

We Believe



First Baptist
HUNTSVILLE

We Believe

We believe in the One God Who exists eternally in Three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We believe in Jesus, the perfect incarnation of God the Son, Who died taking upon Himself our sins, rose again on the third day, and will come again.

We believe all humans are created in the image of God and deeply loved by our Creator. Yet, because of our sinful choices, we are in need of a Savior. We believe Jesus is that Savior—the Savior of all who will turn from their sin and follow Him.

We believe in the power of God's Holy Spirit to teach, comfort, enable and transform us.

We believe in the Bible as the trustworthy authority for what we believe and practice.

We believe in the Church as the body of Christ in the world.

We believe in our calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus, both in our community and around the world.

We believe our decisions in this life have eternal consequences. We further believe that our hope for Heaven comes through faith in Jesus, not our own goodness.

We believe we are to be good stewards of our God-given resources, from our talents to our finances to our planet.

We believe in grace as the heart of the Christian faith.

Contents

Preface

Chapter 1

We believe in the One God Who exists eternally in Three Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Perspective: Diane Gordon

Chapter 2

We believe in Jesus, the perfect incarnation of God the Son, Who died taking upon Himself our sins, rose again on the third day, and will come again.
Perspective: Ed Culpepper

Chapter 3

We believe all humans are created in the image of God and deeply loved by our Creator. Yet, because of our sinful choices, we are in need of a Savior. We believe Jesus is that Savior—the Savior of all who will turn from their sin and follow Him.
Perspective: Ed Culpepper

Chapter 4

We believe in the power of God’s Holy Spirit to teach, comfort, enable and transform us.
Perspective: Diane Gordon

Chapter 5

We believe in the Bible as the trustworthy authority for what we believe and practice.
Perspective: Rob Covington

Chapter 6

We believe in the Church as the body of Christ in the world.
Perspective: Frank Graves

Chapter 7

We believe in our calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus, both in our community and around the world.
Perspective: Holly Canup

Chapter 8

We believe our decisions in this life have eternal consequences. We further believe that our hope for Heaven comes through faith in Jesus, not our own goodness.
Perspective: John Dickson

Chapter 9

We believe we are to be good stewards of our God-given resources, from our talents to our finances to our planet.
Perspective: Tara DuBose-Schmidt

Chapter 10

We believe in grace as the heart of the Christian faith.
Perspective: Travis Collins

Preface

If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10: 9-10 NIV)

We believe sincerely what the Bible tells us in Romans 10: 9-10. This is the essential, most simple and direct statement of faith defining an individual as a Christian. It centers a person's faith in confession of his or her sin, acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and assurance that these are the only requirements to experience God's salvation. We as members of First Baptist Church share this belief, and this is the bond that unites us as a community of faith in the church.

Still, our shared faith has many nuances that call for further explanation of what we believe. To that end, First Baptist Church, Huntsville, has adopted a "We Believe" statement. It is not a comprehensive systematic theology. It is not meant to answer every question about Christian faith. It does offer a reliable summary of what this community of faith believes individually and together.

But, again, questions abound about the fine points of these statements of belief. The collection of perspectives in this booklet offer further insights into the origins of our beliefs in the Bible, how we apply the biblical message to our individual lives, and how we live out our faith individually and as a community of faith in the church and in the world. This is not any final catechetical document, but a collection of expressions by several FBC members of what the "We Believe" statements mean. Other writers on each of the statements would approach each affirmation in different language, with other examples and personal experiences. The important point, however, is that we can agree that these explanations of what we believe are valid, inclusive presentations of our shared faith. This is what we believe.

We invite you to join us in these beliefs as a follower of Jesus serving God with this church. As you read each chapter, think about your own faith. Do these perspectives help to answer questions you have about Christian faith? Do they lead you to new examination of your response to God's grace through faith in Jesus? Can you think of other Bible stories, commandments, or promises that form the foundation of what you believe? What experiences in your life call you to the faith described here? How can you act upon these statements of faith in your own life as a follower of Jesus and as a member of the community of faith in the church? Your story undoubtedly will be different, built upon the marvelously unique creation God has made you to be. You also can know that you have a family of faith, brothers and sisters in Christ, who believe as you do and who share those beliefs in order to tell the world about God's saving grace offered through faith in Jesus Christ.

Ed Culpepper

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Chapter 1

We believe in the One God Who exists eternally in Three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

"*God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity*". Thus ends the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy", the first hymn in many a Baptist hymnal. What exactly does that mean? The word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, yet we have this belief of God existing in Three Persons, the Trinity. We start by examining the Biblical foundations of this belief along with an abbreviated account of its history outside of the Bible. We see that scriptures reveal support for the following statements:

- ♣ There is only one God
- ♣ The Father is God
- ♣ The Son is God
- ♣ The Holy Spirit is God

The Bible points out that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinguishable "persons", yet one in "essence" or "being" (this concept of "person" is central to our belief). In an effort to describe this in human terms, we look at some analogies. In discussing their shortcomings, we actually enhance our limited understanding of the mystery and magnitude of the Trinity. We also consider the word "eternally" and how that helps to tie it all together. After thorough parsing of this belief, why is it important to this church and to the individual believer?

While the word "Trinity" is not explicitly used in the Bible, there is scriptural back-up for the concept.

In the early centuries following the resurrection, there were counsels, leading Christian thinkers, that met and came up with statements or creeds to put beliefs into writing.

In the 4th century, the Council of Nicea (AD 325) affirmed the statement:

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ...true God of true God...of one substance with the Father."

Notice that does not include the Holy Spirit. That was added by the Council of Constantinople (AD 381):

"And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son."

In the 5th century came the Athanasian Creed, which states in part:

"We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Essence."

More recently, in the 20th century, the Baptist Faith and Message put out this statement:

"The eternal God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being."

We must clarify the Trinity is not polytheism (the belief in more than one god). Christians believe in *One God*, not three different Gods. Scriptures support this:

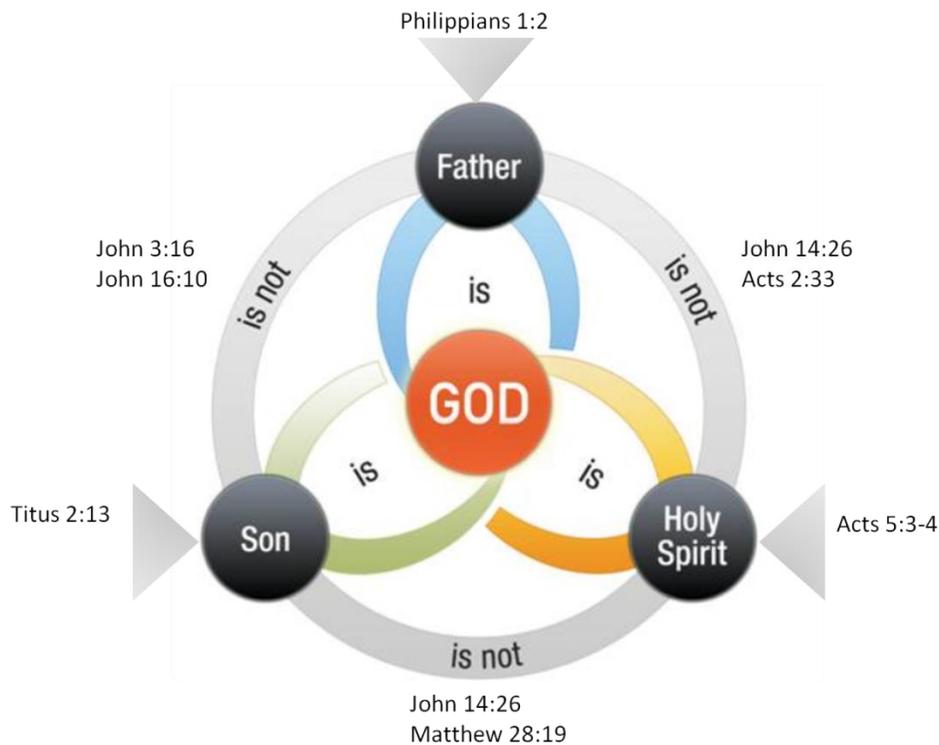
"Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One." (Deut. 6:4)

"This is what the Lord, the King of Israel and its Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts, says: I am the first and I am the last, There is no God but Me." (Isaiah 44:6)

"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever." (1 Timothy 1:17)

Even so, the Bible does speak of the three persons of the Trinity. The Bible speaks of God the Father. In Isaiah 64:8 we read *"Yet Lord, You are our Father"*. John 6:27, Galatians 1:1,3,5, Philippians 1:2, Titus 1:4 refer to *"God the Father"*. In Matthew 6:9 Jesus teaches us to pray *"Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name."* *The Bible speaks of God the Son.* John 17:1 and Luke 1:35 are just two verses speaking of Jesus Christ, God the Son. Another chapter will go into this in much more detail. In Hebrews 1:1-3 we read *"Long ago God spoke ...In these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son... He is the radiance of His glory, the exact expression of His nature,..."* *The Bible speaks of God the Holy Spirit.* 1 Corinthians 3:16 and 6:19 are verses relating to the Spirit of God living within the believer. Acts 5:3-4 uses the Holy Spirit and God interchangeably.

As many of us benefit from a visual aid, the following diagram is helpful as we continue this discussion.



The Bible distinguishes between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Referring to the diagram, the outer circle has an arc between the circles containing "Father", "Son" and "Holy Spirit". Within those arcs are the words "is not". Scripture references just outside these arcs demonstrate how what is contained in one circle is not the same as what is contained in the adjoining circle. For example, John 3:16 is shown near the arc between the Father and the Son - since the Father sent the Son into the world, the Father cannot be the same as the Son.

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are together in numerous passages. Here is one containing striking visual and aural elements:

"After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'." (Matthew 3:16-17)

When we talk of one God "in" or "as" three persons, we are not equating one person (called God) to three other persons, rather we are speaking about the "essence" or "nature" of God in three persons. What exactly is meant by that, i.e. what is "essence" and what do we mean by "person"?

Let's start with "person". How can we consider the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as persons? God the Son dwelt among man, so perhaps it is easiest to relate to him as a person. The Father is referred to as a Heavenly Father, and is referred to as "speaking" in the Old Testament. And the word "father" evokes a personal response in and of itself. The Holy Spirit is sometimes thought of as a force or an "it", however, the Bible reveals that the Holy Spirit has qualities of personhood. The Holy Spirit is referred to as a "He" in John 14:26 and Acts 8:16. He speaks (Hebrews 3:7), reasons (Acts 15:28), wills (1 Corinthians 12:11) and gives personal fellowship (2 Corinthians 13:14).

One aspect of personhood is how a person relates to others. We often think about how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to *us*, but considering how they relate to *each other* is important and instructive. Each member of the Trinity relates to the others "personally" - the Father regards himself as "I" and the Son as "you", for example. The Son addresses the Father: *"At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, ...' (Luke 10:21)* The Father speaks to the Son: *"And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"* (Mark 1:11)

The relationship of three is shown in this passage. Note the Spirit calling out to the Father. *"Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'."* (Galatians 4:6) Throughout the Bible there is a continuing dialog and love among the three persons of the Trinity.

Referring back to the creeds, notice the word "essence". Now the mystery - what is the essence of God? Other words to describe this might be "substance", "nature", "being", "divinity" or "GODNESS". This essence is something that cannot be measured physically or drawn definitively. The essence of God must include eternity, omnipresence and omnipotence. The essence of God is more than we can fathom.

In 1774 Ignaz Franz wrote the hymn "Holy God, We Praise Your Name". This stanza is fitting here:

*Holy Father, Holy Son, Holy Spirit, Three we name you;
While in essence only one, undivided God we claim you.
Then, adoring, bend the knee, and confess the mystery.*

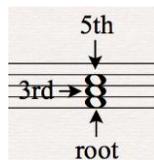
If one God exists in three persons and God is eternal, then the Trinity is eternal. There has never been a time when God did not exist as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In Genesis, we read about the Holy Spirit

hovering or "brooding": *"Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters". (Genesis 1:2).*

In the New Testament, Jesus prayed: *"And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began" (John 17:24)*

Analogies and illustrations are helpful at an elementary level of understanding but eventually fall short of fully describing the Trinity. They can, however, be a good jumping-off point for discussion and help describe some aspect of the concept.

- One person can play different roles. A woman can be a wife, mother and doctor, but she is still the same individual person. This point of view is called *modalism* (changing modes of appearance). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons in relationship with each other so this analogy is not accurate (the fact that some people talk to themselves does not help this analogy, by the way)
- Water can exist as solid, liquid or steam and can even exist as all three at the same time (in a particular setting of temperature and pressure; this is called the triple point). However, there is no such thing as "one water" and there is not an element of personality with water.
- An egg has the yoke, the surrounding liquid and the shell - three parts making up the one egg. This fails in that no one part of the egg is an egg itself. The same can be said of the tree analogy (roots, trunk and branches). The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are not three parts of God.
- Simple math: instead of $1 + 1 + 1 \neq 1$, think $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. This falls short in that the 1's on the left hand side of the "=" have different units than the 1 on the right hand side. 1 Person x 1 Person x 1 Person = 1 Essence
- Project management illustration: God the Father creates the plan. The Son implements or carries out the plan. The Holy Spirit administers the plan by transforming the lives and hearts of those receiving salvation through Jesus Christ.
- Music/Physics: There is a fascinating article entitled "A Perfect Chord: Trinity in Music, Music in the Trinity". It discusses harmony and relates three notes of the triad to the Trinity: the root is the Father, the 3rd is the Holy Spirit and the 5th is the Son.



These lines resonated with me (pun intended):

"musical harmony is certainly a "symbol" for certain aspects of Trinitarian life; but it is also an actual creature of the Trinity, a created reality donated by God to humankind...musical harmony can be a shadow of the Trinity's harmony..."

So why is it valuable to ponder the Trinity? When our pastor, the esteemed Travis Collins, spoke on this subject he stated: *"God gave us His love languages. And one of them is "study". God says "love me with your mind." When we ponder and wrestle with the Trinity, it is an act of love toward God."*

In his book, "Thinking about God", Fisher Humphreys writes "Those of us who are not Jews would never have known the God of Abraham except through his son Jesus. And Jesus would have remained for us one more person in the past except for the ongoing experience of "life in Christ" which is a product of the Spirit's work in the church".

We can take comfort while standing amazed that "God acted in every Person of his being to save us. The Father gave the Son, the Son offered himself on the Cross, and the Holy Spirit brought us to Jesus. We were so lost that it took every member of the Godhead to save us" (Ray Pritchard). What a great love that is!

The Trinity gives us hope and direction, since God exists in three distinct persons who share the same essence, we too can have great diversity, variety, and individuality while sharing the unity of our beliefs. The eternal communication and love between the persons of the Trinity is a model for us. We were created to live in communion with one another and with God.

I think it is suitable to close with these words from 2 Corinthians 13:14:

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Diane Gordon has been a member of First Baptist Church since 1994. She is married to John Gordon and they have two children in their 20's, Jimmy and Mary Beth. Diane currently serves as a teacher in the Family Foundations Bible study class, sings in the Sanctuary choir, rings with the Mosaic Ringers, serves on the One Less committee and the Median Adult ministry team. In the past she has taught preschoolers and 2nd and 3rd grade Sunday School and worked with children's choirs.

Chapter 2

We believe in Jesus, the perfect incarnation of God the Son, who died taking upon Himself our sins, rose again on the third day, and will come again.

This is the central declaration of Christian faith. The first “We Believe ...” statement affirms that we believe in God, the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life and all creation. Finite human minds struggle to comprehend and relate to God, who has been described as “Wholly Other” than ourselves. People of myriad races and faiths have sought to understand, explain, and worship deities they can envision. But Christian faith is not based upon what we may construct as attempts to grasp onto God. Christians profess audaciously that Almighty God lived among us as the man, Jesus Christ. Jesus reveals God’s essential character of goodness, love, grace, and power through his life and ministry on earth. New Testament scriptures tell us that Jesus’ death for our sin, resurrection to life, and future coming to earth again are how God has acted and will act to draw us into personal relationship with himself forever.

Even while Jesus lived on earth, people struggled to figure out, “Who is this man?” Jesus knew that people were puzzling over his nature and identity. He asked his disciples who people were saying that he was, or who the disciples thought he was. Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:14-16) Other characters in the gospels wondered who Jesus was, from members of the ruling council of the Jews, to the Roman governor Pilate, to the high priest Caiaphas. None of them arrived at a sufficient answer. Was Jesus a resurrected prophet, a king of the Jews, or just an amazingly charismatic rabbi from Galilee? Only Peter’s answer pointed toward Jesus’s true identity, but not decisively enough for many early Christians.

In the first centuries after Jesus’ ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, books and letters were written to explain who Jesus was and why we should trust our lives to him. We appeal to those writings recognized as authoritative scripture – what centuries of believers have known as the New Testament - to form our beliefs about Jesus. The gospel of John opens with a stirring description of both the divine and human nature of Jesus, clearly identifying Jesus with “the Word” in his book:

In the beginning there was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} He was with God in the beginning. {3} All things were made by him, and nothing was made without him.... {14} The Word became a human and lived among us. We saw his glory--the glory that belongs to the only Son of the Father--and he was full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3, 14 NCV)

The apostle Paul also affirmed that the essential nature of Jesus was both human and divine, both God and man. He taught early Christians:

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before God made anything at all and is supreme over all creation. {16} Christ is the one through whom God created everything in heaven and earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see ... {17} He existed before everything else began, and he holds all creation together.... {19} For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ.... All of God lives in Christ fully (even when Christ was on earth (Colossians 1:15-17, 19; 2:9)

Jesus is absolutely unique, the one-and-only case of one human being also being Almighty God in all of God’s power, creativity, holiness and grace.

This is the incarnation, God in human flesh. The beautiful stories of Jesus’ birth in the gospels of Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 depict the physical birth of a child, Jesus, born as any other baby. but when Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the Temple for customary religious dedication rites the aging prophet Simeon recognized the infant as God’s Messiah. Simeon declared that Jesus would offer God’s way of salvation. The first generation of Christians professed faith in Jesus Christ as Lord. The same word was used in Greek translations of Hebrew scripture in which God is named. In the New Testament both God and Jesus are referred to as Lord, advancing the affirmation that Jesus is God. John stresses the importance of belief in the incarnation:

Every spirit who confesses that Jesus Christ came to earth as a human is from God. {3} And every spirit who refuses to say this about Jesus is not from God.... We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we can know the True One. And our lives are in the True One and in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and the eternal life. (1 John 4:2b-3a; 5:20 NCV)

But the question of the true nature of Jesus continued to vex early believers. Extreme interpretations developed emphasizing either the humanity of Jesus or his divinity. Some insisted that God could not be contained in human flesh. Docetists (from the Greek word meaning “to seem”) cited verses such as Philippians 2:7 that says Jesus was “born in human *likeness*... (emphasis added).” They taught that Jesus only appeared to be human or to suffer. Some said that Jesus was filled with God’s presence at his baptism – the gospels report that the spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove as he was coming out of the water (Luke 3:21-22) – and departed from him at his crucifixion – Luke 23:46 quoting Jesus praying to God, “Into thy hands I commend my spirit,” and then giving up the spirit. So, they said, Jesus only appeared to be a human being.

On the other extreme some insisted that Jesus was entirely human and not god at all. 1 Peter 2:5 says that there is one mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, “himself human....” Jesus’ hometown contemporaries resisted his ministry and teachings by pleading that they knew his mother and father, brothers and sisters, so how could there be anything special about him? (See Matthew 13:54-55.) Some said that Jesus was just a man with keen spiritual insights, impressive teaching abilities, and unusual powers of persuasion. But they insisted that Jesus was just a man.

Conflicts between differing visions of the nature of Jesus began to threaten the ability of the early church to teach a consistent faith. Leaders from across the world that had been penetrated with the Christian message convened at Nicea in Greece in 325 A.D. to debate the divergent positions and to resolve what constituted orthodox Christian faith. The bishops rejected both extremes, that Jesus was merely human or that he was God only seeming to be a man. The Council of Nicea determined that Jesus was *homoousios* – of the same being – as God. Moreover, the Council affirmed that God exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three personal manifestations of God are of the same essence. Unorthodox, heretical teachings persisted, but the central beliefs of Christian were established. Additional ecumenical councils followed to refine beliefs and consistent teachings of Christian belief. By the Council of Chalcedon in 451 the unity of God and Jesus was firmly stated. Jesus is

the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father;... not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ....

Christian congregations today comprising the great majority of believers subscribe to modern statements of the Nicene Creed. It is read and recited in worship services of Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and non-denominational churches. Although Baptists have historically been non-creedal, some Baptists affirm the tenets of creeds such as this one and the Apostles’ Creed in solidarity with other Christians. The prevailing confession of Christians about the nature and identity of Jesus is:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, By the power of the Holy Spirit. he was born of the Virgin Mary and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. (The Nicene Creed, Contemporary Version. Prepared by the International Consultation on English Texts)

We stand with other Christians worldwide in our belief that Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, was a man whom we can imitate in order to live God’s way in the world. Jesus demonstrated the life of love, sacrificial service, and obedience to God that is the ultimate paradigm for anyone who commits himself or herself faithfully to God. Jesus is at the same time

God who created us, abounds with love and grace so deep that he suffered sacrificial death on the cross to redeem us from our sin, was resurrected to offer us genuine hope for new life, and will come again to gather us to himself forever.

We believe as Paul taught, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” (2 Corinthians 5:19) The New Testament also clearly states that God’s salvation is made possible through Jesus’ death on the cross. The apostle Peter taught that “[Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24 NRSV) Our most intricate rationalizations fall short of explaining how Jesus’ death by crucifixion accomplished God’s plan to save us from our sin.

But again and again that marvelous message is repeated in Christian scripture. Paul plainly described how dire our situation is and how God graciously saved us through Jesus’ actions - when we could do nothing to save ourselves:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

When we were unable to help ourselves, at the moment of our need, Christ died for us, although we were living against God.... {8} But God shows his great love for us in this way: Christ died for us while we were still sinners. {10} While we were God's enemies, he made friends with us through the death of his Son. (Romans 5:6, 8, 10 NCV)

We believe that Jesus’ death on the cross is far more than a heroic, noble self-sacrifice for the good of others. Yes, Jesus did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He died taking the penalty for our sin in order to forgive us and redeem us for right relationship with God. But that is not the end of the story of God’s grace. Jesus arose from death three days after his crucifixion. God demonstrated power over our most universal fear – death – by Jesus’ resurrection to new life. Through Jesus’s resurrection we have genuine hope that we can have life everlasting through faith in him.

Confession of faith in the saving power of the death and resurrection of Jesus is clear in the New Testament. Jesus himself told his followers that he would be killed at Jerusalem, but that he would be raised to life on the third day. (See Matthew 16:21.) The disciples did not understand at first, but after Jesus’ resurrection they affirmed the reality and power of what Jesus had said. Paul wrote that of first importance to the profession of faith in Jesus is “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, {4} that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The crucial importance of Jesus’ resurrection was cited by Paul to validate the message he was preaching. He was calling for faith in the one who “was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 1:4 NIV)

Jesus’ resurrection is God’s validation of the absolutely unique nature of the God/man, Jesus. No other religious leader, teacher, or philosopher has risen from death. But the effect of the resurrection is not limited to the validation of who Jesus is. It also is God’s way of offering us new life through trusting in Jesus. Peter put it this way: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. (1 Peter 1:3 NIV) We enter into that promised new life through our confession of faith in Jesus. The Christian gospel declares that “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9) We have security in the hope of our salvation because of the resurrection of Jesus. It is attested by God’s demonstration of power over death by raising Jesus, and it extends hope to us through our faith in him. Paul assures us that “God raised Jesus from the dead, and if God’s Spirit is living in you, he will also give life to your bodies that die. God is the One who raised Christ from the dead, and he will give life through his Spirit that lives in you.” (Romans 8:11 NCV) Our personal invitation is to trust Jesus own words about resurrection and the hope we can have for new life. Jesus asked his friend, Martha, and asks each of us by extension: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, {26} and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25-26 NRSV)

We believe that Jesus Christ was God present among human beings. He died and rose again to save us from our sin, and our hope is as sure as Jesus’ resurrection.

But that does not complete the story of God’s salvation. We believe – as Hebrew scripture promised God’s Messiah would come in full perfection in the “day of the Lord,” and as New Testament writers declare over 300 times – that the

Lord will come again. Jesus told his closest followers the night before his crucifixion, “I am going [to my Father’s house] to prepare a place for you. {3} And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:2-3 NIV) Building upon the Hebrew expectation of the day of the Lord, early Christians understood Jesus to be talking about God’s consummation of all creation. Christ will return to bring wholeness, peace, and renewal to all creation in the eternal presence of God. A New Testament sermon preaches that “Christ was offered as a sacrifice one time to take away the sins of many people. And he will come a second time, not to offer himself for sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:28 NCV) We don’t know when or how this happen, but we believe in the end of history that will culminate all of God’s blessings. We can believe with assurance that Jesus will come again to gather all who follow him faithfully, “and so we will be with the Lord forever” (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

This is who we believe Jesus to be. God bridged the gap between his awesome, all-powerful, eternal being by living among us as the man, Jesus. We believe that he died for our sin on the cross of Calvary. We believe that God demonstrated power even over sin and death by Jesus’ resurrection to life. And we believe that Jesus is coming again so that we can be in perfect fellowship with God forever. These are core beliefs for anyone who professes to be a faithful follower of Jesus. These are central affirmations of Christian faith.

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Chapter 3

We believe all humans are created in the image of God and deeply loved by our Creator. Yet, because of our sinful choices, we are in need of a Savior. We believe Jesus is that Savior—the Savior of all who will turn from their sin and follow Him.

Christian faith traces God’s goodness and love back to the very origin of everything that exists. The creation account in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is punctuated by the affirmation that God saw all that he had made and called it good. In fact, when humankind comes on the scene God says that they are very good. That is how it should be, because the Bible reports that we are created in the image of God and that God loves us dearly. But the story quickly took a disastrous turn. Rather than continuing along the idyllic path God has intended for them, the man and woman turned away from God’s ways to seek self-satisfaction and to exalt themselves. The habit once acquired has proven impossible to break. Every individual, family, community, and nation continues to choose self-interest over God’s designs. The shortcoming is called sin, and every last person chooses to repeat the pattern. God’s immeasurable goodness and love have persisted from the beginning. Every member of the human race has squandered God’s goodness with actions and choices that fall short of God’s designs. Regardless of how individuals and groups of people have tried to reform themselves and restore genuine goodness, choices that fail to meet God’s standards occur time and time again. The only viable solution to the problem of sin must be in the hands of God who created everything in the first place. Fortunately, God’s love was evident not only in creating all there is and everyone in it, but God also determined to provide a way to save us from ourselves and for relationship with himself. That is where our most distinctive Christian belief makes all the difference: we believe that salvation is available for every person who trusts Jesus to forgive his or her faulty choices. The result is restoration to life as God intended it to be, and that is forever.

God’s essential goodness is evident in all of creation. Scripture affirms this numerous times. The wise writer of Ecclesiastes searched diligently for the meaning of all things and concluded, “God has made everything beautiful in its time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11) Paul agreed that God’s goodness is evident in all of creation: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” (Romans 1:20 NRSV) The account of creation in the first chapter of the Bible observes six times as God creates the cosmos, day and night, land and seas, plants and animals that God saw his creation and pronounced it good. But something was missing in all of the natural order. God did not find his capacity for relationship, creativity, or love adequately reflected in creation ... until “God created human beings in his image. In the image of God he created them. He created them male and female.” (Genesis 1:27). With humankind as a reflection of God’s essential personality and equipped for loving personal relationship “God saw all that he had made and it was very good.” (Genesis 1:31) God entrusted caring stewardship of his good creation to the residents who bore his image freedom, creativity, and love.

God’s love for all of creation – and especially for people created in his image – is never-ending. A marvelous poetic affirmation of God’s eternal love is Psalm 136. The first verse invites us: “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” (Psalm 136:1) The faithful affirmation, “his steadfast love endures forever,” concludes each of the 26 verses of the psalm. Verses 1-9 recall God’s goodness in creation as evidence of his love. The remaining verses tell the story of God’s salvation of his faithful people. God is shown to love us in spite of the circumstances we have gotten ourselves into.

A major problem for all humankind quickly emerged to shatter the relationship between God who deeply loved his creation and those he created to share his love. The man and woman God created chose to use the marvelous freedom that reflected God’s essence to satisfy their own selfish desires. God had provided for all of their needs and had placed them in paradise to live. The one thing God said was off limits to them they decided was more intensely desirable at the moment than proper relationship with God. They took what was good – fruit that was “good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom” – and misused it to fulfill their

selfish desire. Their act initiated a habit that has proved to be unbreakable for every man, woman, and child through our present moment. Relationship with God was broken by the disobedient, self-serving choice. Subsequent choices by every one of us continue the pattern of misusing God's good creation to our own selfish satisfaction – fulfilling the broad categories of “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16.)

Sinful choices are the persistent conduct of every member of the human race. The psalmist lamented three millennia ago: “God looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. {3} They have all fallen away, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” (Psalms 53:2-3 NRSV) We learn about the problem of sin from the misdeeds of Adam and Eve, but every one of us continues to make self-serving choices like they did. Paul offered an extended exposition of the universal problem of sin. He wrote about specific examples of human choices that deviated from God's good ways, concluding that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” (Romans 5:12 NRSV) The prophet Isaiah 600 years earlier had expressed similar sentiments in metaphorical language: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” (Isaiah 53:6 NIV) Each of us has besmirched the image of God that is an essential element of our beings. We do this by our own continuation of the pervasive pattern of choosing our own way and not God's loving intentions for us. The wise seeker of Hebrew scripture summed up our predicament: “One thing I have learned: God made people good, but they have found all kinds of ways to be bad.” (Ecclesiastes 7:29 NCV)

Sin is much more than an irritating insistence on satisfying oneself that disturbs relationships with others and with God. The consequence of sin is eternal separation from God who loves us and gave us life. Paul states the stark reality plainly: “Once you were dead, doomed forever because of your many sins.” (Ephesians 2:1 NLT) He also bluntly writes that “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) Lists of actions people choose to do that are contrary to God's ways and God's image within us are prominent in the books by Hebrew prophets and in the New Testament books of Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Peter, and other books of the Bible. None of the lists is all-inclusive, but only illustrate the pervasive problem of sin. Again, Paul leaves no room for anyone of us to deny our guilt: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 6:23)

When a person is dead he or she obviously no longer can do anything on his or her own behalf. Death due to sin is no different. Though still alive physically, we are spiritually dead when our way of life is characterized by persistent selfish choices, or sin. Romans 7 presents a keen account of the futile struggle we perpetually lose when we try to keep from sinning. Paul writes that he often knows what is good and is consistent with God's ways. However, he finds himself repeatedly doing the very sinful things he knows he should not do. He admits that he – and every one of us with him – is enslaved to the power of sin. He exclaims in personal defeat: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24 NIV) We believe with Paul that we are mired in sin and that we are powerless to break the universal habit of continuing to make sinful choices. We cannot save ourselves.

We believe the good news of the gospel, that God loves us so much that he provides a way to save us from our sin. Jesus Christ is the savior for our sin. On the heels of venting his frustration over his own inability to overcome sin, Paul exclaims the sole way of salvation he has found: “Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25 NIV) The best known verse of scripture in the world begins the story of our salvation:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16 NRSV)

Our finite minds cannot reason how or why God saves us by his love and grace through the death of Jesus for our sin. We simply trust what the Bible tells us about the way of salvation God has provided through faith in Jesus. Paul assures us that “when we were unable to help ourselves, at the moment of our need, Christ died for

us, although we were living against God. (Romans 5:6 NCV) When we were dead in sin and unable to help ourselves, God sent Jesus to save us. It is a profound mystery of love and grace. We believe that “Christ had no sin, but God made him become sin so that in Christ we could become right with God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21 NCV) The divine, somberly ironic description of God’s Messiah in Isaiah 53 is cited by Peter, who applies the saving work to Jesus: “He himself [Jesus Christ] bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24 NRSV) In one of the first Christian sermons on record Peter preached that Jesus’ death for our sin and resurrection to new life is the only way of salvation. Peter said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12 NIV)

We believe that faith in Jesus is available to everyone in the world across all time as God’s loving way of salvation. The Greek word in John 3:16 translated as “world” is *cosmos*. It refers to the totality of creation. So God loves the universe he created and every person who will ever live on earth. Further, the verse says that “whosoever,” or “everyone – anyone at all” who trusts in Jesus will not face condemnation for their sin, but will have everlasting life. Jesus is the savior for the whole world. You can take Jesus’ word for it! When Jesus’ dear friend Martha was grieving over her brother’s death and wondering about his salvation, Jesus said to her: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, {26} and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26 NRSV) Lazarus and everyone else in the world who trusts in Jesus will not die the death that comes with sin but will live forever with Jesus. The apostle who wrote about this promise from Jesus assured anyone who reads one of his letters in the New Testament, “I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely. {2} He is the sacrifice for our sins. He takes away not only our sins but the sins of all the world.” (1 John 2:1-2 NLT) Salvation is not confined to just “good church-going folks,” but is for everyone created and loved by God – and that is everyone in the whole world.

The New Testament repeats this message time and again. Paul wrote that salvation through faith in Jesus amounts to God recreating his image within us. He says that we are new creations through faith in Jesus, “reconciled” to God. The Greek word translated “reconciled” depicts something that is put back together that should never have been broken in the first place. God created every person for loving relationship with himself, and we broke away from God by our choices to sin. The good news for everyone is that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people’s sins against them.... {21} For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:19-21 NLT)

We can draw a clear implication for our church today from our belief that Jesus is the way of salvation from sin needed by the whole world. Believing this, we should do everything we can do to spread that message to everyone we can. Jesus told his first followers that they were to love other people the way he loved them. His ultimate demonstration of love for the whole world was his death for our sin. We can’t die to save another person from his or her sin, but we can tell them about Jesus who has done that already. Just as God loved the whole world, we can tell everyone about God’s way of salvation through faith in Jesus. We stand in the legacy of Jesus’ first disciples when we continue the mission Jesus personally entrusted to them before he ascended back into heaven after his resurrection to new life. Jesus told them and us: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) The first followers’ neighborhood was Jerusalem and Samaria, but they were not to stop there with sharing news of God’s love through Jesus. Like them, we are to be sure to tell our closest neighbors how they can find salvation from sin, and we are also to do all we can with God empowering us to tell the whole world.

We believe that God loved us from the beginning of creation, that every one of us has chosen our own way rather than choosing to remain in proper relationship with God. We believe that God continues eternally to love

us and has provided a way to save us from our deadly choices to sin. God's loving way of salvation is the death of Jesus for our sin. It is a loving message that every person needs to experience for themselves. We as individual followers of Jesus and as a community of faith are saved from our sin by faith in Jesus. We participate in God's loving way of salvation by choosing to take as our own personal calling the life-work summarized by Paul: "[God is] entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. {20} So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:19)

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Chapter 4

We believe in the power of God's Holy Spirit to teach, comfort, enable and transform us.

The Holy Spirit possesses truly magnificent power, as revealed throughout Scripture. This awe-inspiring power was shown in Genesis during the work of Creation and in giving life to man.

Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. (Genesis 1:2).

Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being." (Genesis 2:7)

It was the Holy Spirit that conceived Jesus in Mary! *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you". (Luke 1:35)* Jesus acknowledged the influence and power of the Holy Spirit on his ministry when he read that the prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed Me...". (Luke 4:18)* After Jesus left this earth, the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was revealed, when there was a sound like mighty rushing wind and there were thousands converted.

These are wondrous events recorded in Scripture, but recall the Holy Spirit is eternal and thus has influence on believers to this day and all days yet to come. We established the Holy Spirit as a "person" of the Trinity. His power affects us in personal ways as he dwells within us. Scriptures bear out the powers to teach, comfort, enable and transform us.

The verbs "teach", "comfort", "enable" and "transform" can be readily used with humans. We've all had teachers who taught us to read and write and do arithmetic. We've been comforted by family and friends with hugs when we're scared, words when feeling discouraged, and even by casseroles when we are recuperating or mourning! We've been enabled by others emotionally with encouragement and physically by transportation and financial support. Surgeons can transform our physical bodies and society pulls to transform our attitudes. The Holy Spirit takes all of these actions to another level - a Godly level, so that there are not just actions, but genuine powers.

The Holy Spirit has the power to teach. Jesus said to the disciples:

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26).

However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will tell you things to come. (John 16:13).

How did this teaching manifest itself? And how does it continue? Does the Holy Spirit teach through information, inspiration, and illumination? The Holy Spirit revealed *information* to specific people in the Old Testament: David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and in the New Testament: Simeon, Agabus, Paul. (These are just examples; there are others). Jesus promised in Luke 12:12 that when the believer's authority is questioned: *"the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say"*.

The Holy Spirit teaches through inspired Scripture. (2 Timothy 3:16) Are the words from the Bible by themselves sufficient? How much do we learn about God or ourselves just by the act of reading? This is mechanics without motivation, form without foundation, words without wisdom.

"The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." (1 Corinthians 2:15)

As the Holy Spirit was at work in the writing, it must also be at work in the reading. The Holy Spirit through *inspiration* helps us understand what was written and apply it to our lives. Billy Graham wrote "That the writers of the Old and New Testaments were inspired by the Holy Spirit is one part of the story. In addition, He *illuminates* the minds and opens the heart of its readers." It is having the author explain the book! *"What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us." (1 Corinthians 2:12)*

Clara Scott illustrates this beautifully in her hymn:

*Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready my God, Thy will to see,
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!*

Jesus talked about the Holy Spirit as a Comforter or Advocate several times as recorded in the Book of John:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever - the Spirit of the truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him, for he lives with you and will be in you. (John 14:16-17)

But the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26)

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7)

The Greek word translated as helper, or advocate or comforter is *parakletos*. "para" means alongside (as in parallel) and "kletos" means called. Thus the word means "called to one's side". Dr. Gary Gulun writes: "The disciples were going to experience fear, disillusionment, confrontation, and a crushing of their hopes, when Jesus would be put to death and buried. This word shows that Jesus was a "comforter" to them while he was alive because he was "personally alongside them." Jesus also taught there was another "comforter" of the same kind that he would send to them and who would be inside of them. This is the indwelling described at the end of John 14:17. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers continues for eternity. We have this Comforter with us this very minute! He is our counselor and helper and we are never truly alone.

In 2005, my mother was diagnosed with liposarcoma. She had a cancerous growth on her right forearm and required an amputation in order to live. I took many trips by myself to Kentucky and to Vanderbilt where she was treated and had surgery. I distinctly remember an experience one time while getting onto I-65 from Hwy

53 in Ardmore. On that exit ramp I had an incredibly strong feeling that I was not alone. I believe there were people praying for me on my journey and the Holy Spirit was there in the car with me. To say it was comforting is an understatement. I know there are many, many stories like this, where one has felt that power in a time of need. This is written in Romans 8:26: *"the Spirit also joins us to help in our weakness, because we do not know what to pray for as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with unspoken groanings."*

Here is a stanza from an old hymn published in the 1850's, we can read these words as a prayer even today:

*Holy Ghost, the Infinite!
Shine upon our nature's night
With thy blessed inward light,
Comforter Divine!*

Scriptures show the great power of the Holy Spirit to enable those who believe. To "enable" is to make possible; provide with the means or opportunity, to cause to operate. Other words similar are "equip", "empower" and "endow" (this tempts me to call them ePowers). In the Old Testament, an empowerment for service is shown in the following (this is just a small sample):

- Joshua - leadership skills, wisdom (Num 27:18, Deut 34:9)
- David - skills required of kingship (1 Sam. 16:13)
- Bezalel - artistic skills for construction of the tabernacle (Ex. 31:3-4)

The Holy Spirit also enabled God's people to overcome their enemies at the time of the Exodus (Isa. 63:11-12).

Professor Richard Gurgel writes "God's prophets in Scripture were given direct revelation from the Holy Spirit to speak of things that would otherwise not be known". Two examples of this are Deborah (Judges 4-5) and Huldah (2 Chronicles 34).

In the New Testament, Acts 1:8, Jesus says to his disciples: *"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* The early believers were empowered in the following ways (another small sample):

- Stephen - to perform *"great wonders and signs among the people"* (Acts 6:8)
- Paul - to demonstrate miraculous signs and wonders (Rom 15:19)
- Disciples - to proclaim the Word boldly (Acts 4:31)
- Lydia - to open her house and support missionaries as first European convert (Acts 16:12-16, 40)

How does the Holy Spirit bestow Powers on Christians? An answer appears in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul is discussing matters of the spirit and gifts, ministries and activities:

*A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person to produce what is beneficial:
to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit,
to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit,
to another, faith by the same Spirit,
to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit,
to another, the performing of miracles,
to another, prophecy,
to another, distinguishing between spirits,*

*to another, different kinds of languages,
to another, interpretation of languages.
But one and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each one as He wills.*

In each person, the Spirit enables the believer in a particular way for the common good.

A talent is an ability to do things. Both saved and unsaved people possess talents. Combining one's talent(s) with a gift from the Holy Spirit can turn a job or a performance into a ministry. There is a story about a certain organ performance that is germane to this subject. Stuart Briscoe wrote about a famous organist who, in the 1880's, travel the country giving concerts. (Those were the days of the reed organ - large organs requiring someone besides the organist to pump air into the organ.) In every venue this famous organist would hire a local boy to pump during the concert. After one performance the little "pumper" said to the organ player, "well, we had a great concert tonight didn't we?" "I had a great concert", replied the organist rather arrogantly. The next night, in the same concert hall with the same boy pumping, right in the middle of the concert the organ faded out. The little boy who'd been pumping the organ, had stopped. The boy grinned, and said to the man at the keyboard, "we aren't having a very good concert tonight, are we?"

As the organist needed the boy pumping air, so we need the Holy Spirit at work in our lives as individuals and in our lives as the Church. Without it we have motions but no music, mechanics but no meaning, form but no foundation.

Predominant in the Holy Spirit's work is the power to transform. One definition of "transform" is "to change in character or condition". When we say we believe in the power of God's Holy Spirit to transform us, we are talking about a change in our character and our attitudes. Another definition is "to change in composition or structure". Is it a stretch to say the Holy Spirit has such great power, it can cause a change in the structure of our soul? The prophecy of Ezekiel presents a very "structural" analogy:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezek. 36:26-27)

The transforming power of the Holy Spirit begins its work within us when we receive Christ into our lives. *"he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."* (Titus 3:5) The Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we now have a new "nature", we are a new creation, we are born anew. The transformation continues as we read in 2 Corinthians 3:18: *"We are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit"*.

The word "sanctification" means "to set apart for a purpose". It is a progressive work that makes us more and more free from sin and more and more like Christ. Sanctification is not a passive activity, it takes human effort as well as the working of the Holy Spirit. It is a two-way street, so to speak: the continuing action of the Holy Spirit and the believer's continuing struggle against sin. If we grow in sanctification, we "walk by the Spirit" and are "led by the Spirit" i.e. we are more and more responsive to the desires and promptings of the Holy Spirit than sinful desires. We are transformed.

For the individual, there are several verses that direct us in our continuing transformation. Here are just a few:

Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Gal. 5-16)

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and ... be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and ... put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24)

Make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with godliness, godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they will keep you from being useless or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:5-8)

As a church, we can offer opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work through worship, Bible Study, and service (just to name a few). This verse is also applicable to the church as a whole: *"So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Romans 14:19)*

As I pondered these concepts and powers of the Holy Spirit, Luke 10:27 was brought to mind: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"*. Perhaps the Holy Spirit has modeled this by loving us using the power of teaching (mind), comfort (heart), enabling (strength) and transformation (soul).

This stanza from an old hymn, written by an anonymous author in the tenth century (or earlier) is a fitting close to this discussion on the Holy Spirit:

*Make our dull minds with rapture glow,
Let human hearts with love o'erflow;
And, when our feeble flesh would fail,
May thine immortal strength prevail.*

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Chapter 5

We believe in the Bible as the trustworthy authority for what we believe and practice.

We, as a church, have affirmed that the Bible is the trustworthy authority for what we believe and practice. The Bible stands as a collection of books, written by humans over centuries, which tells the story of God's revelation to humanity. The Bible has been faithfully compiled and conserved by Christians over the centuries. It is this faithful account of God revealing himself, first to the Jews through the Law and then to the world through Jesus. It informs both what we believe about God and how we live in our world. In order to further unpack the affirmation of the Bible as the trustworthy authority, it is worth tracing the story of how the Bible went from words on a scroll in the Middle East to a book in the back of our pews.

The Bible is a compilation of books written by various authors over the course of approximately fifteen centuries. Most of the books to the Bible circulated as individual books, or as a small collection of books, before eventually being compiled into the format we see in the back of the pews. The reality that the books were circulated individually led to challenges for the early church, as a church may have only had access to one gospel instead of all four. It quickly became clear that an authoritative statement would need to be made about which books would be accepted as trustworthy for informing Christian belief and practice.

It fell to the Bishop of Alexandria, a man named Athanasius, to compile the list of books which would be considered valid for Christian belief. In 367 A.D. Athanasius penned the *Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle*, which outlines the books that are to be considered "divine scriptures for salvation."¹ Athanasius undertook this work so that Christians would no longer be confused by false books that had been circulating, or by their own lack of information. The list produced by Athanasius went on to be affirmed throughout the history of church.

The story of Athanasius and the compiling of the Bible is not intended as a boring history lesson, but as a source of inspiration. The Bible was written by men and women who had encounters with the living God, and who then wrote about it. The Bible was then compiled by people who loved both God, and his people. For this reason we believe that we can trust the testimony of the Bible. This history however is not the only reason we believe the Bible is trustworthy.

The most powerful reason we believe the Bible is trustworthy is because of the transformative power of its message. Our church, and all Christian churches throughout history, stand as witness of the personally transformative power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news of Jesus has transformed hearts for centuries. This good news is revealed to us through the pages of scripture, and we believe that the Bible perfectly conveys the good news of the gospel to all who are open to hear it. The transforming power of the message of Jesus serves as a faithful testimony to the trustworthiness of the Bible. The Apostle Paul summarized this point when he proclaimed; "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."² In short, the Bible is not merely the trustworthy authority it is the trustworthy authority for how we live our lives.

The first area that we, as a church, believe the Bible is authoritative is our beliefs. This means that the Bible permeates all that we teach in our church. All the Sunday school lessons we give, all the sermons that we preach, and all the songs that we sing must be compatible with God as he reveals himself in scripture. When there are disagreements in beliefs among members of our community it is scripture that is used as the corrective. Scripture however is not only authoritative to our beliefs as a church, but also to our beliefs as individuals. To believe outside the scope of what is taught by scripture is to be outside of the community. Both

¹ Athanasius. *Thirty-Ninth Festal Epistle*. p2.

² 2 Timothy 3:16

the church, and individuals within it, are called to submit to the authority of scripture. Being the foundation of our beliefs alone is not enough, because our beliefs call us to action in the world.

We believe that the Bible is the trustworthy authority for what we practice. In other words, the Bible informs not only what we think about God and the world, but also how we approach God in the world. This means when Jesus calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, we seek to live our lives in ways that put our neighbors above ourselves. This also means that when culture shifts, as it has shifted thousands of times since the scriptures were written, we look first to scripture to inform us on how to live in a changing world.

In the end, the Bible is the trustworthy authority, which reveals to us the transforming power of God in Jesus Christ. It was written by those who had encounters with God, and compiled and preserved by those who loved God's people. It has spoken to the hearts of women and men of every age, and informed them not only on what to believe, but on how to live in their world. We believe that the Bible still does this today, and will do this for ages to come.

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Chapter 6

We believe in the church as the body of Christ in the world.

This statement has 4 key elements that need to be understood before one can fully grasp the implications of its meaning on the way we do church.

First, why a “we believe statement”? Usually a mission or vision statement tells others what we are doing and where we are going. “We believe statements” tells people about us, where the heart is and why we exist. A believe statement is also *a* roadmap for all that’s involved along the way. For the church that would include the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John, Timothy, et al.

Second, we believe in the church. Well, what is the church? We start when Jesus first used the word **ekklesia** (Matthew 16:16). Jesus had asked His closest followers: “Who do you say I am? Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”, to which Jesus responded: “you have spoken as one who received this from my Father” and “on this confession, *I will build my church*”. Jesus promised to build his church on people like Peter, that is those who make such a confession. With the confession “Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior,” (the birthmark of all believers) and their baptism, new believers become a part of the church.

Peter’s testimony in 1st Peter 2:5, affirms that “you come to “Him as living stone,you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” *The hymn “Living Stones” using words from 1 Peter 2:5 gives a concise meaning of God’s intention for the church.*

*Our God has built with living stones, A church that lives as well;
in solid and in certain tones To pray and sing and tell.
God’s Son, our Rock, our Cornerstone on which we stones must build;
Foundation that is Christ alone, Each stone in Christ ful-filled.
Then should a seeker see the stones and ask what these rocks mean;
They are the church which our God owns and through which God is seen!
Let sinful pride, like the Easter’s stone, By God be rolled away.
Then thro our lives let it be known Christ lives and leads to-day*

Jesus spoke of the church before it had even come into existence on the day of Pentecost. Yet Jesus use of “church”, revealed four basic teachings needed to understand the significance of church:

1. Jesus is the builder of the church using living stones, (that’s us)
2. Jesus is head of the church
3. Jesus is the chief cornerstone
4. Jesus’ will empower and sustain the church (for not even the “gates of Hell will overcome it”).

Ephesians 1:20-23 says that God made Jesus Christ Lord of all, and the church as His centerpiece was placed in the world. The power of God in Christ created the church and sustains it. Christ rules the church, believers are the body, through and by which he speaks, acts, and makes the redemption of the world possible. As members of the body, with Christ as the Head, we are the ongoing physical presence of Christ in today’s world. Teresa of Ávila said it this way:

*Christ has no body now, but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which*

*Christ looks compassion into the world.
Yours are the feet
with which Christ walks to do good.
Yours are the hands
with which Christ blesses the world.¹*

¹<http://www.ocarm.org/en/content/ocarm/teresa-avila-quotes>

Ekklesia was more commonly used with reference to a local (sometimes universal) community or assembly of God's people (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1), who enjoying "koinonia" as fellowship with one another and with God thru Jesus Christ. It's of interest to note that the church is called out on many occasions in scripture...most notable is 1 Peter 2:9-10: "You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted." (MSG). This passage reminds us that we are not only 'called out' but are "chosen by God to be a holy people, we have a high calling to do priestly work. This doctrine is known as the "priesthood of the believer". This Priestly work is to God and more specifically to one another. We as instruments (gifted for ministry and service); do His work by speaking for Him in praise, worship, adoration, and witness.²

²Marney, Carlyle. *Priests To Each Other*. Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. Macon, GA. 1996. p. xvi.

The history of the church in the book of Acts and throughout the New Testament, reveals a called people who engaged in the same activities that characterized the life and ministry of Jesus. Prayer, both communal and individually, was the foundation for church life and growth. The early church was charismatic as evident by the work of the Holy Spirit in directing the church. We now, as then are a Christ called community, engaged in worship, fellowship, discipleship, stewardship, and outreach.

Third, we believe the church is the Body of Christ.... In 1st Corinthians 12, Paul writes:

²⁵⁻²⁶ The way God designed our bodies a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one-part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one-part flourishes, every other part enters the exuberance.

²⁷⁻³¹ You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything. The church with its many individuals is diverse in every way, yet it becomes unified and alive in Christ. Each member playing a different role for the benefit of the body. No part can function independently. Within the community there is subordination and dependence just as there is within the physical body. (MSG)

In Ephesians 1:22-23, (NIV) Paul proclaims that God has made Christ "**head of the church, which is his body**". Paul affirms in Ephesians 4:4-13, that the church body, like the human body, has many parts, and unity within both is necessary to function as they should.

The work of the body of Christ is accomplished by individuals, each one gifted and called to use their gifts for the good of all. (verses 12-13 from the Message uses beautiful imagery to describe the body's movement and unity) "He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, **until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.**

From Paul's perspective, the primary responsibilities of the church are the use of individual gifts to equip the body for service, spiritual maturity, and to unify the fellowship. The challenge to the body is threefold:

1. to use their giftedness to **train Christ followers for works of service within the body.**
2. to edify the body so that **all are moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son**
3. to glorify God by becoming **fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ** who glorified and pleased the Father in all he did.

Fourth, we believe the church is the Body of Christ....in the world. The hymn “To Worship, Work, and Witness” offers a fitting summary of the essence and nature of the Church as the Body of Christ in the World:

*To worship, work, and witness, the Good News spread abroad,
We magnify thy mission, Church of the living God
The Father's new creation thro Jesus Christ His Son
The Spirit it has empowered to do as Christ has done*

*Be thine thy Master's purpose, To seek and save the lost,
To ransom those in bondage, To dare not count the cost
To love and lift the lowly, To heed the prisoner's groan,
To take up other's burdens And bear them as thine own.*

*Be thou to Christ His body, Hold Fast to Christ thy Head
Be thou Christ's open letter By all men to be read;
Be thou Christ's holy temple, Himself the cornerstone;
Be thou Christ's living altar Whereon His love is shown.*

*Head of the church inspire us To have in us Thy mind,
To humbly wait Thy guidance, Thy joy in serving find;
Bestow the Spirit's grace gifts To serve the common good,
While helping each other To love Thy brotherhood*

This we believe is the heart of the matter and is what the church is about. The church is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church.

The world is a big stage for the local church. While “we can't love the world that's God's job”; we can love our neighbor, our neighborhood and all the little communities we have around us daily.

You must never forget ...You are Christ's body—You are the Church, and that's who you are, wherever you are! (1 Corinthians 12:27)

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Frank Graves is married to Eugenia (FBC Parish Nurse). Their combined family consist of five daughters and five grand- children. He has served on stewardship and discipleship/spiritual formation committees, teaches Men's Sunday School class, and works with Baptist builder activities (PET, Seeds of Hope, and other local mission efforts).

Chapter 7

We believe in our calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus, both in our community and around the world.

We Believe in our Calling...

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

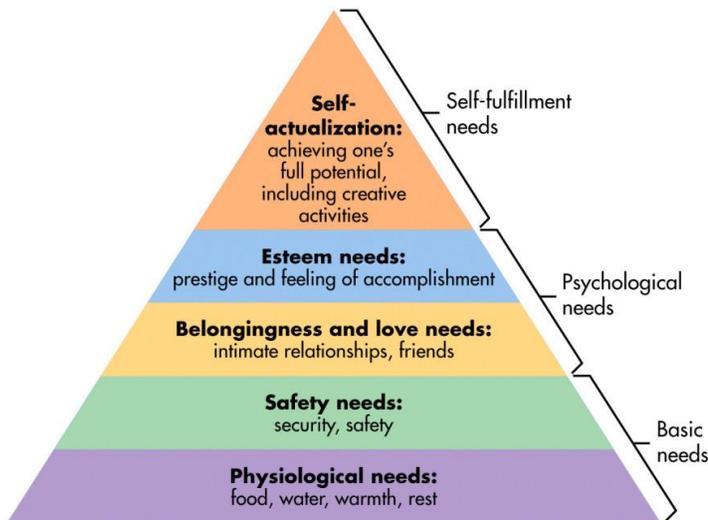
“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:34)

Jesus tells us that his command is this: “Love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-11)

Yes, we are all called, but more than that we are commanded to Love Others by Jesus himself. What better way to show love to others than to first meet their needs?

We Believe in our calling to Meet Human Needs...



During my social work days, I studied Abraham Maslow, an American psychologist from the 1940s who created a hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a five-tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid.

Maslow first thought one would need to have their physiological needs met before moving to their safety needs and so on. He later realized that people are motivated from having a variety of needs met and at different levels along his pyramid. It is still used today to study motivation. One recent (2011) study of 60,000+ people in 123 countries found that

basic needs like food and water, are important, especially when those items are missing, but do not have to be met before going to the next level – people, it was found, also needed to have other needs met such as safety, friends, and self-esteem.

There is no doubt that having your physiological or any other of your needs met makes it easier to focus on God, but we must strive to follow Jesus' example – he sacrificed his needs to meet the needs of others and to be with His Father. Just take his response while being tempted in the dessert: “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)

Based on that verse we can add another layer to Human needs - God. The need for God and His son Jesus is our foundation.

How is our church meeting the needs of others? Historically our church and others have met needs through what is called Missions 1.0 (mobilizing money) and Missions 2.0 (mobilizing people). Our church is working with others and the community to upgrade to Missions 3.0 (having structures and strategies for sustainable and transformational solutions in place to make long-lasting changes for a person and community). The tutoring at Lakewood Elementary is a good example of how we are making a difference in children and families that can have long-lasting benefits. In the student ministry I have witnessed how one person has made a difference in the lives of several children from one family over several years. Those children have come to know the Lord, are continuing to be discipled and are bringing their friends because they know that we have a safe place with loving people where they can be fed physically and spiritually.

We Believe in our calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus...

“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Wade Trimmer in his book, *Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing*, writes “When we stand before God to give an account of the stewardship of our lives, the basis of the examination will not focus on how many good things I did, but how well did I do the ‘main thing’?” The “Main Thing” is The Great Commission. How well did we go? How well did we make disciples? How well did we teach others about God? Those are things of which we will have to answer for on judgment day.

We truly believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we believe that the gospel matters not just for our personal salvation and blessing, but also for God’s pursuit of restoration, redemption, and reconciliation of the entire world. This gospel is not just for us. The gospel is good news for all. Our success at encouraging others to follow Jesus is dependent on how well they believe we care. Remember Theodore Roosevelt’s quote, “People don’t care about how much you know until they know how much you care.” Meeting people’s basic needs shows how much we care.

We Believe in our Calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus, both in our community...

A beautiful example of how First Baptist is meeting needs and sharing Jesus in our community is our Fresh Expressions of Church that began over the last year. Heartfelt Expressions and Bright Star, provide safe connections to people outside our walls who would never feel comfortable - not as an extension of our church but as a stand-alone Church. Gamer Church reaches out to people with a common interest, although within our walls, still a stand-alone Church for those not comfortable with First Fellowship or Sanctuary Worship services. Dinner Church is a prime example of meeting the basic physical needs, sharing God’s love and then having the opportunity to share His hope for eternal life to people who have very little hope.

Another example of how First Baptist is reaching into the community is the partnership with Lincoln Village and Lakewood Elementary. We are making strategic and systematic changes in both of those communities. We are continually looking for ways to be the light of Jesus and a “neighbor” to those within the shadow of our steeple.

We Believe in our Calling to meet human needs and to encourage others to follow Jesus, both in our community and around the world.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Acts 1:8 was the theme verse one year I was a chaperone at Spring Camp. I loved how the speaker interpreted the verse for us. “Jerusalem” = our community (Huntsville), “Judea” = our state (Perry County), “Samaria” = our Nation, then “to the ends of the earth” = the world. It gave personal perspective as well as comfort that God is giving me power when I do go into my community or state and even to the ends of the earth to share the gospel.

Our church meets human needs and encourages others to follow Jesus in numerous countries – Dominican Republic, Honduras, Jordan, Vietnam...Through our Missions committee we provide resources for members to go around the world to build houses, teach Bible stories, and business classes, provide medical care and most importantly to share what it means to follow Jesus.

I'll close with the first verse and chorus of “Carry the Light” by Twila Paris. How will they know? Because we carry the light:

*In this world of darkness We are given light
Hope for all the dying; How will they know?
How will they know That Jesus loves them And He died to save them?
(Chorus) Carry the Light, Carry the Light
Go and tell the children They are precious in His sight.
Carry the Light, Carry the Light.
Go and preach the gospel 'Til there is no more night*

In the name of Jesus Christ, Carry the Light

Holly Canup has been married to Dow for 23 years and they have 3 sons Ethan (21), Eli (19), and Fletcher (16). They moved to Madison and joined First Baptist as newlyweds and have made their home here for the last 21 years. Holly has been involved in the life of our church through teaching Mission Friends, Children's Bible Study, and working with Students on Wednesday nights. She has served on the nominating Committee and planning committees for numerous women's events. In 2016 she became Median Adult Ministry Coordinator, and recently was named Minister to Median Adults. Holly has a heart for missions and the disenfranchised. She and Dow have been on mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Vietnam as well as helped with local mission efforts through First Baptist.

Chapter 8

We believe our decisions in this life have eternal consequences. We further believe that our hope for Heaven comes through faith in Jesus, not our own goodness.

Romans 3 reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Our decision to accept Jesus Christ as our personal Savior changes the trajectory of our eternity from banishment in hell to a glorious reunion with Christ in heaven. None of us is worthy of this gift from Christ; none of us can earn eternity in heaven; but through the sacrifice of Jesus taking on the sins of each of us on the cross we can receive this magnificent gift. Let's explore the vastness of this one decision to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior.

How long is eternal? For God was before all things and will be after all things. (Revelation 22:13) That distance of eternity is just incomprehensible to our minds that calculate all things in numbers and mark time for all major events – our birth, our salvation, life events with family, and even our death.

God invites us into a relationship with Him – an eternal relationship that begins with our salvation and NEVER ends. This relationship between us and God transcends this world and intensifies with our constant praise and adoration of the King in heaven. However, without Christ's sacrifice for our sins on the cross, the chasm between us and God is too vast to cross (Hebrews 9:14-15).

The basis of Christianity is to believe that one decision in our life carries the consequence of eternity in heaven or eternity in hell. The Bible describes heaven as a beautiful place where sin is no more. Heaven is a place that is void of struggle, strife, pain, and discontent. It is a place where believers in Christ are in constant praise of our Savior. To believe in heaven where all is good is to also acknowledge hell where nothing is good. The Bible describes hell in very disturbing terms as a place that no one would desire.

The decision is pure and simply to believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior (John 3:16-18). Belief is defined as an acceptance that something is true or exists. Belief in Jesus means that we acknowledge that God came to earth in human form as God's Son and took on the sins of all of us in the sacrifice of His life on the cross. But just as important is the acknowledgement that Jesus will come back for His people and that all believers will be gathered together in praise to the Father (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Acts 16:25-34 tells the story of salvation of a Philippian jailer. Paul and Silas were jailed for sharing their faith. But instead of lamenting their jail time they used this as an opportunity to sing songs of faith and pray aloud for their fellow inmates. During the night, an earthquake shook open all the gates and freed the prisoners. When the Philippian jailer awoke and found the prison gates open, he knew that he would be killed for allowing Paul and Silas to escape. But instead of finding their prison cell empty, he found Paul and Silas waiting for him in their cell. The Philippian jailer wanted what these men had that gave them joy to sing in difficult situations, the courage to pray out loud, and the conviction to hang around when they could have fled the prison cell. Paul and Silas shared the good news of Jesus Christ and simply asked the jailer to "believe on the Lord Jesus". There was no discussion of his political or moral beliefs. He was asked to simply believe that Jesus came to die for our sins and be raised to new life.

Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins brings us to the second part of our belief statement – faith in Christ. We are saved by grace, not by anything that we ourselves do (Ephesians 2:8-9). Our comforting words, our kind thoughts, and our unselfish actions toward others are meaningless when it comes to entering heaven. Our inferior nature – sinful in every way – cannot begin to establish a lasting relationship with the superiority of God without Christ bridging that gap. Pure and simple – without God's unending, undeserved, unrelenting grace we could not be saved to spend eternity with God in heaven.

Grace is the free and unmerited favor of God through the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. Grace cannot be earned, is not justified, certainly is not deserved; but God so desires an eternal relationship with His people that he created a bridge between our sinful nature and eternal life in heaven with Him.

Does that mean that kindness to others is unnecessary? On the contrary, Jesus was the perfect example of how we should live – healing the sick, feeding the hungry, giving hope to the helpless, returning joy to the distraught. We are commanded to add goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, mutual affection, and love to our faith. (2 Peter 1:3-11) What makes humanity great is when strangers come together for a single purpose to help others in need. We see that demonstrated during natural disasters, humanity’s efforts to solve global problems, and in every day interactions with people all around us. When asked by the Pharisees what the greatest commandment of the Law is, Jesus responded “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34-40) Following the great commandment calls each of us to live a Christ-like life. We lend a hand to a neighbor, go the extra mile to walk in their shoes, and exemplify the love of Christ in every action we undertake. These acts of good deeds do nothing to secure our place in heaven, but we do them because of the grace we received from Jesus that allows us to enjoy an eternity with Christ.

The Baptist doctrine of salvation by grace through faith means that we share the gospel daily through living like Christ. Romans 12:1-2 teaches us “not to conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. Saved from the punishment of sin, we must live saved from the power of sin, and we will be saved from the presence of sin.¹ Living a Christ-like life will lead other people to ask what is different about us. Through relationships developed when meeting the needs of others, we have the opportunity to share our faith in Jesus so that other people may experience eternity with God as well (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus commanded us to go and share the good news with other people so that all may believe and have eternity in heaven. (Mark 16:15-16) Our influences on the faith journey of those around us are another way our decisions in this life have eternal consequences.

¹ Beliefs Important to Baptists, c 2001, Baptistway Press, Dallas, Texas

John Dickson and his wife, Elaine, are proud parents of three grown boys - Jeremy, Christopher, and Patrick. During his time at FBC, he have served as a deacon (including Chair), trustee, personnel, finance, stewardship, and baptism committee member, and Sunday School teacher with preschoolers, children, and young adults.

Chapter 9

We believe we are to be good stewards of our God-given resources, from our talents to our finances to our planet.

Obviously, there is much overlap between this and previous belief statements. Stewardship is a logical outgrowth of our calling to meet human needs. Our management of what we have been given allows us to do this in tangible ways. Our stewardship also shows that our decisions in this life have eternal consequences. How we invest our talents and our wealth can build the Kingdom of God on earth, or the mismanagement can have the opposite effect. All good gifts come from God (James 1:17) and “from everyone who has been given much, much will be required” (Luke 12:48). How we use our gifts from God is how we put our faith into practice, not as a means to earn salvation but as a grateful lifestyle of obedience and service.

Our foremost gifts are our very **selves. Our physical bodies – encompassing all that we are and all that we possess – surely are to comprise “a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God”** (Romans 12:1). In a larger sense this must imply how we use our bodies, our minds, and our abilities. These are our talents, not defined as some rare or extraordinary power but however we have been individually designed to contribute to the church as well as the world in general.

One specific definition of talent may indicate spiritual gifts, which are a gift to every believer. The Church is the body of Christ in the world. As believers, we are members of this body and serve individual functions (1 Cor. 12:27). God has gifted some for prophecy, teaching, service and so forth. However, “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7). In other words, specific abilities are intended to build up the church as a whole. Furthermore, Paul warns that no one ought to esteem his gift as more important than others’ because all are necessary. He uses the analogy of the physical body, in that some are eyes or ears or hands, vital but unable to stand alone. He wrote “If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (1 Cor. 12:26).

While spiritual gifts are intended for the building up of the church, a more generalized definition of talents can include strengths for use in the world at large; these are things we do vocationally or avocationally. One clear purpose for these abilities is to provide for ourselves and our families. Paul offered himself as an example, having worked as a tentmaker to support his own needs:

We did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you. (2 Thess. 3:8)

He further clarifies “If anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either” (2 Thess. 3:10). We are also to use our abilities to tend to those in our care. This provision is certainly for material needs but also must include nurture and other responsibilities. If we are not practicing our faith at home, it is hollow to practice it at church or in the marketplace. “If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” (1 Timothy 5:8)

Moreover, our talents, our skills, are intended to bless the world at large. Philippians 2:4 commends us not to “merely look out for (our) own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” Our inclination is often to highlight helping professions such as medicine, education and social work, but myriad fields contribute to the betterment of humanity. We also need farmers and grocery clerks, plumbers and barbers, engineers and mechanics, and so forth. Musicians J.S Bach and G.F. Handel inscribed “Soli Deo Gloria” (for the glory of God alone) on their compositions. While God can be so honored in music and the arts, He may also be glorified in a paved road, a tax return, a mopped floor, or a business transaction. Colossians 3:23 admonishes “whatever you

do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.” Regardless of who signs the paycheck, God is our ultimate employer, and we are answerable to Him for our investment of time and abilities.

Money and possessions are the second most referenced topic in the Bible, possibly because the pitfalls of wealth are so tempting. Materialism may be the most pervasive form of idolatry. From Genesis through the New Testament, believers’ handling of money demonstrates attitudes of the heart. We must not trust in our riches (Proverbs 11:28) but must daily decide to serve God and not money (Luke 16:13). Likewise, Jesus taught on the folly of storing up treasures on this earth (Luke 12). Clearly, we are not to seek our earthly or eternal security in our financial status, but we cannot avoid the handling of wealth. How are we then to honor God with the money that is temporarily under our control?

Scripture proposes several parameters for our use of wealth. In the Old Testament, the tithe is the first specific guideline for financial responsibility. In Genesis 14 the concept is introduced and later reiterated in Leviticus 27 as setting aside of ten percent of “first fruits”, one’s best and first possessions, not what is left at the end. The Old Testament tithe went in support of the temple, and Malachi 3:8 warns that withholding of tithe is robbing God. While New Testament Christians weren’t held to the strictures of Old Testament law, nor are we, this should not be seen as an excuse for less generosity but for more. Indeed, Jesus held as an example the widow who humbly gave all she had to the temple (Mark 12:42-44). We believe that the tithe is a good benchmark for Christians, both to support the work of the Church and to live out our priorities in concrete ways. Jesus is clear that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21).

However, we should not assume that once we have given a tithe, we are not accountable for the other ninety percent. We must be stewards of the whole. The Bible teaches that we serve God by serving our fellow human beings, and money is part of the equation. The most famous passage regarding this is in Matthew 25:

I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me. Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You? The king will answer and say to them, “Truly, I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.”

So we are to serve God by sharing with those in need. The earliest church understood this principle, “for there was a not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need” (Acts 4:34). Provisions were made for care of widows, among the neediest in that culture. The churches of Macedonia and Achaia are commended for sending money to support the poor in the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:25). Paul praised the Corinthian church for their ongoing generosity. He revealed that God’s over-arching intention in financial blessing is that the abundance can be shared:

You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. (2 Corinthians 9:11)

In God’s economy, giving to those in need is the ultimate investment. Jesus taught:

Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal (Matthew 6:19-20)

Earthly wealth is temporary and corruptible but transforms into eternal value as it is devoted to the furtherance of God's kingdom in human lives. In light of this return, we should regard giving as a joyous act of worship versus an obligation. Indeed, "God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Christ taught that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). How are we to give? First, we must give wisely. Believers are not obligated to respond to every financial request. To do so would not only be impossible but imprudent. We must take care that financial support is aboveboard and truly helps rather than creating a culture of dependency. Granted, it takes effort to investigate causes and organizations, but it is part of being good stewards of the wealth God has entrusted to us.

We are also to give humbly. Just as wealth can lead to materialism, generosity can lead to a sense of pride and self-righteousness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus criticized those who drew attention to their charitable giving in order to receive public acclaim. He advised us to let our giving, "be in secret, and Your Father who sees what is done in secret will regard you" (Matthew 6:2-4). As much as possible, our giving should be anonymous.

For the development of our character as well as the needs of the world, we should give sacrificially. In 2 Samuel 24:24, King David vowed that he would "not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost (him) nothing." If our giving does not impact our lifestyle, perhaps we are similarly offering what costs us little. Stewardship of God's money necessitates an examination of our spending habits in light of other priorities. James 5:5 condemns those who "have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure" while treating unfairly those who have labored to support this lifestyle. Discipleship may call us to live below our financial means in order to free up resources for others.

Finally, we are to be good stewards of our planet, God's creation which he proclaimed "good" (Genesis 2). Too often Christians associate environmental diligence with the New Age movement and Earth-worship. We forget that God's first directive to His children was to "cultivate and keep" the garden of Eden—in other words, a call to stewardship of nature (Genesis 2:15). God-followers should care deeply about those things that God values. Psalm 24:1 declares: "The earth is the Lord's, and all it contains." Scripture offers many examples of how God cherishes not just humanity but also the animals and the land. Mosaic law specifies that beasts of burden are included in the Sabbath rest, and even land should rest, or lie fallow, every seventh year (Exodus 23:11-12).

Perhaps all aspects of nature are to be included in God's ultimate redemption. John 3:16 states that "God so loved the *world*." Protestants have traditionally read "world" as pertaining to humanity alone, but the Orthodox church holds that another interpretation of "world", or "*kosmos*", would be the sum total of all created things. The Orthodox view is that Christ's sacrifice is to redeem all that has fallen, not just sinful man but also nature that suffered from the fall as well. Paul hints that "creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption" (Romans 8:21), and the intent is "to reconcile all things to himself" (Colossians 1:20).

Clearly, the objective of all creation is the glory of God. Psalm 148 joyfully calls every element of creation to "praise the Lord!"—everything from the heavens to the hills, from the oceans to fields, everything from fruit trees to "creeping things." When we harm nature, we interrupt this divine objective. Therefore, conservation and environmental protection should not be seen as merely political issues but also theological ones. In Genesis 1, God proclaimed that humans were meant to have dominion over plants and animals to provide our needs. Dominion should mean stewardship of these resources, not for merely selfish means but for the good of all.

How are we to be good stewards of our planet? The mandate is clear, but the specifics are often matters of conscience. Not everyone will feel convicted on the same measures and actions, but care of the earth is not an area a Christian may blithely ignore. Just as we teach a child to clean up after himself, we must discipline ourselves to do likewise on a broader scale. Even though it is in our power to effect change on the natural

world, we must always question whether is God-honoring to do so. Conservation may also speak to our lifestyle choices. Though we may have the wealth for more, choosing to consume less of the earth's bounty may help to preserve the environment as well as free up resources for others in need.

Theologian Abraham Kuyper wrote, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry Mine!" This is the bedrock of our stewardship: from our abilities and labors, from the wealth such affords us, to the bounty of our world—all belong to God, and as His servants, we are to manage them to the increase of His kingdom and glory. The hymn writer expresses it well:

*Were the whole realm of Nature mine,
That were a present far too small.
Love so amazing, so Divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

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Chapter 10

We believe in grace as the heart of the Christian faith.

Grace is God's unconditional, undeserved, unlimited, unrelenting love. Grace means our place in God's heart and our value in God's eyes are not determined by our decisions.

Grace, in the words of Philip Yancey, means "There is nothing we can do to make God love us more...And nothing we can do to make God love us less." There is nothing good you can do to *earn* one ounce more of God's love than you already have for He loves you infinitely. And there is nothing bad you can do to *forfeit* one ounce of God's love for He loves you unconditionally.

To paraphrase Peter Scazzerro, although we are more scarred and more sinful than we would dare to admit, we are more deeply loved than we would dare to dream. That's grace!

Grace is a multi-faceted and beautiful gift from God. The following aspects of grace are very important to our church family.

We believe we are saved by grace, through faith, not by good works. Near Centre, Alabama, in Cherokee County, there used to be a fish camp. I think it was called Pruett's Fishing Camp. We used to go fishing there, off what we called "Dead End Bridge." I guess the bridge is still there. Dead-End Bridge is, as its name implies, a bridge that reaches part of the way out across the Coosa River—probably 75 yards if my memory serves me well. The problem is that the Coosa River is probably more than 200 yards wide at that point. But for some reason construction on the bridge was halted and there is now this great expanse of air and water between the end of the bridge and the far banks of the Coosa.

That bridge is great for fishing but inadequate as far as traversing the river is concerned. It can get you only so far. Oh, you can catch a glimpse of the other side. You can get an idea of what the other side looks like. But you can't get there via the incomplete bridge.

Such are our efforts to reach God. We simply cannot do it even by our best and most sincere efforts. Our best of intentions and best of works can only get us so far. The Bible describes a great gulf, a huge chasm, an insurmountable gap between us and God. Isaiah 59:2 reads, "But your iniquities have separated you from your God."

That difference between us and God—that absence of a relationship—is a problem we can't fix—a ravine that we just cannot cross. The first step had to be God's; reconciliation between us and God had to be initiated by God Himself. We had neither the right nor the power to bring about that re-union.

We don't have to accept the offer, but without the offer—without God's first step toward us—we are completely unable to take a step toward Him.

While we were still separated from God by our sins God took the first step toward us.

While we were spiritually clueless, spiritually lifeless, and spiritually powerless, God stepped across the great divide between us.

While the best we had was a Dead-End Bridge, God came down to earth and lived a down to earth life to make our eternal lives possible.

And we believe the truth is in Ephesians 2:8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” Our best of intentions and best of works can only get us so far. There is still a great gulf, a huge chasm, an insurmountable gap between us and God. That difference between us and God—that absence of a relationship—is a problem we can’t fix—a ravine we simply cannot cross.

God, in Jesus, crossed the great divide to rescue us. And the response that saves us is the response of faith—to trust Jesus, not our own goodness.

We believe we are supposed to extend grace to each other. 1 Peter 4:10 says we are to be “stewards of God’s grace.” Grace is primarily God’s unconditional, undeserved, unlimited, unrelenting love toward *us*. But we are also to extend grace to *each other*. In the beautiful words of Joseph R. Cooke, “Grace is the face that love wears when it meets imperfection.” And every time we meet a fellow human, we meet imperfection.

Grace includes the will to embrace those with whose opinions we disagree, and that is critical in a congregation like ours with varying opinions on a number of topics. That has long been a strength of our church.

Furthermore, we are to extend grace to those with whose *choices* we disagree. As the religious leaders learned when they dragged the woman caught in adultery before Jesus: We never will change the world with stones in our hands.

We believe grace can restore music to hearts that need a song. In her hymn, *Rescue the Perishing*, Fanny Crosby wrote, *Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter, feelings lie buried that grace can restore...chords that were broken will vibrate once more.*

Feelings lie buried that grace can restore... Some of us have feelings of joy and a sense of worth that have been buried beneath mounds of guilt. We believe that if anyone will embrace grace, that joy and sense of worth will return.

Chords that were broken will vibrate once more... The piano makes music because of the chords. The hammer strikes the chord and the vibration produces music. The guitar chord is strummed and music breaks forth. For some of us, our heart-strings—the chords that form the music of the heart—have been broken and torn by feelings of regret. And the music has been stifled. Yet we believe that for those who embrace grace, the song can be restored. Heart-chords that are broken will vibrate again.

Grace will make a difference in the way we feel about life, and re-create the music that may seem to have faded away. We believe that if hurting people will embrace grace, God will restore the feelings of joy and self-respect that lie buried beneath the dirt, and that the broken heart-chords will produce music again.

We believe grace does not mean “anything goes.” Grace is unconditional, undeserved, unlimited, unrelenting love; not undiscerning, unrestrained leniency. Grace does not mean our behavior doesn’t matter. Grace simply means that our worth in God’s eyes, and our place in His heart, are not dependent on our behavior.

The Bible sets a high standard for morality, ethics and spirituality. A dominant theme in Scripture is that the choices we make matter to God, shape our lives and impact people around us.

There’s not a word in the definition of grace about indulgence, enabling, “anything goes,” a wink and a nod, or turning a blind eye to obvious wrongdoing. In fact, the small New Testament book of Jude warns against people who, in Jude’s words, “change the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (vs. 4).

Unconditional love is not undemanding love. Christian love is challenging, purifying, and sometimes tough. Again, grace simply means that our value in God's eyes, and our place in God's heart, are not determined by whether we meet God's standards. Grace does not mean "anything goes." That means there is a responsibility for honest and mature accountability within the Christian family.

John introduced us to Jesus in the opening words in the Bible's book that bears John's name. He described Jesus as the one *who came from the Father, full of grace and truth*. That—full of grace and truth—must be our guiding principle in our attempts both to elevate holy living as a church value and to “encourage each other and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

When all is said and done we do hope people will remember that First Baptist Church declared truth because we were compelled to do so, and extended grace because we were thrilled to do so.

We believe we all are in desperate need of grace. When our church offered its position on sexuality, we included this key line: “We believe none of us is without a desperate need for God's grace.”

It's not just people in the gutter who need grace. Behind countless façades, behind forced smiles, and behind the doors of countless upscale houses in Suburbia, U.S.A., there exists sin and hurt that would rival the sin and hurt of any gutter anywhere.

No stereotype has the corner on the need for grace.

Some people in need of grace wear shackles and orange jumpsuits. Others needing grace wear Rolexes and navy business suits.

Some in need of grace hate authorities. Others in need of grace hate themselves.

Some people in need of grace abuse their alcohol. Others in need of grace abuse their power.

All of us are sinners by choice. Those whose hope is in Jesus are not defined by our sin. Not shackled to our sin. Not controlled by our sin. But sinners by choice. Clear and unadulterated *choice*.

So we are all privately grateful, really grateful, for that line from the hymn “Amazing Grace” about grace saving “a wretch like me.”

Some of you know my favorite baptism story. No offense to anyone else I've baptized. But my favorite baptism ever, besides that of my kids, was in the middle of the night in a hospital.

In May, 2008, right about midnight on a Sunday night, our home phone rang. It was Denise's best friend. Denise had taken a serious turn for the worse and was in the hospital—in the “Neuro Intensive Care Unit.” Denise had terminal cancer.

Her friend said Denise wanted me to come to the hospital. And said she wanted me to baptize her...that night. On the way I wondered how I was going to baptize her in a hospital room.

Denise was not a member of our church, but a few weeks earlier she'd told one of our members she wanted me to visit. Denise explained that she never had gone public with her faith, though she believed in Jesus. As I spoke with her it seemed to me that her faith was real. I'm not in charge of judging anyone's heart, but I was (and still am) convinced that Denise's faith, for this world and the next, was in Jesus and not her own goodness. She wanted to give a public indication of her faith and so I told her of our upcoming annual baptism service in June in the James River. Denise was thrilled at the idea of being baptized in the river and began looking forward to it. But suddenly Denise was deathly ill and in ICU.

When I arrived, the room was full. Close friends. Her husband. Her former husband and his wife. Even two nurses saw what was about to happen and came in to add their support. We had a good, brief chat and she indeed wanted to be baptized. I hadn't figured out how I was going to baptize her until I looked over and saw a sink and some Styrofoam cups. I took a cup and filled it with water. I obviously couldn't immerse her; I'd have to pour the water gently over her head. (And if anyone's first thought ever were to be that that isn't real baptism I'd suggest they haven't understood grace.)

And we began to sing...*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me...*

It was beautiful. At night in an intensive care unit, where the only sounds are the occasional beeping of IVs and the constant puffing of ventilators, the notes of Amazing Grace echoed movingly.... *"I once was lost, but now I'm found...was blind but now I see."*

Denise was too weak to sing more than a few words at the time. But she sang the words she knew the best she could. She'd sing a phrase or two. Then catch her breath. Then sing again. We sang, *When we've been there ten thousand years...*

And then I baptized her. I poured the water gently over her forehead, a sign of cleansing—an outward indication of her newfound, inner faith. Common water from a Styrofoam cup became a sacred symbol that she had opened herself up to Jesus and that God's unconditional, undeserved, unlimited love had relentlessly pursued her and flooded her life.

Shortly after I baptized her, Denise drifted off to sleep. The next day Denise woke up...in the presence of God.

Why sing Amazing Grace? Because Denise seemed to be slipping away fast and I wanted Denise to know that God delights in her. Like all of us, Denise had made some of those "what was I thinking?" choices in her past. But I wanted Denise to know that the Father whom she soon would meet face-to-face absolutely adores her. I wanted her to know that when she saw God at the proverbial pearly gates He wouldn't be standing there with his hands on his hips; He'd be standing there with his arms open wide.

I wanted her to know He was not going to say, "What were you thinking, girl?" But rather, "Come on in, girl; I've been waitin' for you."

*Grace, grace, God's grace. Grace that will pardon and cleanse within.
Grace, grace, God's grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

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