

PHYLCIA MASONHEIMER

THEOLOGY BASICS

*A Summary of Fundamental
Christian Beliefs*



Introduction

Welcome to Theology Basics! I wrote this short book as a light overview of Christian theology—an introduction to basic Bible teaching about Christ, the gospel, and life with Him! If you are new to theology, the more expansive books can be a bit intimidating, especially if you don't know the terms or where the concepts are found in Scripture. I hope this book serves as an introduction to these concepts without the intimidation and overwhelm!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For personal use: If you're reading Theology Basics by yourself, I recommend reading a short section as your personal quiet time with God or after your study time is complete. I have included suggested Scripture passages for further study on each topic, so you can easily use these passages as a foundation for Bible study (to learn how to break down a Bible study passage, see the Bible Study Basics book in the Every Woman a Theologian shop or utilize the free tips I share on social media!). The discussion questions can be used as journal prompts to help you critically think through the topics!

For small groups: This revised and updated Theology Basics includes passages and discussion questions for small group exploration! I recommend reading a short section of the book

aloud, then looking up the relevant passages as a group. Take turns reading these passages aloud, being sure to follow cross references and read study Bible notes. The discussion questions will provide further ideas for group discussion.

Theology can be a touchy subject in group settings. We bring our church experiences and childhood traditions to these conversations. Be sensitive to the diverse experiences in your group. The leaders are responsible for creating a structure to keep the conversation from devolving into debate. While healthy conversation is great, intense theological debates do not produce the kind of intimate Christian unity God is after for His church! Quieter members may feel intimidated and discouraged from sharing their opinions if louder, more opinionated members talk over them or speak in a condescending way about a different view. Understanding the “tiers of theology”—first, second, and third tier theological issues—is very helpful for leaders who are directing theological conversations (listen to the podcast episode of Verity with Phylicia Masonheimer: How to Determine Core Doctrine or find the book by the same name in the Every Woman a Theologian shop).

Remember: the goal of studying theology is not to prove us right and others wrong. The goal is intimacy with God, understanding of His purposes, and a renewed desire to share Him with the world.

I am praying for each person who reads and uses this book, that it may launch you into a deeper walk with God and ignite in you a passion for the world to meet Him through you!

Phylicia Masonheimer



What is *Theology?*

By its most simple definition, theology is *the study of the nature of God*. By that definition, every Christian should be a theologian! In fact—believe it or not—you *already have a theology*.

It's true! Every person has assumptions and beliefs about God's nature from which they form their view of the world. Our job as Christians is to check those assumptions against objective truth and to ask, "Is what I assume about God and His nature actually true?"

Many things can color our theology: An abusive parent, a legalistic church, false teaching, and political ideology can alter our view of God in ways that do not line up with who He has revealed Himself to be. We can even embrace wrong theology based on *good* things, such as love or a comfortable, conflict-free upbringing. Any time we allow our view of God's character to remain subjective—or unchecked by the universal standard of Scripture—we make God small.

We all have a theology. We just need to check it against the Word of God. Is what we believe about Him accurate to Scripture? Or is it laden with our own assumptions and experiences?

This short book will give you some foundational principles of Christian theology. They may be helpful in explaining the Christian worldview to secular friends, for understanding the

church in which you were raised, and for discerning through worldview material you encounter in everyday life. But ultimately, theology is meant to draw us closer to the heart of God as a person. As C. S. Lewis said, “Doctrine leads to devotion!” The more we dedicate ourselves to studying who God is and how He chose to reveal Himself in the world, the more confident we become in our faith. And that is not just confidence with unbelievers; it is an inner confidence in our personal walk with Him.

Every author of a systematic theology brings a particular bias to their text. Though this is by no means a systematic work—we are only in the kiddie pool of theology!—I, too, bring a particular stance to what I write. I have striven to present multiple viewpoints wherever possible so the reader can continue their research into alternative views. However, since we lack resources from an Wesleyan-Arminian perspective and I am a Wesleyan, I have highlighted ideas and sources from that persuasion to bring an often-ignored viewpoint to the table.

There is so much we could cover in this edition of *Theology Basics*, so we will be concentrating on a few essentials that I believe will equip readers to understand deeper theological works that will use similar terms.



Bibliology *The Authority of Scripture*

Before we can talk about the nature of God, man, sin, or anything else, we have to discuss the place from which we gather this information—the Bible! Christians ground the truth of their beliefs in the objective standard of God’s Word. But how do we know we can trust this compilation of documents? Where did they come from? Aren’t they full of errors?

These are valid questions, and we need to know their answers. Remember: It is not wrong to question the Bible. Studying theology often brings as many questions to light as it does answers. But the Christian life is not one of constant questioning; it is not existing in a state of never-ending doubt. There are fundamental truths we can stand on, and those truths are rooted in history, just like the Bible itself.

WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?

The Protestant (non-Catholic) Bible is a compilation of sixty-six individual books (originally scrolls). There are thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. In the original Hebrew Bible, many of these Old Testament books were combined together. The Tanakh (an abbreviation for the three sections of the Hebrew Bible) contained either 22 or 24 scrolls, depending on which version was used. Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah were known to be combined.

When Greek culture began to influence the Jewish faith, many scrolls were converted to codexes, and the order of books changed—even though it was all the same content.

The Old Testament we have today was transmitted orally at first. Oral tradition was the norm even into the days of the early church when the New Testament was being written! In fact, it was so customary that one Roman orator said, “For my own part, I think we should not write anything which we do not intend to commit to memory.” What kept oral histories accurate was:

- Community accountability
- Expectation of memorization
- Connection to eyewitness

Those boring genealogies in Genesis? Those were a way of keeping track of lineage, but they also serve as a record showing how closely connected these accounts were to those who lived them.

Though oral transmission was important, so was writing down the accounts. We know Moses did this with the law (e.g. Exodus 34). We see other people recording what God did such as Joshua (Joshua 24:26), David (Psalms), Isaiah, and other prophets as time progressed. By the time of Jesus there was an accepted Hebrew Bible made up of the three Tanakh sections, beginning in Genesis and ending in Chronicles. This is the Bible Jesus would have studied, quoted, and understood, and it is the Old Testament we have today—just in a different order!

The New Testament likewise began as eyewitness testimony. Here are some quick facts about the gospels specifically:

- All four were written during the lifetimes of the eyewitnesses.

- When an apostolic text was written, it was counted as authoritative (2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:14; 2 Peter 3:15-16). Texts after eyewitnesses died were not authoritative because no actual witnesses were available.
- 2nd century church father Irenaeus testified to the gospels: “Matthew published his Gospel among the Hebrews in their own language, while Peter and Paul were preaching and founding the church in Rome. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and translator of Peter, passed down to us in writing those things that Peter preached; and Luke, the attendant of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel that Paul declared. Afterward, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also reclined on his bosom, published his Gospel while staying at Ephesus in Asia.”
- 1 Timothy 5:18 indicates early Christians viewed both Old and New Testament accounts as authoritative; it quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7.

WHY CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

The Bible was compiled progressively (over time) and closely to the eyewitness accounts; it was preserved in community and held doctrinally accountable. But why should we trust it?

First, the narrative of redemption, God’s character, and the themes of justice and reconciliation are consistent from Genesis to Revelation. How could sixty-six books, authored by half that many people across thousands of years, maintain doctrinal consistency in a purely fictional account? And if they did manage it, why all the effort? What would be gained by the authors’ labor? Either these authors really believed the accounts were true, saw testimony in creation (Romans 1), and trusted divinely-inspired authority (1 Timothy 3:16)...or they were

crazy!

The Old Testament is adamantly opposed to false prophets, or people who claimed to speak in the name of ‘HaShem’ (God) but who actually did not serve Him at all. In fact Deuteronomy 18 outlines what to do with a false prophet, and it is not pretty! Later in 1 Kings and the minor and major prophetic books we see harsh judgments brought upon people who lied about God’s character. The Bible has a consistent message of grace and blessing for those who walk with the Lord, and followers of God preserved that message.

We see the same dedication to truth about God in the New Testament era. The early church vetted material about Jesus to make sure it aligned with Christian doctrine. Gnostic gospels, or books written about Jesus and the apostles but which denied the humanity of Christ, were rejected. These books were not connected to eyewitnesses, and they contained major theological flaws. By rejecting books that did not align with the existing Scriptures, the biblical narrative was preserved.

We trust the Bible because it is historically rooted, progressively canonized, and consistent in its doctrinal teaching. It is also the only religious book where God makes a way to know man instead of man having to make his way to God! The concept of grace—the solution to man’s sin—is specific to Christianity and is revealed to us in Scripture.

WHAT ABOUT ERRORS?

Both the New and Old Testaments were carefully preserved by copyists. Old Testament scribes were painstakingly meticulous in how they recorded the law of God, as well as the writings and prophets up to and past the time of Jesus. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the earliest Old Testament manuscripts we had were from approximately AD 900. But when the scrolls were found, they included

manuscripts from as early as 125 BC! When the Isaiah Dead Sea scroll was compared to the Masoretic Text (the one from AD 900), the results were astounding.

Scholar Millar Burrows describes it:

“Of the 166 words in Isaiah 53, there are only seventeen letters in question. Ten of these letters are simply a matter of spelling, which does not affect the sense. Four more letters are stylistic changes, such as conjunctions. The remaining three letters comprise the word ‘light’, which is added in verse 11, and does not affect the meaning greatly... Thus, in one chapter of 166 words, there is only one word (three letters) in question after a thousand years of transmission—and this word does not significantly change the meaning of the passage.”

Can you say WOW?! Over one thousand years of copying a text—an important Messianic text, we might add—and the variations are *that* slight!

Likewise, the New Testament we have today is based on early Greek manuscripts. So many of these survived that they were used as a measure to confirm accuracies in later texts.

Scholar Timothy Paul Jones says about the Bible’s accuracy: “In the few instances where uncertainty about the right reading remains, none of the possibilities changes anything that Christians believe about God or about His work in the world.” In other words, small copy errors do exist in the Scriptural narrative. But these do not change the narrative story about Jesus or the gospel.

You might ask, “Well yes, but what about inerrancy? Doesn’t that mean no errors at all?” Actually, no! The definition of inerrancy is ‘not in error’ or ‘unable to deceive’. The original Hebrew and Greek texts (called ‘original autographs’) are

considered inerrant and infallible, not every copy made afterward. In ensuing translations, there may be variations in language or minor copy errors along the way; inerrancy means none of these alter the core doctrinal truths of Scripture—truths which are unable to deceive us.

*For more on how the Bible was compiled and more on translations, errors, and objections, listen to the 12-part Canon Series on Verity Podcast or visit the Every Woman a Theologian shop to grab the complete transcription of that series in the book *How the Bible Came to Be*. The series includes a discussion of translation methods, the apocryphal books, and more.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does this definition of inerrancy challenge you? Why or why not?
2. How does the accuracy of the Bible affect your view of God and His Word?
3. If the Bible is not accurate or trustworthy, what alternatives do we have? What effect does that have on our faith?



Theology

The Nature of God

The Bible is ultimately about God. It is His story, one in which we get to participate! But while the Bible teaches us everything we need to know about God, there is not a Cliff's Notes to God's nature. We do not pick it up and find a list of God's character traits ready to go! Rather, the character of God is woven through stories about humans like us. He is portrayed in songs praising His love and justice. He is assumed in prophetic speeches about judgment and reconciliation. We learn God's character by learning to study God's Word!

When theologians study the Bible, they create terms to express concepts found within it. For instance, the word 'Trinity' doesn't exist in Scripture, but the concept clearly does! Similarly God's 'omnipotence' is not expressed using that word, but it is implied through the authors' writing about His power and sovereignty. Understanding God's nature in Scripture requires a little digging, comparing notes across the Bible, and reading the trusted works of orthodox (which means 'sound teaching') scholars from the last two thousand years of church history.

God has many attributes, and we could never cover them all in this short guide! Instead, we will highlight a few of the most obvious traits of Father, Son, and Spirit that are core to Christian doctrine and belief.

GOD IS TRIUNE

No analogy to the Trinity can ever fully express the nature of God, but it is important that we discuss this vital doctrine all the same! The concept of God as Trinity is found in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. This doctrine is so important, scholar Michael Reeves said, “because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others.”

As shared earlier, some argue that the Trinity is not *actually* in the Bible, since we do not find that word in its pages. But neither do we find other doctrinal terms such as complementarian, Baptist, or any of the many descriptors Christians use to define specific doctrines. God as three-in-one—Father, Spirit, Son—is woven in Scripture from the creation narrative (Genesis 1:1, 1:27-28, 2:7) to under the oak with Abraham (Genesis 18). It is seen empowering Joshua to battle (Numbers 27:18), guiding judges in wisdom (Judges 3, 6, 13), inspiring prophets (Ezekiel 2), and filling and empowering followers of the Son, children of God (Acts 2).

The Angel of the Lord, seen in several instances throughout the Old Testament, is considered by many scholars to be a ‘theophanic appearance’—an appearance of God/Christ in human form before Jesus walked the earth. This is assumed because the Angel speaks for God in the first person (Genesis 16:10, 22:11, 31:11). One of the three men who visit Abraham under the oak is believed to be an Old Testament visitation from God, because he not only remains and speaks with Abraham but “goes on his own way” in human form (Gen. 18:33). In 1 Corinthians 10:9-10, Paul equates the Israelites testing God with the church testing Christ, saying these two are one and the same.

One of the most powerful testimonies to God’s triune

nature is in Isaiah 11:

“There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a **Branch** [Messiah, Jesus] shall grow out of his roots. The **Spirit of the Lord** shall rest upon Him, The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, The Spirit of counsel and might, The Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the **Lord**.”

(Isaiah 11:1-2, NKJV)

How do we express the Trinity as a concept without making it seem like we worship three gods? And how do we describe God in such a way that we do not fall into heresies like modalism—the idea that God is one but has three ‘modes’?

Father John Behr’s succinct way of describing the Trinity grants some clarity to the issue:

“...there is one God and Father, one Lord Jesus Christ, and one Holy Spirit, three ‘persons’ (hypostases) who are the same or one in essence (ousia); three persons equally God, possessing the same natural properties, yet really God, really distinct, known by their personal characteristics. Besides being one in essence, these three persons also exist in total one-ness or unity.”

Another way to think of it: I am human, but I am also daughter, sister, and mother. I am all three of those ‘people’ or roles, but I am still one in essence (human). Again, no analogy is perfect. The Trinity must be made up of both individual persons and one monotheistic spirit to reflect what the Bible teaches. That is hard to express! If your head is still spinning a little, it is okay. The theology of the Trinity is a lot to grasp! But what we can take away is very simple:

The Bible speaks clearly to the Trinity in the Old and New

Testaments.

The concept of the Trinity is fundamental to Christianity and, in particular, to salvation.

Because God is Trinity, He is by nature loving (Father loves the Son and the Spirit, and they love Him); this outward, communal nature is so inherent to who God is that it underlies every other doctrine of the Christian faith and distinguishes Christianity from monotheistic religions like Islam.

God's triune nature is in perfect unity. Because God is unified by nature, He can (and does) ask us to pursue unity with Him and with our fellow Christians.

Passages to read: 1 Corinthians 8:6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Colossians 2:9, John 1, Luke 1:35, Ephesians 4:4-6, Colossians 1:15-17, John 14:9-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If God is not triune, how does this impact our daily walk with Him?
2. If God is triune, how does this impact our daily walk with Him?
3. How is the Trinity a foundation for the Christian ethics of love and unity?
4. What would happen if one Person of the Trinity were removed? What effect would that have on Christianity?

GOD IS OMNIPOTENT

What does omnipotent mean? Biblically, this term describes God's *all-powerful* nature. The word comes from two Latin roots, *omnis* (all) and *potens* (power). When this attribute is expressed over creation, we say that God is sovereign. Wayne Grudem describes omnipotence as God's ability to do "all His holy will." This definition is important because it is not the same as saying "God can do anything." There are certain things God cannot do—things that deny His nature! For example:

God cannot sin (Hebrews 6:18)

God cannot stop being God (2 Timothy 2:13)

God cannot tempt us to evil (James 1:13)

All of these things would require God denying His perfection, power, or purity. Therefore, God is able to do anything consistent with His character, and He is unable to do things that deny who He is. This "inability" is a form of self-restraint; His holiness restrains Him from doing evil.

Where does the Bible teach about God's power and sovereignty? Many places, but here are a few:

"Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure." (Psalm 147:5)

"Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you." (Jeremiah 32:17)

"For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth— the Lord, the God of

hosts, is his name!" (Amos 4:13)

"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." (Romans 1:20)

"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:3)

"Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Sometimes Christians misunderstand God's sovereignty. They assume it doesn't matter what we do or how we live; because God's will is going to happen anyway. This results in a fatalistic "faith" caused by misconstruing God's omnipotent nature. While God can work His will any way He likes, He permits consequences for our sinful choices. God created man with a will, and that will is permitted by Him to choose "life or death" (Deut. 30:19). When we choose to live sinfully, we are rejecting God's perfect will. In so doing God may delay or alter His perfect, original plan in order to teach us and draw us back to Him. This does not downplay God's sovereignty, because He is the one who created man, gave Him a will, and watches over his coming and going (Psalm 121). We will discuss this in more detail in the Nature of Man chapter.

Another belief pertaining to God's sovereignty involves defining sovereignty as "controlling all things." This is called *determinism*. Determinism is on a spectrum, with some people saying God causes all things except sin (though He may cause things such as disease and disaster) and others playing the idea out to its logical conclusion—that God is the *author* of evil! Most Reformed/Calvinistic denominations hold to some form

of determinism, though not to the extreme of God authoring evil.

There is an alternative view, one upheld by classical Arminianism, orthodox Wesleyanism, and other non-determinist traditions. This view is often summed up as 'free will' but that is really not a great definition, because both Calvinists and Arminians believe in a form of human free will in conjunction with God's sovereignty. A better term for the non-Calvinist approach is 'libertarian freedom'. Jerry Wells describes it well:

"...God is no less sovereign in a world where he chooses to grant his creatures libertarian freedom than he is in a world where he determines everything. Sovereignty cannot simply be equated with meticulous control. Rather, sovereignty is the freedom to choose as one will and to accomplish one's purposes. If God chooses to create people who are free and to accomplish his purposes through their undetermined choices, it is his sovereign right to do so. Less control is not the same as less sovereignty if God chooses to have less control. A perfectly good and wise God will exercise just the amount of control appropriate for the sort of world he chooses to create."

Wells is saying that God's decision to create people who make free choices does not *downplay* His sovereignty, but rather affirms it. This means that the evil we see in the world is *permitted* by God's sovereign nature because He created man with libertarian freedom; it is not His perfect will for evil to occur, but His permitted will, because relationship requires choice. The Enemy is *permitted* to roam the earth tempting mankind until final judgment (2 Cor. 4:4, 1 John 5:14, Eph. 2:2, Rev. 19), and each person will answer for whether she follows Satan or follows Christ. We will talk more about how this

relates to salvation and “salvation decisions” in the Soteriology chapter.

Passages to read: Colossians 1:16, Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Joshua 24:15, Jeremiah 32:17, Matthew 19:26, Proverbs 19:21, Revelation 4:11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Discuss the pros and cons of each view: fatalism, determinism, and libertarian freedom.
2. What does it mean that God cannot sin?
3. How is God’s sovereignty a comfort to us? How does it bring up questions?

GOD IS OMNISCIENT

God's 'omniscience' is His ability to know all things past, present, and future. Not only does He know what *has* and *will* occur, He also knows what could have *possibly* occurred. In Scripture, God's knowledge of the future is described as 'foreknowledge', or 'perceiving beforehand'. All Christians agree that God is omniscient, but there are varying interpretations of how God's all-knowing nature works out in real life.

The determinist, or Calvinist, view closely binds foreknowledge with ordination, or decrees. God knows what will happen because He *decreed* it to happen. Robert Reymond describes it this way:

*"...Future, free contingencies' [the ability to make free choices] do not and cannot even exist because they do not exist in God's mind as an aspect of the universe whose every event he certainly **decreed**, creatively **caused**, and completely and providentially **governs**."*

In other words, it is not possible to make fully free choices in this world because God has preordained and decreed everything which will happen. God knows because God caused. Our concept of free will is really within our own minds, because our path has been determined by God from the foundation of the world.

The open theism view says that God restrains His foreknowledge and does not *actually* know some things, such as who will choose to follow Him. It is often expressed this way: "God knows everything *that can be known*, and some things, such as future human choices, cannot be known." This view is not biblical, as Scripture clearly teaches that God knows all

things that have been and will be:

*“Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; **his understanding is beyond measure.**”* (Psalm 147:5)

*“For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and **he knows everything.**”* (1 John 3:20)

*“And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for **the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought.** If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever.”* (1 Chronicles 28:9)

*“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! **How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!**”* *“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”* *“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”* *For from him and through him and to him are all things.”* (Romans 11:33-36)

*“Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? **Whom did he consult,** and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?”* (Isaiah 40:13-14)

A third approach to God’s omniscience is Molinism. Molinism attempts to strike a balance between determinism and open theism, saying that God knows all choices that will be made and works through those free choices to accomplish His purposes. Some theologians say that Arminians are Molinists. Others argue that Molinism leans toward determinism, because God places people in circumstances where their choices will

inevitably be what He has foreknown.

The classical Arminian view, though similar to Molinism in many ways, differs slightly. It upholds the absolute omniscience of God—knowing past, present, future, and all possibilities. It also upholds the libertarian freedom of man. Arminians believe God knows what man will choose, but He does not cause him to choose it. God's Spirit is involved in convicting, leading, and counseling people in their decisions. Arminianism makes a distinction between knowing and causing (ordination). However, non-Molinist Arminians emphasize the definition of 'foreknowledge' as simply 'perceiving beforehand'.

Passages to read: Romans 11:33, 1 Chronicles 28:9, Proverbs 2:6, Psalm 147:5, 1 John 3:20, Matthew 10:30, Hebrews 4:13

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Does knowing equal causing? Why or why not?
2. Based on the passages above, what does God know?
3. How does God's omniscience affect your daily faith?

GOD IS CREATOR

God is not a created being; He is uncreated and eternal. Colossians 1:16 says, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” Most of us know Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning, God..” At the beginning of all things, the only existing entity was God Himself! It is rather amazing to see this narrative of God as creator woven through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

God as the initial Being, uncreated, ties into His triune nature. He was completely fulfilled in Himself, in communion, loving and being loved. He did not *have* to create the world, especially one with potential for so much pain. But because He is inherently loving, *He created*.

Both love and power are manifested by the creative nature of God. Romans 4:17 says that God “calls into being that which did not exist.” He is able to make life, beauty, and mere existence where none of those things existed before. All true Christian theology must include the view of God as the ultimate creator and sustainer of creation.

God as Creator is a fundamental doctrine defended by Christianity as far back as the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds (statements of faith from the early church). But under the umbrella of this doctrine there are varying points of view.

Some Christians believe in a literal, six-day creation as described in Genesis 1-2; they are called young-earth creationists. Biologists, geneticists, and other scientists have made a case for the literal interpretation of these verses and the

possibility of their scientific accuracy.

Other theologians and Christian scientists (especially geologists) disagree, saying the Hebrew word ‘yom’ does not always mean ‘24-hour day’ and can be argued as a longer period of time. These believers propose day-age creation, which posits that each ‘day’ of creation was actually an era of time. As a result, those who hold this view are often called old earth creationists. This theory attempts to reconcile a creating God with modern scientists’ estimated age of the earth.

Gap Theory holds to a literal six-day creation after eons of time. Adherents to this view believe there is a gap between Genesis 1:1: “God created the heavens and the earth” and Genesis 1:2: “And the earth was formless and void.” To gap theorists, this gap of time explains scientists’ estimated age of the earth. The Gap Theory first emerged in the 17th century to explain the fall of Satan. Some theologians believed Satan’s fall may have occurred in the gap between verses 1 and 2. Hebrew scholars argue that the grammar in Genesis 1 does not support this view, but some Christians argue its possibility.

A fourth view, sometimes combined with a modified Gap Theory, is theistic evolution. As the name indicates, proponents of this view believe God used evolution to accomplish His creative purposes. Theistic evolutionists believe that the fall of man only resulted in human death, not plant or animal death, and that plant or animal death was permitted by God to accomplish His creative purposes. The biggest biblical stumbling block with this view is the problem of death before sin, since evolution requires death (through natural selection) to develop a new species. Scripture indicates God’s creation not only did not require death, it was anti-death. Sin had to be present for death to occur (Genesis 3-4).

Theistic evolutionists generally see the Bible as a book for spiritual guidance. They believe the intent of Genesis 1-2 was

not to depict a scientific play-by-play of creation, because the ancient people it was written to would not have read it with such a lens. The disagreement between the biblical narrative and evolutionary narrative is not as disturbing to theistic evolutionists as it would be to Christians adhering to other creation theories.

We do not have time to delve fully into these theories in this short guide, but further research into the different perspectives is essential to today's cultural climate.

Passages to read: Hebrews 11:3, Colossians 1:16, Genesis 1-3, John 1:1-3, Psalm 33:6, Exodus 20:10-12, 2 Peter 3:5, Psalm 90:2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are some biblical pros and cons of each creation view? Discuss.
2. Can someone hold a view other than young earth creationism and still be a Christian? Why or why not?
3. How does God's creating nature affect your daily faith?

GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

God's righteousness can also be called His *justice*. Both terms come from the same linguistic family in Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew word for just or righteous means 'straight' or 'in order'; the Greek connotes equality. Both essentially mean *rightness*.

This attribute of God is unique because it both describes Him and is His very nature. God is both the standard of righteousness and also perfectly righteous; He always does what is just, and He is, by nature, justice. The human measure of what is right and wrong comes back to God's character. Anything that does not align with God's moral character cannot be deemed just or righteous.

The concept of God's righteousness is expressed in every part of Scripture. We spot it right at the beginning, during creation, when God declares His work "good" (Gen.1). God gets to call things good because God is the *standard* of good! And while goodness and righteousness are technically two different attributes, the goodness of God proceeds from and is tied to His righteous and just character.

Because God's righteousness sets the bar for what is right and wrong and what is good and evil, we see it expressed particularly after the fall into sin (Genesis 3). At this point, humans have a choice: They can align with the evil of the world, or they can align with the righteousness of God. Their faith in God's character counts them righteous before God (e.g. Noah in Genesis 6:9, Abraham in Genesis 15:6, Moses in Exodus-Deuteronomy, Rahab in Joshua 2, and so on). God's righteousness is the measure against which we check every moral decision. His justice is perfect, and He is the standard we use for living justly in the world (Isaiah 1, Jeremiah 2, Micah 6).

Scripture describes God's righteousness this way:

"For the Lord is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face." (Psalm 11:7)

"Let my tongue sing of your word, For all your commandments are righteousness." (Psalm 119:172)

"The Rock! His work is perfect, For all his ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4)

"Declare and set forth your case; Indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except me." (Isaiah 45:21)

"O righteous Father, although the world has not known you, yet I have known You; and these have known that you sent me..." (John 17:25)

God's righteousness is a comfort for those reconciled to Him through Christ. His righteousness has been imputed—put upon—us through Christ's blood, and the "just requirement of the law" (the punishment owed us for sin, because God is wholly just and cannot endorse it) was borne by Jesus (Romans 8:4).

Passages to read: 2 Corinthians 5:21, Matthew 6:33, Psalm 106:3, 1 John 2:29, Isaiah 33:15-17, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Ezekiel 18:5-9

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does God's righteousness tell us about His love?
2. How does the knowledge that God is righteous affect our decisions?
3. What do the passages about God's righteousness teach us about His character?

GOD IS GRACIOUS

Talking about God's grace on the heels of His righteousness may seem like theological whiplash. Some pastors and writers present these two character traits of God as a 'tension'; attributes at odds with one another. But the Bible presents them very differently. The righteousness and grace of God are *complementary*. There are many instances in Scripture where righteousness and grace, or mercy, are presented as parallel concepts:

"Your mercy, O LORD, is in the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the great mountains; your judgments are a great deep; O LORD, you preserve man and beast. Oh, continue your lovingkindness to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright in heart." (Psalm 36:5-6, 10)

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; mercy and truth go before your face." (Psalm 89:14)

"I will betroth [Israel] to me forever; yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in lovingkindness and mercy." (Hosea 2:19)

"For if by one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the one, Jesus Christ. So that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:17-21)

"That having been justified by his grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life." (Titus 3:7)

We will talk more about justification in the Soteriology section, but for now, suffice it to say that justification is God's *applied righteousness*. In the Titus 3 verse, Paul is saying that we have received God's righteousness by *His grace*. Righteousness and grace go hand in hand.

Dr. Michael Heiser describes God's righteousness and grace this way:

"...in saying 'God is righteous,' the writer was saying that God would keep his side of the covenant. The original reader would have been shocked to hear this. The gods of the ancient Near East were notoriously bad at keeping their promises. If anything, they were the ones who played justice and love off one another, threatening either at any time. But because Yahweh was righteous, because he was a promise-keeping God, he would necessarily be merciful/gracious to those he loved. This is what made Yahweh so unique, so wonderful, so worthy of worship."

The mercy of the Christian God is indeed what makes Him unique. Mercy must be personal in order to exist; it is an outward action applied toward another person. This affirms God's personal, outwardly-loving nature (as discussed in the Trinity section). But mercy exists because there is a universal standard of righteousness, which God Himself represents.

Because He is faithful to His nature, He will always be gracious toward those He loves.

In the next section, we will explore the nature of humanity and how our nature interacts with God's.

Passages to read: Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 4:16, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Titus 2:11-14, 2 Corinthians 9:8

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Grace simply means the 'favor' of God. How does understanding grace as favor change your view of it?
2. Some denominations of Christianity believe God dispenses grace both at salvation and throughout our lives. The grace we receive after salvation is to empower us into holy living. These 'dispensaries' of grace are called sacraments—the most well known of which is Eucharist, or communion. Discuss this view of grace.
3. How does God's grace/favor affect your view of Him?
4. How does God's grace impact your daily faith?



Anthropology

The Nature of Humanity

Man is different from God—we know this to be true! But humanity is also made *in the image of God* (Genesis 1:27-28). Theologians over the years have pondered on what this means. Clearly, man echoes some of God’s characteristics. But we also know that we are vastly different from Him in a myriad of ways. Sin—behaviors, thoughts, and actions that violate God’s holiness—also distinguishes us from the Trinity. We are so *unlike* God; it is truly miraculous that He has made such an effort to reconcile humanity to Himself.

In this section, we highlight some basics of human nature affirmed by confessional Christianity: the *imago dei*, or image of God; humanity’s sexual design; the difference between soul, spirit and body; and the concept of original sin.

HUMANITY IS IMAGO DEI

In Genesis 1:26, at the end of the Genesis 1 creation account, God says: “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

The plural pronoun God uses is indicative of the Trinity (discussed in our previous section). But what does it mean that God made man in His “image”? God is a spirit, so He had no

physical image until Jesus walked the earth in a human body. Theologians have discussed this at length over the ages, but here are a few things we can agree on about the *imago dei*:

Since the same words are used to describe Seth, Adam's son (Genesis 5:3), as to describe Adam, God's "son" (the first created man), we can infer from the text that 'likeness' and 'image' indicate Adam was similar to God in his makeup, though not identical to Him. Wayne Grudem says these terms likely indicated to the original readers that man was to be *like God* and to *represent* God.

Other attributes scholars have mentioned as part of the *imago dei* are humanity's intellectual ability, our ability to make moral choices, and our possession of a will. These things specifically differentiate us from animals, which are not made in God's image. Before sin entered the world, this likeness also included moral purity and perfection.

The image of God in man is an important theological point, because it has to do with the sanctity of life. Blood symbolizes life, and in Genesis 9—not long after creation—God establishes a death penalty for murder (murder being distinct from war). Attacking an image-bearer of God was and is a capital offense to God Himself.

We are no longer perfect image bearers; the image of God in us has been marred by sin. But we still see the distinct imprint of God's image in how humanity is separate from the animal kingdom, and in the sanctity of life, which will come up again in the Christian Life section.

Further, those in Christ are being renewed and changed (sanctified) *back* into the holistic image of God through Christ's work in our spirit. Both Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians speak to this transformation: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being *transformed into the same image* from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the

Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Passages to read: Genesis 1-3, 9:6, 2 Corinthians 3:18,
Romans 8:29

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does knowing you are an ‘idol’ or image of God change your view of yourself?
2. If we embrace the fact that we represent God on earth, how does this change the choices we make, if at all?
3. Some scholars believe moral discernment and intellectual ability make us the image of God. Do you agree or disagree? What impact does this view have on the unborn or mentally handicapped?

HUMANITY IS MALE AND FEMALE

Given that God created both man and woman in His image (Genesis 1:26-27, 2), we have a template from creation for the equality of the sexes. We also have a clear indication—set up from Genesis, upheld through the Old Testament, and affirmed by Jesus in His discussions of marriage (Mark 10, Matthew 19)—that male and female are the only two genders recognized by God, and heterosexual marriage is the only sexual relationship God affirms. The differences between male and female, though significant, empower the unity of marriage with each spouse's respective strengths.

Marriage is a creation ordinance that will continue until Christ returns (Matthew 24:38-39). It serves several purposes: to reflect unity of spirit and body (Genesis 2:24), for pleasure in one another (1 Corinthians 7:1-40, Song of Songs), for having children (Genesis 1:27-28), and to portray the relationship of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:25-33). It is also an ordinance unbelievers can participate in—a good marriage is a reflection of God's 'common grace' for all people. Christian marriage, however, is a lifelong covenant reflecting a spiritual truth (Christ and the church). As a "visible form of an invisible grace," marriage is a sacrament.

When discussing roles in marriage, there are two general views. The first is complementarianism. Complementarianism is a relatively new term developed in the late 80s as a response to Christian feminist ideology. Complementarians believe men and women are equal in value but different in role or design. This viewpoint is on a spectrum; some Christians believe that men must be the head or leader of their home as well as the head of the church (e.g. pastors and elders must be male). Other complementarians believe that men and women are biologically different but that there is great freedom for women to lead and

serve in the church and home.

The second view of roles is egalitarianism, which holds that men and women are equal in value but interchangeable in role. There is no position in home or church which a man or woman cannot hold. Egalitarians look to passages like Galatians 3:28—“there is neither Jew nor Greek, male or female”—as evidence for a changed male/female relationship structure under the new covenant of Christ. While both of these viewpoints—complementarian and egalitarian—can stray into extremes, they can both be arrived at through biblical study and interpretation. It is vital that the basis for one’s view of this subject be derived from what Scripture says in its context, not from cultural narratives or legalistic fears one might read into the Bible’s words.

One of the most overlooked Christian teachings on marriage is on the nature of sex. Since the Anglican Church changed its stance on contraception in the 1930s, the Protestant (non-Catholic) churches have increasingly absorbed cultural narratives surrounding children and the procreative design of sex. The original sexual ethic held that self-giving love is life-giving love, meaning that to give fully of oneself sexually to another person was to be done with the understanding that such unity could, or would, create life. The sexual love of spouses should be like God’s love for the world: free, total, faithful, and fruitful. After the sexual revolution, Protestant churches swiftly “sanctified” all forms of contraception, and today many Christian couples believe there is no reason why sex should not be completely sterilized (whether temporarily or for a lifetime). This move to remove procreation from sex is the foundation of the progressive embrace of Christian same-sex marriages. If procreation is not a fundamental element of Christian marriage, then non-heterosexual sex or marriage can be fully endorsed (sanctified) by God.

Marriage is a blood covenant before God. Though He

permits divorce because of the hardness of human hearts (Mark 10), this permission is meant to protect the vulnerable in cases of unfaithfulness or abuse, not because God favors divorce. The same goes for birth control. There are circumstances in which contraception may be necessary for the health of a mother, for financial circumstances, or in other situations which require godly discernment. God grants wisdom for those seeking His heart on such issues and grants grace for things like divorce and contraception—He does not exalt institutions above the people within them. That said, the heart of Christians toward marriage and children should be one of openness to life. Self-giving, life-giving love is the model Christ gives us and should be the attitude of all believers. Intentionally rejecting God’s procreative design for sexuality is far more influenced by cultural narratives around sex, children, and self—not the historical, biblical Christian ethic. As Catholic author Christopher West writes, “Children are not added on to marriage and conjugal love, but spring from the very heart of the spouses’ mutual self-giving, as its fruit and fulfillment.”

Outside of marriage, men and women still image God and image the church through communal relationships with one another. Celibate Christians have been an integral part of church history for as long as the gospel has been proclaimed. Some Christians will choose singleness as a long-term lifestyle for service of God (1 Corinthians 7), and others are single for seasons of life, whether prior to marriage or due to widowhood or divorce. In all cases, the single Christian offers their spiritual gifts and person to the body of Christ as much as those who are married with families. Their sanctified, celibate sexuality is an example of God’s Spirit working honor, restraint, and godliness in their lives. Their discipleship of others is a spiritual ‘mothering’ or ‘fathering’ as they bear Christ in the world.

Passages to read: 1 Corinthians 7, Genesis 1-2, Ephesians 5,
Mark 10

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Is your church more complementarian or egalitarian?
What is the practical impact of that teaching?
2. How does marriage image Christ? How does singleness?
3. How does the church's view of sex and romance impact
their view of children? How does it impact their view of
singleness?
4. How do men uniquely image God? How do women?

HUMANITY IS SOUL, SPIRIT, AND BODY

What is humanity made of? The trichotomist view says man is made up of three parts: soul, spirit, and body. The soul contains emotions, will, and intellect, but the spirit is something activated by life in Christ.

The dichotomist view says man is only two parts—soul and body—but the Bible uses the terms spirit and soul interchangeably. An example is in John 12:27, where Jesus says “my soul is troubled,” but in the following chapter the authors writes that Jesus was “troubled in spirit.” Conservative theologians have held both of these views over the years.

Though our bodies die and our souls live on, the idea that “body is bad, soul is good” is not biblical but Gnostic. Hebrew thought in particular saw the human as a whole entity, made up of separate parts all equally important to God. God cares just as much about the physical body as He does about the soul/spirit. The Judeo-Christian ethic applies moral significance and need for purity to the whole person, not just to the soul. This is why we see extensive laws concerning physical purity in Leviticus, and why we see the necessity of sexual purity confirmed by the apostles in such places as 1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Thessalonians 4.

Passages to Read: 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, 1 Thessalonians 4:29, Psalm 139:13-14

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Which view of the soul do you find more persuasive—dichotomy or trichotomy?
2. In what ways does Gnosticism sneak into our view of our bodies?

HUMANITY HAS ORIGINAL SIN

We know humanity was originally made in the perfect image of God, which included absolute moral perfection. But God also gave man the will to choose: To choose Him, the source of all life, or to choose disobedience and sin, which would result in death and decay. Adam and Eve's choice to distrust God and to trust themselves and the Enemy resulted in separation from God. This spiritual death eventually manifested as physical death as well.

There are several theories about original sin and how it works. Some believe God holds all of humanity accountable for Adam's sin in addition to being accountable for their own personal sins (federal or seminal original sin). Others believe that Adam's sin caused all his descendants to inherit a *predisposition* to sin, which inevitably leads them to actively sin when old enough to make such choices. It is these personal sins for which God holds people accountable.

Because our whole being is affected by sin, we cannot save ourselves or make ourselves worthy before God. Jacob Arminius put it this way:

"In this state, the free will of man towards the true good is not only wounded, maimed, infirm, bent, and weakened; but it is also imprisoned, destroyed, and lost. And its powers are not only debilitated and useless unless they be assisted by grace, but it has no powers whatever except such as are excited by Divine grace."

What this means is that God must be the initiator of salvation for humans corrupted by sin. We have a natural inclination to sin, and we cannot earn favor from God. Through Christ, the power of sin is broken and a new identity

is imparted to us. As we live into that identity and walk by God's Spirit, we are less and less bound to the habits and patterns of our old corrupt nature.

Further, we are no longer separated from God but joined to Him as joint heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17).

Passages to read: Genesis 1:26-28, 3:1-19, Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 3, Colossians 2:13, Romans 8:7-8, John 6:44

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Some Christian traditions believe baptism cleanses a person from original sin. This is the reason for infant baptism in some liturgical churches. Discuss this point of view.
2. How does original sin affect our ability to have relationship with God?
3. What is the solution to our bent toward sin?



Soteriology

The Nature of Salvation

Soteriology is a fancy term for theology of salvation. In this section, we will discuss some of the essential doctrines regarding Christ's atonement, imputed righteousness, justification, and sanctification. Before we begin, however, it is important to note some of the differences in salvation theology within confessional Christianity, the most significant of which is probably the Calvinist/Arminian debate. Both Calvinists and Arminians hold to confessional Christian doctrine; they are both within the Protestant (non-Catholic) tradition. Both are biblical defenses of salvation theology, but they happen to interpret certain passages differently in regard to salvation and how it works. In the following paragraphs, I will outline some of the basic differences between Calvinist, Arminian, and Catholic salvation theology.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ON SALVATION

Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy are often accused of teaching salvation by works. While this may be true for some liturgical church members who use sacraments and rituals as a means of earning God's favor or grace, the Greek and Roman Churches themselves do not teach salvation by works (though Calvinists would probably argue otherwise). Both the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern churches hold

that man's works are part of making salvation *effectual*. Man, they say, must partner with God's initial work of salvation to make it effectual, and God designed salvation to work this way. This belief is based on passages like Philippians 2:13: "God is the one, who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work" and James 2:24, 26: "See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone for just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead."

In Session 1, Canon 6 of the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church stated: "If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own works, whether done by his own natural powers or by the teaching of the Law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema [excommunicated]." The Church authorities also wrote in Canon 9, "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema."

In other words: Justification is initiated by divine grace, but man must accept and work out that salvation by the activation of his will.

The Confession of Dositheus—an early confession of the Eastern Orthodox Church—states that "We believe a man to be not simply justified through faith alone, but through faith which works through love, that is to say, through faith and works... we regard works not as witnesses certifying our calling, but as being fruits in themselves, through which faith becomes efficacious." In other words, works prove that faith is genuine and make faith effective in the world.

There are other liturgical churches who hold similar views of salvation to the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Calvinism arose through the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation sought to correct corrupted Catholic theology. Calvinism is named for one of the Reformers, John Calvin, but is representative of the beliefs of many more theologians and pastors from the Reformation forward. Because Calvinism was, to a degree, a reaction to Catholicism, some of the original Calvinist works took an extremely strong—and even a directly opposite—stance from the Catholics on salvation theology. One such stance is the idea that any ability to respond to God’s offer of salvation is considered working for salvation.

Calvinist soteriology is best summed up by the acronym TULIP.

Total Depravity: The first tenet of Calvinist salvation theology is total depravity, or better said, total *inability* (since Calvinists, Catholics, and Arminians would all agree that man is totally depraved, e.g. sin has affected every part of his personality). According to this point, man is completely incapable of responding to God’s offer of salvation without God first regenerating him. This idea is taken from Romans 5:12, that man is “dead in his sins.” Since dead men are unresponsive, no one is able to respond to God of his own will. God must will him to choose salvation in Christ.

Unconditional Election: The second tenet of Calvinism has to do with who is saved. God elected certain individuals to salvation based on His own will (Romans 9). This decision was made before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1). Election is often termed ‘predestination’. Some Calvinists believe in double predestination—that God not only elected some people to salvation but also predestined everyone else to Hell/separation. Others believe God predestined only the elect to salvation.

Limited Atonement: The third tenet teaches that Christ died for some, not for all (Matthew 26:28), and that His salvation was effective only for those God gave Him to save (John 17:9).

Irresistible Grace: The fourth tenet teaches that those who are called or elected by God will certainly respond to Him. All whom God has elected will be saved, and anyone who was saved is so because God elected (chose) them (John 6:37, 44, Romans 8:14).

Perseverance of the Saints: The simplest way to define the final tenet of Calvinism is “once saved always saved.” The saints (Christians) will persevere in salvation and cannot lose their salvation or reject it (Romans 8:28-29, Philippians 1:26).

Calvinistic views of salvation are found within Reformed theology, including in Reformed Baptist, Presbyterian, CREC, Dutch Reformed, and Protestant Reformed traditions.

Arminianism is named for Jacob Arminius. Arminius actually started out as a Calvinist who was defending Calvinism against what we would now call an Arminian teacher! In writing his rebuttal, Arminius was convinced that Calvinism was in error regarding salvation theology.

Arminianism is best understood by articulating its differences from Calvinism.

Total Depravity: Arminians are in agreement with Calvinists on the effects of sin on the human personality. Salvation begins with God: He is the one who calls to each person; He is the initiator of grace. No one can come to God unless He draws them (John 6:44). Other sources that support this are Genesis 3, Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 3:23, Colossians 2, and Romans 8:7-8.

Unlimited Atonement: Not to be confused with universalism, which says all people will be saved whether or not they follow Christ, unlimited atonement can also be called ‘unlimited provision’. Contrary to Calvinism, Arminians believe Christ died for *whoever* would respond to God’s initiation (John 3:16-18). God loves everyone in the world and sent His Son to atone for it (1 John 2:2). God’s desire is for all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and that all should come to repentance (1 Peter 2:9). God’s mercy drives His salvation (Titus 3:5). However, only those

who believe can experience eternal life. John 3:16-18 is clear on this, as is John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on them.” 1 John 2:2 also supports the idea that Jesus died for the whole world, not just for the elect: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world,” and 1 Timothy 4:10 also supports unlimited atonement.

Freed by Grace to Believe: God, by His ‘prevenient’ grace, gives man the opportunity to respond to or reject His atonement. His Spirit will draw and convict, but He will not force or will someone to accept the gospel. In His sovereignty, He has imparted man the ability to respond. The fact that God supernaturally freed the will of sinners to believe or not believe is an act of His Almighty nature. Acts 7:51 is a clear testament to the ability to resist God, and in Matthew 24 Jesus tells a parable where people resist the invitation to the wedding banquet. The idea of choice is also upheld throughout the Old Testament in Genesis 2, Joshua 24, Deuteronomy 30, and Ezekiel 18.

Conditional Election: God elects only those who respond to Christ. He has known who will respond from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1) and has predestined a plan of salvation through Christ. That plan of salvation is available to those whom He knew would repent and follow (1 Corinthians 2:7, 1 Peter 1:18-20).

Security in Christ: Christ secures our salvation eternally. Our salvation is preserved by Him and by walking in the Spirit, who helps us continue in our faith. Some Arminians believe salvation can be lost, but most classical Arminians believe the only way to lose salvation is to actively and consciously reject Christ. Still others hold to a more Calvinistic, “once saved always saved” view, that those who reject Christ never knew Him to begin with.

Arminianism is sometimes confused with Pelagianism. Pelagianism is based on the work of the monk Pelagius, who taught that man can come to God by his own merit or willpower. Pelagius also taught unbiblical theology about original sin—that man is essentially good and makes himself ‘bad’ by his choices. Pelagius’ ideas were condemned at the Council of Carthage in 419 and also at the Council of Orange in 529. True classical Arminianism has never affirmed any Pelagian or semi-Pelagian tenets.

Arminian salvation theology is found in Methodist, Wesleyan, Nazarene, Holiness, Independent Baptist, and Pentecostal/charismatic traditions and shares a view of the human will with the Anabaptists (Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Brethren).

Passages to read: Ephesians 1-2, Romans 6-9, John 3:16, Titus 3:5, Acts 4:12, John 14:6, Mark 16:16, Galatians 2:19-21, 2 Corinthians 5:17-22, John 1:12

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the biblical pros and cons of the Catholic/Orthodox view of salvation?
2. What are the biblical pros and cons of the Calvinistic view of salvation?
3. What are the biblical pros and cons of the Arminian view of salvation?
4. How does your understanding of salvation affect your daily walk with Jesus?

ATONEMENT THEORIES

Themes of atonement run deep in Scripture, foreshadowing the perfect atonement of Christ for the sins of the world. One of the clearest pictures of atonement is with the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. Only the people who had the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts were preserved from judgment and death. In the same way, the blood of Christ preserves (saves) those who trust His sacrifice and call Him Lord.

There is more than one theory on how atonement works, but one of the most widely accepted among conservative theologians today is the theory of *penal substitution* (also called 'vicarious atonement'). Christ bore the penalty of our sins, and His death was a substitute for ours. You might ask, "Why would I have to die for anything?!" Romans 6:23 tells us "the wages of sin is death." The payment for our sin is separation from God; this is the pattern handed down to us from Adam. God's holiness cannot tolerate or ignore sin, and His love provided a way to reconciliation. That reconciliation is through atonement.

Christ's sacrifice "put away" our sin according to Hebrews 9:26. He acted as a substitute for our payment/judgment according to 1 John 4:10. This then reconciled us to God: "through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation..." (2 Cor. 5:18-19).

There are also some other less accepted views on the atonement:

Ransom Theory says that Adam and Eve owed a 'debt' to Satan because of their sin, one which required a payment or ransom. Jesus acted as that ransom through His death, which paid the debt and delivered humanity from bondage.

Christus Victor Theory was the majority view in the church until Anselm introduced Satisfaction Theory. This view believes Christ died to defeat the power of evil: sin, death, and the devil. His overcoming evil is what freed man from spiritual bondage.

Satisfaction Theory was introduced by Anselm in the 12th century. This model suggests that the atonement satisfied the justice of God, making restitution for sin. This counters the Ransom Theory in that the person being paid back is not Satan, but God.

Government Theory was developed in the 1500s and denies the idea that any personal 'payment' is required for sin, but rather that Jesus died to illustrate God as moral lawgiver. He died because God's law had been broken. Thus a penalty is required and must be paid, but not as direct propitiation for certain people.

Scapegoat Theory believes Jesus was not a sacrifice but a victim. Jesus was killed by a crowd who assumed His guilt; He was proven to be innocent and to be the Son of God. No one is being ransomed or paid for with this theory.

Moral Theory holds that God, through Christ's death, was simply showing how much He loved mankind. Moral Theory says God does not require any kind of payment for sin. This view fails to deal with the plethora of Scriptures regarding Jesus' death as propitiation for humanity.

Passages to Read: Leviticus 17:11, Hebrews 9, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, Romans 5:6-11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What atonement theory is most familiar to you? Which is most new to you?
2. How does Scripture describe the atonement?
3. How does your view of atonement impact your walk with God?

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESURRECTION

Christians tend to emphasize the cross and atonement, but the resurrection seems to be something we talk about only at Easter. Why does it matter that Jesus literally resurrected from the dead?

The literal—not just symbolic—resurrection of Jesus has been increasingly under attack since the rise of German rationalism in the mid-20th century. But the resurrection is not an optional doctrine; rather, it is the turnkey of the gospel.

Jesus' resurrection—the clincher miracle, if you will—proved His identity as the Son of God. It revealed that not only did He have power over illness, food, water, weather, and demonic powers, but that He also has power over death. Furthermore, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, He is a liar! Jesus said, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men; and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day” (Matt. 17:22).

Christ's resurrection ensured our salvation. 1 Peter 1:3 says, “we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Without Jesus' resurrection, we have no hope and no rebirth into the family of God. Romans 4:25 tells us that Jesus was “raised for our justification.” His defeat of death was the finished work which secured salvation for the elect. With a symbolic resurrection, none of this would be possible.

Paul gave the most robust defense of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. He was so serious about the physical resurrection that he stated, “if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins” (1 Cor. 15:17). A physical resurrection is a necessary doctrine of the church and has been from the very beginning. We see it mentioned in both the Apostles' and Nicene creeds.

Passages to read: Luke 24, 1 Corinthians 15, Matthew 17:22-23, John 11:25-26.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read 1 Corinthians 15 again. What is at stake if the resurrection is not true?
2. What does the resurrection guarantee for us?
3. How does the resurrection of Christ change how we live?

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Justification means to be ‘justified’, or to be *made righteous* in the eyes of God. It is a twofold action because justification means our sins are forgiven *and* our identity has changed from sinner to saint. This is a legal act by God through Christ.

Our righteousness is not our own. It is *imputed* to us through Christ. This means that Christ’s righteousness covers us, is upon us, and is what God sees when He looks at us. This is reminiscent of Isaiah’s words: “He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

Justification is not given to us by any merit of our own but is a gift of God, made possible through Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf (atonement). Scripture speaks extensively to this concept:

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

“[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Romans 5:24)

“Yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:16)

“...the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.” (Galatians 3:24)

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that

in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8)

Charles Spurgeon described justification this way:

“There, poor sinner, take my garment, and put it on; you shall stand before God as if you were Christ, and I will stand before God as if I had been the sinner; I will suffer in the sinner’s stead, and you shall be rewarded for works that you did not do, but which I did for you.”

Our justified status is a fundamental change of identity. Though we may still sin, we can “approach the throne of grace with confidence” (Heb. 4:16) to repent and find restoration to God. We identify as children of God, no longer as sinners, but as saints in His kingdom. The process of walking out our justified status is called sanctification.”

Passages to read: Romans 5, Galatians 2-3, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Ephesians 2

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Spurgeon’s description of justification affect your view of salvation?
2. What would it be like to wear a ‘garment of salvation’? How would it change how we live?
3. Justification is a change of identity. We are righteous saints in Christ! How does knowing you are a saint impact your view of yourself and others?

VIEWS OF BAPTISM

There are two primary methods of baptism. The first is paedobaptism, or infant baptism. The second category is credobaptism, or believer's baptism. *Paedo* means child; *credo* indicates creed or testament. Credobaptism bases the baptism on someone's personal testimony, and they have to be old enough to make a profession of faith. Within these two methods are different ways of understanding what baptism accomplishes and how it should work.

While credobaptism, or believer's baptism, is by immersion, paedobaptism is usually not—because we do not want to be dunking a baby in a baptismal font! This type of baptism is also called sprinkling, and there are a few different ways to view it. One of the terms for this view of how infant baptism works is called *baptismal regeneration*. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, many Methodists, and Lutherans all baptize infants.

In the Catholic view, baptism invites the child into the covenant family of God. That child then must walk out his salvation as he grows older and is educated in the truths of Scripture. The Holy Spirit may grow in His influence over the child's life, or when the child is grown he may reject the Spirit's work.

Similar to the Catholic church, the Lutheran church holds that baptism is a means of conferring grace. When the Bible talks about the beginning of faith, it includes terms like *conversion* and *regeneration*. Lutherans do not claim to fully understand how this happens. They believe when the infant is baptized, God creates faith in the heart of the infant. This is similar to the Catholic view. Citing Matthew 18:16, Lutherans argue that the infant can believe, and that according to John 3 regeneration happens in baptism. Of course the infant cannot

actually make any kind of response. They are not intellectually capable of responding to this type of ritual. The faith of the child must be nurtured by God's Word and by discipleship or the faith will die. So this is not a one-time thing, but a lifelong process of discipleship and growth.

In the Reformed view, baptism is the sign and seal of the new covenant. It is ushering people into the church, infants included. Baptism can be for adults, but it can also be for infants of believing parents who are committing to raise them in the covenant family of God. But once again, the children do have to actually walk out that Holy Ghost impartation at baptism or eventually reject it. In the case of rejecting it, that would be because they were not elected. That is the difference between the Reformed-covenantal approach and the Catholic or Lutheran approach (the Catholic approach moreso than Lutheran, because Luther was a Reformer. In the Catholic approach man actually does have a part in responding to God's salvation, whereas in the Reformed view it is all by God's grace and man does not have a part in the salvation process).

Turning to credobaptism, or believer's baptism, we see the immersion of a believing adult or older child. Within this immersion view there are two sub-categories. The first is *salvation-occasion baptism*, meaning baptism is the point of salvation. Baptism is when salvation happens; the two can not be separated. The second is believer's baptism, in which baptism is a symbol of personal faith but is not the actual act of salvation.

Salvation-occasion baptism is the culminating act of salvation and is necessary to complete the conversion process. Even if it is an adult who is making a confession of faith in Jesus Christ, it is absolutely necessary to be baptized in order for that salvation to be complete. This is based on the fact that baptism and salvation are linked throughout Scripture. A person who holds to salvation-occasion baptism uses all the same passages

that Catholics and Lutherans use in regard to baptism: 1 Peter 3, Colossians 2, and Mark 16:16, where salvation and baptism are connected. Based on these texts, those who hold to salvation-occasion baptism believe that baptism is an essential part of salvation. However, it is important that the person be an adult who is making that confession of faith.

To the salvation-occasion Christian, baptism is essential to salvation because it is when sins are forgiven and when a person receives the Holy Spirit. It is not that baptism is the grace of God or that it is a work accomplished to earn the grace of God. It is that it is *the occasion on which God dispenses the grace of salvation*. It is the point of actual salvation, the time and place that God forgives and saves.

The final credobaptist view is believer's baptism. This is what you would be familiar with if you grew up in most Baptist, Southern Baptist, or non-denominational churches, as well as some Anabaptist churches. In this view, baptism is an outward symbol of personal faith by an adult or child. Believer's baptists think that people who are baptized as infants may misunderstand the teachings on baptism and think they are saved when they actually are not. Such infants, they think, might grow up and have not actually owned their faith, walked out their faith, and or continued to walk in personal relationship with Christ. To stay true to how baptism is modeled in Acts—testifying believers who confess Christ—believer's baptists expect converts to give a testimony of faith and public witness through baptism. This rite, however, is symbolic. Baptism itself does not save you. It is a representation of a spiritual state of the heart, and it is only performed for confessing adults and children who can actually make the choice or respond to Christ.

Passages to read: Acts 2, Acts 22, 1 Peter 3, Galatians 3, Romans 6, Colossians 2, and 1 Corinthians 12

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In which baptism tradition did you grow up? How did it impact your faith?
2. Which baptism tradition seems most true to Scripture? (Be sure to read the recommended passages)
3. What are some of the cons to each baptism view?
4. What are some of the pros or advantages of each view?

SANCTIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

The process by which we are sanctified (purified of sin) conforms us to the new identity we have in Christ. Scripture teaches—and we all know by experience!—that we do not become immune to sin when we surrender to Christ. We will still be tempted and have daily opportunity to make godly or ungodly choices.

Jacob Arminius described sanctification this way:

“It is a gracious act of God, by which he purifies man who is a sinner, yet a believer, from the darkness of ignorance, from indwelling sin and from its lusts or desires, and imbues him with the Spirit of knowledge, righteousness and holiness, that, being separated from the life of the world and made conformable to God, man may live the life of God.”

One of the fundamental differences between justification and sanctification lies in the nature of each process. Justification is a one-time work of God on our behalf. Sanctification is progressive, for our whole lives and requires our cooperation (obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit’s conviction). And since the Holy Spirit declares the truth of God’s Word back to us, sanctification will result in a character aligned with biblical values. Jesus prayed for this: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17).

Scripture presents sanctification as a continual work of the Holy Spirit in our lives:

“Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.” (2 Timothy 2:21)

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” (Romans 6:6)

As Christians become more and more like Christ, they reflect the fruit of the Spirit, or the collective attributes of God manifested in human character! Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self control reflect who God is in our sanctified bodies. We are ‘idols of God’—His image on earth, temples to His glory—as we allow God’s Spirit to make us more like Him (Galatians 5).

Because sanctification is progressive, as the Christian matures they should increasingly reflect the love and righteousness of God in their character. These “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5) are the natural outpouring of a life lived in connection to God. Moral behavior is not forced, but willingly chosen as we walk in the love and grace of Christ.

Some traditions, including some branches of Wesleyanism (Holiness churches), believe in ‘entire sanctification’, or that it is possible to become entirely sanctified on earth. But most Christians agree that sanctification is not complete until death, when Christ returns and we are resurrected with Him (1 Corinthians 15:49).

Passages to read: John 17:17, 2 Timothy 2:21, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 6:6, Galatians 5

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does our justified identity (we are saints saved by Christ) impact our journey to becoming more holy?
2. How do we bear the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?
3. What should a sanctified Christian life look like?
4. Is entire sanctification possible? Why or why not?



Eschatology *Theology of Final Things*

Eschatology is the fancy word for the final things. It comes from two Greek words: *éschatos*, or ‘final’, and *logos*, meaning ‘word’ or ‘idea’. When we talk about eschatology, we are really talking about when God brings all things to reconciliation or justice. Revelation—that crazy book at the end of the Bible with all the visions, bowls, and seals—is what we often think of. But we also see a lot of these same themes in the book of Daniel. Jesus talked about these things in John 14. When we look at all of these narratives together we form our understanding of what the end times are all about.

There are four primary views on the end times. If you grew up in a church that only ever taught the pre-millennial view, which we will get to in a second, then you are probably going to be a little surprised that this is not the only view of Revelation! There are orthodox views of the end times that do not even believe in the rapture! Much of what is written in the Bible about the final days is in very nuanced language, with much symbolism, imagery, and numbers. It takes time and study to work through it. As we talk about each of these views, there will be some consistent themes and words that are used, and I want to make sure we understand what those are.

Church Age: The Church Age is the era or span of time from the beginning of the church to present day. This time frame

spans from Jesus' ascension right around AD 30-33 to the final things, which Jesus predicted (John 14).

The First Coming of Christ: The First Coming is when Jesus initially entered the world, born of a virgin, and lived on Earth from about 4 BC to AD 30.

The Second Coming of Christ: This is the bodily return of Jesus as King. Across all of the views of the Second Coming, it is agreed that Jesus will be actually returning to Earth to rule and reign and conquer evil for good.

Millennial Reign: The millennium, or millennial reign, is a thousand-year period when Jesus reigns on Earth as described in Revelation 20. There are different perspectives on what this millennium means and what it will look like.

Preterist: This refers to biblical prophecies about the end times applying to past events. At the time of the writing of Revelation, these events would have been in the future. But for us today, these events are now in the past. A preterist would see references to the antichrist as references to Emperor Nero, the tribulation would be the Jewish war, and the abominations include things like the destruction of the temple, which happened in AD 70. A preterist believes John's prophecies were fulfilled in the first century of the church.

Futurist: This view of the end times believes all the events described are yet to occur and will still happen in the future. This is the view of premillennial Christians, who believe Christ's millennial earthly reign is yet to happen.

Historicist: This view holds that the events in Revelation depict the arc of church history from the apostles' day to ours.

The wars, bloodshed, and persecution we see in Revelation all occurred in the 2,000 years between John's vision and today.

Idealist: Popularized by early church fathers Origen and Augustine, this view holds that Revelation does not have to do with historical events at all, but is instead symbolic of the battle between God and Satan and between good and evil. God's victory at the end represents our hope in Christ.

Tribulation: A period of persecution prophesied about in Revelation. Some believe this is a specific and literal span of time, others believe persecution comes in cycles and this is represented in Scripture through symbolic language.

Now that we know some of the terms, let's move on to the four views.

Historical pre-millennialism: This was the original view of the early church fathers. We need to look at what the early church fathers taught because it gives us an idea of what was held by the church right away, showing us what the general view was in those first few centuries. This does not mean that every church father was completely correct.

Another word for historical pre-millennialism is covenant pre-millennialism. They believe the thousand-year reign is a literal future event where Jesus Christ would come and reign on the earth. But as the church fathers died and as Greek philosophy began to influence the church leading people to view the physical world as not as desirable, this idea of an actual millennium and an actual reign of Jesus on earth began to fade.

Amillennialism: The 'A' prefix means 'non' or 'no', which in this case means no millennium. This view proposes that the millennium is symbolic. It is a spiritual reign of Jesus in the

hearts of His followers. Christ's triumph over Satan was what restrained the power of Satan on Earth. So, there will always be persecution of Christians, but Jesus is reigning spiritually right now. When He finally returns in that second coming, He will defeat evil for good. But up until that point, what we are seeing is tribulation and Christ's reign happening at the same time throughout history. If you picture the cross as our starting point, almost like a timeline, and then you have Christ reigning, moving forward, and then at the same time, this tribulation and this persecution happening. If you look at history, that is exactly what has happened. Christians have been persecuted on and off and in different areas of the world for the entirety of the Church Age. So, this Church Age, according to the amillennial view is that Christ is reigning and winning people to Himself, taking them into the body of Christ while tribulation and trial are happening at the same time. So, when Christ finally returns, all things will be made right, and we will go to be in the new heaven and the new earth that He is creating.

This view became very popular in the fifth century, following the pre-millennial view. It was perhaps influenced a bit by the Greek philosophy that did not put as much emphasis on the physical as it did the spiritual, but it can also be argued biblically because the Bible does use the number '1000' figuratively (you see this quite often in Psalms 50, Psalm 90, Psalm 105, and 2 Peter 3).

A few people you might know who were amillennials are Martin Luther, John Calvin, J. I. Packer, and there is speculation that St. Augustine was also amillennial in his eschatology. A big thing for these men is that they focus on the fact that numbers represent concepts, such as the number 7 or the number 6. 7 represents completeness and 6 represents incompleteness, which is why the number 666 was perfect incompleteness—or the opposite of perfect completion. These numbers are representative of something, and that should

be kept in mind by you as a Christian, regardless of which viewpoint you end up holding.

Post-millennialism: This view is that the Second Coming of Christ is going to happen after the thousand-year reign. To picture this, you have the Church Age and then a tribulation period, where there is pushback and there are evil forces at work in the world. But gradually, as Christians expose the world to the gospel, the world gets better and better. Post-millennials think the world is going to improve over time as the world is won to the gospel, and then Christ will return once all the people who need to be saved are brought into the church.

The earliest point at which we see this type of theology is around the 1200s, but some people believe that Athanasius and even Augustine were post-millennials. This became more popular in the 1800s, most likely because of the increased work of missionaries. This was the missionary boom when we saw churches—especially Baptist churches—sending missionaries out into the world to bring the gospel, with the idea that as the good news spread the world would get better and better. But historically, if we look at the 1900s, what happened? People have said that more people died between 1900 and 2000 than any other century. There was a lot of really bad stuff happening in 1900, and that slowed the popularity of post-millennialism, because as people realistically looked at the world the view did not seem to hold water.

Dispensational pre-millennialism: If you grew up on *Left Behind*, this is the view you are likely familiar with. If I were to draw a timeline of this framework, you would see that it is the most complicated of all of these views. Historical pre-millennialism essentially says, “The Church Age is happening, society’s growing evil, there is a great persecution,

Christ returns, and then He reigns in an actual thousand-year millennium, and then all things are restored.” The amillennial view is even more straightforward, simply saying, “Jesus came, He died, He ascended, the Church Age happened, persecution happens, and then Jesus returns.” Then with the post-millennium view, there is the Church Age where society gradually improves, then a persecution, and then Jesus returns. They are all quite simple.

But with dispensational pre-millennialism, everything is chopped up. The reason for that is that dispensationalism tends to do this to the entire Bible. This is a very recent theology, similar to post-millennialism. It developed in the mid to late 1800s, and it was popularized by a scholar named C. I. Scofield, who wrote the Scofield Reference Bible. This Bible made pre-millennial, or dispensational pre-millennial, views popular especially among fundamentalist Baptist churches. Eventually most non-Calvinist churches were eventually exposed to this theology.

Dispensational pre-millennialism is the belief that Jesus will come back to earth after a seven-year tribulation and will rule during a literal thousand years of peace on earth. This view is extremely pro-Israel. Israel—the actual country itself—is a centerpiece of pre-millennial theology, and it is one of the reasons you will see Christians who are unabashedly pro-Israel in politics, perhaps without even realizing why. It comes back to dispensational pre-millennialism. The re-gathering of Israel as a recognized state in the 1940s is viewed as a significant fulfillment of prophecy by dispensational pre-millennialists, even though among Jews themselves there are some who believe the Messiah was supposed to regather Israel, not the state. There is even some conflict among Jews themselves on the prospect of the regathering of Israel, but dispensational Christians tend to view it as a universally good thing, and also as a prophetic fulfillment. Again, this became popular in the

1800s, it expanded among Christians, and was popularized by such people as C. I. Scofield, Hal Lindsey, Chuck Smith, Charles Ryrie, Tim LaHaye, and even John MacArthur.

Dispensationalists believe the rapture and the second coming of Jesus are two separate events. This doctrine was pretty much nonexistent in church history up until this point in the 1800s. It is taken from 1 Thessalonians 4 which says, “For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then, we who are alive, who are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so, we will always be with the Lord.” This idea of being caught up in the air is the concept that was adopted as the rapture.

The Bible does not teach a secret or silent rapture. If you noticed in Thessalonians, it says there will be a great shout, a trumpet sound, an angel, and basically a big shebang when this happens. There will be no secretly sneaking away into the sky; rather if this happens it will be a public event. Very little in Scripture talks about this, and the Scriptures that do talk about it make it extremely clear that there will be an announcement when the Christians are taken.

Passages to read: Revelation 21-22, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Daniel 12

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Which end times view do you resonate with most? Which do you think is most biblically supported? How do you think people arrive at the other views biblically?

Try to understand their perspective.

2. How has your view of end times contributed to your peace (or fear) about Christ's return?
3. How does our view of eschatology change how we live day to day?



Conclusion

I hope this overview of Christian theology has given you a desire to further your study, and I pray it has bolstered your ability to dive deeper into your faith than before! As C. S. Lewis so rightly put in the foreword to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, "doctrine leads to devotion." Studying the Trinity, the work done on the cross, and our life in Christ leads us to a richer personal relationship with our God. Understanding other viewpoints within Christianity grants us the grace and patience necessary to have conversations across the aisle.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you" (2 Corinthians 13:14)



Resources

GROWING IN FAITH

- *The Handbook for Christian Living* by Charles F. Stanley
- *Practicing Basic Spiritual Disciplines* by Charles F. Stanley
- *Growing Deep in the Christian Life* by Charles Swindoll
- *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan
- *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster
- *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund
- *Rejoice and Tremble* by Michael Reeves

THEOLOGY AND HISTORY

- *Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine* by Dale Moody (Baptist)
- *Understanding Christian Theology* by Charles Swindoll (Baptist)
- *Foundations of Wesleyan-Arminian Theology* (Arminian)
- *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* by Roger Olson (Arminian)
- *Reformed Theology* by Michael Allen (Calvinist)
- *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem (Calvinist)
- *Dogmatic Theology* by Francis Hall (Catholic)
- *The History of Christianity* by Justo Gonzalez (Church History)

- *Church History in Plain Language* by Bruce Shelley (Church History)
- *How We Got the Bible* by Timothy Paul Jones (Canon)
- *Fix Your Eyes* by Amy Gannett
- *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* by Matthew Bates

PODCASTS

- Verity by Phylcia Masonheimer
- The Bible Recap
- The Bible Project
- After Class Podcast
- Help Me Teach the Bible
- Sotierology 101
- Remonstrance Podcast
- 5 Minutes in Church History
- The Gospel Coalition
- InTouch Ministries
- The Alisa Childers Podcast
- FWS Podcast
- The Naked Bible Podcast
- BibleThinker with Mike Winger
- Basecamp: Into the Dark
- Ask NT Wright Anything
- Women of the Church
- Doctrine and Devotion
- ChurchLeaders Podcast