

Core Concepts

*Basic Ideas in the
Gospel of Jesus Christ*

Gary Henry

WordPoints
Louisville, Kentucky
WordPoints.com

Core Concepts
Basic Ideas in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Copyright © 2020 by Gary Henry

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN-13: 978-1-936357-03-1 – Print Edition
ISBN-13: 978-1-936357-04-8 – PDF Edition

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from
The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2011 by Crossway Bibles.
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

WordPoints
12123 Shelbyville Road, Suite 100-247
Louisville, KY 40243

(601) 490-0514

Web: wordpoints.com
Email: garyhenry@wordpoints.com

PREFACE

THE ESSAYS IN THIS LITTLE BOOKLET ARE ON TOPICS OF FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE. The intent here is not to discuss these exhaustively (that would require a much larger book); it is simply to introduce them and emphasize their importance in the gospel of Christ.

Here are the nine topics:

1. <i>Sin</i>	5
2. <i>Grace</i>	7
3. <i>Conversion</i>	9
4. <i>Faith</i>	11
5. <i>Repentance</i>	13
6. <i>Baptism</i>	15
7. <i>Hope</i>	17
8. <i>Obedience</i>	19
9. <i>Congregation</i>	21

Sometimes people are turned off by the discussion of “basic” issues. But it is necessary for us, as Christians, to go back and look at the foundations of the faith, if only to prepare ourselves to talk about the gospel with those who are not convinced of its truth. Even in our own lives, a periodic reassessment of the basic truths can help us see how everything fits together in the overall plan of God’s salvation.

Written for *AreYouaChristian.com*, these articles may be viewed on that website, along with many other resources for studying the how and why of becoming a Christian.

If you’re not a Christian, I pray that your study of the Scriptures will lead you to the point of wanting to become one. And if you are a Christian, I pray that God will bless your desire to “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

Gary Henry – AreYouaChristian.com

SIN

IN THE UNIVERSE CREATED BY GOD, ORDER AND BEAUTY DEPEND ON THE CONFORMITY OF EACH PART TO GOD'S WILL. He created all of them, and when the parts are rightly related to Him, they interact harmoniously with each other and the result is a realm of great magnificence. But what if some of the parts do *not* conform to the Creator's will?

The only parts of the creation that can do that, of course, are the beings that are "personal," that is, the creatures to whom God granted freedom of the will. They alone have the power to choose between obedience and disobedience.

Tragically, however, such a rejection of God's will has taken place. One of the highest personal beings created by God rebelled against Him at some point in the distant past. Known in the Bible as Satan (a name meaning "Adversary"), this powerful being was joined in his revolt by many of the other beings in the heavenly realm (Matthew 25:41; Ephesians 6:12; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). And when God created Adam and Eve and gave them dominion over the earth, Satan tempted them to disobey God also. The account of that is in Genesis 3:1-24.

To make a long story short, the result was chaos. Where there had been harmony, now there was strife and suffering. And even though it was only the personal beings in God's creation who rejected His rule, the rest of the creation was harmed by the rebellion. The world was disastrously disrupted — resulting in a creation that now groans under the burden of mankind's choice and yearns to be "delivered from the bondage of corruption" (Romans 8:18-22).

"Sin" is the word used in the Scriptures to describe this disobedience. The apostle John wrote that sin is "lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). When all is said and done, that is what sin always comes down to. It is not just doing something that makes us feel guilty, nor is it the transgression of whatever social norms that may be in effect. *It is the violation of the objective laws of the God who created us.*

Now, sin is a problem that affects us all. Everybody who lives in the world suffers, at least indirectly, from the damage done by other people's sins, some of which were committed before we even got here. But if we're old enough to discern right from wrong, we have a problem far worse than that: *we are guilty of sin ourselves.* We know that we have disobeyed God, willfully doing things that were wrong. The apostle Paul put it succinctly: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

By God's design, the penalty of sin is "death" (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). We fear it, as well we should. But God had a plan ready to deal with sin and death (Genesis 3:15; John 3:16) — and the Bible is the story of that plan: its growth and development, its historical frui-

tion in Jesus Christ, and the promise of its consummation in eternity, when God has brought the present world to an end.

Of Jesus Christ, the writer of Hebrews said, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery” (Hebrews 2:14,15).

On our own, we would be incapable of fixing the problem of sin. If it took the death of God’s Son to atone for what we’ve done and make our forgiveness possible, that is a gift only God could give. Paul wrote, “For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6-8 NASB).

To a great extent, our appreciation of the gospel of Christ is determined by how seriously we view sin. Those who deny the existence of God and the objective reality of sin will have no use for the gospel at all. But even those who acknowledge God may underestimate the seriousness of sin, at least in their own lives. If so, the gospel will not be to them the life-changing “good news” that it should be.

So there is a great irony that confronts us. The gospel of Christ, if it is true, is the best news in the world — but its joy depends on our swallowing the bitterest medicine of all: the ugly truth that we’ve cut ourselves off from God by disobeying the laws that He designed for our government.

GRACE

SIN IS THE GREATEST TRAGEDY IMAGINABLE. Yet God was not willing to leave us in our lost condition. When Adam and Eve sinned, God already had a plan to rescue them and their descendants. Designed before the world began (Ephesians 1:3,4; 3:10,11) and open to any who would be willing to come back to Him, this plan was based on God's love rather than any obligation on His part. It would be God's *grace* that would open the door to reconciliation and eternal salvation.

Sin "disordered" God's creation, to say the least. The harmony of the creation depended on the perfect relationship of every part to the will of its Creator, and when the human race rejected that will, choosing disobedience instead, the result was strife, suffering, and death. The ripple effect of sin goes far beyond what little we know of it. We see only the edges of the true damage that sin has done, but one thing should be obvious: the only way the *consequences* of sin can be dealt with is to deal with the *root* of the problem. If it was the breaking of the Creator-creature relationship that disrupted everything, that relationship is what must be brought back to normal. And to put it simply, this is what the gospel of Jesus Christ is about: *the restoration of the Creator-creature relationship*.

But to repeat the point we began with, it was by God's *grace* that He provided a way for this relationship to be restored. Having alienated ourselves from God, we could not have repaired the breach. And God, who was capable of repairing it, did not have to do so. He could have remained perfectly just and leave us to the consequences of our wrongdoing. But He chose, in love and compassion, to reach across the chasm and offer us salvation. He did this by giving His Son as a sacrifice that would pay the penalty for our sins, thereby making it possible for Him to remain "just" and still "justify" us (Romans 3:24-26). And it is in the gospel ("good news" or "glad tidings") of Jesus Christ that God's offer of pardon is made known to mankind, an offer that is available to anyone in the world.

The universal offer of the gospel does not mean that its forgiveness is provided automatically or unconditionally. It was God's prerogative to set the terms of our reconciliation to Him, and that is what He has done. In the New Testament, we find that in order to receive the gift of God's grace there are some things required of us — both initially, when we first respond to the gospel (Acts 2:37,38), and also afterwards, as we live our lives in Christ (Titus 2:11-14).

To say that we should be thankful for God's grace is a considerable understatement. The rest of our lives would be too little time to show adequate appreciation. Nevertheless, it is by our actions — our actual *response* to the gospel — that we show our gratitude. Our feelings and

good intentions, although important, are not enough. The real test of our appreciation is whether we've been willing to return to a position of obedience to God, the lack of which was the thing that got us into trouble in the first place.

So God's grace calls for a response, and Jesus ended His Sermon on the Mount with this memorable call to action: "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, *and does them*, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, *and does not do them*, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall" (Matthew 7:24-27).

If we have accepted the conditions upon which God initially forgives our sins in Christ, we live the rest of our lives in continued obedience to the gospel. And one way we can describe the Christian's life is to say that it is *a response, moment by moment, to the grace of God*. No matter what happens, the Christian can always ask himself: "In this situation, what would be the best way for me to show appreciation for God's goodness? What do the Scriptures say?"

And won't that be the true joy of our perfection in heaven? Having obeyed the gospel and submitted to God's (sometimes painful) renovation of our character, in eternity a perfect relationship with God will have been restored to us — and we will respond to His goodness completely and perfectly forevermore.

CONVERSION

A “CONVERSION” IS A “TURNING.” Some of our turnings in life are more radical than others, but none is more radical than when a person is “converted” to Jesus Christ. The difference between the before and after is so fundamental, it can be said that a person has been reborn (John 3:3-6). Paul could even describe it as being crucified with Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

If we wanted to put our finger on the act which separates the old from the new, it would be a person’s baptism into Christ. In Romans 6:4, Paul wrote, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” The “newness of life” is said to be after a person’s baptism and not before.

In the book of Acts, which contains a record of the beginning and growth of the gospel in the first century, we find numerous examples of people being converted to Christ. Starting with the conversion of three thousand people following Peter’s sermon in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-47) and continuing to the other conversion accounts, we find a pattern that merits our serious attention today: *people believed the truth of the gospel, repented of their sins, confessed their faith, and were baptized for the remission of their sins.*

If a person’s heart was not in it, of course, he could go through the motions of doing these things and not really be converted to Christ. But when a person obeys the gospel “from the heart” (Romans 6:17), these are the things that occur when a person turns to Christ.

At the center of any true conversion to Christ is *commitment*. Turning to Christ is a process not engaged in lightly; it involves a determination to remain true to Christ for the rest of one’s life. Jesus talked about it very plainly: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). And Peter wrote, “If, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first” (2 Peter 2:20)

Conversion to Christ can be looked at in two ways. There is a sense in which it is a *present reality*. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul could say that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” But since we must learn how to be like Christ, there is also a sense in which our conversion is a *process*. Think of it in terms of “putting off” one set of clothes and “putting

on" another. For one who has been converted to Christ, it is true that he *has* "put off the old self with its practices" (Colossians 3:9), but he is also commanded to do that in the *present*: "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires" (Ephesians 4:22).

So is conversion to Christ a *fact* or it is a *goal*? It is both. In Christ, we've made a commitment to put away our past, and in that sense we are a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) with a new identity. But we must learn how to live on the basis of that identity. In a manner of speaking, we must learn how to *be* the people that we have *become*. Paul summed it up when he wrote to the Christians in Colossae, "As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him" (Colossians 2:6)

In many ways, those who have been converted to Christ don't have anything that is not also enjoyed by other people in this world. They don't have better houses or clothes or automobiles, but one thing they do have that can *only* be found in Christ: the glorious hope of eternal life.

In the eloquent words of the apostle Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

So if "conversion" to Christ is a "turning," it is a turning of the highest order. It is turning from disobedience to obedience, from condemnation to salvation, from waywardness to faithfulness. Indeed, it is turning from death to life.

FAITH

IT WOULD BE HARD, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, TO OVERESTIMATE THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH. It is so central to the gospel, Paul could describe his righteousness as that “which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:9).

Concerning God, the writer of Hebrews simply said, “Without faith it is impossible to please him” (11:6). And the entire chapter in which this statement is made provides a long list of examples that help us understand how faith works. Having defined faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (v.1), the writer pointed to numerous stories in the Old Testament where people did things *because they trusted God’s promises concerning the future*. Faith, then, is more than belief — it is *trust* in God, a willingness to *depend* on Him rather than on ourselves. It is a courageous quality, one that will do whatever God commands, no matter how dangerous, because it really believes that God will do what He has said about the future.

A breakdown in Adam and Eve’s trust concerning God’s character is what led them to disobey God. Had they never deviated from their trust in God’s love and wisdom, nor begun to doubt that His will was best for them, they never would have gone against His commandment. It was only when the devil had fractured their confidence in God that they were open to the idea of disobedience (Genesis 3:4,5). And today, our own sins come from the same source. As long as we trust God (not only His *existence* but also His *benevolence*), the devil can’t make much headway with us. But once he plants doubts about God in our minds, sin is not far away.

This being true, we should not be surprised that God’s remedy for sin — His “plan of salvation,” if you please — requires us to come back to a position of faith and trust in God. If it was a breakdown in trust that created the problem, the problem can’t be fixed without addressing that issue. To be sure, the trust that God wants us to have is a thing we’ll spend a lifetime learning, but even at the beginning of our obedience to the gospel, God requires that we believe Him enough to trust that Jesus is His Son. On one occasion in Jesus’ life, God spoke audibly from heaven and said to those present, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Matthew 17:5). And Jesus Himself said to a certain group of people, “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (John 8:24).

If we go back to Hebrews 11, that great chapter on faith, more space is devoted to Abraham than any other person. That is not an accident. Abraham is consistently pointed to in the New Testament as “Exhibit A” for how faith works. Abraham believed the truth about

God, but more than that, he trusted God implicitly — even when God’s instructions to him were hard to understand and difficult to carry out. Go back and read Hebrews 11:8-19 again. Then read Galatians 3:6-18,26-29 where Paul presents Abraham as the spiritual forefather of all those today who, by faith, obey the gospel of Christ and begin to live on the basis of faith. “So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (v.9).

In the gospel of Christ, our life of faith begins by *trusting God enough to accept the initial requirements of the gospel*. We must **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 3:18), **repent** of our sins (Acts 26:18), **confess** our faith in the presence of witnesses (Romans 10:9,10), and **be baptized** for the remission of our sins (Acts 2:38). Beginning at that point, we start to learn (perhaps we should say *re-learn*, since children naturally trust their Heavenly Father) to live on the basis of faith, trusting God with every step we take. We learn in the laboratory of life what the prophet meant when he said, “The just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17). Living in this new way is what Paul meant when he talked about the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). In the obedience of faith, our faith shows up in obedience, and our obedience is motivated by faith — each is necessary to the other.

Jesus taught that a part of genuine faith is the willingness to confess it. We must be willing to let our faith be known publicly, rather than hiding it (as if we were ashamed of Christ or afraid to be persecuted for His sake). Jesus said, “I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8,9). So faith may be easy to talk about within the privacy of our own lives, but out there in the rough-and-tumble of a secular world, it can be dangerous. So Jesus calls for us not only to believe in Him but have the courage of our convictions.

As Paul wrote to Timothy, a coworker of his who may have been a little timid, “*Fight the good fight of the faith*. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which *you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses*. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 6:12-14).

Faith is so important in the gospel, both in the beginning of our obedience and every day thereafter, that our lives in Christ can be summed up as being *produced* by faith. We do what we do because we believe and trust the God who is our Father, when it is easy and when it is hard.

REPENTANCE

REPENTANCE IS A CRUCIAL PART OF THE PROCESS THROUGH WHICH A PERSON RECEIVES SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST. It was the gist of the message which both John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1,2) and Jesus (Mark 1:14,15) preached as they prepared people for the coming of God's kingdom, and when the kingdom was inaugurated on Pentecost following Jesus' resurrection, repentance was a part of what people were told to do to receive the remission of their sins: "And Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Later, preaching the gospel in Athens, Paul said, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

In its most basic sense, repentance means a change of heart. It is what happens when a person sees that the way they have been looking at things is wrong, and they decide, with their new perspective, to make the necessary changes. It is, as preachers used to say, a "change of mind that leads to a change of behavior."

Paul wrote that "godly sorrow" is what produces repentance: "Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:9,10). Note that godly sorrow is not the same thing as repentance. Repentance is not a feeling; it is *the change that takes place* when a person experiences godly sorrow.

Perhaps we could put it this way: godly sorrow is what leads to a change of mind, which, in turn, is what leads to a change of behavior. Paul summarized it when he said that he "declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should *repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance*" (Act 26:20).

The danger is that we all tend to see repentance as something other people need to do but not we ourselves. It is the "wicked" who need to repent, and we rarely see ourselves in that category. But Jesus was frank when He talked about the applicability of repentance to *all* of His hearers: "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless *you* repent, you will all *likewise* perish" (Luke 13:4,5). The person does not live who does not have sins he needs to repent of.

The Lord is patient. He will give us time and opportunity to repent, and we should be encouraged by that. In regard to the return of

Christ, after which there will be no more opportunity for repentance, Peter said that one reason the Lord has not returned already is that His patience is still waiting for some to repent: “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

God’s grace — and the patience extended to us by His grace — should not cause us to delay our repentance; it should impart a greater urgency to that repentance! “Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience,” Paul asked the complacent, “not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:3,4).

Indeed, the more opportunity we’ve been given to repent, the more accountable we are for the use we’ve made of it. And by that standard, many of us today are in for a strict accounting. We may be like those whom the Lord rebuked in Capernaum: “Will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you” (Matthew 11:23,24). If there needs to be a change in our thinking (leading to a change in our behavior) but we don’t make that change, it won’t be because the Lord’s call for repentance never reached our ears. In this “information age,” we’ve been presented with enough truth to bring the whole world to repentance. Having been given the opportunity to think better and do better, we will receive no mercy if we fail to use our advantages in the direction of repentance.

Even after repenting and being baptized into Christ, repentance must be a part of our character and way of life. It was, after all, to a group of Christians that Christ said in Revelation 2:5, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” The tenderness of heart that is ready to see where we’ve been wrong and make the necessary changes is one of the biggest parts of our growth in godly character.

Whether we are Christians or we are still contemplating obedience to the gospel, we should be encouraged: there is no damage to our souls that Christ cannot repair. *But He will not be manipulated by fake repentance on our part.* If we expect His forgiveness and help, we’d better lay it all down before Him, with extreme honesty. No exceptions and no excuses will be allowed, and if we have in mind anything other than complete repentance, we’d better not insult Him by saying that we’re “sorry.” In the words of the old saying, “Christ can do wonders with a broken heart if He is given all the pieces.”

BAPTISM

IN JERUSALEM ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST AFTER JESUS HAD BEEN RESURRECTED, THREE THOUSAND INDIVIDUALS WERE BAPTIZED. On that day the apostle Peter had preached a sermon which was the first public proclamation of the gospel following the completion of Jesus' mission and His ascension back to heaven. Before His ascension, Jesus had told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem and not begin preaching the gospel until the Holy Spirit came upon them — and it was on the Day of Pentecost that this happened and the gospel began to be preached.

When the multitude heard the gospel explained to them — and it became obvious that the man they had crucified was indeed the Son of God — “they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37). Peter’s answer was clear and concise: “And Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself’” (vv.38,39).

In the next verse, we are told that “with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation.’” And we can’t help but be thrilled to read the result in v.41: *“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.”*

With this narrative in mind, let’s briefly consider three things about baptism in the New Testament that people today are sometimes confused about:

(1) *Who?* In the New Testament, it was always believers in Christ who were baptized and not infants. The only people baptized were those old enough to repent of their sins and confess with their lips that they believed Jesus to be the Christ.

(2) *What?* Today, people are sometimes sprinkled or have water poured upon their heads, but in the New Testament baptism was an immersion in water, a “burial” that recalled the burial of Jesus following His crucifixion (Romans 6:3-5).

(3) *Why?* As we saw in Acts 2, people in the New Testament were baptized for the remission of their sins. They understood that their sins had not been forgiven until their faith had moved them to obey this command of God (Acts 22:16).

God has designed the gospel of Christ in such a way that baptism plays a key role. We certainly do not earn our salvation by being baptized, but the Scriptures clearly teach that it is in the act of obeying God’s command to be baptized that we participate with Christ in the sacrifice by which He made our forgiveness possible. In baptism we die

with Christ, and the benefits of His death become available to us. Paul put it this way in Romans 6:3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In vv.4,5, he continued, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” This is consistent with what we read in other texts like Galatians 3:27 and Colossians 2:12.

It is indeed *a new life* that we lead after our baptism (Romans 6:4). Baptism is by far the biggest turning point in our lives; it is the line of demarcation separating the old from the new. As life unfolds, we’ll learn *how* to live our new life more consistently, by God’s grace and with His help, but it is at the point of baptism that we *commit* ourselves to the new life. Forgiven of our sins, we rejoice in having been reborn — and we gladly begin living in fellowship with others who have died with Christ and are now living their lives in Him.

I have always enjoyed reading the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40. As they rode along in the Ethiopian’s chariot, Philip had taught him the gospel of Christ, beginning in the prophecy of Isaiah 53 concerning the Suffering Servant. In the course of explaining the gospel, Philip taught the Ethiopian about his need to be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of his sins, because when they came to a body of water, the Ethiopian said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (v.36). In v.38, we read that “he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.”

The next verse says that the Ethiopian, having been baptized into Christ, “went on his way rejoicing.” We know nothing about the rest of this man’s story. It is a fact that today, two thousand years later, there is a large community of Christians in the same region as ancient Ethiopia. Wouldn’t it be interesting to know what role this man played in the spread of the gospel in that part of the world? But whatever happened to him afterwards, what we do know is that his baptism into Christ was the most important thing that ever happened to him.

And the same thing is true today. When we, having repented of our sins and confessed our faith in Christ, are baptized into His death, we embark on a life that is so new that we can say along with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

HOPE

BECAUSE OF GOD'S GRACE, WE CAN HAVE A HOPE THAT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE OTHERWISE. The wrongful things we've done would, if we're honest about them, drive us into despair. The gospel, however, brings us the glad tidings of grace: *in Jesus Christ there is forgiveness*. And the hope begotten by that forgiveness turns us toward the future and away from the past. As Paul said about his own experience, "I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:9,10).

The greatness of the hope offered by the gospel is not the prospect of a more comfortable life in this world; it's the hope of eternal life. In the here and now, the Christian's life may or may not be more comfortable than the non-Christian's, but either way, the Christian's heart is set on life with God in eternity. Paul wrote that those who are in Christ have become "*heirs according to the hope of eternal life*" (Titus 3:7). And John wrote to his brethren, "If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. *And this is the promise that he made to us — eternal life*" (1 John 2:24,25).

Nowhere in the New Testament is this hope more beautifully expressed than in the words of Peter to his beloved brethren: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to *a living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for *a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Peter 1:3-5).

This hope is worth more than any other treasure a person could possibly have. If a person has it, he can survive the loss of everything else, and if he doesn't have it, all the peace and happiness he has acquired by secular means will turn out to be empty and unprofitable. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. *For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*" (Matthew 16:24-26).

It is important to understand that this hope is found only in Jesus Christ. Outside of His salvation, there is no scheme or plan that can do what we need. But in Christ — and in Him alone — we have exactly what we need. When arrested by the authorities in Jerusalem and told not to preach the gospel of Christ anymore, Peter said that he and his fellow apostles would continue to preach Jesus, for "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among

men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The writer of Hebrews said, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, *who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God*” (Hebrews 12:1,2). Emulating the example of Jesus who “for the joy that was set before him” endured His crucifixion, the Christian is motivated by hope. That is what he feeds his mind on, and that is what gets him through the difficulties of the present world, no matter how hard they might be.

Writing to Christians who were facing serious hardship, John wrote, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). And in the last chapter of Revelation, he spoke of Christians being at home with their Father, after the present hardships are over: “No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads” (Revelation 22:3,4).

The result is that the Christian is able to be *forward-oriented* in his thinking. Some parts of the past are pleasant to think about (and even the hard parts can be helpful to remember), but much more than the past, the Christian focuses on the *future*. He ponders the hope that he has in Jesus Christ, anticipating the day when the Lord will return. And in the meantime, the Christian is a diligent worker. Not content with yesterday’s work, he concentrates on the good work still waiting to be done. He wants to be found busy when the Lord comes back.

After he became a Christian, Paul had a life that was so hard we can barely imagine it. But his perspective was always positive: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13,14). To Timothy, his beloved coworker, he wrote near the end of his life, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7,8).

The crown of righteousness. That’s what is offered to us in the gospel — not because we’ve earned it, but because of God’s grace. If you’ve not yet obeyed the gospel of Christ, I hope you will. *When you do, you’ll have the same hope that Christians have cherished since the beginning of the gospel.*

OBEDIENCE

IN SOME CIRCLES, OBEDIENCE HAS GOTTEN A BAD NAME. Mention the word in any positive way, and a sermon on “salvation by grace” will be immediately forthcoming. But in the Scriptures, is obedience the negative concept it is portrayed as being in popular preaching? Can it be de-emphasized as we do (if by nothing more than by our praising it so infrequently) and those who hear us still understand the scope of what God has said about it?

The problem which the gospel of Christ proposes to fix is the problem of *sin* — and the problem of sin is that of *disobedience*. Our deeds are produced by our thoughts and attitudes, obviously, and those must be brought back to God if we are to be saved. But we are fooling no one but ourselves if we think we’ve given our “heart” to God while our deeds are still showing no regard for His commandments. If we think that way, Jesus would say to us, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

The fact of the matter is, our *will* (and not just our *intellect* and *emotions*) must be brought into subjection to God or it can’t be said that we’ve been saved from sin. The rebellion that separated us from God has not been put down until our deeds have become loyal to the King — in other words, until we have become *obedient* to Him. The old hymn “Rock of Ages” got it right when it said, “Let the water and the blood, from Thy riven side which flowed, *be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.*” It is not just the *guilt* of sin that must be removed; its *power* over us must be broken — and that is measured by our actions, our actual obedience.

Of course, the kind of obedience the gospel wants to produce is a unique kind. It is what Paul referred to as “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Unlike a legalistic obedience in which the outward action is thought to be enough, regardless of the heart, the gospel calls for an obedience that comes from *faith* in God. And unlike the faith which presumes that it alone will save a person, the gospel calls for a faith which *obeys* God. Neither the faith nor the obedience is optional: (a) the obedience must be motivated by faith, and (b) the faith must show up in obedience.

Paul emphasized that everybody serves either God or the devil. There is no such thing as a human who has no master at all. But how can we tell whose servant we are, not just in our words but in actual fact? Paul said that our obedience is the real test. Whatever we may say, it is what we *do* that tells the tale. “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16).

One of the primary principles in the Scriptures is that of reaping and sowing. In the spiritual realm just as in the physical, we get whatever harvest we have planted. Paul used this metaphor in Galatians 6:7-9, where he wrote, “Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” If these words do not emphasize the importance of obedience, it is hard to imagine what words would do so.

And similarly, in Romans 2:6-11, Paul stressed that God’s judgment of us will be impartially administered, based on the deeds that we have done: “He will render to each one *according to his works*: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality.”

When we are baptized into Christ and begin our lives as His disciples, one way of describing the difference between what we used to be and what we are now is to say that we are now living under the “lordship” of Christ. He wasn’t our Lord before, but now He is. We’ve given up our self-will and begun submitting ourselves to Him, trusting that His will can always be counted on to be in our best interests. But whether Jesus is truly our Lord is determined by the reality of our situation: have we or have we not actually begun *doing* His will? “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

It would be helpful if we saw obedience to Jesus Christ as a *privilege* — something we are blessed to be *able* to give to Him. In contrast to the deadly will of Satan our adversary, the will of our Savior is good and wholesome, even when it requires the doing of difficult things.

So let’s reconstruct our concept of obedience and see it in the positive light in which it is presented in the Scriptures. Yes, it can be perverted and made into something other than what God intended (as can every other good thing, including love and joy). But let’s not “throw out the baby with the bath water” and fail to emphasize its importance in God’s plan of salvation.

And finally, let’s consider it a privilege to *grow* in our obedience. “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, *bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God*” (2 Corinthians 7:1).

CONGREGATION

ONE OF OUR CHALLENGES IN LIFE IS TO KEEP IMPORTANT THINGS IN BALANCE. In the New Testament, two of the things that call for balance are the “individual” and the “together” aspects of life in Christ. As Christians, we have an individual relationship with God that would be ours even if there was not another Christian in the world, and we must pay careful attention to the health and growth of that relationship. But, of course, there *are* other Christians in the world, and we must relate ourselves rightly to them, especially those that live in close proximity to us. In these busy days, it is a challenge to keep up with either of these alone, much less keep them both in balance.

The result of God’s salvation in Christ is not just saved *individuals* but a saved *people* — a people who belong to Him uniquely. Paul wrote that Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). And in Peter’s words, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

In Christ, our individual relationship with Him is primary. We might call that our “vertical” relationship.” But that relationship with Christ also brings us into relationship with others who have been saved by the same grace as we have, so there is also a “horizontal” aspect of life in Christ. *The vertical relationship is primary, but the horizontal relationship cannot be neglected.*

John spoke of it in terms of the siblings in a family. In a physical family, having the same father automatically creates a sibling relationship, and so it is in the spiritual family of God. In God’s family, our sibling relationship is to be appreciated rather than neglected. “Whoever loves God must also love his brother . . . and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him” (1 John 4:29-5:1).

At the practical level, this means that faithful Christians who live near one another are to engage with one another actively as members of the Lord’s “church” in that place. In its most basic sense, the word “church” means “assembly,” so when the New Testament uses the word in reference to a certain locality, it means those who are the Lord’s “assembly” in that place (whether they are physically assembled at a particular moment or not).

Sometimes “church” is used to mean all of the Lord’s people everywhere (Ephesians 1:22). In this sense, the Lord only has one church (Matthew 16:18). But “church” may also refer to a local group of Christians, like the ones at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:1), Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1), etc.

The word “congregate” means “to assemble,” so when we speak of a “congregation” (we could just as easily call it an “assembly”) we mean a group of Christians who live near one another and have banded together in a common commitment to the “together” aspect of life in Christ.

The congregational dimension of the faith is seen especially in the *Lord’s Day* and the *Lord’s Supper*. The Lord’s Day is the first day of the week, the day on which the Lord arose from the dead, and it held a high meaning in the New Testament (despite the fact that people weren’t off from work on that day back then). Whatever other times Christians might assemble, they certainly gathered on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). So if there was nothing more to the congregational part of being a Christian than the Lord’s Day assembly and the Lord’s Supper, *those two things alone mean that a purely “solo” Christianity would not be pleasing to the Lord* — at least in localities where there were other Christians that a person *could* assemble with.

I was recently asked which I thought was the most neglected by Christians in our generation: the “individual” part of the faith or the “together” part. I had an off-the-cuff answer to that question (as you probably would), but after I thought about it, I wasn’t so sure. The fact is, *both of these are neglected* — and both are often caricatured, misrepresented, and twisted out of shape. Looking into my own heart, I can see ways in which I have neglected both at various points in my life.

So I urge you to keep studying the New Testament and ask yourself questions like these:

(1) *What is going on in my personal obedience to the truth of Christ?* Have I truly obeyed the gospel of Christ and died with Christ in baptism? If I have, am I relating myself rightly to Christ on a daily basis and making progress in my spiritual growth?

(2) *What am I doing about the “together” part of being a Christian?* Do I understand what the New Testament teaches about what a congregation of Christians should be and do? Am I engaging in that relationship wholeheartedly, being grateful for its blessings and accepting my share of its responsibilities? Am thinking as I should about the *people* of the Lord, both universally and locally?

These are heart-probing questions, for all of us. But we are fortunate to be able to ask them — and look into the Scriptures as we seek to answer them. May God be our Guide as we learn better — and do better — in everything relating to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

AREYOUCHRISTIAN.COM

IT IS IN THE SCRIPTURES THAT JESUS CHRIST MUST BE INVESTIGATED. We may listen to what our peers say and we may have our own presuppositions, but in the end, it is the information about Jesus found in the text of the Scriptures that must be decisive.



Similarly, the question “Are you a Christian?” must be answered from the Scriptures. Just as popular stereotypes of Jesus may not be true to His portrait in the Scriptures, popular notions about becoming a Christian may not hold up to investigation either. In both cases, the website at

AreYouaChristian.com encourages honest and courageous study of the information found within the Scriptures themselves.

AreYouaChristian.com is a special sub-section of *WordPoints.com*, and it is focused on the how and why of becoming a Christian.

- (1) Is the message of Jesus Christ true?
- (2) If it is, what should we do about it?

On the pages of *AreYouaChristian.com*, we hope you’ll find the help you need in your study: (1) information to help you discern whether Christ’s message can be trusted, and (2) encouragement to help you decide to follow it faithfully.

AreYouaChristian.com offers rich, challenging Bible study resources for every person.

- Each day’s page from *Obeying the Gospel* — with audio
- E-Study Courses, Core Concepts, 20 Questions
- Small-group discussion guides

A unique characteristic of *AreYouaChristian.com* is that it asks Christians to re-examine whether they are, in fact, Christians. Have we truly responded to the gospel as people did in the New Testament?

- (1) Forgiveness
- (2) Faithfulness
- (3) Ultimate hope

Our need for these three things deserves our most careful attention. *AreYouaChristian.com* will help you study these from the perspective of the Scriptures. Visit the website today and become a regular reader.

WordPoints.com
AreYouaChristian.com