Common Questions in the

Christian Faith

Volume One

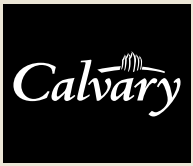


By John H. Munro

Volume One

THE VERDICT

WITH PASTOR JOHN H. MUNRO



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Introduction

WE LIVE IN A CONFUSING WORLD. We are constantly bombarded by information and so-called experts on social media, news outlets, advertisements, entertainment—and it's difficult to know who or what to believe.

At the same time, today's culture often encourages us to bypass the mind. Just have "an experience." "Follow your gut!" "Trust your feelings." "Think with your heart." "I have my truth and you have yours." Our society is very susceptible to the view that morality and truth are decided by each one of us. All of this makes it very easy for us to be deceived and manipulated by ourselves and others.

So what are we to believe?

Contrary to what you may have heard, the Christian faith is not outdated, hateful, or ignorant. God exists, and He welcomes your questions. He loves you.

Because of His love, He sent His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save you, to reconcile with you. And He has revealed Himself in His Word, the Bible. He promises: "You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

The purpose of these booklets is to help you ask the honest and difficult questions you may have about the Christian faith and to help you identify and begin to understand the answers found in the Holy Scriptures, which are the Word of God. The Bible has guided multitudes of people for centuries. Of course, the ultimate verdict is yours.

I am praying for you as you embark on this spiritual journey! Ask for the Lord's guidance as you seek the truth with an open and humble heart.

Warmly in Christ,



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QUESTION ONE

Why do I need to be saved?

ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THIS WORD 'SAVED'? Do you find it strange, or possibly offensive? Our society argues that most people are basically good. But this is neither true to Scripture nor human experience. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Consider our words. They are often deceptive, poisonous, angry, and bitter. Consider the violence of humanity. History is filled with misery, war, crime, and abuse. Even the best men and women are imperfect. There are no exceptions.

Of course, focusing on things that make us feel good about ourselves is much more enjoyable. It is tempting to see ourselves and others as well-meaning victims of circumstances and a flawed society. But I challenge you to see yourself not as a victim but as someone in desperate need of the forgiveness of God.

How did sin enter the world?

God created man and woman in His image as perfect beings to live in communion with Him. So, what happened? Into this perfect world where God is King, there enters another kingdom. A kingdom of evil

and deadly sin—the kingdom of Satan. Make no mistake, the devil is real, and he is our enemy. He was expelled from heaven for his pride and his rebellion against God, and he lives to oppose God—to tempt, deceive, and accuse.

By skillfully causing Adam and Eve to question God's Word, doubt His goodness, and question His character, Satan successfully tempts them to sin, to do what God has expressly forbidden. As a result, Adam and Eve are expelled from the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden. Mankind is no longer a perfect creation. As the apostle Paul explains in Romans, "Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

This is what sin does. Sin alienates us from God. Indeed, our sins have grievous consequences for ourselves and others, but most importantly, our sin is against God.

The holiness of God

To fully appreciate the gravity of sin, we must understand the holiness of God. God alone is perfect in who He is and in everything He does. Unlike us, His attributes are perfectly balanced. God is gracious, but He is also truthful. God is compassionate, but He is also just. God is forgiving, but He is also a God of wrath. God's wrath is not an emotional rage but is, as one commentator puts it, a "deeply personal abhorrence" of evil. God loves righteousness and hates wickedness (Hebrews 1:9).

What would be your reaction if someone abused your five-year-old daughter or granddaughter? What is your reaction when you hear of a school shooting? We are outraged. We are justifiably angry. These situations call for something to be done. God would not be perfect and holy if He tolerated sin and ungodliness. So why do we struggle with the idea of God's wrath against sin?

Instead of being upset about our sin, we laugh at it. We enjoy it. We are hardened against it. We prefer to compare our conduct to society's

norms rather than to God's standards and His Word. But God's standards don't change according to the culture. God is holy. God is always opposed to sin, and as sinful people, our relationship with God is broken.

So, our fundamental problem, the problem of our world, is not a problem of circumstances and solutions. The problem is within us—our sinful hearts. And we are powerless to save ourselves, to mend this broken relationship with God and receive His forgiveness.

The good news of the Gospel

But this isn't the end of the story! This is where the Gospel, the "good news" of Jesus Christ, comes in. There is hope!

Despite the fact that we deserve the wrath of God because of our sin, God Himself has provided a way of salvation and reconciliation. Not because we deserve it; this salvation is a gift of God's grace. "For God so loved the world he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

As the perfect Son of God—fully God and fully man—Jesus Christ took on Himself the consequences of all our sins, indeed the sins of the whole world. He paid the price of sin by dying in our place on the cross, was buried, and was raised from the dead. For those who believe in Him, the blood of Jesus satisfies the wrath of God and cleanses us from all sin. We are reconciled to God and are bound for heaven when we die. That's the promise of the Gospel. "For the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Accepting God's gift

We may modify our behavior. We may try to clean up our act. We may try religious rituals or do good things. But there is only one way for our hearts to be changed and for our sins to be forgiven. With a humble heart, we must acknowledge our sin before God, repent (turn away) from our sin, and trust in our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is found in Christ alone. This is the very definition of the Christian faith.

"For by grace you have
been saved through faith.
And this is not your own
doing; it is the gift of God,
not a result of works, so
that no one may boast."

Ephesians 2:8–9



QUESTION TWO

What does it mean to be a Christian?

Does knowing about Jesus make me a Christian? Do I have to follow certain rules? How does it work?

THE TERM 'CHRISTIAN' originally dates to the 1st century. After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to Heaven, the apostles followed His command to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The book of Acts in the New Testament details this initial spread of the Gospel, and records "in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11:26).

In our culture today, people use the term 'Christian' quite broadly! Maybe they believe in God, the Ten Commandments, or some of the Bible. Or perhaps they just believe in Christian morals or go to church occasionally. Some people identify themselves as Christian because they want to be accepted in certain social circles, or because they were baptized as a child, or because their parents or grandparents said they were Christians.

So you can see, there is a very real danger to reducing the Christian faith to a mere label and adapting it to our own interpretation. I prefer the term "follower of Jesus Christ" because it reminds us that, in choosing and living the Christian life, we are following Jesus Christ in obedience to the Word of God.

Trusting and following Jesus Christ

The identity of Jesus

We must always be clear about who Jesus is. Many people are quite comfortable in saying that Jesus was a wise man and a brilliant teacher. But Jesus claimed to be God in human flesh—the promised Messiah, the very Son of God. He said: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

If Jesus were only a wise man and teacher, He would have been no different than everyone else. And He would not have been able to be our Savior. To be a Christian and a true follower of Jesus Christ, you must recognize and trust Him for who He is: the perfect, sinless Son of God (Hebrews 4:15). He died for your sins, rose from the grave, and is alive forevermore.

The message of Jesus

Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1:15). No one is excluded. Everyone has a choice. In the sight of God, we are all unfit for the kingdom of heaven. But all who turn from their sin and believe in Jesus Christ are welcome. We are reconciled to God, our sins are forgiven, and we will be with our Lord for all eternity in heaven when we die. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25–26).

The call is personal

When Jesus originally called His disciples, He invited them, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:27; John 1:43). Notice that the call to follow Jesus is not a call to the cause of Christ, the teaching of Christ, or people and organizations who profess Christ. It is a call for you to follow the actual person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in a continuous and personal relationship. The Christian life begins when you repent and trust in Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

What is an authentic Christian?

Authentic followers of Jesus are committed

When Jesus calls the disciples, they immediately leave what they are doing and follow Him. This is the obedience of true faith. Following Jesus is the opposite of a life focused on self. Anything or anyone claiming a higher allegiance or authority in your life is to be rejected. And there is no guarantee of material benefits or a life without hardship. You follow Jesus on His terms, not yours. "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Authentic followers of Jesus learn from Him

The disciples were often slow learners, occasionally afraid, and sometimes doubtful and argumentative. In other words, they were quite like you and me! But to learn, you must spend time with Jesus. You must spend time daily in the Word of God and in prayer. And frequently gather with other followers who will help you learn and grow. To stop learning is to stagnate! "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Authentic followers of Jesus are transformed

Once we choose to trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and are saved by God's grace, a supernatural transformation takes place. We receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Now, instead of being characterized by sinful thoughts and attitudes, we are empowered to display godly characteristics and live a godly life. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22–23).

Authentic followers of Jesus are fruitful

As we follow Jesus Christ, this new life in Christ bears fruit. That means there will be outward acts and evidence of our faith in action. But don't be confused. It is not our fruit or good works that save us. We are saved by trusting in Jesus Christ as a gift of the grace of God. Good works are merely evidence that we are following Christ and

united with Him. They are the result of our salvation, not the basis of our salvation.

How are followers of Christ to live in the secular world?

Jesus sends us into the world to glorify God, serve Him, and share our faith with others. However, living in the secular world creates tensions and temptations for us.

Some followers of Christ conclude that they should isolate themselves from the unbelieving culture. Other professing Christians get on very well with unbelievers because they live just like the unbelieving culture!

Neither of these options is what Christ commands. To His followers, Jesus says, "You are the salt of the earth… You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16).

Jesus is teaching that His followers are to be different from unbelievers. As we develop relationships with others, they should see Jesus in our lives. We are to shine His light in a world of increasing darkness. This means we are to live openly and visibly as followers of Jesus, even when it is difficult or unpopular. Jesus calls us to go into the culture with His truth and love. We are to be gracious, kind, and helpful to those who do not believe, including our enemies.

So there's more involved in being a Christian than repeating a prayer or completing a checklist. God knows your heart. There must be a personal decision to acknowledge and turn from your sin, and to put your trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Then there is the ongoing commitment to follow Him as you grow in your faith and live a transformed life to the glory of God—looking forward to a glorious eternal future in heaven.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Luke 9:23

QUESTION THREE

Why is the Bible so important?

How do we know the Bible is true? Can I believe in certain parts and not others? How do you read the Bible?

A COMMON MINDSET TODAY is that each person is their own authority in determining the right path. We are encouraged to follow our heart and be guided by our feelings. But our feelings and emotions often change and are easily swayed.

Isn't it important that we base our decisions on facts, on reality? Shouldn't we base our lives on truth? Some may rightly ask, "What is truth?" And that is a question that has echoed through the centuries!

For followers of Jesus Christ, truth is not arrived at by cultural consensus, political expediency, or personal opinion. Truth is given to us by Almighty God. He has revealed Himself to us in His Word — Holy Scripture that has been collected in the Bible. We believe that all Scripture is "God-breathed." It is holy and without error, and contains God's eternal and unchanging truths. When the Bible speaks, God is speaking. Therefore, the Bible is our authority in faith and practice. We do not pick and choose based on what is convenient or comfortable.

"Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89).

"For you have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Psalm 138:2).

"But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2).

"It is written man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

How can the Bible be perfect if it was written by men?

Scripture teaches us that God directed the writing of Scripture, using men for His divine purposes. "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Also consider how God has preserved His Word. The Bible has survived intact for more than 2,000 years and remains, by far, the bestselling book of all time, with more than six billion copies sold. It is the most translated book in history. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8).

Can we disregard the Old Testament or other parts we don't like?

Some point out that God in the Old Testament seems very wrathful. There are many rules and punishments. There are acts of violence and genocide. Women are treated as pieces of property, and others are slaves. Where is loving your neighbor? Where is the grace of God? How can both the Old Testament and the New Testament be true?

These people are missing the point. All Scripture is God-breathed, inerrant, consistent, and profitable for our instruction.

In the New Testament, we read: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). In another passage, speaking of the Israelites in the wilderness: "Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (1 Corinthians 10:6).

In the Old Testament, we are introduced to the one true God, Creator of heaven and earth. Darkness intrudes on this perfect world with the Fall, and we see the catastrophic impact of rebellion against God. But God does not abandon His creation. Over generations, we see God's faithfulness to His chosen people (Israel) as He pursues a relationship with them to stand as a beacon to the world. They repeatedly disobey His perfect Law, and though they experience the just consequences of their disobedience, God never abandons them. Through the Old Testament prophets, God continues to promise ultimate redemption—a promise fulfilled by the arrival of Jesus Christ, the long-awaited Messiah who brings the kingdom of God not only to the people of Israel but to all the people of the world.

Holy Scripture is given to us by a God who wants to reveal Himself to us: His works, His character, His love for us, our own sinfulness, His ultimate plan for our redemption, and the victory of God's kingdom over the kingdom of darkness.

So, don't be confused. God has not changed, and His standards have not changed. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament are essential parts of Holy Scripture, the very revelation of God. And we cannot pick and choose what we want to believe or take things out of context. Correct interpretation is essential. This is one of the primary reasons I often preach consecutively through a book of Scripture. There may be difficult or uncomfortable passages that we might prefer to skip, but it is vital that we seek the whole counsel of God.

Reading and responding to the Bible

Anyone can read the Bible. For beginners or skeptics, a great place to start is with the four Gospels in the New Testament—Matthew,

Mark, Luke, or John. These books present the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And before you read, ask God (even if you don't believe in Him) to give you understanding.

Much of the Bible is not difficult to understand. There are difficult parts, but don't allow what you don't understand to take away from what you do understand. The basic message of Holy Scripture is simple: We are sinful, broken people. We need to be delivered from our sin and self-absorption, and that is accomplished through our Lord Jesus Christ.

For followers of Jesus Christ, knowing and reading the Word of God is essential to growing in your faith. When He was tempted, Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). The apostle Peter compares new believers to "newborn infants, [who] long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

The goal is not to know the Bible like a student studying the facts of a subject, just to pass an exam and then quickly forget what was learned. Jesus said: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The Bible is the living, eternal Word of God. It is to be loved and read over a lifetime, integrated into every area of our lives, and, most importantly, it is to be obeyed.

Make it part of your daily routine to read the Bible, even if only for 15 minutes. Read and reread passages and books with a prayerful and open heart, asking for the Lord's wisdom and guidance. Meditate on how you can apply His truth to your life each day. And each day, God will help you to grow in your faith and your understanding of Him.


“If you love me,
you will keep my
commandments.”
John 14:15

QUESTION FOUR

Does prayer work?

Can anyone pray? How do you pray?

THE GREATEST POWER IN LIFE is not the power of possibility or of positive thinking, but prayer to our all-powerful God. And this power is available not just to some spiritual elite, but to each one of us. Scripture repeatedly teaches us to pray: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). "Praying at all times in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18). "Continue steadfastly in prayer" (Colossians 4:2).

Prayer is at the center of the Christian life. We rightly talk of the importance of reading the Word of God. But we are also to pray, to talk to God. After all, it is inconceivable that we would pursue a relationship or love someone without communicating with them.

Scottish preacher Oswald Chambers wrote: "We pray when there's nothing else we can do, but Jesus wants us to pray before we do anything at all." Are you too busy to pray? Do you prefer to rely on yourself? You might not even believe in God. So why waste time talking to someone who isn't there? Too often, people pray only in emergencies, when all hope seems lost.

But God is our Creator, and for followers of Christ, He is our Heavenly Father who has saved us and adopted us into His family. He wants

to have a relationship with you. Rather than consider it a chore or a desperate last resort, recognize prayer as the incredible privilege it is.

Does prayer work?

Absolutely. Prayer is real, and the power of prayer in our lives, in the lives of others, in the events of the world, is incalculable. We are communicating with and trusting in Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who upholds the universe with the power of His Word and directs the affairs of nations and the details of our lives. "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

However, as we pray, we must understand...

God is not a genie

Prayer is not trying to get God to grant your requests. It is not trying to get God to bless your plans. It is not dreaming your dreams and then asking God to help you fulfill them. We are to pray with a humble heart for the glory of God, for the will of God. In the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

God's ways and timing are different from ours

When we pray, we are often impatient, and we get ahead of God. We think we know best. But God is God. He is wiser than we are, and He often works in totally unexpected ways. Following Christ and living a godly life do not eliminate heartaches and disappointments. It may be God's will that a difficult situation continues for reasons you may not currently understand, but He promises to give you the grace and strength you need to bear it.

So when the answers to your prayers don't come in your time or in the way you expect, don't lose heart. Don't be bitter. Keep praying and trusting. For "we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

How to pray

In Matthew 6:5–15 and Luke 11:1–13, Jesus gives His disciples what we call the Lord's Prayer as an example of how to pray. Notice that He presents it as a model. Prayer is not to be a mindless or mechanical recitation, and He proactively warns us against hypocrisy, praying only to be seen.

Pray to "our Father in heaven"

Through faith in Jesus Christ, we become part of the family of God (John 1:12–13). Just as a child comes to an earthly father who loves her and is welcomed with open arms, so we come as children to our loving Father who is in heaven.

Prayer is to be God-centered

We don't begin prayer with our needs. Our priority in prayer is the glory of God. We come to Him in reverence and humility, seeking the kingdom of God. We pray for His will to be done. Remember, God is not your personal genie who is there to do your will, grant your requests, and extend your personal kingdom. God, not you, is sovereign.

Pray for material provision

God wants us to bring our requests to Him even though "your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). God wants you to live each day in dependence on Him. So pour out your requests for practical needs and material provisions to the Lord. As our Heavenly Father, He loves it when you ask Him for good things (Matthew 7:7–11). He "is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20).

Pray for forgiveness

Every day we sin. And every day we need to confess our sins and ask our Heavenly Father for forgiveness. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The more we understand

and experience this forgiveness, the more we forgive others (Ephesians 4:32).

Pray for protection

We want to be kept far from anything that could lead us to sin. We have a cunning enemy who wants to confuse and deceive us and stop us from following Jesus. So we pray that God will not lead us into temptation and will deliver us from the evil one.

The promise of prayer

Jesus urges His disciples to be persistent in prayer and to come to the throne of God with boldness and confidence as children of God: "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). This is an incredible promise. So never give up praying!

The power of prayer is real. If you are following Jesus Christ, expect God to work in your life and to answer your prayers. This is the joy of being a Christian! God is working in our lives, guiding us, providing for us, granting us peace, strengthening and comforting us. He hears our prayers and answers them according to His purposes.

"And I tell you, ask, and
it will be given to you;
seek, and you will find;
knock, and it will be
opened to you."

Luke 11:9

QUESTION FIVE

Is it important to go to church?

How should I choose a church? Why can't I just worship at home?

WE OFTEN HEAR IN THE NEWS that regular church attendance is falling. And there are plenty of people, Christians and non-Christians, who criticize the church based on their personal experience with a particular church, the terrible behavior of those within a church, or perhaps even the historical past of a particular type of church.

As a pastor, you don't need to remind me of the faults of the church. For many years, I have lived and breathed the church and must confess there have been times when the pettiness, lethargy, and sheer meanness of some church members have threatened to overwhelm me. Yet, I love the church where I serve, and certainly the larger church—the worldwide community of all those who believe in Jesus Christ.

We should always measure any particular congregation by its view of Jesus Christ and its adherence to the Word of God. But to dismiss the institution of the church and attending church outright is a grave mistake. You cannot be an authentic follower of Jesus Christ without a vital relationship with His body, the church. And you cannot grow in your faith and become a mature follower of Christ without being a part of a local community of believers.

What is the church?

Jesus Christ is the builder and the head of the church. The word *ekklesia* first appears in the Gospel of Matthew, as Jesus tells His disciples: "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). And throughout the New Testament, the word 'church' refers not to a building or a particular denomination, but to the community of believers in Jesus Christ in certain areas (1 Corinthians 1:2).

The church is God's new society, designed to demonstrate the love and truth of Christ in a dark and hostile world. Barriers of race, culture, education, age, and socio-economic status may separate us. But the church of Jesus Christ embraces all those who love Him and tears down all the barriers of this world. We are to worship together, love one another, and serve one another.

The New Testament uses different pictures to help us understand.

The body of Christ

Christ is the head, and we are the members of the body which work together (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12).

The flock of God

Jesus Christ is the chief shepherd, and we are sheep of the same flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1–2).

The temple of God

Christ is the cornerstone, and we are stones in the same building (Ephesians 2:20).

All of these metaphors emphasize Christ's leadership, our dependence on Him, and our interdependence and commitment to one another as fellow believers.

Does this mean that the church is perfect? Absolutely not. Followers of Christ are still sinners living in a fallen world. And yes, there are

hypocrites in the church, even as true followers of Christ strive to be different.

But the love of Christ is not just for us as individuals; it is for the church. Scripture tells us that Christ loved the church so much that He gave Himself up for her. And just as He is working in our lives, He is purifying the church for His return—like a bride being prepared for her groom (Ephesians 5:25–27).

What is the purpose of being part of a local church?

Belonging to a local church is a sign that you belong to Jesus Christ. Each person who receives Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord becomes a member of the great universal church. Becoming a member of a local church is the practical application. Sin isolates you, but God wants you to live and grow in healthy and godly community with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

When you become a member of a local church, you are demonstrating a desire to be a productive part of the body of Christ. You are being obedient to Holy Scripture as it emphasizes worshiping together, praying together, loving one another, serving one another, speaking truth to one another, bearing one another's burdens, forgiving one another, encouraging one another, spreading the Gospel, and so on.

Church activities reflect the example of the early church—the teaching of the Word of God, coming together for fellowship, prayer, for the celebration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, caring for the needs of others, and evangelizing the world for Christ (Acts 2:41–47). The biblical church doesn't specialize in entertainment or inspirational hype but rather prioritizes a commitment to being "a pillar of the truth" so that its members are grounded in the Word of God (1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 4:11–16).

What if I prefer to worship on my own?

Some professing to be authentic followers of Jesus rarely attend any church. They love to trot out the tired clichés:

"The church is all about religion; I'm all about relationship."
"I don't like organized religion; I just love Jesus."

This is more spiritual than the Bible! In Hebrews 10:25, we are warned "not [to neglect] to meet together as is the habit of some" Consider also that Jesus went frequently to the temple. So don't be wiser than God; be a member of a local church.

Choosing a local spiritual home

Is it Christ-centered?

I once saw a sign outside a church: "The church that puts its faith in you." We do not put our faith in ourselves. We place our faith in Jesus Christ. The very foundation of the church is Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11). We look not to attendance trends or what pastor may be influential or popular, but to Christ for direction. How does this congregation view Christ? Is the message and person of Jesus Christ central or invoked only to endorse a particular agenda?

Is it Bible-based?

Jesus said that if we love Him, we will keep His commandments (John 14:23). The true church is committed to the truth (1 Timothy 3:15). One essential element of the true church is the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Hearing God's truth purifies and strengthens us, convicts us of sin, and helps us live according to Holy Scripture. What are the specific beliefs of this congregation? Are they consistent with Scripture? Are attendees encouraged to have and bring their Bibles? Is the Word of God central in weekly services and sermons?

Become a member

Many people spend their time "just looking," going from one church to another. Becoming a member of a church demonstrates your commitment to Christ and to a local body of believers. You become invested and stop seeing yourself as a pampered consumer or a remote critic. Link arms and hearts with other believers in responsible commitment and fellowship.

Don't be a critic

Scripture calls us to do all we can to preserve spiritual unity in the church (Ephesians 4:1–3). It takes no talent to gossip, to divide, to criticize, to point the finger, to spread rumors. It may be an understatement, but there is no perfect church, just as there are no perfect families. We are called to love one another and have patience with one another.

I realize it's easy to look at different churches and point out their failures and shortcomings. But the amazing truth is that Christ loves us. He saves us. And He has given us the privilege of being in His church. Because the church matters so much to God, shouldn't it matter to us?

Be involved in the life and ministry of a local community of believers. Enjoy the privileges and responsibilities of being a member in the most glorious community of all: the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

QUESTION SIX

Why is there evil in the world?

If God exists, why is there such evil in the world?

EVIL IS A PROBLEM to any thinking person. Sooner or later, all of us are confronted with evil. And we respond with questions that are often intensely personal and penetrating, representing profound grief and suffering.

"How could a loving God allow my child to die?"

"Where was God when I was enduring unthinkable abuse?"

"Where was God when innocent people, even children, were being gunned down?"

"How could God have allowed such a tragedy?"

Isn't God meant to be a God who can do all things? Isn't He meant to be a God who is all-loving? But evil exists, and God seems to allow it. Something is not adding up. If evil exists, perhaps God does not exist. On the other hand, if God does exist, perhaps He is not all-powerful or not all-loving. Why doesn't He do something?

Freedom abused

In the beginning, our good God created a good world, a perfect world. But man chose to rebel against God, and as a result, sin entered our world—and what was once perfect became distorted and broken.

God did not make us robots or machines, but human beings made in His image, with the privilege of choice. God could have made beings who would always choose good. But instead, God gave us freedom and the capacity to make moral choices. When we choose evil rather than good, the consequences are disastrous for ourselves and others. So why do we often blame God?

Consider—water is essential for life and a wonderful gift of God. Yet we can use water to drown someone. Or is a company that makes sharp kitchen knives responsible for a murderer taking a kitchen knife and killing someone?

The most basic problem lies within ourselves. We are not basically good, as so many want to believe. The evidence of history is overwhelming. The human heart "is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9).

Genocide, terrorism, violence, sexual abuse, war, and all kinds of tragedies are the results of the abuse of human freedom. C. S. Lewis writes: "It is men, not God, who have produced racks, whips, prisons, slavery, guns, bayonets and bombs." People hijack human freedom and use it for evil with the most unspeakable of consequences.

The personification of evil

We must also understand that evil exists because of the existence of a totally evil being: Satan, the devil. He is not an intriguing rogue or an attractive anti-hero. He is totally and irredeemably evil. In the Bible, he is described as the deceiver, the father of lies, our adversary, and a murderer from the beginning. Everything he does is evil; he is implacably opposed to God and the people of God, and to all that is good and virtuous.

For now, our fallen world lies in the power (under the influence) of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Satan is not all-powerful. Still, he is very powerful and devious, tempting us to do evil and wicked things, just as he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is why Jesus

taught us to pray, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matthew 6:13, NIV).

Hope is not lost

The ugliness of human evil and the devil's power and influence paint a bleak picture. But hope is not lost, precisely because of the goodness and love of our great God.

God is good, and He is sovereign

When there are evil acts that take the lives of innocent people and wreak havoc in our world, we are apt to doubt the goodness of God. But God is always good and is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28). God has a purpose for everything, including the things He does not cause but allows to happen (Psalm 136:1; Exodus 33:18–19; Nahum 1:7).

For example, in the Bible, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Living as a slave, he was later falsely accused of attempted rape by an evil woman and thrown into prison. But Joseph's trust was in our good God. Years later, Joseph becomes a powerful leader in this foreign land and saves the lives of thousands of people. Upon being reunited with his brothers, he says: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20). So when life seems out of control, meaningless, senseless, even chaotic, remember this good God is in control, and He is working out His perfect purposes in the lives of those who love Him. Trust Him.

God cares for you

Given your circumstances, you may think God has abandoned you. But I want to remind you that God cares for you so much that He went to incredible lengths to save you from evil and give you hope.

God entered into our evil world as Jesus Christ, the Son of God, God incarnate. He suffered for us on the cross, dying for our sin and our evil hearts, making a way of salvation that only God could make. In Christ, God comes to us. He became human, identified with our suffering, and died for our sins, rising from the dead to show that He is triumphant.

He paid the price for our evil acts so that we could be reconciled to Him and have hope for new life (2 Corinthians 5:19). Our God chose to become man, to suffer, and to die to solve this very problem of evil, out of love for you and me.

God guarantees that evil will be punished

At the cross of Christ, there is victory over sin, death, and Satan. And God has promised that one future day, the living Christ will return to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. The entire world will realize the truth and be filled with the knowledge of God and the glory of God (Habakkuk 2:14). Then there will be perfect justice, goodness, righteousness, and peace. In that great day, God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Revelation 7:17). And there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And sin and evil will be gone forever.

Trust God to triumph over evil

As we look around, we shudder at the evil of our world. But evil isn't just out there, it's in our hearts. And we need a power greater than ourselves, a power greater than sin and Satan, to defeat that evil. We need the power of the living Christ who died for your sins and who indwells and empowers those who receive Him as their Savior and Lord.

None of us understands everything that God is doing. But the cross reveals what God is like: He is a God of love. He is a God we can trust even when we don't understand. He is a God who comes to save us and to forgive us. He is a God who triumphs over evil.

"And we know that for
those who love God
all things work
together for good,
for those who are
called according to
his purpose."

Romans 8:28

QUESTION SEVEN

Is Jesus the only way to heaven?

Isn't it bigoted to say that Jesus is the only way to heaven?

WE LIVE IN A DEEPLY POLARIZED WORLD where it has become almost impossible for people to discuss differing points of view on serious issues without characterizing opposing viewpoints as evil or bigoted. According to the Merriam–Webster dictionary, hate is a key element of the definition of a bigot—"to feel hatred toward others based on their group membership."

I trust that all of us can hold deeply felt truths and beliefs without being bigots, even if our views disagree. As followers of Jesus Christ, Scripture teaches that we are to "honor everyone" (1 Peter 2:17). No debate. No exceptions. We are to show respect to everyone, including those who are very different from us. All of us are made in the image of God and should be treated with respect and dignity. We are to "love one another" (John 13:34–35) and to "love our enemies" (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35) even as they may persecute us. Hate should have no part in the life of an authentic Christian.

Can all roads lead to heaven?

Many people seem to believe that all religions essentially teach the same thing. But how can all beliefs be equally valid and true when they contradict each other?

> *Protagoras to Sophocles: "Whatever a person believes is right."*
>
> *Sophocles to Protagoras: "In that case, my dear Protagoras, I believe you are wrong."*

Jesus Himself contradicts this popular viewpoint that all roads lead to God. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Different approaches to a common problem

If we are all looking for heaven, for spiritual fulfillment and perfection, there is an implicit acknowledgment that our present life is imperfect and corrupt. We need only look at history to know that something is wrong with the human heart. We are sinful beings, prone to selfishness, greed, corruption, violence, murder, and self-destruction. Clearly, if we are going to go to heaven or some perfect place, our sin needs to be dealt with.

What do the world's religions say regarding this universal problem? They encourage morality through self-improvement and self-actualization. Keep the Law (Judaism). Observe the eightfold path that leads to Nirvana (Buddhism). Obey the five pillars of Islam. Seek enlightenment within you (Humanism). Become one with the universe (Pantheism). Struggle, strive, meditate, go on a pilgrimage, give money to the poor, pray, look within, become worthy, go through a cycle of reincarnations, and eventually everything may work out in the end.

One thing all these religions have in common is the belief that the solution lies within ourselves. If we try hard enough, work hard enough, and dig deep enough, we can fix this problem. We can earn our way to God, to heaven. But does that make sense? If our hearts are corrupt, how can we cleanse ourselves?

The Christian faith is unique. The message of Jesus Christ is unique because it acknowledges that we cannot reach heaven on our own. Christianity is not us striving for God. It is God reaching down to us and offering salvation through Jesus Christ.

A unique Savior

This is the picture of Immanuel, "God with us." The Son of God, born of a virgin, is fully God and fully man, and lives a perfect life in order to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin, redeeming us from sin and cleansing us from all unrighteousness. Jesus' death was not merely a heroic example of suffering or a demonstration of unselfish love. It was a one-of-a-kind substitution: the perfect Savior dying for you and me. It was a death planned from all eternity by a God who loves you and gave His only Son so that you could be forgiven and welcomed into heaven.

And on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead, demonstrating His power and His victory over sin and death. "I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:18). The tomb of Abraham in Hebron is occupied. The tomb of Buddha is occupied. The tomb of Mohammed is occupied and visited by millions every year. But the tomb of Jesus is empty. Among world religions, the resurrection of Jesus Christ stands unique.

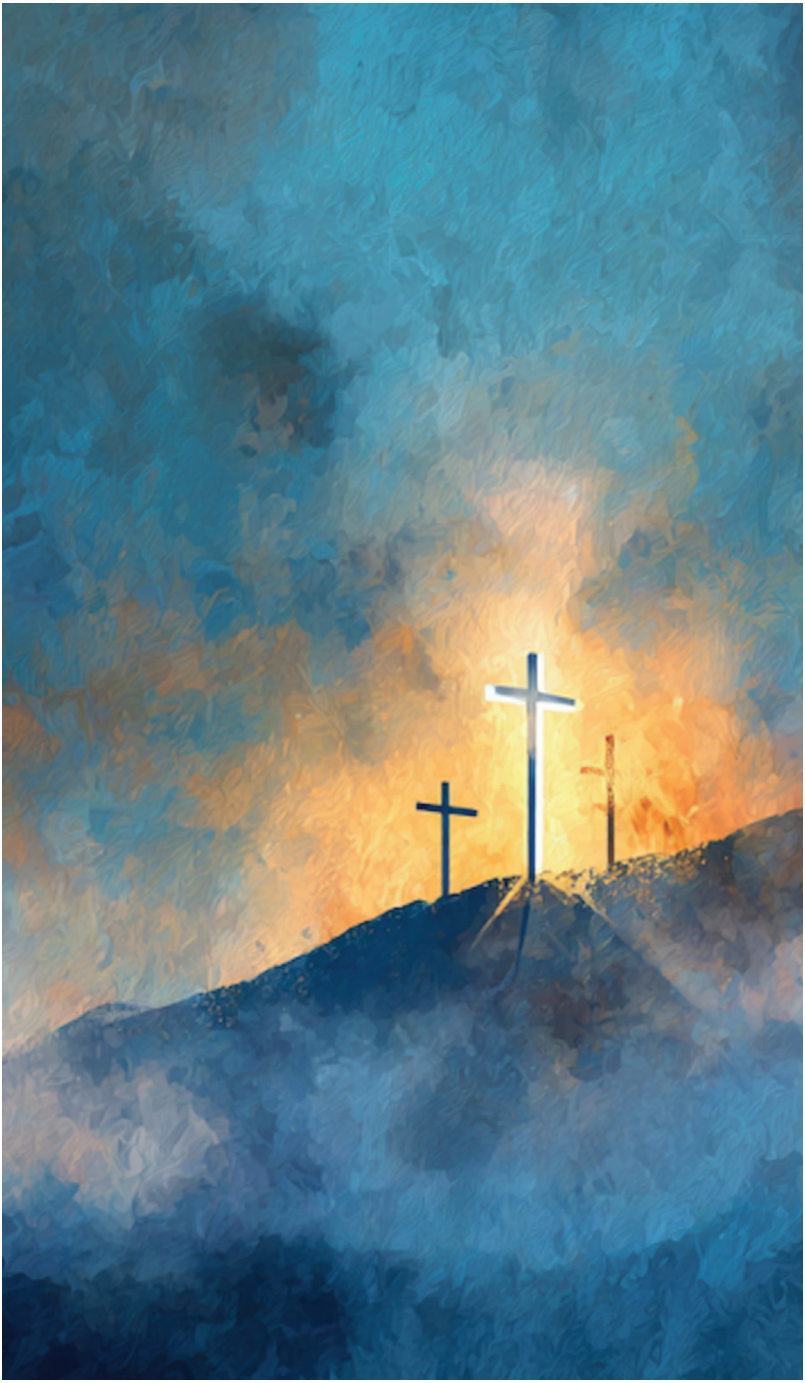
The only way

No one can keep the Mosaic law. Muslims struggle with following the five pillars of obedience. People get frustrated with Buddhism as they never reach the level of enlightenment. Hinduism has its caste system and its endless reincarnations. No matter how well-meaning you are, how smart you are, how determined you are, none of us is perfect.

Religion emphasizes what we must do, and yet cannot. The good news of the Christian faith emphasizes what Jesus Christ has done for us. And all you have to do is turn from your sin and place your trust in Jesus Christ as Savior. It doesn't matter who you are or what you

have done. What a relief! No more striving. No more failure. No more guilt. Because it doesn't depend on you.

God is so just that He can't ignore our sin. But God is so loving that He sent His Son into this world to die for our sins. Jesus is the only sinless person. Therefore, He is the perfect sacrifice. He is the only one who can forgive your sins and take you to heaven when you die. This message is one of truth and grace and love, never of bigotry or hate. God has come to us. This is why the Christian faith is different, and why Jesus really is the only way.



QUESTION EIGHT

Should I be baptized?

If I was baptized as a baby, do I need to be baptized again?

MANY PEOPLE WERE RAISED in a Christian tradition where they were baptized as babies. Then you hear different preaching or come to a church that does not believe in or practice infant baptism, and you may wonder if you need to be baptized again.

My goal is not to advocate for a particular church tradition. My calling is to preach the Word of God and help you understand what the Bible says. For followers of Christ, the Word of God is our ultimate authority. So we must have an accurate, biblical understanding of baptism.

Baptism in the New Testament

In Matthew 28:19–20, the resurrected Jesus is speaking to His disciples in the moments before He ascends into heaven. He says: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Notice the command is not just to go and share the message and teaching of Jesus, but also to baptize those who become disciples. In the book of Acts, we see the disciples obeying Jesus. Note the pattern.

The disciples preach the Gospel, and then baptize those who believe (Acts 2:38, 41–42; Acts 8:12, 26–40; Acts 9:17–18; Acts 10:47–48).

So the act of baptism is a public profession of faith, a symbol of each believer's decision to trust in Christ as their Lord and Savior. And the act itself (being immersed in the water and then brought up again) is a beautiful picture of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, highlighting the end of the "old life" of the believer and the beginning of their "new life" in Christ (Romans 6:3–4). This is why we often describe baptism as "believer's baptism."

The background for other traditions

So why did things become more complicated? Where did infant baptism come from? Over time, different church traditions began to present baptism in different ways.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that it is the act of baptism itself by which we are saved. Their Catechism 1213 states: "Holy baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as Sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: Baptism is a sacrament of regeneration through water in the word."

According to this view, baptizing an infant ensures their sins are forgiven and reconciles them to God. But an infant has no capacity for realizing their sin and need for a Savior. And those baptized may have the tragically false impression that they have been saved when they have never made a personal decision to trust Christ. Furthermore, this view may imply that it doesn't matter how you live—as long as you were baptized as a baby, you are saved. This is not the teaching of Jesus on what it means to trust and follow Him.

Another belief that developed is that infant baptism is the New Testament equivalent of Old Testament circumcision (which was the sign and seal of God's covenant to the Jewish people before the

coming of Jesus Christ). Yet Jesus and His disciples never speak of this practice, and there is not one example of a baby being baptized in the New Testament.

Again, neither of these beliefs is biblical, nor is any view that suggests that if we do this or do that, we can be saved by our own efforts or earn our way to heaven. Scripture teaches: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). Salvation comes by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, not by the act of baptism.

As a definitive example, consider the thief who was on the cross beside Jesus at the crucifixion. As the thief was dying, he trusted in Jesus as Savior. And Jesus said to him, "Today you shall be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Have you been baptized as a believer?

When followers of Jesus are baptized, they declare to the whole world that they are trusting in Christ and following Him. Have you trusted in Jesus Christ? If so, then joyfully obey Jesus and be baptized as a believer. It's as simple as that. You are not being disrespectful to your family or your heritage. Don't allow pride or embarrassment to keep you from identifying yourself as a believer in Christ.

"If you confess with
your mouth that
Jesus is Lord and
believe in your heart
that God raised him
from the dead,
you will be saved."

Romans 10:9

Conclusion

THE VERDICT IS YOURS. Following Jesus Christ and growing in the Word of God is a lifelong journey. Don't be discouraged if you have doubts and questions as you read the Bible and think about these important matters. Ask God to guide you and help you.

Faith involves believing in what is unseen, but that does not mean that truth does not exist. God has revealed Himself in His Word so that you can seek Him and find Him as He promised.

In fact, God loves you so much that He created a way of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ so that your sins could be forgiven and you could have eternal life in heaven.

Have you trusted in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior?

If you are following Christ, are you growing in your faith and living a life that is obedient to God's Word?

I pray you will experience the peace, joy, and purpose that is found only in Jesus Christ. Ultimately, the choice is yours.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." — John 3:16

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." — John 8:12

"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." — Romans 10:9–10

Do you have questions about Jesus Christ? Would you like to talk to a pastor or have someone pray with you or for you? Contact us at Calvary Church at 704.543.1200 or *calvarychurch.com.*

THE VERDICT

WITH PASTOR JOHN H. MUNRO

"Where the Gospel is preached, the lives of men and women and boys and girls are transformed. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, our Lord Jesus offers us forgiveness of sins, peace with God, supernatural power for living, and a future hope for eternal life." — John H. Munro

The Verdict is a radio and podcast ministry featuring the expository Bible teaching of Pastor John Munro.



Born and raised in Scotland, John graduated from the University of Edinburgh and practiced law in Scotland before God called him to full-time ministry. He and his wife, Gudny, moved to Texas, where he attended Dallas Theological Seminary.

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On The Verdict, listeners are challenged to turn to the Bible and render a "verdict" as they consider their personal response to the truth of God's Word. John Munro presents a clear examination of Scripture, offering insight and application for all backgrounds, from those unfamiliar with the Gospel to mature believers following Christ.

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