

**Dec. 25, 2015**

*Christmas Day*

Christmas is upon us and I must say that I still consider this time of the year special despite all that I know about the denigration of what should be its true meaning. Despite the recent commercialism associated with it, Christmas for me has always been a time to focus on the meaning and significance of the birth of Christ in the context of the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. That, in turn, has meant a reading of the Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ and also the many other New Testament sections that deal with God sending his Son into the world for the ultimate redemption and salvation of mankind. Though all of the above verses are obviously meaningful for our lives each and every day that we live, it certainly doesn't hurt to have a special time of year devoted to focusing on this subject and contemplating the greater meaning for our lives.

Of course, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day on December 24 and 25 are the days that the institutional Christian Church of the Western world has set aside to celebrate the birth of Christ and its life-changing significance for the world. Though the Eastern Orthodox Church and certain other Christians traditions focus on other dates, all of these dates have no spiritual significance whatsoever from a solely biblical perspective. Instead, as is well-known, the dates chosen were primarily chosen in accordance with previous pagan celebrations of the winter solstice such as the pagan festival of Saturnalia in Roman times. Thus, many of the traditions of Christmas date to that time and many others have been added through the centuries since that time. It's certainly wise to keep that in mind if one is to be true to the Christian meaning and significance of Christmas. From a solely biblical perspective the significance of the birth of Christ is in the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is what makes his birth special. Apart from this – that is, what God accomplishes through Christ in bringing salvation to the world - Christ's birth has no special meaning at all. It is not, after-all, what the baby Jesus did, but rather what "the man, Christ Jesus" did that is most important for bringing salvation to the world.

In fact, the well-known Gospel accounts of the birth of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke both focus on the promise of the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation and its blessings for the world. Even the Gospel of John's "the Word became flesh" is not centered on Christ's birth, but rather on the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation which God had conceived "in Christ" before the foundation of the world. Each of these Gospels continues from the birth of "our savior, Christ Jesus" onwards with the actual working out of this story of fulfillment all the way through the life and ministry of Christ; his sacrificial death on the cross; his victorious resurrection and ascension; and finally, the resulting promise of redemption and salvation for those who believe in him. This is the very essence of why these beautiful narrative accounts are called "Gospels" and it should always be remembered that the accounts of the birth of Christ in each of them are simply the opening chapters in a much larger story of fulfillment in these Gospels. And, importantly, this story of fulfillment continues onwards even up until today as God's plan of salvation continues to be worked out in history every time a man, woman or child from anywhere in the world believes in Christ and becomes a child in God's family forever. Though many "Christian" traditions have developed over various aspects of the Gospel "infancy narratives" over the centuries, their biblical significance and abiding meaning continue – as from the time when they were first written – to be part of the unfolding Gospel story about Jesus, the Christ, who accomplished redemption and salvation for the world. As such they present an aspect of the "good news" about Christ, which, in its fullness, is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16).

In the entire New Testament itself as it came to be formulated over the first few centuries, the Gospels set the table for the rest of New Testament message to be proclaimed and explained. Thus, the coming of Christ is not only a subject of the Gospels but also for the entire New Testament which follows. In fact, it is in the Book of Acts

and in the NT Letters that follow that the deepest meaning of the significance of the Gospel records is explained. Its abiding significance is in the entire new covenant message as the following passages from the NT Letters show:

Paul:

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba, Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.” (Galatians 4:4-7 ESV).

John:

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to the propitiation [atoning sacrifice] for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” (1 John 4:7-12 ESV).

Let us all, as children in God’s family, abide in the fullness of this new covenant message not only at this time of the year in the Christmas season, but every day as we live for our God.

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## **November 26, 2015**

### *Thanksgiving Day in America*

Greetings to all of our friends and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ on this Thanksgiving Day in America. Dorota and I have been spending the week visiting Charleston, South Carolina and then working our way up the southern coast to our family beach cottage at Ocean Isle Beach just across the North Carolina border. This has been a great region to be during Thanksgiving week since it is an area which is loaded with American history and is also a region that traditionally has been very religious – including the original Anglicans who settled in the Charleston region, the French Huguenots who fled persecution in France in both the 1600s and 1700s and the many other Christians and Jewish groups who set down roots here through the years. The American holiday of Thanksgiving, of course, embodies both the best of American and Christian traditions. We celebrate the remembrance of the Separatist Christians – the Pilgrims as they later became known as - who came to present-day Plymouth Massachusetts in the fall of 1620. They were seeking freedom to worship God and to live their lives in accordance with the scriptural understanding that they had developed over the previous decades during the later stages of the Reformation. They believed that the Bible was the inspired word of God and was their only basis for faith and practice. Though most other Protestant churches (Lutheran, Calvinist, etc.) proclaimed this same ideal, the Separatists believed that those Protestant churches had often become corrupted both in doctrine and in practice. In England, in particular, the ruling Church of England was still heavily influenced by Roman Catholic beliefs and practices and despite the best efforts of the more Bible-based group of Puritans who sought to purify the Church of England the Separatists came to believe that this was to little avail and, thus, they “separated” themselves to form their own Christian church and community. In short, they courageously sought to begin anew as best they could in the face of much persecution and hardship, patterning themselves on the original first century church of the New Testament. Because of this they found it hard to fit into any society of the

times and were constantly in search of a place where they could worship God freely and live out their Christians lives in accordance with their understanding of scripture. They thus came to be known amongst themselves and by later histories as “the Pilgrims” after the New Testament passage from Hebrews 11 in the King James Version and other versions of that time. As with all of us, they were far from perfect; however, their earnest commitment and their devotion to God has served as a testimony to many other Americans, and Christians everywhere, since that time. And, of them, it can properly be said that they were amongst those faithful people of God throughout history “of whom the world was not worthy.” (Hebrews 11:38).

Since my early childhood in America I have viewed with great reverence the faith, commitment and devotion of these Pilgrim forefathers – both as a Christian and as an American. An American myth has grown up around them emphasizing all that is positive about their experience and presenting them as an example for others to follow. Most of the elements that make up this myth are true. As a historian and teacher of history nothing that I’ve learned about them over the decades has diminished my respect for them; in fact, just the reverse. In contrast to many superficial history accounts by post-modern historians which seek to judge and, thus, condemn them by the canons of present-day political correctness, my respect for them has actually grown by leaps and bounds the more I’ve come to study and understand the true reality of both their early 16th and 17th century European and American historical situations. As with all good historical study one must endeavor to actually put oneself in the shoes of the people one is studying in order to properly understand and appreciate their true historical situation. This takes a great deal of time and diligent study but it is the only honest way to study history. When one does this, however, what emerges is in fact a picture that is quite similar to the time honored “American myth” of the Pilgrims that developed over time: a group of dedicated Christians who fled religious persecution and corruption in Europe and, instead, came on a precarious voyage to America seeking freedom to worship God in accordance with their own scriptural understanding. This group of just over a hundred people made an historic contract – the Mayflower Compact – to govern themselves in accordance with the common good under God’s providential care and rule. They then—after losing about half of their people to death in the first winter—set about establishing a colony which, on the whole, succeeded in justly governing itself and became a pattern to many of the other English colonies that were established in the decades to come. As an American story, that is about as representative for the future of America as it gets – both in the good and bad aspects of their real life experience as it was worked out over time. But I will leave that history for others to tell in more detail and I hope that readers of this blog will endeavor to honestly study it for themselves.

In an even greater sense, however, as Christians, these Separatists were also an outstanding example for other Christians, not only in America, but also throughout the world. In fact, their devout and courageous example shines forth even more brightly today in age of ever-increasing hostility to Christianity, not least, in America itself. One of the key verses that the Separatists held to was Christ’s statement that “wherever two or three are gathered in my name there am I in their midst”. The Separatists took this as a basis for forming their own separate house churches in an era where this was actually illegal in England, Holland, and much of Europe. Instead, the maxim “whose the region, his the religion” was the general ruling principle of the day for most of Europe. This meant that the ruler of a region determined the religion of the region over which he ruled – either Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Calvinist for most of Europe - with England being an exception to the rule in that it was firmly Anglican, under the rule of the king of England, on the basis of its own earlier break from Rome in the 1530s. Freedom of religion, as we understand it today, was not yet a concept generally recognized anywhere in the world. The horrendous Thirty Year War (1618-1648) was about to break out in continental Europe and England itself would be convulsed by war over the combination of religious and political issues for most of the next century. America, thus became a place of refuge for all groups of the religiously persecuted of both England and continental Europe for much of the next two centuries up until the time of the American Revolution.

The Pilgrims themselves represent a unique aspect of American religious life over the course of its history. They were a Bible-based, self-governing and self-supporting church that formed out of deep dissatisfaction with the religious status quo of their times. This set a pattern that has been a continual theme in American history over the entire course of our history. In fact, it continues unabated until today with churches and denominations splitting right and left, over, for instance, the issue of same-sex marriage. Beginning with the coming to America of the Separatists, then Puritans, and then many other Christian religious groups during the Colonial era the flood of people coming to America for religious freedom has never stopped. Add to this the continual renewals of Christian life embodied in the First and Second Great Awakenings of the mid 18th and early 19th centuries and the various revival movements of all kinds ever since, and one sees that the Separatist example was indeed the beginning of a great American tradition.

I myself, together with many of my closest friends, have been a part of this tradition in attempting to start new, small and dynamic churches – often house-churches on the pattern of the NT church. Though I grew up as a member of a large and established Presbyterian church, my entire adult life starting at the age of 18 has revolved around starting and building new house-churches and participating in other ways in the general renewal of the wider Christian movement both in America and in other parts of the world. Of course, many in the wider Christian movement have also sought to purify the Church at large by starting new non-denominational churches – many of them very large – along a more traditional basis. I wish them Godspeed in what they are doing but I also pray that the basis of their fellowship will be unfettered NT truth rather than numbers of people. Others have chosen to stay within their traditional churches and denominations and I have always wished them well in doing so – may God bless their work, but may it indeed be a truly godly work in accordance with the truth of the New Testament. In the end, however, as with the Separatists of the 17th century I could not, myself, see any other way to go in order to live out the truths of the New Testament in the fullest possible way than to separate from the mainline denominations and start anew with fresh house based churches on the pattern of the New Testament itself. From the end of my high school days onward I have had the privilege of helping to start, build and oversee many of these house-churches in many different places – that is, different cities, states and countries - through the years. In this I have no regrets, only the joys of the shared “partnership in the gospel from the first day until now” (Phil. 1:3-11) in all the many places and with all the many dedicated believers I’ve been privileged to serve with over the years. May God’s blessings be upon all of his faithful people throughout the world on this Thanksgiving Day in America who – like the Separatists of the 17th century – are endeavoring to the best of their ability to live for our God and to help accomplish his purposes in the world.

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**July 13, 2015**

The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage (Update)

Greetings to all of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We hope that you are having a good summer as we all endeavor to live for and grow with our God each and every day. Recently, I’ve been asked a lot of questions about how Christians are to live in an increasingly secular and, in some respects, increasingly hostile society. In the light of current events on several levels – especially the recent Irish vote and the US Supreme Court decision on same sex marriage - I’ve updated and put in article form my earlier July 2013 blog on “The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage.” It now appears under the “Articles” heading of this web-site and can be read, downloaded, and used as desired by any person for whom it might be helpful. It also follows below at the end of this blog.

Fortunately, in terms of the biblical view the God-given gift of marriage and sex is not a difficult subject to understand since the Bible is clear throughout and speaks with one voice throughout the Old and New Testaments on this subject. Attempts by some to make it seem that the Bible is not clear – and even contradictory - are the result of unsound principles of biblical interpretation and, often, simply the dishonest desire to deceive others for the sake of bolstering their own predetermined positions. As with all written documents the Bible must, above all, be understood in the light of the original intent and meaning of its writers rather than according to the private personal interpretations of its reader(s). If this fundamental principle of interpretation is not adhered to there is no proper control of meaning and, instead, there is a guarantee of resulting interpretive chaos – a chaos not inherent in the biblical text itself.

Most importantly, for those Christians who believe the Bible is “inspired by God” and, therefore, authoritative for their lives, there can be no question but that it should be followed for our own blessing and benefit in accordance with God’s will. The biblical story begins with God’s purpose and intent in creation, continues primarily through God’s dealings with his chosen people Israel in the Old Testament, and then culminates in God’s redemptive work in Christ for the entire world in the New Testament. All biblical subjects must be understood in the light of the progression of that biblical story. The specifics of how to apply the Bible’s teachings on marriage and sex in the light of any particular nation-state’s secular laws and customs is the greatest challenge of this subject for any Christian. It is of course clear what God’s will is for the individual believer(s) on this matter; however, how the Christian believer is to relate to a given society’s laws, customs, etc. on this matter is more difficult. Fortunately, we have many biblical examples both in the Old Testament and New Testament as to how to do this. Ultimately, this must be determined by the individual believer or church in that specific nation or situation as they walk with God according to his love, truth and grace. It is to him, not to any human court, that we must one day give account and it is at that time – irrespective of what happens in this life - that God’s purposes, justice and people will fully and finally be vindicated.

What follows is my updated article:

The Biblical View of Sex and Marriage

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## May 28, 2015

A Graduation Message: “The Greatest of All”

Dorota and I have been doing some traveling since I last wrote including a wonderful visit to Vienna, Austria, then Krakow, Poland and finally Prague, Czech Republic. This was a great visit and the time we spent both with Dorota’s family and with our sister Bible fellowship in Krakow over Easter week was especially precious to us. Uniquely, we were also able to attend the beautiful wedding of our niece, Ola, who is very dear to us. We are thankful to all whom we saw during this trip for their love, kindness and hospitality. The joy and memories of the time we spent together there will not be forgotten.

We are now moving towards the end of May and this time of the year is filled with news of college graduations. Indeed, high school graduations are also just around the corner. So, it is a time of celebrating accomplishments

as well as a time of moving on to new challenges and new opportunities in life. I well remember my own high school graduation 42 years ago from Needham Broughton High School in Raleigh, NC. My graduating Class of 1973 was approximately 650 students of whom I knew about half to some degree and maybe a tenth on a closer basis. The ones I knew best were those with whom I had progressed from grades 1-12 together through three different schools: elementary, junior high, and high school. And, of those, the ones I knew the very best were those with whom I had played sports all along the way, had attended church or Bible study groups together with, had been involved in Boy Scouts together with, or – last but not least – had played bridge together with through most of my high school years. This last group was a very special and unique group since playing bridge was not exactly what most high schoolers were doing at the time (or at any time) in their non-school hours. However, it was probably the friendship, competition and camaraderie of it all that made playing bridge special to us. Though we've each gone our own ways since that time and I'm no longer in close contact with most of these people, I consider them all to be lifelong friends and would always be glad to see or hear from them. Indeed, I could say the same about those with whom I played sports as well. In both cases, the shared experiences built a bond that was deeper than mere academics or school social activities. In fact, this Class of 1973 was filled with a large number of exceedingly talented people and many of them have gone on to accomplish a great deal in the professional and business world in their chosen fields. Occasionally, I read about their exploits in the newspapers or hear about them in the news or in a conversation and it usually brings back good memories from those shared times. I have great fondness and respect for them all.

Another very important aspect of my life throughout high school was church life and Bible study. Though my own West Raleigh Presbyterian Church – a university connected church - had become increasingly liberal in both its theology and corresponding social/political outlook over the decade culminating in my high school graduation, I had personally become involved in various non-church Bible study groups and was a voracious reader of the Bible itself, especially as new versions such as the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, Good News for Modern Man, etc. were published. Undoubtedly, this all set the stage for my life-long participation in the non-conformist house-church movement which began soon after high school. However, amongst mainline denominations of the times denominational allegiances were already starting to break down and it was easy enough to find individuals or groups of Christians who were much more interested in simply following Christ – and the Bible - than in particular denominational affiliations. Even amongst my high school classmates we discussed a great number of Bible topics – the return of Christ, the Holy Spirit, etc. - sometimes even at the bridge table, sports meetings, scout camps, etc. In addition, the radio airwaves and television airwaves were full of religious programs of all kinds such as The Hour of Decision (Billy Graham), The World Tomorrow (Herbert W. and Garner Ted Armstrong), local church services, etc. – all of which I listened to or watched on a pretty regular basis. Three books that profoundly influenced me at the time were “The Cross and the Switchblade”, “Brother Andrew: God’s Smuggler” and the infamous “The Late Great Planet Earth.” These were very popular books at the time and though I wouldn’t by any means sanction everything in them they each made a marked impression on me – each in its own way. They were also books that I discussed with my high school friends and that led many of us to further search the scriptures. So, though increasingly disillusioned with my own church, all of this together simply fueled my own desire to better understand the truth of the Bible itself.

At the time I graduated in 1973 it was still traditional for a high school to hold not only a graduation ceremony but also a baccalaureate ceremony which was focused on the religious significance of our graduation and high school experience. Somehow, I was chosen from amongst my fellow students to give the student address at the Baccalaureate Ceremony. I considered it a great honor both then and now and even remember to this day what I spoke on. The main text was:

“He that is great among you must be servant of all.”

I think this is a great passage for people of great ability and ambition to remember. It equalizes the worth of every life of service before God no matter how high or low the worldly station or status may be. My text was from the beautiful KJV which was widely used at the time but here is the full text of the passage from the updated and more modern NIV:

“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

(Matt. 20:20-28; cf. Mark 10:35-45 NIV).

This is still a great graduation message for those who graduate from either high school or college because its truth never loses its meaning and it can be applied to each and every life. The greatest example in history of an individual who gave his life in service to others is the one who “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45) Thankfully, the example of his life is wide open for all to see in the biblical testimony of the Gospel records. And, for those who are seeking for a solid foundation to their own lives as they move forward in life there is no better place to go. It is as simple as “open the book and read.” Yes, you’ll need plenty of help along the way in understanding and living the truths of the New Testament; however, simply reading, reading and reading the pages of the NT in a coherent and consistent way must be one’s foundation.

I hope that those who are graduating both from college and from high school at this time of the year will focus their own lives first and foremost on these same biblical truths and live their lives in the light of them. No matter what else one accomplishes in life, “living is giving” and the greatest service of all is true Christian service after the example of the greatest servant of all – our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May his life and words continually guide you!

“For the love of Christ compels us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and rose again.” (II Cor. 5:14-15).

May God guide you, lead you and care for you in every way as you live for him! (Matt. 6:33)

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**February 28, 2015**

**The Essential “Christian” Confession of Faith: “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God”**

February 28, 2015

The Essential “Christian” Confession of Faith: “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God”

In traveling throughout much of the US and the world over the last few decades I've often met people who profess to be Christians, usually, quite sincerely. This has led to many pleasant conversations and I have usually felt safe in assuming a great deal of commonality in viewpoints between us, though recognizing also that there would probably be differences in details of belief and practice not too far beneath the surface. Indeed I might not have even felt very comfortable in their churches nor they in mine. Nevertheless, I still considered them to be fellow Christians with whom I had much in common in the essentials of our faith, and I could safely assume that we had a common ethical outlook based on our common beliefs. This comes to mind because recently there has been an avalanche of incidents regarding the persecution of Christians in various places in the world. In the Mid-east and Africa persecution, kidnapping, torture and slaughter of Christian groups such as Coptic Christians, Assyrian Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Anglican Christians, Catholic Christians, and even various Protestant Christians have been taking place on a scale not seen in recent times. In fact, there is probably more about conflicts within Christianity and persecution of various Christian groups in the news now than at any time I can remember in my lifetime. Partially this is true because persecution of Christians in communist countries during the Cold War – which was often massive in scale – was simply not known about or reported about in any detail in the Western press during that time. Indeed, such persecution is only sparingly reported about in China today. But, aside from all of this, let us ask another question: What is meant by “Christianity” and “Christian groups” when they appear in the news and how should I as a Christian regard them? Simply put, what is meant in the news by the term “Christianity” is the common body of beliefs, traditions and practices which have come to be identified with the Christian faith through the centuries, beginning with the first followers of Christ in the New Testament and building up until today. What is meant in the news by “Christian groups” are those who identify themselves as “Christians” however different their particular beliefs and practices may be compared with either the original Christians of the NT or with others who also identify themselves as Christians today. These are both very wide definitions; however, this is the reality of the world in which we live today and it seems only fair to grant the benefit of the doubt to all professing Christians of, indeed, being Christians – unless, of course, there are specific doctrinal or practical reasons to exclude them.

On the other hand, given that this is how Christianity and Christians groups in the news are generally understood and spoken of how are we as Bible-believing Christians to understand “who is a Christian” today? And, who do we recognize as fellow-Christians amongst the many different Christian groups that exist in the world today? Only God of course knows what is in the heart of any individual and who is, if there is reason for doubt, truly a Christian. The rest of us are left to discern as best we can on the basis of what people profess, the Spirit they may manifest, and the fruit they produce – judging (yes, judging, e.g. I Cor. 5:6-13, etc.) in the light of the clear standards of the New Testament itself. And, it must be added, though we should all certainly give fellow professing Christians the benefit of the doubt, we are in fact supposed to judge or discern on the basis of clear NT teaching as to what right and wrong Christian beliefs and actions are. As the verses in I Cor 5 clearly show the Christian faith itself and Christian groups themselves can become corrupted. Unfortunately, this has all too often been the story of the history of Christianity and continues to be so today.

In fact, the history of the Christian church since its founding in the first century A.D. has rightly centered on two major goals: (1) the ongoing attempt to spread the Christian faith throughout the world; and, (2) the continual attempts to keep the Christian faith pure in accordance with its original beliefs and practices as set forth in the New Testament. The way to most clearly understand this history of the Christian faith is to master the history of Bible, starting with the history of the Old Testament and culminating in the history of the New Testament. Then one must gain an overview of the history of the Christian era post-New Testament beginning in Roman times in the first century, continuing through the Middle Ages, the Reformation and all the way up until today. This is doable for any generally educated person since there are many good histories of Christianity available to read

today. However, what is most essential is an accurate understanding of the original Christian faith as set forth in the New Testament itself. Everything else – in history and today - must be measured by that and we should always make that our primary point of reference in judging true Christian belief and practice.

Thankfully, then, in God's providential care for his people, the New Testament documents themselves make clear the essentials of the Christian faith. These essential truths are contained in the "good news" or "gospel message" which was originally preached by the first Christians for a number of years before these truths were written down in a more systematic way for their accurate spread to others and for the preservation of the truth of the Christian faith (cf. Luke 1:1-4). Indeed, that is the primary reason why they were written down in the first place and eventually collected in the form that we have them today. The four Gospel records, each in their own way, are meant to show the fulfillment of God's Old Testament promises to his people of Israel through the coming of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus is presented in each Gospel as the Son of God who was/is the promised Messiah – sent to fulfill God's Old Testament promises to his people and, thus, to bring salvation to Israel and to the world. Though each Gospel was originally sent to its own particular audience and emphasizes different events and themes to that particular audience, the major goal for which each was written is specifically stated in the Gospel of John:

"Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31 NIV).

Later, the apostle John confirms the same truth in a letter that he sends to early Christian believers who were dealing with doctrinal difficulties and possible persecution:

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) is born of God ... everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God ... I wrote these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:1-5, 13).

This belief that "Jesus is the Messiah (Christ), the Son of God" is the essential defining belief of the Christian faith and the foundation of the Christian church itself (cf. Matt. 16:13-19, 1 Cor. 3:10-11, 1 Cor. 15:1-11, etc.). Those who accept this profession in faith have the assurance of being born of God, of overcoming the present world, and of having eternal life both now and at Christ's future return. The Book of Acts, which follows the Gospels in the New Testament canon, shows this to be the essential defining belief of the Christian faith and the Christian church from its beginning as both the faith and the church spread from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century (Acts 2:22-39; 5:41-42, etc.). Those who accepted this message in faith eventually came to be known as "Christians". Collectively, they believed themselves to be children in God's family, heirs of God's coming kingdom, and members of the universal church of the body of Christ that transcended ethnic, social or racial contexts. In the specific areas where they lived these Christians became members of thousands of local assemblies, or churches, spread throughout the Mediterranean world.

The NT Letters were sent to these local Christian churches, or to individual Christians, and were meant to confirm, correct, strengthen and encourage the local churches in their Christian faith. It is from these NT documents and these original NT churches that all subsequent Christian history has developed over the last two thousand years. However, the essential beliefs and practices of the Christian faith are established in the pages of the NT itself and they are the same essential beliefs and practices of the Christian faith today. However much various "Christian" individuals, groups, denominations or churches have developed their own specific ideas, traditions, rituals, practices and theologies over the centuries, the essentials of the true Christian faith which were "once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3) have not changed and all other subsequent particularities of

various Christian groups need to be measured against them and in the light of them. These essentials need to be continually learned, re-learned, emphasized and lived by all individuals who profess the Christian faith and by all Christian churches “who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, their Lord and ours”. (I Cor. 1:2).

Of course, it should always be remembered that a person can be a Christian – because he or she truly believes that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” – yet still be still be wrong about certain, or even many, matters of Christian faith or practice. To be a Christian does not mean, or in any way imply, perfect Christian understanding of the faith or perfect practice of the faith. If it did, none of us would measure up. That is why the focus must always be on the essentials of the faith, and only then, on continual growth in our Christian understanding and walk with God.

This belief that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” is the most essential of all Christian beliefs and all other authentic Christian beliefs and practices are derived from, or built upon, it. Those who hold to these beliefs and live in the light of them should be considered fellow Christians however much the details of their particular beliefs and practice may be unfamiliar to us. Does that mean that there are not particular details of their faith and practice that would – as a matter of Christian conscience – not allow us to fellowship in church on a regular basis with these professed Christians? No, there may indeed be such doctrinal or practical differences that prevent common fellowship. In fact, there are some doctrinal or practical differences that are of such gravity that they would cause the Christian faith and Christian church to be corrupted. These simply cannot be tolerated within the church because, as the apostle Paul strongly stated, “a little leaven will leaven the whole lump.” (e.g. I Cor. 5-6). Nevertheless, in general, those who profess Christ, despite differences, should be accepted as fellow Christians and they also deserve our prayers and support in their attempt to live their Christian faith in the midst of the turmoils of today’s world. As professing Christians we should begin with the essentials and build from there. Unfortunately, the world in which we live is a very complicated place and even the world of Christianity itself is complicated. Let us, however, hold fast to the simplicity of Christian faith as set forth in the New Testament itself and live our Christian lives in the light of it!

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### “The Unity of the Spirit - in the Bond of Peace”

As the new year of 2015 begins I am reminded that it was twenty years ago this spring that we first began publishing *The Unity of the Spirit* newsletter which, after being published quarterly for some twelve years, gradually evolved into this web-site. As regular readers can see we have taken the opportunity of the new year to refresh and update the website. This has primarily been the work of my dear wife Dorota who has put a great deal of time and effort into this task. Her work, of course, builds on the original work of Adam Kleczkowski who started our website, and on the on-going contribution of both Dorota and our brother in Christ, Scot Hahn. We are also grateful to our nephew, Piotr Kusek, whose suggestions helped initiate the update. We hope that this newer and more up-to-date look and format will make the website even more inviting and easy to use while still retaining the original feel of both the original newsletter and the original website.

Our purpose from that beginning in the spring of 1995 has been to help build up the body of Christ on the basis

of the fundamental truths of God's word as well as to explore specific, detailed, and sometimes more controversial Christian subjects in a spirit of Christian unity and peace. Thus, the name chosen for our publication and website: *The Unity of the Spirit – in the Bond of Peace*, which is taken from the beautiful section of Ephesians:

"I therefore, a prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

"There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:1-6 ESV).

With the start of the next twenty years our goals at *The Unity of the Spirit* remain the same. To the best of our ability we will continue to make available the best knowledge and understanding of God's word that we are aware of through our own articles, blogs, books and audio teachings. In addition, we will continue to recommend what we consider to be the quality works of others even if we have some disagreements with their perspectives. Of course, though finding very much that we agree with in the works of others that we recommend, we can only vouch for our own articles, etc. which set forth our own understanding of God's word. In all that we present and recommend we assume a high level of Christian maturity on the part of our readers and we rely on them to think for themselves and to judge all that they hear and read on the basis of their own mature understanding of God's word. As fellow Christians, we are all children in God's family and, despite differences, we recognize and accept as our fellow brothers and sister in Christ – from whatever background, denomination, church, or fellowship - all who sincerely "call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, their Lord and ours." (I Cor. 1:2).

Of course, it would be naïve to think that Christian unity in all matters of faith and practice will be achieved this side of the return of Christ. Divisions had already begun within the pages of the New Testament itself and they will certainly not all be resolved now some two thousand years later. In addition, every local church or fellowship must apply the principles of God's word to its own unique circumstances and this produces legitimate differences in the practices of churches and fellowships around the world. Nevertheless, we believe that despite our differences we as Christians can for the most part be unified on the fundamental truths of the Christian faith and that we can continue to learn and grow together as the family of God and body of Christ.

It has been the basic assumption of *The Unity of the Spirit* from the very beginning that the Bible – according to its original intent and meaning - is our only standard for truth in matters of Christian faith and practice and it is there that truth must be found and established. Nevertheless, we also believe that true Christian unity should, and must, transcend denominational and sectarian groupings so as to strengthen God's people around the world. We are all growing and none of us has a perfect understanding of the truth in all of its dimensions. We, at *The Unity of the Spirit*, continue to learn from fellow Christian believers, especially biblical scholars, from across the denominational spectrum. And this is as it should be. As fellow Christian believers we are all united "in Christ" above and beyond denominational differences and we should endeavor to grow up "into Christ" in all things. Thus, the goal of every Christian in the world should be Christ-likeness in all that we think, say and do in all of life's endeavors. On this we can surely be united as fellow-Christians as we move forward to the ultimate time of Christ's return when we will all see him "face to face" and "be like him, for we shall see him as he is". Therefore, let us as children in God's family and members of the body of Christ continue to grow up together in Christ as God's people. And, as we grow in our own personal walks with God and within our own fellowships and churches let us "endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

To start this new year I append three of my favorite articles from our past years that are representative of what we stand for at *The Unity of the Spirit*:

[One God, One People of God, and One Hope of Salvation](#)

One Spirit – One Body

The People of Faith

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