

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## MODULE 3: NEW TESTAMENT

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- What does faith in Jesus look like?
- How did Jesus transform Simon Peter's life?

## Simon Meets Jesus (John 1:40-42)

Simon, son of Jonah, was brought to meet Jesus by his brother Andrew, who heard John the Baptist's commendation of Jesus. Jesus "gazed intently" at him (v42). He would have seen a muscular man, because Simon was a fisherman with no formal education (Acts 4:13) who spoke with a distinctly Galilean accent (Mark 14:70). Beyond this, however, Jesus saw potential in Simon. He said this fisherman, whose name was one of the most common ones among first century Jews, would have an unusual new name, 'Peter', meaning 'a rock'.

Jesus' use of the future tense is significant. Simon will become something he is not yet. As with people in the Old Testament whose names were changed (e.g., Abraham and Jacob), Simon's new name signified a new identity: who Simon was becoming by God's grace. Jesus was going to change an ordinary fisherman (Simon) into a rock on which He could build (Peter). Simon became the leader and spokesman for the twelve.

## Jesus Calls Simon Peter (Luke 5:1-11)

For around a year after Simon first met Jesus, he had combined his fishing business with following Him. He saw Jesus perform many miracles, including healing his own mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39). Jesus now performed a miracle that entered the world of Simon's work, enabling the disciples to catch many fish when they had been unable to do so on their own. Simon was humbled and suddenly became aware of his own sin. He had obeyed Jesus' command to let down his nets but had doubted that they would catch anything. Simon had to learn that **there is no area of life over which Jesus is Lord and in which His knowledge does not surpass our own**. Jesus' responded with comforting words often spoken in the Bible by God to people who are humble before Him: "Do not be afraid!" Jesus said that from this point on Peter would stop fishing for fish and would become a fisher of men, calling people to follow Jesus.

Simon left his business to follow Jesus full-time, leaving behind his boat and nets with the profitable catch. Afraid and uncertain of himself and aware of his sinfulness and weakness, Simon was beginning to learn that Jesus can always be taken at His word. With Him in charge, what seems impossible becomes possible.

## Simon Peter Walks on Water (Matthew 14:22-33)

Having miraculously fed over 5000 people, Jesus commanded His disciples to go out in their boat. Obeying Him, they soon got into trouble in a strong wind. Their terror at the storm only intensified when they thought they saw a ghost walking on the water. In fact, it was Jesus, who again said, "Do not be afraid!" In a test of Jesus, Simon asked Him to call Him to walk to Him on the water. Jesus invited him and, trusting His words, Peter stepped out of the boat. He became distracted by the storm, took his eyes off Jesus and began to sink, but when He cried out to Jesus, He immediately reached out and rescued him.

**Jesus does not promise a problem-free life for His followers but does promise to be with us** through every challenge and to help us rise above our problems. Importantly, He will not allow His followers to sink, even if their faith is weak. It is not the amount of our faith that matters so much as who our faith is in.

## Simon Peter Recognises Who Jesus Is (Matthew 16:13-26)

Jesus' ministry had reached a turning point. He had been rejected in Capernaum, John the Baptist had been beheaded by Herod, His family thought He was mad, and opposition from the religious leaders was growing. Against this background, near Caesarea Philippi, a multicultural Roman city in the Golan Heights, Jesus asked his disciples who people said He was. They answered with three possibilities people had suggested, but Jesus personalised the question, asking who **they** thought He was. Simon replied on behalf of the twelve in a declaration of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Simon had been convinced by Jesus' words and actions of Jesus, but ultimately, Jesus said, it was God who had revealed this truth to him.

Jesus then made an amazing promise to Simon: starting with this first rock, Peter, He would build His church. Together with the other apostles, Peter became the foundation of Christ's Church (Ephesians 2:20). Jesus began to prepare the disciples for His coming death and resurrection. Peter rebuked Him, but Jesus stopped him, saying he was speaking Satan's words, then said anyone who followed Him must take up their own cross.

## **Simon Peter Witnesses Jesus' Majesty (Matthew 17:1-8)**

Jesus took the inner circle of twelve – Peter, James and John – up a mountain where they saw an amazing sight, as His glory was revealed to them visibly and Elijah and Moses (representing the Old Testament prophets and Law) appeared with Him. Peter initially wanted to set up three tents, believing that Elijah and Moses would stay with Jesus, presumably to assist Him in setting up His kingdom. He was interrupted by the voice of the Father speaking from Heaven saying, "This is my Son, and I am fully pleased with Him. Listen to Him." This special event (which is often called the 'Transfiguration') confirmed that Jesus is God's sinless Son and that we must listen to Him. It also reminds us that His death was central to His mission and its fulfilment of the Old Testament, since Luke 9:31 says it was the subject of His conversation with Elijah and Moses.

## **Simon Peter Denies Jesus (Luke 22:47-62)**

As so often, Simon Peter did not understand what God was doing when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. He tried to defend His master with a sword, even taking a swipe at a servant of the High Priest and cutting His ear (John 18:10-11), but Jesus, knowing He had to die, refused to let him fight and graciously healed the injured man. Simon followed at a distance to see what would happen to Jesus, but he was very afraid that he might be arrested next. When he was accused of being a follower of Jesus three times he denied that he even knew Him. Then Jesus looked intently at Simon once more (as He did the first time they met – John 1:42), and Simon realised what he had done. Peter was overwhelmed by guilt and fear, and his hope was shattered. Jesus had predicted that Simon would deny Him (see Luke 22:31-38), but Peter had been confident he would remain strong and would even die with Jesus. In reality, he was still weak. All that kept Peter from complete ruin was the fact that Jesus had earlier prayed that his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). Just as He had done when Peter walked to Him on the water, Jesus held on to him when his faith failed.

## **Jesus Restores Simon Peter (John 21:1-23)**

After His resurrection, Jesus reconstructed the events of Peter's original call. Peter was fishing unsuccessfully in the Sea of Galilee when Jesus appeared on the shore and commanded a second miraculous catch of fish. Three times, mirroring his three denials, Jesus restored Peter by asking him whether he loved Him. Instead of rejecting Peter, Jesus gave him a new task – to look after His 'sheep'. Simon would become Peter, the rock, after all. Jesus simple call, "Follow Me" (v19), was a powerful reminder of Peter's first calling. Peter's failings were forgiven. All that mattered was his loving relationship with His Lord. As a fisher of men, Peter travelled widely to spread the good news about Jesus and to shepherd the flock, caring for Christians until his dying day.

## **Peter's Letters**

Peter wrote two New Testament letters – 1 and 2 Peter – to Christians suffering for their faith. These letters tell us much about what Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, understood after Jesus' resurrection, including:

- Recollecting the Transfiguration (2 Peter 1:16-18), which affirmed to Him that God's words through Old Testament prophets were fulfilled in Jesus (1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:19-21);
- Jesus died as a perfect sinless Lamb (1 Peter 1:18-20) to carry away our sins (1 Peter 2:21-25) and rose again so that people can be born again through faith in the message about Him (1 Peter 1:3,23);
- People who come to faith in Jesus as Peter did become living stones and are built into the spiritual building that began with Peter, the rock, becoming part of God's people (1 Peter 2:5,9-11);
- God has appointed shepherds for His people, just as Jesus called Peter to feed His sheep (1 Peter 5:1-4);
- God's day of judgement is coming, and people must repent before it (2 Peter 3).

**SUMMARY: Peter's journey of faith illustrates God's love, faithfulness and power to transform us**

- Simon was an uneducated fisherman who often misunderstood Jesus and blundered along.
- Jesus turned him into Peter, a fisher of men, a shepherd of His sheep and a solid rock on which to build.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 17 – SIMON PETER

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. How would you describe your journey towards faith in Jesus so far? What ups and downs have you experienced in it? What are the highlights and low points?

*Read Matthew 16:13-17:8*

2. Who do people today say that Jesus (the 'Son of Man', 16:13) was?
3. What things had Peter seen and heard that convinced him that Jesus was the "Christ, the Son of the living God" (16:16) and not just another prophet? What do these titles mean?
4. What do Peter's words in this passage and Jesus' responses tell us about his personality, the spiritual influences upon him and his understanding of who Jesus was? What plans does Jesus have for him?
5. What does this passage tell us about who Jesus is and how he understood his mission?
6. Why was it important that Peter and the other disciples did not begin to tell people that Jesus was the Messiah (Christ) at this point? What did they need to understand and witness before they could do so?
7. What do Jesus' words about the cost of following him (16:24-27) mean for us today? What would it look like for people today to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow Jesus?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Imagine yourself in Peter's position in some of the events covered in this study. Do you think you would have reacted differently or in the same way that he did?
- Does Simon Peter's journey of faith encourage you at all? Why is it significant that the Gospels include his failures as well as the positive things he said about Jesus?
- Christians today are linked to Jesus through the message Simon Peter and others preached about Him. Why is it important to make sure we are following their authentic teaching?
- Simon's new name, Peter, indicated the person Jesus was making him into. What do you think Jesus might name you? In what ways does He want to change your character and life?
- What would it mean for you personally to deny yourself, die to yourself and follow Jesus?

### ***Was Peter the first Pope?***

Peter was clearly significant among the Twelve as indicated by several factors:

- He is always named first in lists of their names in the Gospels;
- With the sons of Zebedee, James and John, he was part of an ‘inner circle’ invited by Jesus into key moments in the ministry of Jesus such as the raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:37), the Transfiguration (Mark 9:2) and the His prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane before He was arrested (Mark 14:32-35);
- He is often the spokesman for the group (e.g., Matthew 12:16; 19:27; Luke 12:41; John 6:68), but also the one most often rebuked by Jesus (e.g., Matthew 14:31; 16:22-23; 26:33-35; John 13:6-8; 18:10-11);
- He often takes a lead in challenging situations, for example walking to Jesus on the water and trying to defend Jesus with his sword when He was arrested;
- We have more insights into His relationship with Jesus and his family life than we have for any of the other members of the Twelve;
- The early chapters of Acts place a special emphasis on Peter and it is he who preaches on the Day of Pentecost and (see Part 18);
- Jesus renamed him Peter, ‘the rock’, and said he would build his Church on this foundation and would give Peter the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:13-20).

It is this last point that raises a question that has been debated among Christians. Was Peter as an individual being given authority over the whole Church? There are several reasons to answer ‘no’:

- In Matthew 16 Peter is speaking on behalf of the Twelve as the first among them to appreciate who Jesus is, but later references to the foundation of the Church refer to the apostles collectively (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14) and in John 20:23 the risen Jesus gives the kind of authority associated with the keys of the kingdom to them as a group. Similarly, Acts 2:42 says the Church was devoted to the apostles’ teaching without singling Peter out.
- In the Council of Jerusalem, which responded to the question of inclusion of the Gentiles without adherence to the Law of Moses, Peter is present, but it is James (believed to be the half brother of the Lord and not one of the Twelve) who chairs the proceedings and announces the decision (Acts 15:13-21). The apostles had authority to determine the teaching of the Church, but they did not rule over it.
- The apostle Paul confronted and corrected Peter when he wavered on the principle of inclusion of the Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-21). Peter was not infallible (without error), nor was he senior to Paul (a fellow apostle) in some hierarchical sense.

Related to the question of Peter’s primacy among the Twelve is the suggestion by the Roman Catholic Church that he was the first pope. This depends on traditions (not recorded in the New Testament) that he went to Rome and became leader (or bishop) of the church there. It also depends on the idea that the apostles passed on their authority as teachers in the Church to the bishops. This idea is foreign to the New Testament, which instead emphasises the authority of the apostles’ teachings and writings for the Church after their time, which must stay true to them (e.g., 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Peter 3:2; Jude 1:3). In other words, Scripture, not individual leaders, has authority over the Church. The hierarchical Roman Catholic system in which the bishop of Rome has primacy over the whole Church was a much later development mirroring the politics of the Empire.

### ***Why was it Elijah and Moses who appeared with Jesus in the Transfiguration?***

Moses and Elijah represent the two great sections of the Old Testament: the Law and the Prophets. They were also the two great workers of miracles (along with Aaron and Elisha) before Christ and marked new developments in God’s plan for His people. Importantly, there were prophecies about Elijah returning before the Messiah (Malachi 4:5-6) and Moses’ words about a future prophet like him (Deuteronomy 18:15-19) were believed by many to refer to the Messiah. The appearance of these two men with Jesus in His glory, but inferior to Him demonstrates His fulfilment of the Old Testament and superiority over all previous revelations.

- What happened after Jesus ascended to Heaven?
- Who is the Holy Spirit and what does He do?

## Introducing Acts

Acts (more fully ‘The Acts of the Apostles’) is a sequel to Luke’s Gospel, written by the same author – the physician Luke – for the same recipient (Theophilus). The words of Jesus in Acts 1:8-9 set the pattern for Acts:

- The apostles Jesus appointed will be witnesses to His resurrection, spreading the good news (or gospel) about Him. This begins with the remaining eleven, but includes others, especially Paul (Part 19).
- The apostles will only be able to fulfil this task through the empowering of the Holy Spirit foretold by John the Baptist and Jesus. Some suggest Acts should be called ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’.
- The gospel will spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and on to the ‘ends of the earth’. This fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah 49:5-6 that God’s Servant would restore Israel and be a light to the Gentiles too.

## The Holy Spirit Comes

Before He ascended to Heaven, Jesus told His apostles that in a “few days” they would be “baptised with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:5). The apostles waited prayerfully in Jerusalem and finally on the Day of Pentecost (a festival 50 days after Passover when the Jews gathered in Jerusalem), the baptism in the Spirit happened. Acts 2:1-13 describes the consequences. The disciples heard a noise like a wind (v2), saw flames (v3) and were given ability to speak in languages (or tongues) they had not learned. Many people visiting the city from distant places heard them speaking about what God had done in their own languages and local dialects. Some in the crowd wondered what this meant, while others accused the disciples of being drunk. Attention was now focussed on the apostles and they had power from the Holy Spirit to speak about Jesus.

Simon Peter spoke to the crowd of people who would have been familiar with the Old Testament. He said:

- 1. The supernatural gift of speaking in other languages was a fulfilment of prophecy (2:14-21).** Joel had prophesied about a coming day when God would pour out His Spirit on all of His people indicating a new age of salvation (Joel 2:28-32). The gift of tongues was a sign that this salvation had now come.
- 2. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah (v22-36)**
  - God endorsed Jesus’ message through His miracles, which they had seen (v22);
  - The people had executed Jesus, but this was also part of God’s plan (v23);
  - God raised Him from the dead as David had foreseen and the apostles had witnessed (v24-32);
  - Jesus is now seated beside God the Father from where He was pouring out the Spirit (v33).
- 3. They must respond to the message (v37-38).** To have their sins forgiven and be transformed by receiving the Spirit, they must repent (turning from their sins) and be baptised, expressing a new identity in Jesus.

The response to this first preaching of the Christian gospel was amazing: 3000 people were baptised.

## Jesus’ Teaching About the Holy Spirit

On the night before He died, Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit would come after He left them (John 14:15-31;16:5-16). Indeed, the Spirit could not be sent until Jesus left them (16:7). He will be:

- 1. The Spirit of Truth** – the Spirit teaches people God’s truth. He would remind the apostles of what Jesus taught and reveal new truths from God to them, which were the basis for the New Testament writings (14:26, 16:13). For others, the Spirit would convict them of important truths: that they have sinned; that God is righteous; and that judgement is coming and deserved (16:8-11). Above all He will bring glory to Jesus by revealing only those things Jesus gave Him to say (just as Jesus did with the Father’s words).
- 2. Like Jesus** – the Spirit is a person, not an impersonal force. He does everything for Christians that Jesus did for His disciples when He was on earth. The word used in 14:15 and 14:26 is a rich one and could be translated ‘counsellor’ – the Spirit guides Christians – ‘helper’ – He strengthens them to serve God – or ‘advocate’ – He speaks for Christians and defends them.

**3. With and in Christians** – the Spirit will make His home in the lives of Jesus’ followers (14:17), indicating a permanent ‘indwelling’. In the Old Testament, the Spirit anointed some people, enabling them to fulfil tasks or speak God’s words, but He was never said to **live in** God’s people. This new kind of relationship with God fulfilled prophecies of Joel and Ezekiel about a future outpouring of the Spirit. The Spirit gives “peace of mind and heart” to Christians despite their troubles in this world, just as Jesus did (14:27).

## The Gospel Spreads

Over the first months after the Day of Pentecost, God performed miracles through the apostles, people believed their message and the new Christians formed a community we call the Church (Part 21). Peter and John even preached the message about Jesus to the Jewish leaders who had executed Him (Acts 4:1-22). Not surprisingly, they faced opposition and one young man called Stephen was stoned to death by them for preaching boldly about Jesus (Acts 7). A man called Saul who was an official witness to the killing became a leading enemy of the Christians (Acts 8:1-3). Many Christians who fled Jerusalem to escape persecution shared the gospel across Judea and beyond through ordinary conversations. Opposition helped the Church grow! A man called Philip preached in Samaria and shared the gospel with an official from Ethiopia who had been worshipping God in Jerusalem and was reading from Isaiah 53 (Acts 8). Philip explained that these words were speaking about Jesus and the man responded in faith and was baptised. The gospel was spreading north and south. Acts 9 shows God’s power to transform people. In a personal encounter with the risen Jesus, Saul, who had believed he was serving God by arresting Christians, was commissioned as an apostle (see Part 19).

The first Christians were all Jews, Samaritans (who shared many religious beliefs with Jews) and a few Gentiles who were already worshipping God. Acts 10 tells of a Roman army officer called Cornelius who was visited by an angel who told him to send for Peter. Peter was given a vision (three times as often in his life) in which he was told to eat various animals forbidden as food by the Law of Moses. Just then, Cornelius’ messengers arrived, and Peter went with them to Cornelius’s house. He realised the significance of his vision: **God will accept people from any nation who believe the gospel about Jesus** (v34). Many Gentiles in Cornelius’s home believed and received the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in other languages as the apostles had on the Day of Pentecost. Some Jewish Christians disagreed with Peter preaching in the home of a Gentile but accepted that he had been right when they heard about the coming of the Spirit on them.

Before Jesus came, inclusion among God’s covenant people, Israel, meant acceptance of the Law of Moses. Jesus initiated a new people of God – the Church – beginning with the apostles He chose. He said He would fulfil the Old Testament Law, bringing it to its proper conclusion. It was obvious from the beginning that the sacrificial system no longer served any purpose when Jesus had offered Himself as a sacrifice for sins, but what about the other aspects of the Law, such as special festivals and restrictions on eating certain foods? Most importantly, should Christians practise the sign of the covenant with Abraham, circumcision? God had included Gentiles like Cornelius in the Church, but should they be expected to follow the Law of Moses?

Opposition to Christianity continued and James, brother of John and one of the Twelve, was killed by Herod Agrippa, a grandson of Herod the Great who had been substituted for Herod Antipas as king of Judea by the Roman Emperor (Acts 12). The message about Jesus continued to spread despite this opposition and God released Peter from prison miraculously, while Herod Agrippa was struck down by God for his pride. The remainder Acts (Chapter 13 onwards) focuses on the work of Paul, who took the message about Jesus to many Gentile regions (see Part 19). Importantly, however, the Church resolved the question of what was expected from Gentile converts in terms of obedience to the Law. Some Christians tried to teach Gentile converts that they must be circumcised, so the apostles met together with the elders of the Church in Jerusalem to resolve this matter (Acts 15). Paul and Peter described what God had done among the Gentiles, including Cornelius. When the others heard this, they agreed that the Gentiles should be accepted as true Christians without having to be circumcised or follow other Jewish religious practices. The Holy Spirit was leading the apostles into further truth, just as Jesus said He would. They saw that the Law of Moses was no longer the way for God’s people to live in obedience to Him. People do not need to abandon their culture or become Jews to be Christians, but they do need to make God’s will the first priority in their lives and allow the teachings of the Bible to guide them, including the New Testament books written by the apostles and others.

### **SUMMARY: The gospel spread by the Spirit’s guidance and power through preaching and conversations**

- The Holy Spirit indwells Christians, enabling them to live as God wants them to.
- The gospel must be shared with people from every nation by gifted preachers and ordinary believers.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 18 – ACTS & THE HOLY SPIRIT

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What do you already know, or what do you hear people saying about the Holy Spirit and His work?

*Read Romans 8:1-30*

2. Why is there no condemnation for people who are in Christ (verses 1-3)? What did Jesus do in order to remove the condemnation we deserve for our sins?
3. Paul contrasts the 'flesh' (our nature without the Spirit) and the Spirit, which lead us to different goals. What standard of actions does the Holy Spirit lead us towards (verses 3-4)?
4. What difference does the Holy Spirit make in our thinking, both in terms of our aims in life and the qualities he produces as we follow Him and not the 'flesh' (verses 5-8)?
5. Who has the Holy Spirit according to verses 9-10? Why does this matter?
6. Paul explains that the Spirit is the 'firstfruits' of the new creation – we have life from Him even though our bodies are still subject to disease and death. As we await future glory, when our bodies will be redeemed (verse 23), what does the Spirit do for us (see verses 15-17 and 26-27)?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you think people are always capable of doing good things so long as they know what is good (education) and are free from constraints that might drive them to do wrong?
- The New Testament describes the Holy Spirit as indwelling people who believe in Jesus. Why do you think we need this presence of God living in our inner beings?
- Have you personally sensed that the Holy Spirit is guiding you or speaking to you (either using words and visions or through your feelings and thoughts)? How do you recognise it is Him and what is He saying?
- How do you think the Christian movement grew so dramatically from such insignificant origins and despite the message of a crucified founder? Was this God's work or something else?
- What do you think the Spirit of God might be leading you towards? What changes might He want you to make in your life and who might He want you to share the good news about Jesus with?

### ***What does speaking in tongues sound like?***

The word ‘tongues’ in the phrase ‘speaking in tongues’ simply means ‘languages’. So, instead of saying ‘speaking in tongues’, the phrase could be translated ‘ability to speak in other languages’. Speaking in tongues is described in Acts 2, 10 and 19 and in 1 Corinthians 12-14. In Acts 2, it is clear that the people in Jerusalem could hear the disciples speaking in their own languages and even dialects (verses 6-11). What is less clear is whether each disciple was speaking in one or more of these languages or the same speech could be heard by different people as if in their own language (in which case the gift was really of ‘hearing’, not ‘speaking’). In any case, the effect was that people noticed something unusual and heard the message. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul includes ability to speak in other languages among the gifts God graciously gives to the Church. Some people who claim to be able to ‘speak in tongues’ use a sequence of repetitive sounds that do not appear to have structure or to correspond to known human languages. This is often called *glossolalia*. Based on a reference in 1 Corinthians 13:1, some describe glossolalia as ability to speak in the tongues of angels, although others suggest it may simply be a result of a heightened emotional state or a learned behaviour and that the reference to ‘the tongues of angels’ in Corinthians is rhetorical (‘Even if I could ..’). Many Christians describe glossolalia as beneficial in their personal prayers and devotion to God. This is an area where sincere Christians have different views and the main practical challenge is that leaders in the churches need to decide what place the gift of tongues should have in public worship. I would say emphatically that it is wrong to suggest, as some people have, that every true Christian will speak in tongues if they have the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12 puts this ability among a list of gifts and clearly teaches that there is no gift that every Christian receives.

### ***Is the Holy Spirit God?***

The Holy Spirit, like the Father and Jesus (the Son), is described in the Bible as being God. When Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, he was lying to God (Acts 5:3-4). The Spirit is included in trinitarian formulations of praise such as 2 Corinthians 13:14 and He is described as the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. In John 15-16, Jesus places the Spirit on a par with Himself and the Father. Importantly, the Spirit is not, therefore, an impersonal force (an ‘it’), but a person who has feelings (He is capable of being grieved according to Ephesians 4:30 and He has a will according to 1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

### ***Does the Holy Spirit possess people?***

People sometimes have an unhelpful view of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. We speak about Him indwelling people and, influenced, no doubt, by Hollywood perceptions of possession by spirits, people sometimes think He takes control of a person. This is compounded by the language used in some translations of the New Testament that suggest that the Spirit ‘controls’ the lives of believers and by the practice of some Christians who describe bizarre actions and noises as the result of the Spirit’s work in a person’s life. This goes against what the New Testament teaches. The Holy Spirit produces qualities in our lives including ‘self-control’ (Galatians 5:23). He leads and guides us, but does not force His will upon us. The Christian must choose whether to follow the Spirit’s leading towards doing God’s will – if we do, He will give the power for us to do it and the results will be peace and life – or the leading of the flesh towards selfish actions, which result in death. The Spirit helps us, but does not take over our mind or will.

### ***What is the evidence of the Holy Spirit’s work in a person’s life?***

People sometimes think that the Spirit’s work is evidenced by special abilities or ‘supernatural’ phenomena, such as speaking in tongues. These things may come as a gift from the Spirit, but the New Testament suggests two things that are the true hallmarks of the Spirit’s work in a person: the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3) and the fruit of a Christ-like character (Galatians 5:22-23). When these things are present consistently we cannot doubt that the Holy Spirit is at work.



## PART 19 – PAUL

- How did the message about Jesus spread to non-Jews?
- Who was Paul and what was His message and mission?

### Paul's Background

Paul was born some time between AD 1 and 10 in the city of Tarsus (Acts 21:39), the capital of a region within the Roman Empire named Cilicia, situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea in the south of modern Turkey. His parents, Jews from the tribe of Benjamin, gave him the name Saul and had him circumcised at eight days as the Law of Moses required (Philippians 3:5). Saul was also a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:22-29) and as a man who lived between two cultures he used the Roman name Paul alongside his Jewish name. Only people in good social standing could become citizens of Rome, so Saul's parents were probably wealthy.

Saul's family were Pharisees (Acts 23:6; see Module 2 Study Aids) and sent him to Jerusalem (probably aged 13 or 14) to study under leading Jewish teacher Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Saul was also a skilled tent-maker. He was passionate about following the Law of Moses (Acts 22:3; Galatians 1:14). Paul does not seem to have been in Jerusalem during the public ministry of Jesus, since he never mentions having met Him, but he was in the city later in AD 33 when the apostles began to preach about Jesus. He rejected the gospel and became one of its strongest opponents, acting as an official witness at the killing of Stephen (Acts 8:1) and afterwards taking a commission from the High Priest to persecute Christians. He carried this mission out with his usual great passion, arresting men and women and even causing the death of some Christians (Acts 22:4-5).

### Paul's Encounter with Christ

Saul was travelling north to the city of Damascus in the Roman province of Syria to persecute Christians. Acts 9 tells us what happened, and Paul re-tells it to a crowd in Acts 22:6-21 and to Herod Agrippa in Acts 26:9-18. As Saul neared Damascus around midday, a light suddenly flashed, blinding him and causing him to fall to the ground. He heard a voice saying in the Aramaic language, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is useless for you to fight against my will." It seems that beneath his apparent unwavering loyalty to Judaism, Saul had already begun to struggle with the possibility that the gospel may be true. Saul's companions saw the light and heard some noise but could not understand the words spoken by Jesus. Saul asked, "Who are you sir?" and the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting". The risen Jesus was confronting Saul and it appears that as well as hearing His voice, Saul also saw Him (I Corinthians 15:7). Jesus commissioned Saul as an apostle, giving him a special responsibility to take the gospel to Gentile peoples (Acts 26:16-18). Jesus told Saul to go on into the city where he would receive further instructions. In Damascus God sent a Christian named Ananias to Paul to restore his sight and baptise him after he believed.

From this time on, Paul's priorities changed, and his life was transformed. The passion he previously put into following the Law and persecuting Christians was now directed to knowing Jesus more and serving Him. Paul later wrote about this transformation in **Philippians 3:4-11**. He lists all the things he used to be proud of and hoped would make him acceptable to God: being a circumcised Jew from Benjamin, a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians. If were possible to earn a good relationship with God, Paul would have won the prize. After he became a Christian, however, his priorities changed. He now realised that:

- Everything he had done for God was worthless compared to what Christ had done for him (v7);
- Knowing Jesus was the most important thing, worth more than everything else (v8);
- He could never earn forgiveness for his sins, but could only be saved by Christ through faith (v9);
- Life was now living for Jesus in the power that raised Him, with hope for the future (v10-11).

### Paul's Mission

God used Paul to bring light to the Gentiles so that they too could share in the forgiveness of sins and be part of God's people (see the Study Aids for this module for a timeline of his life). Jesus, Israel's Messiah, was Saviour and Lord for all people and people from all nations would become His disciples just as He had said

(Matthew 28:19). Paul was at the centre of the debate amongst the early Christians about whether the Gentile Christians should obey circumcision and other aspects of the Old Covenant. He was present in Jerusalem when the Church affirmed the inclusion of Gentiles without obeying the Law of Moses and challenged Peter when he later wavered about this principle (Galatians 2:11-21).

Paul rejoiced that God had called Him to reach the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:8) and insisted that Jewish and Gentile Christians should serve together in the churches. He explained that the Law of Moses was given to prepare people for Christ's coming (Galatians 3:24-29) by exposing sin and the need for God's forgiveness through sacrifice (Romans 3:19-20). Ultimately, however, people could not be made right with God by keeping the Law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ. Christians are set free by God's grace and do not serve Him by following the Law of Moses, but by denying our 'flesh', which wants to fulfil its own desires, and following the Holy Spirit, who always leads us to do what God wants (Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 5). The Christian has died with Christ and is raised to live in new life in the Spirit. This is enacted in baptism.

## Paul's Message

### *Preached in Athens (Acts 17:16-34)*

- *God is unknown* – people worship many gods, but they are really seeking for the one true Creator God, who sustains their lives but is unknown to them unless someone tells them (v23-25). God has been directing human history to work out His plan of bringing people to know Him (v26-29). He is not far away.
- *God calls people to repent* – God cannot be worshipped through idols and people must turn away from false gods to worship Him (v30) before the day of judgement He has set (v31).
- *Jesus is the Saviour and Judge* – God's judgement will come through His appointed person, which was proven by His resurrection from the dead (v31). Paul presents Jesus as the agent of God's judgement but was interrupted before he could present Him as the One through whom we can be saved from it.

People responded in different ways: some mocked idea of the resurrection; others said they wanted to think about it and hear more; some became believers in Christ! How will you respond?

### *Explained in his letter to the Romans*

Romans contains the most complete explanation of the gospel in the Bible. Its message and importance is summarised in Romans 1:16-17: "I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, 'It is through faith that a righteous person has life.'" Notice Paul's emphases: on Jesus as the only way to be right with God; on Jews and Gentiles being united in the Church; on faith as the way to receive salvation; on the fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures. This is a powerful message. It can be summarised as follows:

1. **GOD rules** (Romans 1:20) – God created the world in His eternal power. He has made it possible for people to know Him and shows Himself to people through creation.
2. **WE rebelled** (Romans 3:23) – human beings rejected God's rule and followed their own desires, leading to sinful actions (Romans 1). Sin affects everyone and we deserve God's judgement (Romans 2).
3. **GOD rescues** (Romans 5:8-11) – God still loved sinful humans and so sent Jesus, the Messiah, to die for our sins so that we could be forgiven and have a new relationship with God.
4. **WE respond** (Romans 10:9-10) – God's forgiveness and eternal life are offered to us freely as a gift paid for by Jesus, but to receive them we must acknowledge our sin and confess Jesus as Lord over our lives.
5. **GOD restores** (Romans 8:1-4) – there is no condemnation for those who believe in Jesus. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to be changed now, living for God, as they await future, ultimate transformation of their bodies so that they share in the glory of Jesus as God's children (Romans 8:18-30).

Paul was confident in God's plan to bring people to Himself. God was the One who knew this in advance, chose to save people, justified them and would bring them to glory (Romans 8:29-30). Nothing can interrupt this plan because nothing can break God's love for His people (Romans 8:31-39). In everything God is working for the good of His people, which is His goal of making them like Jesus (Romans 8:28).

#### **SUMMARY: Paul was chosen by God to be an apostle and to spread the gospel to Gentiles**

- Paul's life was transformed by encountering Jesus and He was commissioned as an apostle.
- People can be right with God through faith in Jesus, Israel's Messiah, who died for sins and rose again.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 19 – PAUL

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What do you know about the apostle Paul? What are your impressions of him?

*Read Acts 26:1-23*

2. Paul is defending himself in front of Herod Agrippa and the Roman governor Festus. What accusation(s) was he defending himself against?
3. What do we learn from Paul's words about his upbringing and his past life before he became a Christian?
4. What was Paul's message based on his words here?
5. Why was the resurrection of Jesus so important for Paul (verse 8; see also 1 Corinthians 15)?
6. Why did Jesus appear in a special way to Paul on the Road to Damascus? What did Jesus appoint Paul to do (verses 16-18)?
7. Why was it so important to Paul that the message he preached about Jesus was supported by the Old Testament scriptures (verses 22-23)?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you believe that people can really change? Is it possible for someone's life to be turned around completely and for a dishonourable past to be forgiven?
- Paul is an example of someone whose life was transformed by an encounter with the risen Jesus. Has your life been transformed in this way? Do you think it needs to be?
- Paul became a 'missionary' – someone who travelled to new places and people to share the gospel with them. Do you think this kind of work is appropriate and important in today's world?
- In Athens, Paul suggested that all of the religious longings of people ultimately find fulfilment in the creator God, but that people must turn to Him. What longings do you have and can God satisfy them?
- Review the summary of the gospel in five points based on Paul's letter to the Romans in the notes for this lesson. Do you agree with these points and have you responded personally to this message?

### ***Was Saul's name changed to Paul?***

It is commonly said, especially in children's bibles, that God changed Saul's name to Paul. This is probably based on the fact that he is called Saul in the earliest references in Acts and only later called Paul. A parallel is then drawn with other people in the Bible whose names were changed by God (e.g., Abram/Abraham; Jacob/Israel; Simon/Peter). God certainly changed Paul's life, but there is no reference in the Bible to his name being changed. Instead it is almost certain that he had both names from childhood. Saul was his Jewish name, used within his family and community, whilst Paul was his Roman name or surname. As a Jewish citizen of the Roman Empire, Paul crossed cultures naturally, making him an ideal candidate to be a missionary.

### ***How did Paul come to be an apostle?***

Paul was unusual among the apostles in that he does not appear to have met Jesus prior to His death and resurrection. Whereas the twelve and others who were eligible to be apostles were familiar with Jesus' teachings and saw Him after His resurrection (there were the criteria for selecting a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:21-22), Paul seemingly had not, despite having spent some time in Jerusalem being trained by a Rabbi named Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Paul was added to the witnesses of the resurrection when Jesus commissioned him on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:15; 26:16; in Acts 1:8 it is only the apostles who are Jesus' 'witnesses') and Jesus revealed the gospel to him directly (Galatians 1:12). Paul recognised how unusual this appointment as an apostle was, describing himself as being like "one untimely born" (1 Corinthians 15:8).

### ***Was Paul's message the same as the other apostles?***

As explained above, Paul insisted that he received his message from Jesus Himself rather than from another person (Galatians 1:12). Elsewhere he writes about passing on what he received from the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:23; 15:3). This was important because Paul insisted that apostles were people chosen and commissioned personally by the risen Jesus to pass on His teaching to others. It was, however, also important for Paul that His message was the same as that taught by those who were apostles before him. In Galatians, having said that his message came from Jesus and that he did not immediately speak to other apostles after his conversion (1:11-17), he describes how he later travelled to Jerusalem where he spoke with Peter (Cephas) and James, the brother of Jesus, and later still with all of the twelve, confirming that he was preaching nothing different from they had taught (1:18-2:10). As we might expect, each of the writers of New Testament books has a personal style and each emphasises some truths above others depending on the needs of their readers, but we must not accept any suggestion that they disagreed in their teaching. There are no contradictions and, in fact, the core message they taught is remarkably consistent whether we are reading Paul, Peter, John, James or Jude.

### ***What were Paul's letters about?***

Paul's letters cover many different subjects and they reflect different styles. In some, he writes tenderly to Christians he knows and loves (e.g., Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians). In others, he writes to challenge and correct Christians who are straying from the truth (e.g., 1 and 2 Corinthians). In a few he provided practical advice and training for individual Christians, some of them leaders (Philemon, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus). In some he writes to Christians he did not know personally or a circular letter to numerous churches outlining the message he preached (Romans and Ephesians). All his letters centre on the core message he preached, that Jesus was Israel's promised Messiah and God's Son and that He died for our sins and rose again from the dead, a message that requires a response of repentance and faith. He had a clear passion to strengthen Christians in these truths and to remind them of what faithfulness to God looks like. He was also committed to ensuring that the Church was united in Christ and that Jews and Gentiles lived in practice as the new humankind in Christ that God intended them to be.



## PART 20 – NEW COVENANT

- What is the new covenant and how is it different from the old?
- How does Jesus fulfil the old covenant and initiate the new?

### The ‘Old’ Covenant

Covenants are special agreements with a group of people based on promises. In Genesis 9, God covenanted with Noah and all living creatures not to destroy the whole earth in a flood, giving the rainbow as a sign. With Abraham, however, began a covenant to rescue human beings. It developed in three stages:

1. **Abraham** (c. 2000 BC) – God promised Abraham, the fore-father of the nation of Israel, three things: the land of Canaan; a great nation; blessing for all nations through his descendants.
2. **Moses** (c. 1440 BC) – the people of Israel received the Law of God, which governed their life as a nation showed them God’s standards, their sinfulness, and the need for forgiveness through sacrifice.
3. **King David** (c. 1000 BC) – God added that David’s family would be kings for ever and a descendant of David would be the one through whom God’s blessing would come to all nations as promised to Abraham.

The nation of Israel was called to respond to this Covenant in faith and obedience. The Old Testament tells how sometimes they did this and at other times they did not. The nation ultimately failed to keep the covenant and God took them into exile.

In around 600 BC, as the exile of Judah drew near, God revealed through Jeremiah that He was planning to bring about a new covenant that would be different from the covenant with Abraham, Moses and David, which the people had broken (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This new covenant contains three promises:

1. God’s Laws would be written on the minds and hearts of His people (v33a) – instead of being written externally on tablets of stone, God’s standards would now be internalised, changing them.
2. All God’s people would know Him in a personal way (v 33b-34a) – this is a new kind of intimacy with God and suggests that there will be no priests mediating between God and people in this new covenant.
3. God will forgive their wickedness and never again remember their sins (v34b) – this once and for all forgiveness of sins suggests there will no longer be regular sacrifices under the new covenant.

### Jesus and the Two Covenants

Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilled God’s covenant with Israel, being faithful where the nation had failed:

- He was the descendant of Abraham who brings blessing to people of all nations;
- He fulfilled the Law of Moses in His personal sinlessness and His sacrificial death for sins;
- He was the descendant of David who will be a King forever.

On the night on which He was betrayed and arrested, Jesus spoke about the new covenant as He shared His last meal with His disciples. He spoke about a cup of wine as “the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as a sacrifice for you” (Luke 22:20). Jesus was claiming that the New Covenant promised through Jeremiah 600 years earlier was about to begin and that it would be established because of His death on the cross.

The book of Hebrews takes up the theme of the New Covenant. It was written to Jewish people who were torn between following Jesus and staying in the Jewish religion. The writer explains that the covenant described in the Old Testament is now passing away – it can be called the Old Covenant – and that God’s New Covenant is replacing it (Hebrews 8). He describes Jesus as:

- **Its mediator** – Jesus reveals the New Covenant and brings people into a new relationship with God (Hebrews 9:15,24-28). He is greater than Moses because He is God’s Son and God Himself (Hebrews 1-2).
- **Its High Priest** – Jesus made the sacrifice that makes it possible for sins to be forgiven (Hebrews 8:1-6). He is a better High Priest, because He is present in heaven before God and is alive forever.
- **Its sacrifice** – the sacrifice Jesus offered was Himself (Hebrews 9:11-14). Jesus was the perfect sacrifice that paid for all sins once for all because He was sinless and was both God and man.

## New Covenant Faith

### *The promises*

Christians have a new relationship with God because of Jesus' death for sins and because He lives forever to bring people to God. The three promises of the New Covenant describe the Christian faith and life:

1. **Sins forgiven** – Jesus' death paid the price for sins once and for all. When people trust in Him they are declared not guilty before God and no condemnation remains. There is no need for further sacrifices.
2. **Personal relationship with God** – all Christians know God as Father and come into God's presence through the new way Jesus opened up. God hears their prayers and will answer as He sees best. There is no need for a priest to stand between people and God or for us to pray through anyone other than Jesus.
3. **God's law internalised** – the Holy Spirit changes Christians from the inside out, aligning their desires and thoughts with God's standards. Instead of trying to keep a set of written standards like the Law of Moses, Christians seek the Spirit's power to obey the teaching of Jesus and His apostles.

### *The sign of entry – water baptism*

Baptism (immersion in water) was practised by John the Baptist as a sign that people had repented of their sins and wanted to live under God's rule. Jesus told His disciples to baptise new Christians (Matthew 28:19), and Acts records that they did so (e.g., Acts 2:41). Christians are baptised "in the name of Jesus", meaning in His authority acknowledging Him as Lord, and in the name of the Father and the Holy Spirit. Different churches have different views about baptism (see Q&A for this study), but all Christians recognise that it is something that should be done once, using water, and that is a sign of inclusion among God's people.

Baptism by immersion is a powerful picture of what God has done in a person's life (see Romans 6:3-14):

- a) **Dying with Jesus** – the person has taken up their cross to follow Jesus (Matthew 18:24-26). They go under water, into a place of death, indicating that they want to die to their selfishness and follow Jesus as their Lord. Their sins have been forgiven, as if washed away in water, because of the death of Jesus.
- b) **Risen with Christ** – coming up from the water, the Christian acts out their new, living relationship with God. They are born again and the Holy Spirit has come to live in their life to give power to live for God. From now on they will live for Jesus, making obedience to Him their first priority.

Baptism is not necessary for a person to be saved and it is only an outward sign of a spiritual reality, but Jesus expects it as an act of obedience and a sign of a new identity in Jesus and among His people, the Church.

### *The regular reminder – communion*

Every covenant has a sign to remind the people about God's promises contained in it. The sign of the New Covenant is to regularly take bread and wine to remember Jesus as Jesus taught His disciples on the night when He was betrayed and arrested (Luke 22:19-20). This practice is called by various names including the Lord's Supper (because it is a meal Jesus invites people to), communion (because it indicates fellowship with Jesus and with other Christians) or, simply, the Breaking of Bread. The bread represents Jesus' body, given for His people (in other words His death on the cross) and the cup of wine represents the New Covenant sealed by His blood that was shed for them. Christ Himself is the sacrifice that sealed the New Covenant. Christians must never forget this – it is the central point of their faith.

1 Corinthians 11:23-34 records the apostle Paul's teaching about communion to the Christians in Corinth:

- He received it from Jesus (v23-25) – Jesus commanded it and set the pattern for it.
- It announces the Lord's death (v26) – the breaking of the bread and its separation from the wine are a visible (and 'tasteable') enactment of Jesus' death.
- It will only continue until Jesus returns (v26) – this reminder is necessary until we are with Jesus, when we will join Him in a feast in God's kingdom. Communion expresses hope for Jesus' promised return.
- It must be taken in a worthy manner (v27-34) – communion, like God's salvation, is received as a gift paid for by Jesus and expresses dependence on God. Christians must, however, confess their sins and recognise its special significance and their unity with other Christians as they take it.

#### **SUMMARY: The New Covenant has replaced the Old Covenant as the basis for relationship with God**

- Jesus fulfilled the covenant with Abraham, Moses and David and began a prophesied new covenant.
- In this covenant Christians know God, are forgiven and are changed by the Holy Spirit.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 20 – NEW COVENANT

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Based on your understanding of the Old Testament, what would you say are the main differences between the way God asked Israel to worship Him and how Christians worship God?

*Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6*

2. According to this passage, what makes the new covenant superior to (greater in glory than) the old (see especially 3:11)?
3. What does the Law (the letter(s) written on stone) bring and, by contrast, what does the Spirit bring?
4. What does Chapter 3 (especially verses 3 and 17-18) tell us about the person and the work of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant and how is this different than the old covenant?
5. Why can some people not see the truth of the gospel (3:15-16; 4:4)?
6. Why is it important for Paul that he does not use 'disgraceful, underhanded ways' (4:2) in his ministry of the new covenant?
7. Paul says that through the gospel God shines light (truth) about Jesus into the hearts of believers. What does the parallel with Genesis 1:3 suggest is happening when someone becomes a Christian?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- The Old Covenant and the Law of Moses did what they were intended to do – they revealed human sin and our need of forgiveness through sacrifice. Why was it essential that Jesus came to die?
- What sins in your past are you ashamed of? Pause and embrace God's promise that, if you are trusting in Christ, your sins will never be held to your account. Give thanks to God for this.
- Do you ever feel distant from God or that He isn't interested in your prayers? The new covenant promises that you can know God directly. Take some time to talk honestly with Him.
- What areas of your life do you recognise are not in line with God's will? The Holy Spirit wants to write God's law on your heart and mind. Take time to ask Him to fill you and change you.
- Have you been baptised and do you take communion regularly? If not, why not? Is there any reason why you shouldn't be baptised or take communion? Consider talking to someone about this.



## PART 20 – NEW COVENANT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### ***Did God abandon His covenant with Abraham?***

In short, no. God does not break His promises and the promises He made to Abraham were and will be fulfilled. The promise to bless Abraham and through him and his descendants to bring blessing to all peoples of the earth has been partially fulfilled in history through the actions of Israel (Abraham's natural descendants) and of the Church (Abraham's descendants through faith), but it is ultimately through Jesus that it is ultimately fulfilled as people from all nations come to believe in Him. The promise of a great people descended from Abraham is also fulfilled in this way. As regards the promise of the land, there is some variation of opinion among Christians. Some believe this promise has been transferred to the Church, which will reign with Christ over the earth, but others think God will bring this promise to fulfilment after Christ's return by giving the promised land in its entirety to the nation of Israel. In either case, God kept His promises to Abraham fully. Even though Israel was unfaithful, resulting in their removal from the land in judgement, God remained faithful and kept a remnant of the nation safe throughout the exile. The new covenant may have replaced the old covenant, but it is also a continuation of the plan of salvation that God began to implement with the call of Abraham. Gentiles who believe in Jesus are included in God's people by inclusion in Israel's Messiah, Jesus.

### ***Has God finished with Israel?***

This question relates to the previous one. Some Christians describe the Church as the true or new Israel, claiming that God's promises to Abraham have now been transferred to those who believe in Jesus. In this view, national Israel has no special part in God's future. Others believe that some Old Testament prophecies (especially in Daniel) refer to a future time when Israel will be restored. They point to words of Paul in Romans 9-11 as further evidence of this. Whatever view we take, Christians should be very thankful for the Jewish people as our salvation came to us through them. They preserved God's words in the Old Testament and gave us our Saviour. We should hope for them to come to recognise their Messiah along with us.

### ***Is water baptism necessary for salvation?***

In the New Testament, baptism in water usually followed soon after belief in the gospel. It was the visible demonstration of commitment to Christ and inclusion in the community of believers, the Church. There was no such thing as an unbaptised believer and a call to conversion was also a call to baptism (e.g., Acts 2:38). Nowadays, in churches that practise believers' baptism there is often a gap between a person professing faith in Jesus and their baptism and some churches require a course of baptism preparation classes. Importantly, in the New Testament period, baptism marked a person out as a Christian, often meaning rejection or suspicion from the wider community. Involvement in the Church, meanwhile, meant acknowledgement of the authority of its leaders and a commitment to be taught and, where necessary, disciplined by them. Baptism was a very early step, but the Church community kept the new believer accountable and helped them in their growth. There is no reason today why baptism should not happen early in a person's faith so long as they are ready to commit to Christ and to accept the oversight of leaders in a church. Baptism is something human beings do and it does not bring salvation, nor is it essential for salvation (consider, for example, the thief on the cross who was saved without baptism). If, however, someone refuses to obey the command of Scripture by being baptised it should cause some concern about the genuineness of their conversion.

### ***Do the bread and wine in communion become the body and blood of Jesus?***

When He instituted the Lord's Supper, Jesus said, "Take, eat; this is my body" and "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant" (Matthew 26:26-28). The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus when blessed by a priest. Protestants reject this view and most believe the bread and wine merely represent Jesus' body and blood figuratively. We should, however, remember when we take communion that we are expressing our utter dependence on Christ to save us by taking into ourselves something from outside that becomes part of our body. The Lord's Supper is a powerful reminder of Jesus, of our need for His sacrifice for our forgiveness and of our new nature in Him.



## PART 21 – CHURCH

- What is the Church?
- What are the core activities of a church?

### The Meaning of ‘Church’

People often call the buildings where Christians meet ‘churches’, but the Bible never uses the word this way. In fact, in New Testament times there were no buildings especially for Christian meetings and they met in privately owned houses. In the Bible, ‘church’ always means people, but it is used in three senses:

- **The whole Church** – all true Christians all over the world form one Church of Jesus Christ. No one other than God knows all its members. Jesus promised to build His Church (Matthew 16:18) and the basis of the Church is Christ and His apostles (Ephesians 2:20). The Church is united by one faith, prayer to one Father God, obedience to one Lord Jesus and shared life in one Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6). This is not unity with everyone who claims to be a Christian, but union with all true Christians created by God which believers must maintain the way they treat and speak about each other (Ephesians 4:3).
- **The Church in a city** – originally the whole Church was able to meet in one place in Jerusalem (Acts 2), but as the gospel spread and people in other places became Christians this was no longer possible. Christians began to meet in each city or town, with recognised leaders known as elders or overseers. They understood themselves to be part of the whole Church, or the expression of the Church in their location.
- **Congregations** – smaller groups of Christians met together in homes (later in designated buildings) as part of the Church in a city or region. They were also under the authority of recognised leaders. This was the primary experience of Church for Christians and is similar to the congregations that exist today.

The picture has been complicated over 2000 years of church history by divisions and differing ideas, leading to local churches taking different names and organising into ‘denominations’ (groups of local churches who share a common position on some belief or a common history). Despite these differences, there remains only one Church and it is important for different churches to speak well of each other and cooperate wherever possible.

### The First Church (Acts 2:42-47)

On the Day of Pentecost, around 3,000 people responded to Peter’s message and were baptised, making around 3,500 Christians in the city of Jerusalem. They devoted themselves to four vitally important things:

1. **The apostles’ teaching** – Jesus told the apostles to teach people to obey everything He commanded them (Matthew 28:19) and as Jesus’ authorised representatives, the apostles’ teaching had authority in the Church. Their teaching was recorded in the New Testament and the Bible should be regarded as the final authority for Christian belief and practice. Teaching from the Bible is, therefore, an important part of most Church gatherings. It is by hearing God’s word from the Bible and obeying it in the Holy Spirit’s power that Christians grow to become more like Jesus and serve God in the world.
2. **The fellowship** – ‘fellowship’ means sharing and they shared meals, homes and possessions with each other because they shared new life in Christ. Church is a community of people who meet together and care for one another because they love one another and understand their lives as interdependent.
3. **Breaking of bread** – the Lord’s Supper (communion) celebration was important because Jesus commanded it and because it kept the Church centred on the gospel.
4. **Prayers** – they depended on God and sought His direction as to how they should serve Him. Acts 4:24-31 shows the kind of things they prayed for: for God to work powerfully for them to speak boldly.

The result of this community grounded on the gospel and centred on Christ was that their shared life overflowed in two ways (Acts 2:47):

- a) *Towards God* – they praised God, giving thanks to Him for what He had done through Jesus Christ and was doing among them. Thankfulness flows from a life of devotion to God.
- b) *Towards others* – other people found this community intriguing and they enjoyed favour with non-believers. People heard the gospel and were added to the Church as they believed.

## Pictures of the Church in the Bible

- **A spiritual building (Ephesians 2:19-22)**

Paul pictures the Church as a building built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus as the cornerstone, with which all other stones must be aligned. The Holy Spirit lives in this Temple.

- **A body (Ephesians 1:22-23)**

As the body of Christ, the Church shares His life through the Spirit and continuing His work on earth as He (the head) directs it. Jesus is the only leader over all Christians. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses this idea to show that all Christians, as distinct body parts, have unique roles to play in the Church and its work.

- **A family (1 Timothy 5:1-3)**

God is the Father of all Christians and so they are brothers and sisters to one another. The love Christians have for each other comes from God and can overcome differences of culture, race, language or age.

## What Do Churches Do?

The aims of the Church are simple: to worship God and to see people come to faith in Christ and grow as His disciples. Churches have many different activities to help reach these aims, including:

- **Sunday services** – most churches have their main meetings on a Sunday, since this was the day when Jesus rose again, following the practice of the first Christians (Acts 20:7,18; 1 Corinthians 16:2). These services usually include sung praise, public prayers and teaching from the Bible. Christians may also share about their experiences and the Lord's Supper may be celebrated. Money is usually collected to help people in need, to support people spreading the gospel, to maintain buildings, and to pay workers' wages.
- **Prayer meetings** – in meetings for prayer, Christians often share about problems they are facing, needs people have, activities the church is planning, and things to thank God for. They then spend time to talk to God in prayer. Some people pray silently, but normally some will speak aloud, leading the whole group. The other Christians usually remain silent and listen, sometimes saying 'Amen', which means 'I agree'.
- **Small groups** – many churches organise smaller meetings, often in members' homes on a weekday night, in which relationships are deepened and more people can participate. They usually include a Bible study discussing the meaning of a Bible passage and applying its truth to their lives and a time of prayer.
- **Group-specific activities** – most churches organise special activities for children and teenagers where they are taught the Bible and encouraged to love and serve one another. Sunday School often takes place during the Sunday service. Some churches also have special meetings for older people, for men or women.
- **Outreach activities** – churches often arrange special activities to help people in need or to care for others, as well as activities where the good news about Jesus is spoken or shared.

## Church Leadership

Churches are organised in many different ways and use different names to describe people in leadership:

- **Elders** – many churches recognise a number of people as elders (the name emphasises their maturity in the faith) who have responsibility to oversee the activities of the church, giving direction, ensuring the Bible is taught faithfully, keeping activities in line with God's purposes and caring for members.
- **Deacons** – look after the practical, day to day running of the church business. They often have specific responsibilities (e.g., treasurer, secretary, youth leader) and work under the guidance of the elders.
- **Pastors or ministers** – many churches recognise one or more elders as pastors or ministers. They are usually supported financially to serve the church and have the main responsibility for teaching the Bible and leading the elders in their work. Pastors may meet together to make decisions for a denomination and in others a senior minister (superintendent or bishop) oversees pastors in a region.

Whatever structures are followed, leaders in the Church should be servants who do not seek power and control or their own gain, but follow Jesus' example in giving their lives for the sake of the sheep.

### **SUMMARY: The Church is a community united in Jesus by the Spirit to worship and serve God**

- Jesus is the head of the Church, which exists to do His work in the world and to make Him known.
- In the Church Christians care for one another as they worship God and share the gospel with others.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 21 – CHURCH

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Based on your experience, what is your understanding of what the Church is and what are its core activities?

*Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27*

2. Why is the body a good illustration for the nature of the Church?
3. What is the basis for inclusion in the body and for its unity (verse 13)?
4. Why is it important for each member of the body to realise what function God has given them and to appreciate the contributions of others (verses 14-20)?
5. What kind of relationships should mark the community that is the Church according to verses 21-26?
6. What is the significance for the actions of the Church in the world of the realisation that it is Christ's body and (as is taught elsewhere), He is its head (giving it direction)? What is the Church supposed to do?
7. How might the human dimension of the Church (the organisation with its activities) reflect the spiritual reality that it is a living organism comprising diverse people?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Have you ever been hurt by people in the Church or who represented a church? Pray about these experiences. Did their actions reflect Christ or not? Can you forgive them?
- Why do you think the New Testament places so much emphasis on our part as Christians in a community with other Christians where we worship, learn, grow and serve together?
- Which aspects of Church activities do you appreciate most and which do you struggle with? Do you think those struggles are legitimate or do you have something to learn about what is important?
- Are you committed to the four things Acts 2:42 describes: the apostles' teaching; the fellowship; the breaking of bread; the prayers? How might you strengthen your commitment to each of these?
- Think of the congregation you are most familiar with. Are you committed to the people there? Do you think it is important that you recognise the authority of the leaders there to teach and guide you?



## PART 21 – CHURCH QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### ***Why are there so many different churches with different names?***

The New Testament describes the Church as one and argues against divisions into factions with different names, for example identifying with different teachers (see 1 Corinthians 3). Over 2000 years of Church history, differences emerged over beliefs, practices and structures. These were complicated further by cultural and language differences, political interests and leadership struggles. The various reasons for the emergence of different denominations (groups of churches united by shared values, practices and leadership) are too numerous to address here, but it is important to acknowledge that they often began as movements for evangelism or attempting to reform the Church to be more faithful to Scripture. Belonging to a denomination can often help a congregation to find training and support for its leaders and to contribute to wider mission activities. It is important, though, to realise that what unites Christians in various denominations is greater than what separates them. There is very wide agreement across the Church on the core beliefs of the Christian faith and many individual Christians and congregations work closely with and enjoy good relationships with Christians and congregations from other traditions. As you grow as a Christian it is worth finding out more about what the specific congregation you attend believes and why. It is, however, healthy to speak more of your identity as a Christian, or a believer in Jesus, than as a member of a particular congregation or denomination.

### ***Why don't you include 'bishops' in your list of Church leaders?***

The words I used to describe church leaders are intended to indicate the different roles to be played in the Church. One of the things that varies between churches is the way the congregation is linked with others. In some denominations, there is a leader who oversees the churches and their leaders in a city or region. This person may be called a bishop or a superintendent. He or she gives direction to the churches in a province or diocese, meets with other leaders who oversee other regions and appoints leaders in the congregations. Other denominations function through representatives of each congregation – usually the elders who lead in each congregation – in a region meeting together to discuss issues or make decisions affecting the whole denomination. In both of these situations, the denomination has authority over the congregation, but in the first that authority comes from the top down, whereas in the second it comes from the bottom up. A third possibility is for congregations to be linked together in an association which coordinates training and mission and provides a context for discussion of issues affecting the churches, but which has no authority over the leaders of each congregation. Some congregations do not belong to any denomination at all. Within a congregation there may also be different patterns of leadership, especially concerning whether a team share authority equally or whether one individual (often called a pastor or minister) has authority over the other leaders. There are historical reasons for each of these patterns and biblical and practical arguments in favour of each. The most important principle of Church leadership, however, is that Christ is the true head of the Church and that leaders are to serve Him and their members, keeping them faithful to the gospel.

### ***Are you saying churches should only do the things described in Acts 2:42?***

Acts 2:42 describes four core activities to which the early Christians were committed – the apostles' teaching, sharing life together in a caring fellowship, communion, and prayers. There are many other things churches can do and some of these have precedents in Scripture. An obvious example might be singing, which has always been an aspect of Christian corporate worship, but the passages that speak about it (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16) describe it as a way of giving thanks to God and encouraging and challenging one another. In other words, singing is a form of prayer and teaching. Churches may do other things as expressions of their life in community or as ways of blessing others, but the four activities in Acts 2:42 should be central to the life of the Church because they keep believers faithful to Christ, reminding them of the gospel, expressing love for one another and seeking God's direction.



## PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

- What has happened in the centuries since the apostles?
- How can Christians live faithfully in a non-Christian world?

### ***Beginnings and initial spread (AD 33 – 312)***

The Church began in AD 33 on the Day of Pentecost (Part 21). As the gospel spread across the world, churches were formed in every city. The Christians faced opposition, initially informally from Jews and local leaders, and later officially from the Roman Empire after Emperor Nero turned against them in AD 64. Peter and Paul were probably martyred during Nero's persecution. The era of the apostles was coming to an end (although John lived for around 30 years longer). During the next 200 years, the Church grew and became stronger throughout the Roman Empire (the Middle East, Europe and North Africa) despite continuing opposition.

### ***Official acceptance and spread to new territories (AD 313 – 1054)***

In AD 313, Emperor Constantine gave freedom of worship to Christians. He later made Christianity the State Religion of the Roman Empire. It is difficult to say whether Constantine became a Christian or saw Christianity as a way to keep his Empire united. This new freedom allowed the gospel to spread more freely, but it was now possible for people to identify as 'Christian' for personal gain and Christianity became linked with the State and with politics in ways that sometimes compromised Christian principles. The gospel spread to Ireland (432), Germany (716), the Slavic countries of Eastern Europe (863) and Russia (988). In some areas, however, (most notably in Russia) rulers accepted a form of Christianity for political reasons, and the nation became officially 'Christian', but only a small minority of people came to a real faith in Christ.

### ***Division and movement away from the Bible (AD 1054 - 1517)***

In AD 1054, a growing division between East and West finally resulted in a split between these two branches of Christianity. The division was over a range of minor issues, but reflected political and cultural differences. Over time, the teaching of the State Church in the West (centred in Rome) moved away from the teaching of the Bible, taking in false ideas from other religions and from Greek philosophy. Leaders in the established Church took political power and became rich. They sometimes taught that Christianity could be spread or defended by force. Many people believed they were Christians because they were born in a 'Christian country' to 'Christian parents' or through attending Church. Most people could not read or had no Bible in their own language, so the Bible's teachings were distorted or neglected. There were, of course, many true Christians, both within the mainstream Church and in separate simple churches where the Bible was taught.

### ***Reformation, Counter-Reformation and revival (AD 1517 - 1793)***

In AD 1517, a man called Martin Luther started a debate about some of the areas where the official teaching of the Church had departed from the Bible. He was not the first to do so, but his message caught hold and spread. Luther's main concern was to re-establish the truth that forgiveness of sins is received directly from God through faith alone, rather than through the Church. The Reformers wanted all of God's people to have the Bible in their own languages and to follow its teachings. The Roman Catholic Church refused to change, and followers of Luther and others had to break away and form new churches. These new churches became known as 'Protestants' because they protested against distortions in the Church. Protestants became the majority in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, Scandinavia and North America. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, revivals in Great Britain and North America brought many people to renewed faith and commitment.

### ***Worldwide spread (AD 1793 - 2006)***

In 1793 an English man called William Carey went to India to spread the gospel. He was among the first of thousands of Western Protestant Christians who travelled, often at great risk, to countries where the Church was not yet present or had died away. Today there are Christians in every country on earth, and the church is stronger in Africa, South America and some Asian countries including China, than in Europe, where increasing wealth and consumerism, supported by ideas of atheism, have distracted many people from Christian beliefs. Christ continues to build His Church as individuals come to faith in Him and are born again by the Holy Spirit.

## Christians as Citizens

Some of the biggest problems for the Church throughout history have occurred either when the State tried to control the Church (limiting its freedom to serve God or to speak His truth clearly) or the Church tried to control the State (causing Church leaders to be distracted by power and money). How should Christians live as citizens of modern countries, especially where they disagree with aspects of government policy?

Jesus taught that His followers should respect those who rule over them and pay their taxes as good citizens (Matthew 22:15-21). He never encouraged his followers to be revolutionaries and He never took a position of power in this world. Instead, He told them to seek God's kingdom and righteousness, trusting Him to provide their needs (Matthew 6:33). They should focus on doing good works that reflect God's rule and so become salt, preserving and adding flavour to the world, and light, shining God's truth so that people may glorify Him (Matthew 5:13-16). He taught His followers to love everyone, even their enemies (Matthew 5:44). He set an example of humility and gentleness, not retaliating to those who persecuted Him and promised that those who experienced persecution for being His followers would be blessed in heaven (Matthew 5:11-12).

The apostles, led by the Spirit, said more about Christians' responsibility as citizens. Christians should:

- Honour and pray for those who rule over them, who are appointed by God and accountable to Him, and should do good and submit to the authorities (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Peter 2:13-16);
- Do everything they can to live at peace with other people (Romans 12:17-18);
- Be hard working (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13), unselfish, and honest (Ephesians 4:25-28);
- Forgive, be generous to all, and care for their families and fellow-workers (Colossians 3:12-14).

These qualities make for a very good citizen in any country. In countries where they have the opportunity, some Christians may seek to serve God as politicians and in positions of authority, but they must be faithful to God's standards. Only where the law of the State directly conflicts with obedience to Christ should Christians disobey the law, and, even then, they should do it in a way that submits to the authorities and seeks peace.

## Recognising and dealing with false teachings

Jesus warned that false teachers would come after Him (e.g., Matthew 24:23-25) and the apostles wrote about the dangers of false teachers who were already in the churches at the time when they wrote the New Testament letters. Some people would be deceived by their false teachings (e.g., Paul's warnings in 2 Timothy 3:12-13, Peter's in 2 Peter 2 and Jude's in Jude 3-4). Jesus described false teachers as wolves in "sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15-23) because they may appear to be harmless and to be one of God's people, but beneath this they cause destruction. It should not surprise us, then, that false teachers exist today and false prophets have even founded movements. False teachings are usually of one of two types:

- **Subtracting from Jesus** – some false teachings suggest we need something or someone else as well as Jesus, perhaps an additional experience of God or extra knowledge. Some of the earliest false teachings, called Gnosticism, spoke of secret knowledge known only to some. Others said God could only be pleased through faith in Jesus plus circumcision or obedience to the Law of Moses. More recent 'Jesus plus' teachings include cults that add other books to the Bible or follow the teachings of a prophet who was not one of Jesus' apostles. Two of the most widespread originating in the USA are the Jehovah's Witnesses (founded in 1852 by Charles Russell), recognisable by their publications bearing the name 'Watchtower', and the Mormons (or 'Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints', founded by Joseph Smith in 1829). Islam could also be considered as a 'Jesus plus' religion because it teaches that Muhammad was a prophet subsequent to Jesus whose teachings supersede His. These beliefs **subtract** from Jesus because they claim He is less than fully God or that His death alone is not sufficient to save us.
- **Distracting from Jesus** – these subtler false teachings do not deny any important truth about Jesus (their teachers may even sign up to standard Christian beliefs), but they do not place the emphasis where the Bible does. They may **distract** from Jesus by focusing on blessings God gives or by promising people wealth or health (healing from all diseases) if they follow Jesus. Alternatively, the distraction may be a theological system or emphasis that, even though it may true, is held to be essential or used divisively.

### SUMMARY: God has preserved His people and biblical truth throughout history

- Christians must recognise false teachers by testing all teaching against the Bible.
- Christians should be good citizens, seeking the good of their nation as they shine for God.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. How should Christians live in the world today? What challenges do they face where you live?

*Read 1 Peter 2:9-25*

2. What do verses 9-10 say about the identity of Christians and why God has a people of His own in the world?
3. What two aspects of living as strangers in the world does Peter emphasise in verses 11-12?
4. Christians are to honour the authorities ('the emperor' in verse 17). What do verses 13-15 say about how and why we should do so?
5. Above all, Christians are to fear God (verse 17). What does verse 16 say about the implications of giving God the reverence He is due?
6. Verses 18-20 are written to Christians who have no choice but to live as slaves. What principles are found there that might apply to how Christians are to do their work in paid jobs?
7. Why does Peter bring the focus back to Christ and the gospel (verses 21-25)? How are the lifestyles of Christians to be shaped by the gospel and how do they help others to understand it?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- Do you think Christians and churches have been broadly a force for good or for bad in the history of the world since the time of Christ?
- How did the gospel come to the country where you live? Who were the pioneers? What did they do well and what could they have done better in seeking to reach people in your culture?
- What false teachings are you familiar with in the area where you live? How can you recognise false teachers and how can you help people to hear the true gospel of Jesus?
- Think about your workplace (if you are employed) and your citizenship. Are there any aspects of how you live, work and relate to authorities that are inconsistent with being a Christian (e.g., dishonesty)?
- What challenges might you face in work and in society where you live because you want to be faithful to God? Are you prepared to suffer for Him if it is necessary?



## PART 22 – FAITH IN THE WORLD

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***Has the Church been a force for good or bad?***

This is a difficult question to answer without bias. The answer depends in part on what we mean by ‘the Church’. If we mean the body of Christ under His direction, then I would argue strongly that its impact has been overwhelmingly good. Christians have been good citizens, working hard and contributing to society. Individual Christians have pioneered health care, science, social reform and education. Where people have acted in Jesus’ name in ways that do not reflect the teaching or example of Jesus as found in the Bible, this cannot accurately be said to be ‘the Church’ at work in this sense. In another sense, however, the Church is a human organisation or institution that can be faithful or unfaithful to Christ, its head. At times in history the institution of the Church (or churches) has acted in ways that do not reflect the gospel, especially where it has used power over the State. Even when we consider the institutions of the Church, however, there has still be much good done in history, especially in founding hospitals and educational institutions and in bringing stability to societies in times of threat, social upheaval or political instability. The Church is imperfect in following its Lord, but it has laid the moral foundations for European culture and society, contributing many of the values, especially the worth and equality of individuals, that have now become global values. Christians make excellent citizens, upholding honesty and fairness, giving to charitable causes and shunning criminal behaviours.

#### ***Should Christians welcome a secular state?***

Western nations, especially in Europe, are becoming increasingly secular, meaning that they do not expect or, in some instances, allow religion to have a place in public life. In a secular state, religion is a private affair and people are free to believe what they want, but there should be no prayers in public buildings, no power in the hands of unelected religious leaders and no privilege for any particular belief system. This is a very different situation from the historical experience in Europe, where most countries have had an officially established Church that is recognised by the State. Christians may have slightly different views about the degree to which the Church should seek to influence the State. Some warn that it always leads to a compromise of the gospel (there is certainly much historical evidence of this); others say that we should use whatever influence we have to further Christian values. Whatever we think, however, we must be wary of a drive towards secularism if it leads to freedom of speech being curtailed. Christians are called to give glory to God and to make the name of Jesus known. Our faith must not and cannot be ‘forced’ upon anyone and we should not want to join in a pretence of being a ‘Christian nation’ if most people do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord, but we cannot accept a situation in which religion cannot be discussed or the gospel cannot be preached. We should avoid causing unnecessary offence to people, but we must humbly speak of God and His truth. Christ is Lord over everything and loyalty to Him will inevitably impact our politics and our work as well as our private lives.

#### ***Is there a simple way to recognise a false teacher?***

False teachers can be recognised in one or more of four ways. Firstly, their teaching may be out of line with the Bible and the historic teachings of the Church. If they refuse to acknowledge the supreme authority of the Bible or to say they agree with the ancient creeds of the Church (formulated in the early centuries of its history) or if they promote another book (or their own statement of values or beliefs) as if it is equal in authority to the Bible, alarm bells should ring. Secondly, they may bring glory to themselves rather than to Jesus. If a teacher speaks little of Jesus and allows himself to become the centre of attention, we should be concerned about his motivation. Thirdly, their lifestyle may not be consistent with a servant of the gospel. This will be especially evident in the way they use money (are they getting rich through ministry) and power (do they frequently fall out with others and control others rather than empowering them)? Another area to watch is their relationships with the opposite sex. Fourthly, false teachers will often major on things that are relatively minor in Scripture and may be critical of others who keep their focus on the central truths of the faith. Healthy teaching centres on Jesus, His cross and resurrection and the call to repentance and faith.

- What do Christians believe about how the world will end?
- What happens to people when they die?

## How will the world end?

People have many theories about how life on earth may come to an end, including global warming, an asteroid collision or nuclear war. The Bible, however, teaches that the future of the Universe is tied to the future of humankind because we are God's most precious creation and the earth was made for us to inhabit and enjoy. Just as God created the Universe, setting it in motion, He will bring it to an end at a date He has set. The Bible does not give us all the details about the end of the world, but it does teach that the world will become more evil until God intervenes when Jesus returns to earth to judge all human beings, living and dead.

When Jesus came to earth in 4 BC, He lived and died as the Suffering Servant foreseen by the Old Testament prophets, refusing to be made King in Israel and choosing the cross. This was necessary to pay for sins and make forgiveness possible. Other Old Testament prophecies, about God's Conquering King, remained to be fulfilled. God raised Jesus to the position of highest authority (at His right hand) where He reigns as Lord over all, but **Jesus must return to finally restore God's Kingdom**. Jesus spoke about this:

- *John 14:1-4* – Jesus told His disciples He was going to leave them to prepare a place in His Father's house for them to live and promised to return one day to take them to be with Him.
- *Matthew 24:26-31,36-44* – Jesus said that when He returns He will appear in the sky in power and great glory and everyone will see Him. He will gather all His people to Himself. No one knows when this say will be, so people should be ready.

The apostles also wrote about the return of Jesus. Paul wrote about the hope it gives to Christians:

- *1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:3* – when Jesus returns, dead Christians will be raised to life, then those still alive on earth will be lifted up with them to meet Jesus in the air. No one will know the date – it will be sudden.
- *1 Corinthians 15:35-58* – the resurrection body of Christians will be different from our present bodies as it cannot die or decay. It will be full of power and capable of living forever like Jesus' resurrection body.

The book that says most about the future is Revelation, which uses much figurative language. Some details are difficult to understand with certainty, but the overall message is clear. When Jesus returns, He will destroy the enemies of God, bring about final judgement and usher in God's new creation.

## The Final Judgement

God must judge and punish sin. He cannot ignore it. There is no hope for a future perfect new creation if sin is allowed to continue. **Revelation 20:11-15** tells about the final Day of Judgement after Jesus returns:

- Jesus Christ will sit on the throne in judgement (v11a);
- All people will stand before Him to be judged – there will be nowhere to hide (v11b-12);
- God knows everything we have done – our actions are recorded in His books (v12b);
- All whose names are not written in another book, the Book of Life, will be thrown into a lake of fire (v15).

The final judgement will be fair and just, with all the evidence taken into account and no miscarriages of justice (see also Romans 2:5-11). The evidence against people will be the sins they have committed, but the reason they will be condemned to Hell will be because they have not received new life from God.

According to Jesus, people are either free from the coming judgement if they have believed in Him or they will face that judgement. In fact, those who reject Him have already been judged because they have rejected the truth God has shown them (see John 3:18-21). Christians, however, will not be condemned on the Day of Judgement, because their sins have been forgiven (Romans 8:1). The return of Christ will mean salvation for them (1 Thessalonians 5:9; 1 Peter 1:13). The New Covenant promises that God will keep no record of the sins of His people (Hebrews 8:12). Christians will, however, give account for their lives at the Judgement Seat of Christ, receiving rewards for faithful service (Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

## Where Do People Go After Death?

Jesus taught that human beings have invisible souls (the centre of thinking, emotions and the will) as well as bodies (Matthew 10:28). When the body dies, the soul returns to God. Human beings only live once then they face judgement (Hebrews 9:27). We do not get a second chance. The souls of Christians who die go to be with Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). They belong to Him and so can be in God's presence. We do not know if these people remain conscious. The souls of non-believers, meanwhile, await the future Day of Judgement. Jesus taught that there are only two possible permanent destinies for people after the final judgement: eternal punishment and eternal life (Matthew 25:46). These two alternatives are often called Hell and Heaven.

### **HEAVEN (the New Earth) – Eternal Life**

By 'heaven', the Bible simply means the place where God lives, while the plural 'heavens' means the sky and outer space. In popular usage, people talk about 'going to heaven' when they die. In reality, Christians will live forever in resurrected bodies on a new earth in a renewed Universe. The prophet Isaiah foresaw this (Isaiah 65:17-25) and Peter told Christians to look forward to it (2 Peter 3:13). Revelation 21:1 describes this new creation being revealed. Life on the new earth will be different from now because:

- It seems that all animals will be vegetarian, just as they were before the Flood (Isaiah 65:25);
- Everyone will be right with God and there will be no more sin (2 Peter 3:13);
- There will be no death, sorrow, or crying or pain as the curse of Genesis 3 is undone (Revelation 21:4);
- People can eat again from the Tree of Life and so live forever (Revelation 22:2).

On the new earth, human beings will live in harmony with God, with one another and with the universe, just as God intended. Sin and all its effects will be gone.

### **HELL (the Lake of Fire) – Eternal Punishment**

The Bible often describes Hell as a place of great suffering and Revelation describes it as a lake of burning fire (Revelation 20:14). This suffering results both from the person's rejection of God and God's punishment. The Lake of Fire was prepared for the Devil (Revelation 20:10), but people who have not responded to God in faith will also be cast into it after the final judgement. There is no hope of escape.

## The Challenge

The promise that Jesus will return brings hope and purpose to Christians. Many New Testament passages challenge Christians to change their behaviour in light of it. The following are just two examples:

### **The apostle John – 1 John 3:2-3**

- Christians are God's children and the nature of the resurrection body has not yet been revealed (v2a).
- When Jesus returns, Christians will see Him in His glory and will become like Him (v2b).
- Christians should, therefore, aim to live like Jesus now, in pure devotion to God (v3).

### **The apostle Peter – 2 Peter 3:3-14**

- Some people will mock the idea that Jesus will return, just as they deny that God created the world (v 3-7).
- God is not slow in keeping His promise but patient, giving people an opportunity to repent (v8-9).
- The "day of the Lord" will come suddenly ("like a thief in the night"), bringing judgement for godless people, the melting down of the Universe and creation of a new Universe (v7,10,12-13).
- Christians should be holy and godly because they are looking forward to the day of God. Christ's return will bring their final deliverance from the presence of sin, and they should live focussed on God because everything in this world will pass away (v11,14).

#### **SUMMARY: God will restore the universe and judge every human being justly**

- The ultimate destiny of saved humankind is to live in a restored universe in resurrected bodies.
- Those who are not saved cannot enter God's new creation and will be eternally separated from God.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 23 – END OF THE AGES

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. What is your impression of heaven? Is it somewhere you would like to live eternally?

*Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11*

2. Why would Paul expect the Christians to find his words in 4:13-12 encouraging in the face of grief over the death of fellow-believers?
3. Like the coming of a thief, the date of Jesus' return will not be announced in advance (5:1-3), but Christians should be ready when it happens (5:4-8). What does this mean for how Christians should live?
4. What will the return of Christ mean for those who believe in Him and, by implication, for those who do not (5:9-11)?

*Read 2 Peter 3:8-14*

5. Why is God allowing time to pass before the final day of the Lord?
6. What will the day of the Lord mean for the physical universe and where will Christians live forever?
7. What are the implications for how we should live now?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- What do you believe happens after death? Have you always believed the same thing? What were you brought up to believe and when did you change your mind?
- The New Testament presents the resurrection of Jesus as the proof that all those who believe in Him will one day be raised in new bodies. What is wrong with our present bodies and what needs to change?
- Do you struggle with the idea that God will judge everyone fairly according to what they have done? What would this mean for you if it weren't for Jesus? What do we deserve from God?
- The main images of Heaven in the Bible are that it is living in peace with God and enjoying a life free of the results of sin. Why is this very good news and how does knowing it change our lives now?
- The Bible says that those who believe in Jesus will not face God's condemnation and will not end up in hell. Do you believe in Jesus? Take time to give thanks to God that you share in Jesus' inheritance in glory.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 23 – END OF THE AGES

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### ***Is hell literally a place of fire?***

Fire is the predominant image that is used in the biblical accounts of the final judgement. It is difficult to say whether this should be understood literally as it may, rather, be figurative of the emotional anguish people will experience. Christians differ over whether the second death means eternal conscious punishment (the predominant view) or annihilation (some argue that those consigned to hell cease to exist). There are verses that could be interpreted in either of these ways. What is, however, clear from Scripture is that the final judgement is irreversible and the destination is eternal. There is no coming back.

#### ***Is hell a choice people make for themselves?***

Some preachers and authors describe hell as a place that people have chosen to be. It certainly seems true to say that hell was not created for people, but for Satan and his angels who rebelled against God. It would, however, be wrong to think that people consign themselves to Hell or that God simply allows them to go there because they have chosen it. People will be in hell because of their own sin and their rejection of God's salvation, but the verdict of eternal punishment is pronounced by God. For now, God allows people to follow their sinful desires and because of His patience He permits people to reject Him so that some will return to Him in repentance. When Christ returns, however, God will call a halt to all human rebellion and no one will escape His judgement. He will expose everything and will preside in the judgement. In Scripture, sin is always personal (an offence against God) and so is judgement.

#### ***Isn't there a place called purgatory?***

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is a third option between heaven and hell, named purgatory. This is believed to be a place where people who are not good enough to go directly to heaven but not bad enough to be condemned to hell can go for a period of time until they are purged of their sins. It is said to be a place of punishment while these people perform penance for their sins and the prayers of people who are still alive on earth are said to help shorten its duration. This teaching finds no basis in Scripture and is a development from a flawed idea of salvation. The Bible describes only heaven (the new earth) and hell (the lake of fire). The former is the destiny of those whose names are written in the book of life – those who have received God's offer of life through Christ – and the latter is the destiny of those who have not responded in faith to God.

#### ***What will our new bodies and the new earth be like?***

It is best to avoid speculation about the nature of our new bodies and the new heaven. We do know that there will be no sickness or suffering on the new earth (Revelation 21:4) and that our new bodies will be incapable of corruption, glorious and powerful (1 Corinthians 15:42-44). We also know that there will be no marriage or procreation in the new creation (Matthew 22:30). Jesus relates this to being like the angels, which may mean that our new bodies will not be gendered, although we cannot be certain of this. The new earth will likely be similar to the present earth and will, presumably, include many species of plants and animals. Whether these are the same as or different from those existing currently remains to be seen.

#### ***Will heaven not get boring after a while?***

The idea that heaven will be boring stems from a misunderstanding of what it will be like. If it meant sitting around forever on clouds strumming harps, that probably would be boring, especially if you don't like harp music! When we realise, however, that we will live in new bodies in a restored universe, the possibilities are endless. We will engage in work and will have dominion over creation, but this will not be laborious, but rather productive and fulfilling. Above all, we will be in God's presence, enjoying Him for ever, and since He is eternal and infinite there will always be more to discover and to appreciate.



## PART 24 – CHRISTIAN LIVING

- How can Christians grow in their relationship with God?
- What difference does being a Christian make in everyday life?

### Looking Back and Forward

The Christian life is lived between two great events – the past death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future day when He will return. God’s salvation, made possible through Jesus, has three aspects:

**PAST** – the Christian’s sins are forgiven and he or she is born again into a new relationship with God as Father and into a full and eternal life. This gift of forgiveness and eternal life is received through repentance (admitting and turning away from sin) and faith (trusting in God to save and surrendering to Christ as Lord).

**PRESENT** – God constantly helps the Christian to live for Him day by day. He saves us from the power of sin through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The Holy Spirit’s goal is to make us more like Christ.

**FUTURE** – on the day of resurrection, when Christ returns, Christians will finally be saved from the presence and possibility of sin and will be made fully like Jesus (1 John 3:1-3). This hope gives great courage to Christians to keep living for God even when things are difficult or when they face opposition.

### The Struggle Within

The aim of the Christian life is to be free from sin to do what pleases God and, ultimately, **to become like Christ**. The Holy Spirit leads Christians towards this goal, but the flesh (our human desires, sometimes called the ‘sinful nature’) pulls in the opposite direction. In sin, we have fallen short of God’s standard of perfection (Romans 3:23), but the Holy Spirit “makes us more and more like [Jesus] as we are changed into his glorious image” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit will change our minds and hearts so that we think and feel as God does, but He never forces us to change. He only does it as we surrender our will to Him.

Paul talks about this struggle in **Galatians 5:16-26**. He tells Christians to “follow the Holy Spirit’s leading in every part of our lives” (v25). Christians must choose each day to allow the Holy Spirit to shape their minds and hearts, giving the power to do what is right and to resist temptation to do what is wrong. Paul calls the results of the Holy Spirit’s work in a person’s life His ‘fruit’ (v22-23). He lists character qualities, like flavours of the Spirit’s fruit, that are evident in Jesus’ life and says that these qualities lead us to fulfil God’s standards.

### A Daily Relationship

Christianity is not a set of rules, but a relationship with God. This relationship can grow through certain habits:

#### *Prayer – talking to God*

The most famous prayer in the Bible, found in **Matthew 6:9-13**, is known as the Lord’s Prayer because Jesus taught it to His disciples. The prayer contains six requests that describe a relationship with God as Father:

- “May your name be honoured” – acknowledging God as the king who is holy and deserves honour.
- “May your Kingdom come soon” – looking forward to the time when Jesus returns to restore the Kingdom.
- “May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven” – asking that we may do what God wants.
- “Give us our food for today” – asking God to provide those things we need.
- “and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us” – confessing our sins, keeping open before God, and remembering to forgive others, maintaining good relationships with them.
- “And don’t let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” – seeking strength and protection.

The most important thing in prayer is our attitude before God. Many Christians end their prayers by saying:

- **In Jesus’ name** – meaning they are praying in Jesus’ authority, not claiming the right for themselves;
- **Amen** – meaning ‘I agree’ or ‘let it be so’ (from a Hebrew word meaning ‘truly’).

It can be helpful to think of four emphases in our prayers, which are remembered with the acronym ACTS:

- **Adoration** – simply thinking about God and praising Him by telling Him how great He is.
- **Confession** – admitting our sins to God in the same way that a little child would confess to its father.
- **Thanksgiving** – thanking God for everything He has given us and done for us.
- **Supplication** – asking God to guide, protect and provide for us and others according to His will.

### ***Bible reading – listening to God***

Christians believe the Bible is God's word to us. Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 3:16-17** that every part of the Bible can make God's people ready to do His good work because it does four things, affecting our ideas and actions:

1. teach us what is true;
2. show us where our actions are wrong;
3. correct our wrong ideas;
4. train us to do what is right.

Christians, therefore, place high value on the Bible and make it part of their lives in several ways:

- **Reading it** – many read the Bible each day, asking God to speak to them through it;
- **Studying it** – taking time to understand accurately what it says, both alone and in groups;
- **Meditating on it** – spending time thinking over God's word, applying its truth to their lives.

To understand the Bible, we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us, read each part in the wider context of the whole Bible, and ask other Christians for help when we find it difficult.

### ***Disciplines to make time for God***

To help them make time for God, many Christians do things like spending time alone, perhaps in silence, fasting (abstaining from food for a period of time) or writing a journal of their thoughts. These things are not done to earn God's acceptance or approval, but to prioritise time with Him and to express dependence on Him.

## **Priorities and decision-making**

The greatest priority for every Christian should be to seek God's kingdom (Matthew 6:33), meaning using everything we have to do what God desires and helping others to know Him in every aspect of life:

- **Church** – every Christian should be a committed member of a church fellowship where they serve other Christians in love and use whatever gifts they have to help others grow in their faith.
- **Family** – Christians follow the Bible's standards for family life, respecting and caring for parents, honouring lifelong marriage between a man and a woman as the proper context for sexual activity and child-rearing, and seeking to raise children in a way that helps them to know God.
- **Work** – Christian workers should be hard-working and honest, submitting to their bosses. They should be generous with possessions and not greedy to have more money (1 Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19).

Based on these priorities, Christians make decisions through a thoughtful process of discerning God's will, which should not be approached in fear of failure, but as an adventure with our loving Father:

- **Scripture** (Psalm 119:105) – if the Bible clearly says something is wrong, it is wrong. God will not ask us to do anything that He has already told us we must not do.
- **Prayer** – asking God to make His will known to us, to guard us from temptation and to preserve us from Satan (in line with the requests in the Lord's Prayer).
- **Self-awareness** – testing motivation (is it for selfish gain or pleasure alone, or to honour God and bless others?), recognising our gifting and limitations as well as those things that cause us temptation to sin.
- **Consequences** – will this action lead to blessing for others or cause them hurt? Will it bring pleasure to God or grieve Him? Will it be successful or not? We need to develop wisdom to discern this.
- **Advice** (Proverbs 20:18) – it is always good to seek advice from wise Christians who know us well and know God well. They may point out things we have missed.
- **Circumstances** – if God wants you to do something for Him, He will make it possible for you at the right time. He always knows the best time, and sometimes you need to wait for His timing.

### **SUMMARY: The Christian life is a relationship of learning from, trusting and obeying God daily**

- Christians live to do God's will and become more like Jesus as they look forward to His return.
- Christians need to listen to God and depend on Him daily, following the Spirit's leading.

# UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

## PART 24 – CHRISTIAN LIVING

### DISCUSS AND APPLY

#### **Discuss – questions to help understanding**

1. Think of Christians you know and respect. In what ways are their values and lifestyles different from non-believers from a similar cultural background? Why is this so?

*Read Ephesians 4:17-5:21*

2. What is wrong with the way non-Christians ('the Gentiles') live (4:17-19)?
3. What is the heart of Christian living according to 4:20-23?
4. What aspects of our behaviour will change when we put off the old self and put on the new self (4:29-32; 5:3-5)?
5. What is the standard for our behaviour as Christians according to 5:1-2? What does this mean in practice?
6. How can Christians shine the light of Christ into a world of darkness so that people wake up and see the light (5:6-14)?
7. Why is the life we share together in the Church important for us as we seek to live faithfully and wisely in the world (5:15-21)?

#### **Apply – questions to help personal application**

- How do you make decisions in life? Do you tend to go with your instincts or to evaluate consequences? What values drive your choices and shape your decisions?
- Do you recognise a tension in your life between the flesh (the old, selfish you) and the Spirit (the new self God is creating in you)? What helps you to put the flesh to death and to follow the Spirit's leading?
- Take time to think about your daily life – work, family commitments, community. What would it mean for you in each of these aspects to live by Christian values, to honour Christ and to serve God?
- Think of your relationships. Does the way to relate to those closest to you reflect God's love and Christ-likeness? What do you need to change to be faithful to God and to reflect Jesus?
- Do you have good habits of reading the Bible and praying regularly? How can you develop more consistent habits and how can fellowship with other Christians help you in this?

### ***Should Christians have a daily ‘quiet time’?***

The idea of a daily ‘quiet time’, meaning a time for Bible reading and prayer, is popular among some Christians and recommended in some books. It can be a very helpful practice and certainly shouldn’t be discouraged, but it is important to realise that the Bible does not command it and so no one should feel guilty if they miss their ‘quiet time’ or if they do not have it as a regular habit. What matters most is that we develop patterns of thinking that are constantly shaped by truths from Scripture and prayerful, seeking God’s insight and guidance. A time of concentrated Bible reading, meditation on its meaning and prayer can certainly help this, but we also need to make time to discuss Scripture and pray with other Christians and some of us may find it more useful to take fewer longer times in prayer and Bible study even if that means not doing it each day.

### ***Are any jobs unsuitable for Christians?***

This is a tricky question. There are, clearly, a few ‘jobs’ that must be inappropriate for a Christian – hitman and prostitute come to mind – but most jobs will have aspects that test the integrity of Christians. We need to walk a line between maintaining our distinctiveness and not disengaging from society and we should be seeking positions of influence. In general, Christians should seek jobs that are productive, promote healthy outcomes for people and do not involve obvious ethical clashes with Christian values. In any profession or line of business, Christians should seek to be above reproach, utterly truthful and fair. They should not seek excessive profit or take advantage of or dominate employees. They should aim to glorify God in the work they do and not to cause harm to God’s world or to other people. Most jobs can be done in this way, but we also live in a time when ethical challenges are confronting Christians in professions that have traditionally been attractive to them (especially medicine, nursing and teaching). We must be open to the possibility that a clash between professional guidelines or regulations and our Christian convictions will push us to a point where it is no longer possible to work in a job with a clear conscience. This requires wisdom and support from others.

### ***Should Christians marry non-Christians?***

The apostle Paul commanded that Christians should only consider fellow believers as suitable marriage partners (1 Corinthians 7:39). Only when both partners are Christians can God’s will be the dominant concern in the marriage. Paul also makes it clear, however, that a person who is already married before they become a Christian should not separate from their partner because they can seek to have a positive influence on them and on any children (1 Corinthians 7:12-14).

### ***Is divorce acceptable or remarriage after divorce?***

This is a big issue that cannot be adequately answered here. The Bible upholds marriage as a lifelong commitment and God does not like divorce. There is, however, a provision for divorce whenever one partner has broken the marriage covenant through unfaithfulness. Separation may be advisable in other circumstances, for example abusive treatment, and some Christian teachers would also encourage divorce in such situations if there can be no reconciliation. Remarriage after divorce is only acceptable if the grounds for divorce are legitimate. A second marriage after the death of a spouse is always acceptable.

### ***Why are Christians so obsessed with sex?***

Whilst the Bible presents a distinctive ethic of sexuality, disapproving of same-sex activity or any sexual union outside marriage, Christians must make it clear that we are (or should be) just as concerned about other issues such as economic inequality and social oppression. The Bible does, however, place a special value in sexual intimacy within the marriage relationship (Song of Songs is a great example of how positively it is viewed) and the apostle Paul explained that sexual sins are particularly serious because they are a denial of spiritual truths (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). Our bodies belong to God, were bought by Christ and are indwelt by the Spirit. We must, therefore, only use them in ways that honour God. We have a high view of sex, because it is a physical statement of giving oneself to the other person, saying with the body what marriage vows say.