For example Public officials had to participate in the sacrifices to the ruler or Roman goddess Roma, the personality of the state. There were also sacrifices at athletic events or drama.

JUSTIN MARTYR

Justin Martyr was a philosopher who became a Christian. He defended the faith to Emperor Antonius and His adopted son. His focus was Christ and the final authority the scriptures. Justin was martyred at about AD 163.

TATIAN

Tatian was a convert of Justin Martyr. His work “Address to the Greeks” ridiculed almost every pagan practice. He argued that Christianity was superior to Greek religion and thought. Tatian wrote “The Diatessaron” the earliest harmony of the Gospels at about AD 150-160.

TERTULLIAN

He wrote many theological works in Latin and Greek. He became enmeshed in the error of Montanism

Montanism

In contrast to Gnosticism there arose the strict, ascetic teaching of Montanus of Phrygia in Asia Minor. At his baptism Montanus spoke in tongues, declaring that the age of the Holy Spirit had come and that the end of the world was near. The New Jerusalem was soon to come down out of heaven and inaugurate the millennial age. He and his disciples were the last prophets, bringing the revelation of God to the world. Two women, as his disciples, also were known as prophets giving new revelation. Montanus found refuge in the writings of John and taught that he (Montanus) was the mouthpiece through whom the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, was revealing Himself to the world. While being generally orthodox in his doctrine, Montanus taught “that the Holy Spirit continued to speak through prophets, and among these it included women.”²⁸⁻⁷ Because it was the end of the age, the gifts of the Spirit were being manifested.

Montanus emphasized strict moral requirements of his followers and for that reason found a considerable following in Asia Minor. He emphasized fasting and dieting, prohibited a second marriage after the death of a mate, and encouraged celibacy as well as martyrdom.

Although the Council of Constantinople condemned Montanism in A.D. 381, the teaching enjoyed considerable popularity, even converting Tertullian to its teaching.

THE POLEMICISTS

Doctrinal errors in Christianity began to surface as Christian grew. These errors necessitated defenders of the faith and eventually to the formation of the New Testament Canon (the New Testament Books). We will talk about the New Testament Canon in a later part of this study. The Polemicists were the defenders of the faith specializing in refuting errors in Christian doctrine. They used the New Testament scripture extensively in their works.

Let’s identify some of these error fighters or Polemicists.

IRENAEUS

Irenaeus wrote "*Against Heresies*" about AD 185 at Lyons, France, where he was bishop. This writing was primarily aimed at the error of Gnosticism. Very important figure in refuting Gnosticism and the development of the New Testament Canon.

Gnosticism

The name *Gnosticism* comes from a Greek word that means "knowledge," and stresses the character of this heresy. Gnosticism was a philosophical system built upon Greek philosophy that stressed matter was evil but spirit was good. This being the case, God could not have created the material world. In their philosophical system, therefore, the *Gnostics* constructed a series of emanations or aeons, beginning with the highest God who was entirely spirit. One of the intermediate beings in the chain was a demiurge, the God of the Old Testament whom they disliked. This demiurge "had enough of spirit in him to have creative power and enough of matter to create the material world."²⁸⁻⁶

This philosophical system also affected the Gnostics' view of Jesus. There were two differing views: one view was that because matter was evil, Jesus could not have actually come in human form; He only appeared in human form and only appeared to suffer. The other view suggested that the divine Logos came upon the human Jesus and departed prior to the crucifixion. Salvation was also philosophical—it was knowing the truth, which was imparted only to the esoteric (those who are specially initiated). Sin and evil were associated with ignorance or lack of knowledge. A modern form of Gnosticism is Christian Science.

HIPPOLYTUS

Hippolytus also defended the faith against Gnosticism in his "*Refutation of All Heresies*" (written about AD 200). It is said that he was the most important third century theologian. Hippolytus also wrote "*The Apostolic Tradition*" which provides a picture of Roman church order and worship (about AD 200). It deals with baptism, the Eucharist (the Lord's Supper), ordination, and other church activities. He also wrote a commentary on Daniel, which survives today in its entirety.

TERTULLIAN

Tertullian was an apologist and scientific theologian depending on which of his works you focused on. He did much to overthrow Gnosticism. He was greatly opposed to paganism, Judaism, Unitarianism, and Gnosticism. He unfortunately fell to the Montanists error.

CYPRIAN

He was an opponent of Novatianism. Novatian held that once a person lapsed (gave in) during persecution, they could not be restored to the faith by the church. He effectively challenged the authority of the church that was conscious of its unity. Novatus (the founder of Novatianism) held that only God alone could forgive such a sin.

THEOLOGY

The need for a standard theology grew just as a need to defend the faith. Theology *is the study of God and the relationship between God and the universe. It is also the study of religious doctrine and matters of divinity.* There are many types of theology. The following is a list of theological types.

1. **Biblical Theology**—A theology centered around the historical information in the Old and New Testaments. This theology stresses the importance of the Bible's historical texts instead of philosophical understandings.

2. **Systematic Theology**—A theology based on the organizing (systematizing) of the facts gained from Scripture and extra-Biblical text. Systematic theology attempts to present a clear and ordered overview of the main themes of the Christian faith⁴.
3. **Historical Theology**— Historical theology is the unfolding of Christian theology throughout the centuries. It is cognizant of the development, growth, and changes of Christian theology. It examines the formation of the cardinal doctrines about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, the church, and other areas to see how these doctrines have been formulated and how they have evolved⁵.
4. **Dogmatic Theology**—A systematic theology that includes the understanding or confession of a church. It deals greatly with dogmatics, which are those statements and doctrines that were formulated from the Scriptures. This is very similar to systematic theology. However, dogmatic theology is more closely
5. **Contemporary Theology**—Modern thoughts regarding theology
6. **Integrative Theology**—A theological method that is biblically grounded, historically related, culturally sensitive, person-centered, and profoundly related to life. It follows a coherent research method, that avoids callous indoctrination, and that encourages the learner to come to his or her own conclusions and create his or her own commitments face-to-face with the Word of God and under the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁶

We must consider that theology attempts to teach us more about God and to reconcile God with our everyday existence. Each method of theology may stress one or more of these factors within its framework.

How does theology tie in with the church in a Christian's life? Many Christians are exposed to the theology that is presented by a denomination, church, and/or pastor. In an overall sense this may not be bad. However, a personal relationship with God and a personal knowledge and understanding of His word is not obtained with this type of theological disposition. A look at dogmatic theology will show the negative and positive impact of this type of theology.

What then is important? It is vitally important, in my opinion, that the Christian have a personal relationship with God and a working knowledge of God's word as presented in the Holy Bible. Without such, we are not really one with God but with the doctrines of man whether man's doctrine is in complete agreement with the scriptures or not. Our own understanding and revelation of God will not come from the Holy Spirit himself but from the understanding of another person. We must know God for ourselves and theology is a way to accomplish them at least in the realm of knowledge.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THEOLOGY

Is theology necessary for the average Christian? It is not necessary to be a student of theology for salvation and basic knowledge of the Bible. However, theology becomes increasingly significant when we venture outside of the Unitarian belief system of our church group. When we start talking to people from other religions and nationalities, we find that our exclusive church dogmatism is not sufficient. We find that we can't effectively say why we believe what we believe except to say that our church teaches it or our pastor said it.

We will find that the less theology we have the less we are able to deal with real world issues. For example, how would you respond if someone said to you to prove that God exists? What would be

⁴ Christian Theology, an Introduction; Alistar E. McGrath

⁵ Moody Handbook of Theology

⁶ Integrative Theology, Gordon R. Lewis & Bruce A. Demarest

the basis of your actions or proofs? How would you begin to objectively demonstrate to this person that God does exist and to identify the god you are referring? The more we stretch out in our global society the more we will find a need to have a firm foundation on what we believe. This foundation must be on the word of God else we will find ourselves extremely ineffective in our testimonies. Therefore, theology becomes more important to the Christian who stretches out to minister, debate, discuss, or just talk about God and the things pertaining to him.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY

Why isn't the Gospel enough for Christians? Why isn't the fact that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead? The reason is primarily found in the fact that there is more to Christianity than simply becoming a Christian. If this were not so then we could profess Christ and live anyway that we wanted to.

Another reason that the message of the Gospel is not enough is because humans always have "great ideas." There arose many controversies and heresies within the early church that produced a need for a standard theology. Christianity involved more than just getting saved. It involved an understanding of who God is and how he relates to the universe and us. Therefore it was necessary for a theology to be developed so that, theoretically, all Christians would have the same set of standards to refer to.

THE SCIENTIFIC THEOLOGIANS

Society as well as Christianity constantly changed or progressed. Therefore, there arose a need to present the study of God in a manner that was appropriate to the customs and language of the people. This was also a main emphasis for the Apologists. The scientific theologians attempted to present theology in terms of the current mode of thought. They also tried to develop scientific methods of biblical interpretation.

The scientific theologians can be classified in three groups:

- 1) **Alexandrian Theologians**—Alexandrian theology was distinctive CHRISTIAN teachings, which developed in the Egyptian City of Alexandria from the late second to fifth century A.D. Its most famous representatives are ATHANASIUS, CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, and ORIGEN. Alexandrian theology sought to interpret Christian FAITH in terms of PLATONIC PHILOSOPHY and laid great emphasis on the idea of the LOGOS, or eternal word of GOD.
- 2) **Western Theology**—Tended to emphasize the authority of the church and its traditions. Its most famous representatives are Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo
- 3) **Asia and Asia Minor Theologians**—Took a more literal approach to Bible study. Its representatives are Basil the Great; Gregory, bishop of Nyssa; and Gregory of Nazianzus.

Let's briefly discuss the theologians of these categories.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

Clement⁷ was a Greek philosopher who was highly influenced by Plato. His works were very influential in the development of the Alexandrian theology. He emphasized the idea that in CHRIST, the LOGOS of the UNIVERSE, was incarnate. He attempted to reconcile Greek philosophy with Christianity by teaching that Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible both leads to Christ. He used much allegorical interpretation of the Bible in his theology.

⁷ Not to be confused with the Apostolic Father Clement of Rome.

Clement is considered to be one of the inventors of the concept of purgatory⁸. Clement had a very optimistic view of the ultimate destiny of humans. However, he did not hold to the beliefs of the Universalists who believed that everyone would eventually be saved (restored).

Clement also contributed to Christian mysticism. Mysticism is a belief system where people have one-to-one experience with God, which is self-authenticating. Christian mysticism is where a Christian claims that they had a personal experience with God and thus a “word” from God (the gnosis) which is therefore valid and true.

ORIGEN

Origen is known for bringing the allegorical interpretation of scripture to a scientific formulation. The allegorical method of interpretation can be described as a method that is based on the hidden or deeper meaning of scripture than is evident by the literal interpretation. This deeper meaning is only available to the spiritually mature Christian. Sometimes, as with Origen, the deeper meaning is not similar to the literal meaning at all.

Origen believed that the souls of humans are in actuality fallen spirits. This accounted for the sinful nature of humans. He also believed that Christ paid a ransom to Satan during the atonement process and that God’s love would result in a universal salvation of all people by a purifying fire. It should be pointed out that Origen might not have actually believed these things as absolute fact. His followers may have blown things out of proportion teaching what Origen may have been questioning, contemplating, or thinking out loud about. Origen was a biblical theologian.

ATHANASIOS

Athanasius was the champion of early Christian orthodoxy and a chief defender against the Arianism controversy (third and fourth centuries). He also vehemently defended the deity of Christ. Athanasius was periodically exiled for his positions. It is believed that Athanasius wrote De incarnation (“On the incarnation”) in his twenties. This writing was a powerful defense of the concept that God assumed a human nature in the person of Jesus Christ (without losing any of his deity).

This writing was of major importance to the opposition to the Arian controversy. Athanasius argued that if Christ was not fully God then devastating consequences followed relative to the Christian faith. Jesus could not redeem man if he was not fully God because one creature cannot redeem another. Also, if Jesus Christ was not fully God then Christianity is guilty of idolatry since there is much worship and prayer to Christ. These arguments led to the rejection of Arianism.

CYRIL

Cyril (a fifth century theologian) stressed the unity of Christians by the Holy Spirit of God. He also defended the deity of Christ. Cyril also wrote about the problem of the deity of Christ relative to his being a human being on the earth. He was true to the Alexandrian school of thought that Christ existed before the incarnation (contrary to Arianism) and that Christ somehow joined his divine nature with flesh and a conscious soul to walk as a man on the earth. He was still fully God but with a body and soul like other humans.

JEROME

Jerome’s knowledge of languages was unsurpassed in the early church. He wrote commentaries on almost all of the books of the Bible. However, he used allegories when he couldn’t discover the

⁸ Purgatory is a doctrine that teaches that after death souls must be purified before they can enter Heaven. This doctrine was the basis for sale of indulgences and the saying of prayers for the dead.

literal meaning of scripture. Jerome's greatest work was the creation of what was called the vulgate. The vulgate was the translation of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament into Latin (the common language of his day). The Vulgate became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church (The Latin Vulgate also included the Apocrypha).

AMBROSE

Ambrose was another prominent early church Father. His writings represent the official witness of the Catholic Church during his time and earlier. He used an allegorical interpretation of the scriptures in addition to a literal interpretation. He wanted to apply the scriptures to everyday life and thus used allegory to extract the hidden meaning or application of scripture.

Ambrose is known for his contribution of music to the church. He promoted the congregational hymn. He was very influential in the development of the choir and the singing of hymns. His services were very moving to those who came in from the outside due to the impact of the hymns that were sung.

Ambrose also encouraged Monasticism, was one of the earliest supports of devotion to Mary in the Western church, and he promoted the cult of martyrs during his office as bishop. He converted Saint Augustine.

SAINT AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Aurelius Augustinus, AKA Saint Augustine, is probably the most prominent and influential theologian of all times. His teachings influenced a wide range of Christian thought. The chart below shows his influence on several religious groups.

Augustine's teaching	Religious group influenced by the teaching
Emphasis on a personal experience of the grace of God as necessary to salvation	Protestants
Emphasis on the church, its creeds, and the sacraments	Roman Catholic Church
Teaching that the millennium was a period between. Christ's first and second coming, during which time the church would conquer the world	Amillennial and postmillennial theologies
Teaching that man is perverted by sin	Calvinists

Augustine had gone was at one time involved in sexual immorality, Manichaeism and Neoplatonism (heresies of the church).

MANICHAISM was a religion that taught that spirit (good) and matter (evil) is irreconcilable.

NEOPLATONISM was a religious, philosophical, and eclectic movement. It had a strong mystical component. It was attractive to philosophical theologians who wanted a way to reconcile Christianity with the world.

Augustine wrote a lot of theological material. His famous, "The confessions of Augustine" is his own moral biography. His work, "Revisions," is an intellectual biography describing changes in his thought. He also wrote "Concerning the Trinity" and the famous "The City of God" which was in response to accusations that the fall of Rome was due to Rome turning towards Christianity.

Augustine was also the first to develop a philosophy of History⁹.

Augustine was very intelligent and had great intellectual abilities. He was converted (baptized) after having many sessions with Ambrose of Milan and studying the Bible. Augustine was looking for truth and found it in Christianity when he finally gave in after reading Paul's letter to the Romans.

One of Augustine's greatest contributions to Christianity was that he developed theology into an academic discipline. There was no systematic theology before this because most of the Christian writers were defending the Christian faith against false accusations and heresies. Augustine's Christianity did remain ascetic¹⁰. Augustine was an African and was most likely black.

THE GREAT CAPPADOCIANS

Three very prominent theologians of Asia Minor and Syria were from Cappadocia. They were Basil the Great; Gregory, bishop of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. These men were known for their contribution in the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and for the orthodox theological position of the church.

THEODORE

Theodore (350-428) was bishop of Mopsuestia. He was a brilliant exegete¹¹ and he wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible. He used the grammatico-historical and realistic explanations of the Biblical text. This method of interpreting scripture used the ordinary grammatical meaning of the scripture and its historical background. Theodore attacked the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, which was the mode used by the Alexandrian School.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

John Chrysostom was also a proponent of the grammatico-historical method of interpretation of scripture. He did not completely rule out the allegorical method of interpretation that was used by the Alexandrian school. He allowed allegory only when the author of the scripture suggested it. John Chrysostom was an excellent preacher and some 650 of his sermons still remain. His sermons must have lasted an hour or more based on the length of some of his written sermons.

EVALUATION OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

We can find the seed of many, if not all, of Christian teachings that arose later. The following chart lists some of these seed plots.

1. Dogmas of purgatory
2. Transubstantiation¹²
3. Priestly mediation (the priest is our link to God and has authority over the Christian)
4. Baptismal regeneration (Baptism has atoning qualities or that it saves)
5. The sacramental¹³ system

⁹ This thought contends that history is moving towards a final goal, purpose, or destiny.

¹⁰ Religious practices, which lead to the neglect of the body and spiritual exercises which, involve extreme FASTING, FLAGELLATION and other discomforts. Asceticism is characteristic of all forms of MONASTICISM.

¹¹ One who explains the scriptures

¹² The teaching that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ, though they obviously do not change their appearance

6. Allegorical interpretation of scripture
7. Grammatical and Historical interpretation of Scripture (literal interpretation)
8. Mystical interpretation of scripture

The Church fathers also were instrumental in the importance of the church relative to salvation. They also were instrumental in the development of the New Testament Canon and the Creeds of Christendom. We also see the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, the establishment and teaching of the deity and person of Christ, and the nature of the Holy Spirit. The church fathers also answered the persecutions, accusations and heresies that arose in Christianity's early years.

HERESIES

Christianity was also a victim of internal problems as well as external problems. There arose various heresies within the church in addition to the false pagan accusations and persecutions. These heresies include Ebionism, Gnosticism, Montanism, Novatianism, Monarchianism, and Manicheism.

EBIONISM

Ebionists stressed the keeping of the Old Testament law as a way of Christian life. They therefore rejected Paul's apostleship due to his stand on grace as opposed to keeping the law. Ebionism also rejected the deity of Jesus Christ in order to preserve the Old Testament view of monotheism. The Son and the Father cannot be God in monotheism (one god).

Ebionism completely disappeared by about the fifth century and had little or no effects on the church.

GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism created a major problem to early Christianity. It combined elements of Judaism, Greek philosophy, Christianity, and oriental mysticism. Gnosticism was a system of thought that fused revelation with the "wisdom of the world." It appears to have been present during Paul's time (See Colossians 2:8, 18-19, and much of 1 John). Gnosticism seemed to have developed as an attempt to Hellenize Christianity. Greek thought was dominant during the time Christianity began. Some early Christian thinkers attempted to make Christianity more understandable and acceptable to the Hellenistic world.

BASIC TEACHINGS

Gnosticism taught that matter was evil and spirit was good. This introduced the problem of how a good god could create an evil world. There answer to this problem was that a infinite chain of beings emanated¹⁴ from the good God. At the end of the chain was the Demiurge (a god that consisted of some evil attributes). This Demiurge¹⁵ was identified with the god of the Old Testament and he therefore created the world and man. The good God took pity on man in his darkened state and sent Jesus Christ (the highest emanation) to minister salvation to man.

Christ came as an emissary (agent, ambassador) of light to dispel the darkness of man. Christ's death for our salvation was considered unnecessary. Gnosticism also taught that Jesus Christ's body was only an appearance (he really didn't have a body) or that Christ used a body between his baptism and his death.

¹³ Religious rituals or ordinances.

¹⁴ Emanationism—The universe flows from the being of God like rays from the sun

¹⁵ A term used by Plato to identify the Creator of the world

Gnosticism placed emphasis on obtaining knowledge of the good God, which would lead to salvation. Gnosticism was aristocratic in that only a few were born with this intuitive knowledge of the good God. The teachings of Christ would help them to overcome the material world and to give them a communications channel to God enabling them to enter the kingdom of light. Faith and good works could save the ordinary church member. Those outside of the church didn't have a chance to be saved. It was very important to the Gnostic and average church member to become initiated into the mysteries of marriage to Christ, baptism, and other mystical rites of the church in order to attain an experience of God.

Redemption to the Gnostic also included a low esteem of the flesh. Some would punish themselves by extreme asceticism and others gave full rein to the carnal desires of the flesh believing that it was the best way to destroy the flesh.

EFFECTS OF GNOSTICISM

Gnosticism was short lived but it did have lasting effects on the church. Its negative effects were in asceticism and the division of Christians into higher and lower classes (clergy and laity). Its positive effect was that it forced to church to come to a clearer definition of its doctrine and the limits of the canon.

MONTANISM

Montanism was an error arising in the 2nd century. Its leader was Montanus. Montanism was a reaction to the worldliness of the church and the deadness or formalism of the church services per se' or in general. Montanism sought to return to the early fervor and spiritual liveliness of the church. Its reaction to the formalism of the church was the charismatic. Its reaction to the worldliness of the church took the form of legalism.

Montanus preached that the millennium was at hand or eminent and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the preparation of this outpouring. Montanus wanted his followers to be elite spiritual Christians who prepared for the coming of the new age by withdrawing themselves from the world. Montanists also taught that there is a new era of prophecy and the continuation of revelation, which sometimes include ecstasy. They also taught that martyrdom had special atoning powers. Montanism emphasized the ministry of the Holy Spirit, which prompted the ecstatic revelations from God.

The early church condemned Montanism. The church declared that there was no more biblical revelation from God and that special spiritual gifts were no longer in operation

SEED FOR TODAY

We can see the charismatic movement in the teachings of the Montanists. The emphasis of the Holy Spirit and the ecstatic practices can still be seen in churches today. It is interesting that the early church declared that biblical revelation was non-existent. We may think of this revelation as a "word from the Lord." It is also interesting that the early church declared that the Holy Spirit was not operating in the way he was in the beginning of Christianity. This, I suppose, includes such things as miraculous healing, prophecies, etc. However, I must say that though the Holy Spirit may not be moving as he was in the early church, we cannot assume that means that God does not heal or perform miracles. Though they are not a promised part of the Christian faith, they do happen and are no non-existent today. This is the topic of another study however.

We should also note that most of the information that we have about Montanus and Montanism comes from those who opposed him and his movement. Therefore, the facts may be somewhat distorted.

NOVATIANISM

Novatianism developed from the belief of Novatian that a Christian who had submitted to the persecution could not be restored to the church. Novatianism held that the church did not have the authority to restore a “backslider” to Church fellowship. Therefore, Novatianism was opposed to the authority of the church.

MONARCHIANISM

Monarchianism arose out of the Trinitarianists theology and the maintenance of the unity of the Godhead. The Monarchianists held that God was the only person and that the Son and the Holy Ghost were impersonal attributes of the Godhead. That is, Christ and the Holy Spirit could not be considered God in the real sense. Some Monarchianists believed that the trinity represented three aspects or modes of operation of God or a description of God himself. The trinity were not distinct, divine persons.

Monarchianism forced the church to develop a solid definition of the Trinity. The basic problem that the Monarchianists had still exists today. Many struggle with the reconciliation of monotheism and the Trinity. The church showed that Monarchianism was more of a doctrinal error than a heresy. Monarchianism held a Unitarian view of God.

MANICHEISM

Manicheism was a dualistic system like Gnosticism. It held that the kingdom of darkness attacked the kingdom of light (evil attacked good) and that resulted in a mixed creation of light and darkness. Jesus Christ came to help us become purified into the kingdom of light and therefore overcome the kingdom of darkness.

The effects of Manicheism are more profound than its teaching. Manicheism had two distinct groups or classes: The elect and the auditors. The elect participated in the sacraments of baptism and communion, which were celebrated with much pomp. The auditors participated in these rites with the elect in return for providing for the elect’s needs.

Manicheism was an ascetic religion and was very influential in separating the church members into clergy and laity. Manicheism also promoted the belief that the minister is an intermediary between laity and God and that they held extraordinary power with God.

THE CHRISTIAN CREEDS

There was a very real need in the infant Christian Church for a standard or rule by which to measure. We know from the last lesson that the Christian canon was hundreds of years away relative to the first century church. Therefore, a rule of faith developed to help satisfy the church’s need for a Christian standard.

The Christian standard general stated *that Jesus Christ was the son of God, he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and then died. He was buried and rose again, and ascended into Heaven all for the remission of sins.* This rule or creed came to be known as the Apostles’ Creed. It developed into what we currently have at about 750 A.D. Those who were to be baptized were asked if they consented to the apostles’ creed.

There were many creeds that were formulated in an attempt to settle controversies that arose within the church. Some of these controversies tore the church into opposing groups. Some of these controversies dealt with the nature of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the nature of God. The controversies were handled differently in the first and second centuries than in the fourth and succeeding centuries.

THE PROMINENT CREEDS

There are three creeds that have gained prominence in the Christian community: The Apostles' Creed, Athanasian Creed, and Nicene Creed.

THE APOSTLES' CREED

THE APOSTLES' CREED DEVELOPED OVER HUNDREDS OF YEARS TO THE PRESENT FORM. It began in the first and second centuries when the Christians needed some type of doctrinal standard since the canon was not developed yet. The early creeds were first known as "rules of faith." They were the common belief of all Christians. The short form, of what was known as the Old Roman Form of the rules of faith, reads:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ His Only Son our Lord, who was born of the Holy Ghost and Virgin Mary; crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the Father, from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. And in the Holy Ghost; the holy Church; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; the life everlasting."

The apostles' creed developed into the following, which originated from the rules of faith.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

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

THE ATHANASIAN CREED

This creed is named after Athanasius (A.D. 293-373); the champion of orthodoxy against Arian attacks on the doctrine of the trinity. It is more of a statement or conviction than a creed. One drawback that it has is the apparent perceived dogma in that it includes a component of not believing this statement result in lack of salvation. In other words, you couldn't be saved if you didn't agree with this statement. Although Athanasius did not write this creed and it is improperly named after him, the name persists because until the seventeenth century it was commonly ascribed to him. It is not from Greek (Eastern), but from Latin (Western) origin, and is not recognized by the Eastern Orthodox Church today. Apart from the opening and closing sentences, this creed consists of two parts, the first setting forth the orthodox doctrine of the trinity, and the second dealing chiefly with the incarnation and the two-nature doctrine.

Note: When the term "catholic" is used in the following creed, it refers to the true Christian church of all times and all places. It is not a reference to the Roman Catholic Church.

Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith. Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

That we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity, neither blending their persons nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is

another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has. The Father is uncreated, the Son is uncreated, the Holy Spirit is uncreated.

The Father is immeasurable, the Son is immeasurable, the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

The Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, the Holy Spirit is eternal.

And yet there are not three eternal beings; there is but one eternal being. So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings; there is but one uncreated and immeasurable being.

Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty. Yet there are not three almighty beings; there is but one almighty being.

Thus the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods; there is but one God.

Thus the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord. Yet there are not three lords; there is but one Lord.

Just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually as both God and Lord, so catholic religion forbids us to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone. The Son was neither made nor created; he was begotten from the Father alone. The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten; he proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers; there is one Son, not three sons; there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.

So in everything, as was said earlier, we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity.

Anyone then who desires to be saved should think thus about the trinity.

But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.

Now this is the true faith:

That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally.

He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to himself.

He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person. For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human.

He suffered for our salvation; he descended to hell; he arose from the dead; he ascended to heaven; he is seated at the Father's right hand; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. At his coming all people will arise bodily and give an accounting of their own deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith: one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully.

NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed is believed to be the result of the Council of Constantinople (381 AD). The Synod at Nice set forth this Creed.

The Ecthesis of the Synod at Nice.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father. By whom all things were made, both which be in heaven and in earth. Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven] and was incarnate and was made man. He suffered and the third day he rose again, and ascended into heaven. And he shall come again to judge both the quick and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost. And whosoever shall say that there was a time when the Son of God was not, or that before he was begotten he was not, or that he was made of things that were not, or that he is of a different substance or essence [from the Father] or that he is a creature, or subject to change or conversion--all that so say, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.

The Creeds were important because they were the prelude to the canon, which standardized what Christians believe.

THE NATURE OF CHRIST CONTROVERSIES

There were no sure statements concerning the nature of Christ in the early church. This seemed to invite controversies that would challenge the very nature of Christ the Son of God.

ARIAN CONTROVERSY

About 318 Arius, elder of Alexandria, had difficulty in accepting the Trinitarian nature of the Godhead. His problem stemmed from maintaining monotheism in Christianity and maintaining the separate Logos-Christ as an independent being. How could Christ be God and the Son of God in addition to being independent from the Father? Arius therefore began to teach that Christ was different in essence from the father and that He created Christ and before such Christ did not exist.

Arius' teaching had a profound implication to the Christian faith. His teachings basically removed the deity from Jesus Christ within the realm of Christian theology. This therefore negated the saving act of Jesus Christ and rendered it insufficient for our salvation. Athanasius rose to the occasion and stated that Christ was of the same essence of God. He also stated that Christ's death would not have been sufficient for all humans if the attribute of infinity (being of the same essence as the Father) was taken away.

The Arian controversy continued for over five years. Emperor Constantine finally stepped in to resolve this problem. Note that since Christianity was the official Roman religion that unrest within Christianity was unrest with the Roman Empire. Therefore, Constantine wanted to secure peace and harmony within the Roman Empire on behalf of Christianity.

In 325 AD an ecumenical council at Nicea was called by Constantine. Over 300 bishops attended. The Athanasian party won the battle and Constantine put his weight behind them. The resulting creed declared that "*the Son was the same in essence with the Father, the only begotten of the Father, and very God of very God.*" However, the controversy continued for many more years until the Athanasian point of view won over.

CONTROVERSY CONCERNING CHRIST'S HUMANITY

Some theologians had argued the deity of Christ at the expense of his humanity. They taught that a complete humanity could not be sinless and that the divine nature took a place of the higher rational

principle of humans. In 381 the ecumenical council of Constantinople finally asserted Christ's full and true humanity while maintaining his true and full deity.

NESTORIAN CONTROVERSY

There arose another problem concerning the deity and humanity of Christ. The question arose as to how the two natures were related to each other. Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, believed that the two natures were independent of each other. Therefore, the divine nature did not take part in the sufferings of Christ. The consequence of this is that mere humanity died on the cross, which is insufficient for the salvation of all as pointed out by Cyril of Alexandria. It took a linkage between the divine and humanity to sufficiently redeem humans from sin.

This controversy led to the third ecumenical council in Ephesus in 431. The council met and approved Cyril's position before the Nestorian party arrived at the meeting. When the Nestorian party arrived, they set up a rival council. The emperor decided against the Nestorians and Nestorius entered a monastery. It should be pointed out that Nestorius denied believing such views as were accredited to his name. He may have been the victim of slander in the early church.

There was some dissatisfaction with this council since it was not a true meeting of the minds that considered all aspects of the arguments in order to resolve them. Eutychas, abbot of a monastery near Constantinople began teaching that the divine nature and the humanity of Christ were fused together therefore obliterating any distinction between the two. This presented another problem in the controversy. For example, how could Christ have grown in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man and at the same time be omniscient (all knowing)? Growth implies a human nature and all knowing implies a divine nature.

THE WILL OF CHRIST

Another conflict arose after the 2nd Council of Constantinople. Did Christ have only one will or two? Some held that if Christ had two wills then he would ultimately have sinned as any other person would with a human nature. The 3rd council of Constantinople was called to resolve this issue. It decided that Christ had two wills but the human will was subject to the divine.

WORD ABOUT THE COUNCILS

These councils did not settle the respective disputes within the church and among the theologians. They did however standardize basic Christian orthodoxy: Christ's true and full deity and humanity and the true union of the divine and humanity without fusion or confusion.

CONTROVERSIES CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Arius, whom we discussed earlier, also taught that the Holy Spirit was different in essence from the Father, as well as Christ the Son. This teaching eventually led to the First council of Constantinople in 381. It developed a creed that asserted that the Holy Spirit is to be worshipped and glorified as was the Father; that he preceded from the Father; and that he was responsible for revelation. A later council, the council of Chalcedon in 451, made declarations of the 1st Council of Constantinople more explicit.

CONTROVERSY CONCERNING HUMANITY

There also arose controversies concerning humanity.

PELAGIANISM

Pelagius taught that the consequences of Adam's sin only effected him. Therefore, there was no original sin that cursed all of humans from that point on. Sins, he taught, was an act of the will of

which Adam was a bad example. Humans were also created on the same plane or level as Adam and could by themselves live a sinless life. God's grace only enlightens a person's reason to the will of God.

AUGUSTINIANISM

Augustine believed that all sinned in Adam. Adam's sin therefore cursed all humans from that point on. Humans were unable to do good works leading to salvation because of the corrupt human nature due to Adam's sin. Faith to believe was a gift from God and therefore God elected some to be saved and passed by the non-elect according to Augustine. Augustine did elude to some being predestined to eternal damnation.

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CONTROVERSY

Pelagius was concerned by a Carthaginian synod in 412, by Pope Innocent I in 416, by a general council of African churches in 418, and finally by the ecumenical council at Ephesus in 431. This did not mean that Athanasianism won. Athanasius did not put much stock into the external ceremonies of the church, which were common during his day. He denied that the Eucharist had any atoning powers, he denied that asceticism had any value in transforming a Christian's life and he opposed the predominant sacramental method of achieving salvation. Augustine also confused justification and sanctification. To him justification was a process instead of a single act.

A system developed that included the joining of grace and human works in order to achieve salvation.

THE CHURCH CANON

The New Testament scriptures of the Christian Bible are called the canon. The word canon comes from a Greek word that means *rule or standard*. Therefore, the Christian canon is the standards for the Christian faith. In it we can determine what is true or consistent with the doctrines of Christianity as taught by the apostles who were contemporaries of Jesus Christ.

The canon was not hastily compiled but took literally hundreds of years to develop. The canon was developed primarily out of a need of the Christian church. The following are the developments that forced the church to develop the Christian canon

1. Need for a scripture that records the message and teachings of the apostles. The contemporaries of Jesus Christ, the apostles, were dead by the end of the first century. The teachings and message of the apostles were handed down orally. However, the apostles' message became corrupt and conflicting as time passed. There arose a need to establish the message of the Apostles.
2. Need to decide what needed to be read in the churches. The Christian church service, which was adapted from the Jewish Synagogue services, incorporated the reading of scripture to the congregation. There became an increasing concern that the scriptures that were read in the services were truly the word of God.
3. Need for a true standard to answer the heretical canon. There were many perversions, if you will, of the Christian faith. These developed their own canon to support their own beliefs.
4. Need to establish an authoritative truth to answer error and accusations. There became a rise in the idea of revelation from God as in the Gnostic religion. Therefore, there became a need to have a Christian record of the message of God to the people that was mutually exclusive from divine revelation. The church, as a matter of fact, declared that revelations from God had ceased.
5. Need to decide which of many books (apocrypha) claiming to be canonical were indeed false. Many extra-apostolic works began to surface during the first few centuries of Christian history.

Therefore, there arose a need to establish what the true canon or scripture of the Christian faith was.

6. Need to decide which books were worth dying for when possession of such resulted in persecution or loss of life. Persecutions resulted in the need to decide on what the canon would be. There were times (during the persecution in 303 by Diocletian) possession of the canon would mean death. Therefore, it became very important that the canon, which these people were willing to die for, was indeed the true Christian canon.

CANONICAL TESTS

There were several tests used to determine which writings would be included in the Christian Canon. These tests are listed below.

1. Book had to be inspired. This was rather subjective so other tests were needed.
2. Apostolicity: The book had to be written by an apostle or someone very close to them. For example Luke was closely associated with Paul and Mark was closely related to Peter and Paul.
3. Internal appeal: The book had to be consistent with the morals and teachings of the accepted canonical books.

THE ACCEPTANCE INTO THE CANON

The canon developed over a period of centuries as we said previously. The four Gospels and Acts were accepted practically as soon as they were written because they were directly associated with the apostles or someone close to them. It is believed, and supported by archeological excavations, that all of the New Testament books were written by the end of the first century.

EARLY CANON LISTS

The following are a list of the early canon lists up to what we have today in our New Testament.

1. Muratori- A canonical list that included the four Gospels, Acts, the Pauline epistles, Revelation, two (or three) epistles of John, and Jude. It also included the Apocalypse of Peter and omits 1 and 2 Peter and Hebrews and possibly one of John's epistles. This canon has not survived in tact to this day.
2. From about 175 A.D the canon seemed to have consisted of the books that we use today. Clement of Alexandria seemed to recognize all of the New Testament books. Origen divided the books into universally accepted works and disputed works. The accepted works consisted of the four Gospels, the thirteen epistles of Paul, 1 Peter, 1 John, Acts and Revelation. The disputed works consisted of Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, Jude, and four works not now part of the New Testament. Hebrews was disputed because the authorship was uncertain though we credit it to Paul. Second Peter was disputed because it differed in style and vocabulary from 1 Peter. James and Jude were disputed because the authors represented themselves as servants of Christ instead of apostles. Second and third John were disputed because the author referred to himself as an elder instead of an apostle of Christ.
3. Eusebius, a great historian of the fourth century, also divided the New Testament into accepted and disputed works as did Origen.
4. Jerome also accepted the present 27 books of the New Testament in his Latin version of the Bible (the Latin Vulgate). He did include other works that are no longer included in the New Testament.
5. It is believed that a local council at Hippo in 393 spelled out the contents of the canon, which included the 27 books that we now use. The third council of Carthage ratified the previous

declaration of the contents of the canon in 397. The sixth council of Carthage (419) reaffirmed the earlier decision as to the contents of the canon. The canon was settled by the fifth century.

We can see that the development of the New Testament Canon was a long one. It involved divine inspiration, gradual human recognition and acceptance of the separate works, and the official ratification of those works that were accepted.

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTIANITY

This is a basic overview of the Christian faith. It is very beneficial for the Christian to know as much of what he or she believes and why. With the rise of the Mega Church and the teachings on prosperity and God's desire for our life, I feel it is important that we review, and in some cases learn for the first time, the faith that we profess.

I find that most Christians that I have talked to know more about their church's doctrine or what the Pastor teaches than they do of the Bible and the faith that they claim to have. Faith in Jesus Christ is many times replaced with the particular teachings of a denomination or movement. Knowledge of the Christian faith is replaced with the teachings of various principles of success and prosperity. My goal is not to necessarily oppose such teachings, but to enlighten us on the true core of the Christian faith. My goal in writing this study guide is as follows:

1. Promote the pursuit of truth
2. Promote the true meaning of Christianity and what it stands for
3. To promote Jesus Christ as the true head of the church and Lord of our lives
4. To promote the truth of the gospel and the truth of Jesus' teaching over and above church dogma.

I have divided this study into two main sections: Historic Christianity and Religions Christianity. Each section will look at Christianity from a primarily historic approach and then primarily a religious approach respectively. I believe this is important in the same way people want to know their heritage or roots. I believe that a complete understanding of Christianity is not obtainable without this historical perspective.

Part 1 - Historic Christianity

We will first look at Christianity from a historical perspective. This means that we are going to concern ourselves with the actual events that occurred and people from which Christianity is founded. We will also look at those who were instrumental in perpetuating the Christian faith.

CHRISTIANITY DEFINED

Christianity is mostly thought of as a religion. However, I think of Christianity as more than just a religion. We will see my reasoning for this as we progress through this lesson.

Most people will say that Christianity is a religion based on the redemptive act of Jesus Christ and His teachings. I think that this answer is not adequate enough to understand fully what Christianity is and what it is about. For example, one can immediately ask, "who is Jesus Christ?" and "what was the redemptive act?" We will fill these in later in this lesson.

Therefore, one definition of Christianity is: *"A monotheistic religion based on the redemptive act of Jesus of Nazareth¹⁶."*

Christianity is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ along with his actions and teachings. Also important to the definition of Christianity is the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth and his deity.

¹⁶ Macmillan Information Now Encyclopedia of World Religions

Christianity is a historical religion. Jesus was a real man who walked on the earth. Other religions were based on imaginary figures and symbols and heroic stories. We must realize that Christianity was attacked in an attempt to reduce it as a religion based on stories or myths. More on that later though.

Christianity is also a way of life based on the teachings (and interpretations of those teachings) of Jesus Christ.

Let's also look at the word Christian since it is important to our definition of Christianity. The word Christian according to the Holman Bible Dictionary is:

The Greek Christianos originally applied to the slaves belonging to a great household. It came to denote the adherents of an individual or party. A Christian is an adherent of Christ; one committed to Christ; a follower of Christ. The word is used three times in the New Testament. 1. Believers "were called Christians first in Antioch" because their behavior, activity, and speech were like Christ (Acts 11:26). 2. Agrippa responded to Paul's witness, "Almost thou persuade me to be a Christian" (Acts 26:28). He spoke of becoming an adherent of Christ. 3. Peter stated that believers who "suffer as a Christian" are to do so for the glory of God (1 Pet. 4:16). A Christian is one who becomes an adherent of Christ, whose daily life and behavior when facing adversity is like Christ.

THE ESSENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

What distinguishes Christianity from other religions and philosophies? One must realize that Christianity is heterogeneous and pluralistic in terms of its forms of organization, worship, belief, and life style.

The essence of Christianity is the "common denominator" of all of the flavors of Christianity (denominations for example) that have remained relatively constant over the years. We seek to find what this common denominator is and thus hopefully reveal the true essence of Christianity. Paul seems to give us good insight into the essence of Christianity¹⁷. He writes:

(1 Cor 13:13 NIV) And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

It is necessary to read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 to get the context of the scripture shown above. A brief description will suffice at the moment. Paul was explaining how important love in particular was. He said how prophesying and speaking in tongues, to name a few, will some day end. All the immature things will come to an end on that day of perfection (assuming the day of the Lord when we are face to face with Him). We will see clearly the mature state that we were striving too all of our lives. At the present time we can only see partially and unclearly what this mature (perfect) state is. However, of all things only faith, hope, and love remain. He also emphasizes the importance of love.

Therefore, the essence of Christianity can be stated as a system of faith, of hope, and of love, a pattern of belief (and thought), a community of worship (and culture), and a way of life.

Christianity is a system that is based on faith, hope, and love. We can immediately ask ourselves, "faith in whom or what," "hope in whom or what," and "What is love?" The answers to these questions will help our understanding of the defined essence of Christianity as stated above.

Note that Paul states that the greatest of these is love. We should not forget that the salvation preached in Christianity originates or is made possible because of God's love for the world (See **John 3:16**). So love is very important, not only to the Christian faith, but also to the Christian system in general.

¹⁷ It should be noted that Paul's writings are not independent of the teachings of Jesus Christ but originate from them. Therefore Paul's insight into the Essence of Christianity is but a reflection of that revealed by the teachings of Jesus Christ.

A SYSTEM OF FAITH

What is faith in this context? Faith here is not referring to believing God for a new home, new car, riches or any of the things you here in typical prosperity teachings. Faith here is not believing God for healing or anything like that. However, I am not saying that faith in other context doesn't include such things. Let's define faith in the context that we are referring to

Faith is:

1. Loyalty to God based on His prior loyalty to the world and to humanity in general.
2. Confidence that God is trustworthy in truth and love.
3. Dependence on God (the source of all).
4. Commitment to direct thought and action in accordance with the divine word and will of God.
5. Affirmation that certain events and declarations (by divine revelation) are a reliable index to God's will.

The word faith refers to many things as you can see from the list above. I should also not that Christians have affirmed the importance of the act of believing, as well as the content of what is believed throughout its history. With that in mind, let's look at a familiar scripture regarding faith.

(Hebrews 11:1 NCV) Faith means being sure of the things we hope for and knowing that something is real even if we do not see it.¹⁸

This scripture reveals a principle that is very important to understanding the Christian faith and practicing the Christian faith. It is also important to realize that things that aren't seen are not necessarily unreal. Many things that can't be seen are just as real as the seen things. For example, consider radio waves, sound waves, and the wind. We don't see these things but they are nonetheless real. The same applies to spiritual things. The unseen realm is just as real as the seen realm. Faith is therefore a link between the realities of the seen and unseen realms. Faith brings to reality in our thoughts and practices the things that are not seen.

I should also point out that an unseen thing is not an unknown thing. Faith is based on fact! Faith is not blind hope in something. Our faith in Christ comes from the evidence of Jesus Christ. Our faith in what God will do is based on what we learn from his word. Therefore, faith does not imply a "just believe it" philosophy. Faith implies evidence and cause for faith. Consider the following scripture as an example of what I have just discussed.

(Mark 11:22-24 NCV) Jesus answered, "Have faith in God. {23} I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, 'Go, fall into the sea.' And if you have no doubts in your mind and believe that what you say will happen, God will do it for you. {24} So I tell you to believe that you have received the things you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you.

The above scripture usually accompanies the "believe you receive" teaching of the Charismatic movement and others. However, in each of these teachings, verse 22 is usually left out. The teaching usually begins with verse 23. Unfortunately, this undermines the true context of faith. Verse 22 tells us that this true context of faith is **faith in God**. Our faith must be in God and not just faith. If God said it then we can believe it. If he did not say it then we have no grounds to believe it.

An illustration of the above discussion can be seen in salvation itself. The Old Testament (Hebrew) scriptures prophesy about the Messiah, namely Jesus Christ. The New Testament record the teachings and activities of the Messiah as well as his students (the disciples/apostles). Jesus came to bring salvation to all the world, those who would receive it (See **John 3:16** and **Matthew 1:21**). So

¹⁸ Notice that I quoted the New Century Version of the Bible. I have grown to like this version very much because of its wording of the scriptures.

God's word declares the salvation through faith in Jesus Christ and we therefore can believe that our faith in Christ brings about forgiveness of sins and reconciliation of ourselves to God: **salvation**.

THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

Christian belief began with the specification of the person of Jesus Christ. Before there was a coherent structure of Christian theology, Jesus Christ was seen as God and worshipped as such. The belief in Jesus Christ was at the forefront of Christian thought and theology. The early Christians believed that

1. Jesus Christ was the son of God
2. That Jesus Christ was divine—He was God in the flesh.
3. That Jesus Christ was savior and Lord

Before there were theologians, apologists, and bishops there was a belief system based on the person of Jesus Christ. The question then is who is Jesus Christ? What do we know about him? Was he a real person or a myth?

First of all let me declare, as does the scriptures, that Jesus Christ was a man who did walk on this earth. The Bible also declares that he was divine (of the same essence as God and therefore was God). Jesus and the Father were indeed one though he was the son of man born of a virgin.

Over the first few centuries various aspects of the person of Jesus Christ were challenged. These included.

1. The actual reality of his existence
2. His deity
3. His relation to humanity and the divine
4. His nature.

We must realize that the person of Jesus Christ was fundamental to the Christian faith as well as the solid foundation necessary for the development and survival of Christianity. Christianity becomes just another religion, philosophy, or cult without the fundament truths of the person of Jesus Christ, which Christianity is founded upon.

Therefore, knowledge of Jesus Christ is fundamental to the understanding of Christianity and all Christians should pursue and become very familiar with this truth, namely Jesus Christ (see **John 14:6**).

SUMMARY

Christianity is more than a religion. It is not based on human thought or philosophies. It is not based on the dogma of men nor the teachings in churches and denominations. Christianity is a way. It is a way of life and a way of living. It is based on the fundamental truth of Jesus Christ. Paul says it best when he stated,

(1 Corinthians 15:3-5 NKJV) For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, {4} and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, {5} and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

Jesus Christ was born of a virgin, lived on the earth, taught concerning the Kingdom of God, performed miracles, healed the sick, demonstrated the authority of God, was crucified, died, was raised from the dead by the power of God, and ascended into heaven.

One very important aspect of the person of Jesus Christ, as it relates to Christianity, is his activities and teachings while he ministered on the Earth. Also crucial to the Christian faith is faith in Jesus

Christ. There is no Christianity without Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is at the center and is the core of the Christian faith. In the next lesson we examine the person of Jesus Christ.

1 JOHN—THE FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTIANITY

By William R. Cunningham

November 1998

BACKGROUND

Author: Accepted since early church history that the author of this epistle is John the Apostle.

Date: Believed to be the latter part of the 1st Century. John was the last of the disciples (apostles) living at this time.

There were many false teachers within the church during this time (1st Century). These teachers introduced their own ideas of Christianity, which originated from the growing philosophical climate. A lack of love for fellow believers was also typical of false teachers.

1. The false teachers separated those who deceivingly followed them from the true fellowship of believers.
2. They were also harsh towards anyone who rejected their new teachings.

Confusion arose within the church regarding which teaching was correct. John, using his authority as an Apostle and eyewitness of Christ, wrote to settle the matter.

John may have been attacking the early stages of Gnosticism. Gnosticism held a dualistic approach to theology. They believed that:

1. Matter is evil
2. Spirit is good

The consequences of this is as follows:

1. The reconciliation of the humanity of Jesus Christ was compromised
 - a. Jesus didn't really have a physical body. He only appeared to have a body.
 - b. The Christ spirit came upon Jesus immediately after his baptism and departed right before his death on the cross.
2. The consequences of Sin was compromised
 - a. The body had to be treated harshly (asceticism). See Col 2:21-23. This introduced an alternate way of handling sin in a person's life. Instead of relying on the forgiveness and transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the practitioners relied on religious acts to keep their flesh under control.
 - b. Sin committed in the body didn't matter since it was independent from the spirit, which was good.

Consider that it has been more than about fifty years since Jesus Christ walked on the Earth. The evidence of the reality of Jesus Christ, His teachings, and who He was rested in the testimony of the Apostles. It is important to realize that Christianity is a historical religion. It is based on historical facts and events. Therefore, the eyewitness testimonies of the apostles and others that witnessed Jesus Christ's ministry on Earth were crucial for the establishment of the validity of the Christian faith. Without this historical component of Christianity, it would become another religion based on stories and the ideas and ideals of men.

Christianity was a very young religion at this time. It was being attacked from all sides and within (as it is even today). The social pressures from Rome and the gentile society effected the early

Christians as well as the Jewish nation. Philosophical ways began to develop resulting in “alternate Christianity.” This led to one of the greatest threat in early Christianity known as Gnosticism, which was based on a knowing or transcending knowledge.

THE CORE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The heart of early Christianity was the person of Jesus Christ. This included the deity of Jesus Christ as well as his humanity. The Christians held sacred the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) because of its prophecies of the Messiah and the link of Christians to the people of God. The early Christians also held sacred the epistles of Paul and eventually the canon (our New Testament). There were other extra-biblical writings as well.

However, at the center of Christianity were the person, teaching, ministry, activity, and validity of Jesus Christ. Christianity did not arise out of a new way of doing things or the development of a new God. Its core was the person of Jesus Christ. Before there was a standardized or established Christian theology, there was Jesus Christ. Christian Theology, for the most part, developed out of a need to defend the person of Jesus Christ from various pagan and inner-Christian attacks.

Therefore, Christianity without Christ is not Christianity at all. A life without Christ is not the life of a true Christian. One may attend church each day of the week but that doesn’t preclude the necessity of a life in Christ and knowledge of him. Christianity must include Jesus Christ at its center.

THE DEITY OF JESUS CHRIST (1:1-4)

It must be understood that there were many that opposed the fact that Jesus was indeed deity. There were disputes for centuries regarding the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. Many of these disputes or oppositions took the form of false teachings within the church. The History of Christianity and the church reveal that there were people who believed that:

1. Jesus was not really human in the strict sense
2. Jesus was not deity
3. Jesus Christ was an imaginary figure that the Christian religion was based on.

John establishes the deity of Jesus Christ by the following statements.

1. “Was from the beginning”
2. “Word of life”
3. “Was with the Father”

“Was in the beginning” in verse 1 can be interpreted two different ways.

1. It refers to the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel
2. It refers to the pre-existent Christ

It seems consistent among the sources that I have used regarding the above that “Was in the beginning” refers to the same “beginning” as in the Gospel of John 1:1. This eludes to the pre-existent Christ and thus his deity.

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS CHRIST

Again it must be realized that the reality of the existence of Jesus Christ was frequently under attack. Was he a real person who actually walked on the Earth? Was he indeed a historical figure? These were the questions that many people had and that many false teachers fed upon in their errors concerning the reality of Jesus Christ. John declares that:

1. “We have heard”

2. "We have seen"
3. "Our hands have handled"

He basically gives evidence that Jesus was actually a living person on the Earth and not a fantasy or myth as some would suppose. The crucial thing is that they handled him (touched him).

John wants his preaching to result in people who would be in fellowship with himself who in turn is in fellowship with God and Jesus Christ. Note the inclusion of "His son" in verse 3. This further establishes the deity of Jesus and His relationship with God the Father.

Fellowship: Implies intimacy. It means communion, close relationship, participation, sharing.

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

How can we have fellowship with God? Here are some points to consider.

1. Know that God is light and that there is no darkness in Him. This establishes knowledge of the true character and WAY of God.
2. Walk in the light and not in darkness.

Light: Intellectually "light" means biblical truth. Morally it means holiness or purity in relation to God as the standard.

Darkness: Intellectually this means error or falsehood. Morally it means sin or wrongdoing.

Light may be thought of as the character of God and darkness as the character of sinful man.

"WALKING" AND "TO BE"

Walking implies a mode of living or a way of life. Walking upright for example implies that your way of life is upright or consistent with God's ways.

"To be," means that you are a certain way by nature. John doesn't say to be perfect or sinless in the absolute sense because that is impossible of humans. However, we can turn over a new WAY of life that is consistent with and according to God's way--God's character.

Therefore, our values, behavior, attitudes, commitments, outlook, and passions must be in line with God's character—God's way. God's character and way are revealed in the Holy Bible by the inspired writing of men.

Walking in the light doesn't mean a sinless life. Walking in the light means a way of life consistent with God's way. Regarding sin, the blood of Christ has cleansed those who walk in the light.

Implications of true walking in the light as described above:

1. Righteousness by the law is negated
2. Religious actions and protocol prove inadequate
3. Works unto salvation proves inadequate because we cannot save ourselves

Walking in the light is not a set of rules and protocol that you have to follow. I can summarize it by saying that it involves being free in the Spirit of God so that the Holy Spirit guides you. You become so engrossed in the things of God and so sensitive to Him that He influences you in a great way. Your life is therefore consistent with His way, though you may slip and succumb to the desires of the flesh. However, as we said, walking in the Spirit is not a life of perfection.

VERSE 1:9

Confession implies saying the same thing about sin as God does. It means to view sin the way God sees it. It implies fellowship and a mind consistent with godly things.

There were those who taught that Christians transcended sin. Denying sin implied a salvation independent of God. A realization of our sins meant a realization of the true salvation provided by God through Jesus Christ. We do not transcend sin. We need the savior. Without the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from sin, we remain in darkness and impure separated from God the Father.

VERSE 2:1

The ideal way is not to sin. However we do not have a license to sin even though God has taken care of our sins through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the propitiation (appeasement, satisfaction) for our sins. Jesus has paid the price for our sins so that we can be righteous before God.

VERSE 2:2

“The Whole World” This does not mean every individual in the world. This is a generic term that indicates that salvation is available to all in the world though all won’t accept this salvation. See John 3:16.

VERSE 2:3

How can we be certain that we know God? John gives what seems to be a straightforward and simple answer. He says that we know God if we obey his commandments. Does this mean that if I follow the Ten Commandments and the rest of the law then I can say that I know God? No. That would be contrary to what Paul preached concerning the law (See **Galatians 2:16**). First we have to consider the meaning of the key word in this scripture, which I believe is the word “*know*.”

“KNOW”

The Greek word translated “know” here means “grasping the full reality and nature of an object under consideration.” The word know also implies an understanding of or grasping of. Therefore, to know God implies that you understand His ways, He of great reality to you. It also implies closeness since fellowship is included here.

OBEDIENCE AND KNOWING GOD

We also must consider the implications of keeping God’s commandments and even what that mean. Knowing God is not based on obedience but is demonstrated by obedience. Consider what Jesus said in **John 14:15** and **15:10**. If obedience were the basis of knowing God then the adherence to the law would be the mode of righteousness. However, the law cannot make us righteous.

OBEDIENCE AND TRUSTING GOD

Consider this. Most people will do what their doctors tell them because they believe that the doctor knows what is best for them and is telling them something that will be beneficial or life saving. Most people will do what they are told by their lawyer for example. They trust that the lawyer knows more about the legal aspects of the situation and is therefore looking out for their best interest. Why do we do what they say? We trust them! We obey these and others because we trust them. Why then should we obey God? We obey God because we trust Him. We believe that God loves us and looks out for us. We believe, or should believe, that God is on our side and what he says will be good for us. Therefore, we do what he says because we trust him and love him.

LOVE AND TRUSTING GOD

So what does loving God have to do with trusting him. We must consider what it means to love God. Our definition of love is to have affection for someone, to be intimately concerned about a person’s well being, to personally care about someone, or to be infatuated by someone. However, this

definition does not neatly transfer over to our relationship to God. For example, how can we be concerned for the well being of God? How can we care about God? Therefore, our love for God must be something else.

Our love for God is closely linked to our trust in God. Our love for God is based on the reality of Him in our own lives. To love God means that He is the most important thing in your life. To love God means that you are committed to doing His will. To love God means that you are committed to obey him. We love God because he first loved us. Our love for God is also out of response to his love for us. We cannot love on our own. The love for God that we have is powered by the love of God that is in us.

KNOWING GOD

Now we can say with a good degree of confidence that to know God is to obey God. We can't say that we know God if we don't do what he says, which implies trusting and loving Him. **To know God is to love God, to trust God, and therefore, to obey God.**

VERSES 2:4-6

How can we discern if others know God? A hit can be found in what Jesus taught in **Matthew 7:15-20**. We can look at the fruits of a person. What does a person produce: life or death, good or evil? How does a person consistently conduct himself or herself: according to the world or according to God's word? To keep God's commandments can be understood as living your life according to God's way.

Notice the correlation of the love of God and obeying him in verse 5. This follows our discussion above about obedience, trust, and the love of God. Also note that John correlates obeying God's teaching with knowing Him. How can we know God's teaching in order to obey them. John gives us the answer in verse six.

(1 John 2:6 NCV) Whoever says that he lives in God must live as Jesus lived.

Notice the phrase "lives in God." This is an implication of living a life bound by God's way. It implies a life that is submissive to the will and way of God. This will and way is seen through the teachings and acts of Jesus Christ. Notice what Jesus Christ said in **John 5:19, 8:28, 12:49-50**.

THE IMPORTANCE OF JESUS CHRIST

We therefore can't know God apart from Jesus Christ. We have to know what Jesus taught and how Jesus lived. From that we can learn how to conduct our own life and therefore be pleasing to God. In the process of this we know God because we know and fashion our life after Jesus Christ. Again we see the importance of Jesus Christ not only to Christianity but also to knowing God the Father.

THE NEW AND OLD COMMANDMENTS—2:7-8

(1 John 2:7-8 NIV) Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. {8} Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

John states that he is not writing a new commandment but an old one. He then states that he *really* is writing a new commandment. What commandment is he referring to and how is it both old and new? John also states that they have heard the commandment from the beginning. What have they heard from the beginning and what was the beginning?

The context here suggests that the beginning was the beginning of their Christian experience. They have heard a commandment from the beginning of their Christian lives. It could also refer to the beginning of the preaching of the Gospel, which they heard.

The message they have heard is most likely a particular Christian teaching. What is that teaching? We will discuss that shortly. This command was also new in the sense that Jesus brought newness to the command. It passed from the Old Testament to the New. It moved or translated itself from the Hebrew religion, if you will, to the Christian faith. Therefore, it can be seen as a new commandment being that it was in a new realm or context—Christianity.

THE MESSAGE HEARD FROM THE BEGINNING

From the context of the subject verses and other scriptures, it appears that the message, and thus the commandment, that John is referring to is the commandment of love. We are commanded to love each other as well as God. Review the following scriptures.

1. 1 John 3:11, 4:21
2. 2 John 1:5,6
3. Matthew 22:39-40
4. Leviticus 19:18

THE DARKNESS IS PASSING AWAY

Refer to the Gospel according to Saint John, which states.

(John 1:4-5 NIV) In him was life, and that life was the light of men. {5} The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

The light has invaded the darkness and as we know from Revelations, the light will prevail. Therefore, the darkness is passing away and being overcome by the light, namely Christ.

One way that we can view this is to think of the light as the kingdom of God and the darkness as the Kingdom of evil or Satan. The kingdom of God will prevail and the Kingdom of Satan will pass away and is passing away.

LIVING IN THE LIGHT—VERSES 2:9-11

Two conditions cannot exist. You cannot live in the light and at the same time hate your brothers and sisters. Let's discuss the terms *hate* and *brother (sister)*.

HATING BROTHER AND SISTER

We cannot take the term brother or sister as literally since that does not involve Christianity at all, though that is a true statement. The backdrop of 1 John thus far deals with fellowship with God and with Christians. Therefore, we should apply the term brother and sister to the Christian faith meaning brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as your blood brother or sister is part of the same family, your brother and sister in Christ is also part of the same family. Therefore, a true born again believer will not hate those of the fellowship i.e., family members. We will love those of the fellowship of Christ—the true Church.

The word hate should not be taken to mean to simply dislike. It refers more to a lifestyle than an instance. There may be people that we really dislike and some we cannot stand to be near or even think about. However, those are simply emotional states that need to be resolved (it is not good to hate in this regard because it has adverse effects on us personally). The hate referred to here deals with your normal mode of operation, the type of person you are. A hateful person, relative to Christian brothers and sisters, cannot be a saved person.

Loving your Christian brothers and sisters is an indication of a saved or regenerated person. If you claim to be saved, live in the light, and yet hate your fellow Christian brothers and sisters then you are not regenerated and therefore not a Christian.

BLINDED BY THE DARKNESS

John states in verse 2:11 that the darkness has blinded those who claim to walk in the light and yet hate their brothers and sisters in Christ. I perceive this to indicate a mode of deception. One cannot be saved in a definitive sense and not experience it or display it in the experiential sense. That is, you can't be regenerated and at the same time your actions and lifestyle do not show it. An example of this principle can be found in the following scripture.

(Matthew 3:8 NCV) Do the things that show you really have changed your hearts and lives.

See also **Acts 26:20; Galatians 5:22-26; and Ephesians 5:9-10.**

The principle here is that those who are of Christ will do the things of Christ. Those who are of darkness will do the things pertaining to darkness or evil. The Spirit produces fruit and if that Spirit, the Spirit of God, is in you then you will produce fruits of that Spirit according those listed in **Galatians 5:22-23**. Those who do not have the Spirit of God and think they are redeemed are deceived and show forth their true nature by the fruit that comes from them. They do not the things that come from the Spirit of God, though a counterfeit may be evident. They do those things that come from the Spirit of this world, the spirit of darkness.

LIFESTYLE

Please note again that we are talking about a lifestyle and/or a mode of operation of a person. We are not referring to individual incidences in a person's life. All have sin and come short of the full glory of God. We all will do things that are not consistent with the Spirit that is in us. However, our general mode of operation is that of the Spirit of God.

An overall view of a person's life will reveal what spirit is on the inside. Jesus reveals a principle in Matthew 7:16-20 that shows us that a person can be known by what they produce. We can know what is in a person because what is in will come out (see **Matthew 12:34-35**).

SALVATION INDICATOR

John seems to imply that the indicator of a person's salvation is the love of the Christian brothers and sisters. This, of course is not an exclusive determinate or indicator since our perceptions of a person are not certain and there are other things that may be involved with a person's behavior. However, the principle is a very good one. Whatever is in a person will come out. If the Spirit of God is in a person because of salvation then that person will tend to do those things that are consistent with that Spirit.

WALKING IN THE DARKNESS

A person who is in the darkness is blinded if they think they are in the light. They are deceived. The only hope for these people is that the light would illuminate their understanding and they would come to that light.

I believe that God will not hide himself from a person to hold back the truth. I believe that if a person seeks God then he will reveal himself even to salvation. There are many people who were saved because they sought God out—not that they knew they were seeking God the Father revealed in the Bible. Some of these people were searching for the meaning of life, the truth God, happiness, etc. In the process, their seeking led them to the true God and therefore the Christian faith.

Walking in darkness is, in many cases, a religious state of deception or a personal state of denial. Religion may have people blinded from the truth by its many traditions and rules thus neglecting the word of God and the way to salvation (See **Matthew 15:6**). Personal denial of the truth is a state where a person does not want to admit that their life is leading them to death. This can also be a

state where a person won't receive the fact that they can't save themselves (this is related to the religious deception).

DO NOT LOVE THE WORLD—VERSES 2:15-17

Here John gives another indicator for identifying the Spiritual state of a person. He says not to love the world and that anyone who loves the world does not have the love of the father abiding within. There are a couple of things we need to define for proper context, which are the words *love* and *world*.

THE WORLD

The word "world" (Greek *κοσμος*) refers to an entity hostile to God (See **1 John 4:4**). The world is a seductive influence that Christians should continually resist (see **John 15:18-19** and **James 4:4**). In other New Testament verses, the word "world" [*κοσμος*] means people (Example **John 3:16-17**). James also revealed this principle in **James 4:4**.

The world is the spiritual system that is opposed to God. The word *world* should not be construed as the physical and material entities on the planet Earth. The world is the system that can direct our affection (love) to those physical and material objects. For example:

(1 Timothy 6:10 NCV) The love of money causes all kinds of evil. Some people have left the faith, because they wanted to get more money, but they have caused themselves much sorrow.

See also **1 John 3:17**.

The following is an excerpt from the Holman Bible Dictionary pertaining to the word "world."

The arena of human activity. This especially pertains to wealth and material goods. "The cares of this world" can choke out the word (**Mark 4:19**). Married persons may be especially troubled over worldly affairs (**1 Cor. 7:33-34**). In this sense, the elder admonished the Johannine community, "Do not love the world or anything in the world" (**1 John 2:15 NIV**).

"The world" can also designate all that is hostile, rebellious, and opposed to God. Paul referred to the effects of the fall on the whole cosmic order: "The creation was subjected to frustration ... [but] the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage" (**Rom 8:19-25 NIV**). The world, therefore, is under the power of "the prince of this world" (**John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11**), "the prince of the power of the air" (**Eph. 2:2**), the "god of this world" (**2 Cor. 4:4**); "the whole world is under the control of the evil one" (**1 John 5:19 NIV**).

LOVE

In this context love means affection and devotion towards something. To love the world therefore means that your affection and devotion is to the world. The world is effectively most important to you. If this is true then you cannot maintain a devotion to God (See **Matthew 6:24**).

ALL THAT IS THE WORLD—VERSE 2:16

John states in verse 16 that the following categorizes all that is in the world system.

1. The lust of the flesh
2. The lust of the eyes
3. The Pride of life

The word "lust" means *having a strong desire or craving for something*.

John further states that these things are not of God. These things pull us away from God and to self and the world.

THE LUST OF THE EYES

Behind the desires of the flesh is the lust of the eyes. The eyes view the things in the world and the flesh develops a desire for those things. First we see it then we want it. Please note that a general desire for something does not mean you are operating under the lust of the eyes or flesh. These refer to a lifestyle. If your life is governed by the lust of the eyes and flesh and not by the Spirit of God then, according to John, the love of God and His Spirit does not dwell in you.

THE LUST OF THE FLESH

This refers to the strong desires of the flesh. This includes sexual desires, and desires for wealth and power. Satan uses the desires of the flesh to entice us away from the godly way of life into a worldly system of living and operation. Those who are of the world want to satisfy the desires of the flesh.

The lust of the flesh therefore refers to the sinful unregenerate state of man. You can see that a regenerated person should not live a life according to the sin nature but of the Spirit of God (see **Romans 8:13-14, Galatians 5:25**).

THE PRIDE OF LIFE

This is the final stage of the lust trio. First you see it, then you want it, and finally you boast about what you have. MacArthur's study commentary¹⁹ states:

*"The phrase has the idea of arrogance over one's circumstances, which produced haughtiness or exaggeration, parading what one possessed to impress other people (**James 4:16**)."*

One cannot love the world and say that the love of God is within. The love of the world and the things in it are not of the Father. Remember that we are talking about the world system and the lifestyle of an individual and not individual events or thoughts.

THE WORLD IS PASSING AWAY—VERSE 17

John states that the world (system) is passing away in addition to the lust thereof. It is interesting that John associates the lust of the world with the world itself. This seems to imply that once the world has passed away then the lust for other things will also pass away except for the lust for God. The world, therefore, seems to entice us, and the lust for the world is induced by the world itself.

Doing the will of God can be perceived as obeying Him. Obedience to God is an indication of love and trust of God.

¹⁹ The MacArthur Study Bible, New King James Version, Published by Word Publishing.