

## ***What About...***

Evil  
Religion and Science  
Other Religions  
Evangelism and Tolerance  
The God of the Old Testament  
Jesus and Christianity  
Resurrection  
The Gnostic Gospels  
The Sins of the Church  
Forgiveness



# **SERIOUS ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS**

Participant's Guide

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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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**- ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS -**

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Craig C. Hill and Ann Schechter.

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**THE FOUNDATION FOR EVANGELISM** ([www.evangelize.org](http://www.evangelize.org)).

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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Seminary professors spend a lot of time speaking in churches. This sort of teaching is a source of great satisfaction and, occasionally, at least, some frustration. Satisfaction, because of the joy of sharing the subjects we love with interested and enthusiastic laypeople. Frustration, because we can be in only one place at a time while the need for responsible, high-quality adult Christian education seems endless.

Having considered this need, Wesley Theological Seminary created a new program, WESLEY MINISTRY NETWORK, to encourage professional theologians to assume more responsibility for educating the whole church. In the past year and a half, “WMN” produced four video-based courses that have been used in a wide range of churches throughout the U.S. and in several other countries. Our fifth course, *Serious Answers to Hard Questions*, fulfills our goal of using the best teachers regardless of their location or affiliation. Future courses now under development will move us even further toward the realization of our vision “to bring the world’s best theological education to your local church.”

The need for a “hard questions” course should be obvious to anyone who has taught a Sunday school class or led a Bible study group. Certain issues come up again and again, such as, “Why does God permit evil?” and “Are religion and science compatible?” While many people ask these and similar questions, most do not have access to thinkers who spend their lives considering them. It is our goal to make that connection.

What our speakers provide are serious answers, not pat or simple answers. Their perspectives are representative of the best of mainstream theological scholarship, and their insights are both important and enriching. Nevertheless, they do not offer the final word on their respective subjects. How could they? For now, all of us, even the most learned, “see in a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). Perhaps it is all the more important for that reason that we do our best to see as well as possible, to think as seriously as we can about serious issues.

I offer my sincere thanks to our presenters for giving selflessly to this project. Thanks, too, to Bishop Kenneth Carder, who lent his valuable time and support to this effort. Finally, let me thank *you* for participating in this course. I am keenly aware of its imperfections; still, I hope that you will find it both interesting and inspiring. As a teacher myself, I know how vital the contributions of class members are to a course. Thank you in advance for all that you will do to make this class a success.

Grace and peace,

*Craig C. Hill*

Professor of New Testament & Director, Wesley Ministry Network  
Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, D.C.



### PREPARATION

Each lesson in this Participant's Guide is divided into two parts. The first section contains a short "Preparation" section which is meant to be completed during the week prior to that class session. It contains the following elements:

► ***Connecting with Scripture***

A short Bible study related to the subject of the weekly lesson.

► ***Personal Reflection***

Questions to consider in preparation for the class session.

► ***This Week's Teacher***

An introduction to the speaker in the upcoming video.

► ***Background***

Background information, such as definitions of technical terms used in the video segment, is provided in some lessons.

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### WEEKLY CLASS SESSION

Each class session will include the following elements. It is our goal to offer resources that will be useful in a variety of settings, including providing for classes of differing lengths. If your class meets for an hour or less, your facilitator will likely select only a portion of these discussion questions and activities for use.

► ***Opening Prayer***

A prayer has been provided to open each class session.



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► **Focusing**

A brief activity designed to focus attention on an issue that is central to that class session.

► **Video Segment**

A video segment, each about half an hour in length, provides participants with a summary of the class session's concepts and topics. Because the lessons contain quite a bit of content, each video segment includes a break about halfway through, at which point the class is encouraged to discuss what it has just seen. Of course, the entire video can be watched without a pause, should that be desired. (Alternatively, classes with limited time might watch each video in two sittings, making two complete lessons.) You might wish to jot notes in this Participant's Guide as you view the video.

**Points to Ponder** are taken from the video lesson and reproduced in the Participant's Guide to serve as a basis for discussion. In many cases, these are condensations or summaries of a much longer quotation. Points to Ponder are followed by related discussion questions.

► **Activity**

Each class session offers an optional activity related to the study topic. These activities vary and may involve individual work, small group discussion or entire class participation.

► **For Further Discussion**

Each session will include discussion questions intended to help you delve deeper into your own beliefs, especially by considering the difference some idea or issue might make in your life.

► **Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

To close the class, we suggest that participants share their "joys and concerns," which can lead to a time of concluding prayer.

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## **SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

Supplemental information about the topics covered in this course can be found at the course website, [www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com/sa](http://www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com/sa).

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# **SERIOUS ANSWERS TO HARD QUESTIONS**

## **LESSONS**



### **Connecting with Scripture:**

Read the following two passages and answer the questions in the space provided.

*Genesis 3:1-8 contains the famous description of “the fall” of humanity in the Garden of Eden:*

**Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden’?” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”**

**So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.**

- ☐ What would you say is the purpose of this story? Do you know any other stories that serve the same purpose?
  
- ☐ What is the serpent’s strategy? Why is it effective? Does this in any way parallel your own experience of temptation?
  
- ☐ Do you think that evil is an external or an internal force—or both, or neither?

*Romans 8:35-39 contains Paul's ringing declaration of faith in God's ultimate triumph over evil:*

**Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

- ☐ The apostle Paul was very well acquainted with suffering, as his list above ("hardship, distress, persecution...") indicates. What would your equivalent list contain? What are things that might seem, at least on the surface, to threaten to separate you from God?
  
- ☐ What does Paul mean by saying that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"? Are you "more than a conqueror"?
  
- ☐ Why does Paul have this hope? What keeps him going?

**Personal Reflection – Session 1: Evil**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What is “evil”?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Are suffering and evil the same thing? If not, how do you distinguish between them?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What explanations have you heard for the existence of evil in the world? How persuasive do you find them to be?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. What is the most evil thing that has ever happened to you or to a loved one? Can you understand anything about why it happened? How did you feel about God in the midst of the trouble? Do you feel the same way now?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How does God respond to evil? How do you know?

## ***This Week's Video Lesson***

### ***Your Host:***

**Kenneth Carder**



A graduate of East Tennessee State University (B.S.), Wesley Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and Vanderbilt Divinity School (D.Min), Dr. Carder, Professor of Pastoral Formation and Director for the Center for Excellence in Ministry at Duke Divinity School, served as Bishop of the Mississippi and Nashville Areas of the United Methodist Church. Prior to that he served as a pastor in Tennessee, Virginia, and Maryland. He is the author of *A Bishop's Reflections*, *Living Our Beliefs*. During the 2000-04 Quadrennium, Bishop Carder served as president of the General Board of Discipleship and chair of the Council of Bishops Committee on Theological Education.

### ***This Week's Teacher:***

**R. Kendall Soulen**



R. Kendall Soulen is Professor of Systematic Theology at Wesley Theological Seminary. He earned a B.A. at Yale University, an M.Div. at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and a Ph.D. at Yale. Soulen has written extensively, especially in the area of Jewish-Christian relations. He is the author of *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, co-author of the *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, editor of *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish Christian Relations*, and co-editor of *God and Human Dignity*. Soulen is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards and serves as an editor or board member of four academic journals. He is ordained in the United Methodist Church.

## ***Class Session 1: Evil***

### **Opening Prayer**

*Read the prayer together as a class.*

**O God, we bring before you this day our doubts and fears about evil and its power in our world. We struggle to reconcile a good creation and the presence of so much wickedness within it. We wonder how we can affirm a God of power and love who does not stop evil from invading our lives. We ask you to open our minds to a fuller understanding of your nature and our hearts to a deeper experience of your presence, even in the midst of suffering. We ask this in the name of Jesus, in whom love and suffering meet. Amen.**

### **Focusing**

*During this first class session:*

- Introduce yourself.
- Describe your own particular “obstacles to faith.”
- Describe the things that encourage you to have faith.
- Share with others what you hope to learn by the end of the course.

### **Video**

*Quotations/summaries from the video are provided in the “Points to Ponder” sections below together with related discussion questions.*



**Segment One****Points to Ponder:****Withstanding Evil**

"There is a big difference between understanding evil and withstanding evil, and that distinction goes right to the very heart of Christian faith. Christians don't claim that their faith enables them to answer every question about evil that has ever been posed or to understand all the evil that they encounter in life. Rather, the claim of Christian faith is that we are able to put our trust in a power that is able to withstand evil—and that is able to help *us* to withstand evil, even when we can't understand it."

**For Discussion:**

In the book of Job, the righteous hero protests against unjust suffering, but he never really gets an answer as to why it is happening to him. What he gets is an overwhelming experience of the power of God, before which he bows in humility and acceptance (Job 38-41; 42:2-6). If God empowers you to withstand evil that you still do not understand, is that enough?

**Points to Ponder:****The Shadow Side of Creation**

"The world that God has made is a world that includes both the sun and the shadow, both the seasons of spring and summer, where life flourishes, and also fall and winter, where life becomes dormant and quiet and even dies. The world God has made includes the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of some forms of suffering; but this suffering may contribute in the long run to our spiritual growth."

**For Discussion:**

Does Karl Barth's concept of "the shadow side of creation" help you make sense of suffering?

Do you think God allows us to suffer so that we can grow in faith or learn something we need to learn? Does it serve some other purpose?

**Points to Ponder:****Covenant**

"The promise of Christian faith has never been that the faithful will never experience the shadow side of creation. The promise of Christian faith is that in the good times and in the bad, in the light and in the shadow, the Lord is a faithful God who keeps covenant with His people."

**For Discussion:**

A covenant is a solemn and binding agreement between two or more parties. Are you in a covenant relationship with God? If so, what is that covenant? What are its promises and obligations? Can it be broken? If so, what are the consequences?

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***Segment Two*****Points to Ponder:****The Evil Within**

"The evil that threatens us most radically is not the evil that is without, but rather the evil that is within. Jesus teaches his followers to pray: Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Jesus knows that the evil that threatens his disciples is often the evil that threatens them from within their own hearts."

**For Discussion:**

Who is responsible for human rebellion against God? What are the pros and cons of personifying evil as Satan, the Devil?

The letter of James says, "One is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death" (James 1:14-15). Do you agree with this perspective?

**Points to Ponder:****Free Will and Consequences**

"Once Adam and Eve introduce evil into the world, they initiate a chain of unhappy events that they are no longer able to control. Ultimately, from the Christian perspective, evil is a power for which human beings are responsible, but having introduced it, they are no longer able to deliver themselves from its destructive influence in their lives."

**For Discussion:**

What are the limits of human freedom? For what actions are we *not* responsible? What do we—and don't we—control?

**Points to Ponder:****Beyond Evil**

"The story of Christian faith is not only about how God suffers with us in the midst of evil, but how God is also able to take us and transform us and lead us to something yet better. Christian faith is not only about coping with evil, but ultimately going beyond it, triumphing over it by the power of the resurrection."

**For Discussion:**

How do you respond to the description of God willing suffering "not in the evil, but in the good that nevertheless will ultimately triumph over that evil"?

Have you ever experienced the resurrection power of God to bring good out of evil? Have you seen or heard of others experiencing it? What are some especially noteworthy examples?

**Points to Ponder:****Jesus as the "Second Adam"**

"Jesus Christ is presented with temptation, but unlike Adam and Eve, at every point, Jesus Christ lives the life that God intends."

He resists temptation and lives in trust and obedience toward God. Jesus lives in a sin-sick world, in the midst of human wickedness, in a way that remains faithful to God; and he instructs his disciples to live as he does, not by returning evil for evil, but by persisting in goodness."

**For Discussion:**

Respond to this further comment by Dr. Soulen: "The hijackers of 9/11 were willing to take their own lives in order that others, no matter how innocent, might be killed. Jesus Christ was willing to give his own life, in order that others, no matter how guilty, might have life."

Have you ever confronted evil by persisting in goodness? Was it an effective strategy?  
Is *effectiveness* even a proper test of such a strategy?

**Activity**

*In small groups, read aloud Ecclesiastes 3:1-10:*

**"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace."**

How does the perspective of Ecclesiastes fit with your understanding of evil?

What "season" is it in your life?

**For Further Discussion**

- 1) What important points do you think have been missed in this discussion of evil? What would you have added to the video?
  
- 2) Why is the existence of evil an insurmountable obstacle to faith to some people but not to others? Why does the same experience (for example, the Holocaust or a devastating natural disaster) produce both atheists and believers? What is the “X factor” that determines who is which?
  
- 3) In a number of the Psalms (e.g., 17; 22; 44; 64; 73 and 88), the author expresses frustration or even anger with God for not correcting injustices. What does their presence in the Bible suggest to you? How might such Psalms provide a resource for your own struggle with evil?

**Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*The creation account of Genesis 1 (here verses 1-5; 20-21, and 26-31) is one of the Bible's best-known passages:*

**In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light;" and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.**

**And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.**

**Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."**

**God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.**

- ☐ Genesis 1 repeatedly affirms that creation is "good." This is in contrast to some ancient religions that regarded the material universe as either an accident or an evil that needed to be escaped. How might a view of creation as inherently good affect one's perspective on science?
- ☐ How might the creation account of Genesis 1 be a positive resource for believers today? How might it be a problem?

*Psalm 8:3-9 is a well-known song of praise to God as Creator:*

**When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

- ☐ How does the psalmist imagine humanity's relationship to creation? To the Creator?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ How has your experience of nature influenced your understanding of God?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ What does it mean for humanity to exercise "dominion over the works of God's hands" in an age of water pollution, global warming, and the extinction of whole species?


**Personal Reflection – Session 2: Religion and Science**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. Do you typically think of religion and science as being in tension or in harmony with one another? Why?
2. In what ways does your knowledge of science inform your religious faith?
3. To what extent do your religious convictions inform your opinions about how scientific knowledge should be used (e.g. with regard to reproductive or environmental issues)?
4. What are the sources and limitations of scientific knowledge? Of religious knowledge?
5. How are scientific truth and religious truth different? For you, is one more important than the other?



***This Week's Teacher:***

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>John Polkinghorne</b></p> 	<p>Dr. Polkinghorne is an Anglican priest, the past President of Queens' College, Cambridge University, a former Professor of Mathematical Physics at Cambridge, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. After a number of years as a distinguished Cambridge professor, Polkinghorne resigned his chair in physics to study for the Anglican priesthood. Having served for several years in parish ministry, he returned to Cambridge to serve as President of Queen's College. During the same time period, he wrote a series of books on the compatibility of religion and science. These include <i>Science and Creation</i>, and most recently, <i>Science and Providence</i> and <i>The Faith of a Physicist</i>. His earlier scientific works include <i>The Analytic S-Matrix</i> (with Eden, Landshoff and Olive) and <i>Models of High Energy Processes</i>. Dr. Polkinghorne was the recipient of the 2002 Templeton Prize in Science and Religion.</p>
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***Background to This Week's Video Presentation:***

<p><b>Anthropic Principle</b></p>	<p>From the Greek <i>anthropos</i>, “human,” as used in this video, it is the idea that the universe is structured in such a way as to make likely complex, carbon-based life, such as human beings.</p>
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## ***Class Session 2: Religion and Science***

### **Opening Prayer**

Creator of the Universe, the whole earth is full of your glory. May we be open to the evolution within us of new and broader understandings of that glory. May we delight in the truth about our world that is revealed by science, because all truth is your truth. May we also let religious truths guide the ways in which we apply the truths of science, so that they may be a blessing to our world and not a curse. Help us, source of all life, to treasure life in all of its forms and to relate to it according to your will and purposes. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:*

Why does the issue of the relationship between religion and science continually resurface in public debate?  
What hangs in the balance?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **How and Why**

"Science and religion are looking at different levels of truth, different dimensions of reality. Science is essentially asking the question of *how* things happen, what is the process of the world. But there's another question you can ask about what's going on: the question of *why* things are happening. Religion asks if there is meaning and a purpose at work in the world. You can ask and answer both of those questions about the same thing."

**For Discussion:**

How would you describe the difference between scientific and religious truth?

Why do people want to understand “why”? Is it enough simply to know “how”?

What should be the attitude of religious people toward scientific findings that seem to overturn their religious conceptions?

**Points to Ponder:****A World in which Creatures Make Themselves**

"No doubt God could have created the world ready-made with a snap of the divine fingers, but God has done something cleverer than that. In bringing into being an evolving creation, God has made a world in which creatures can make themselves. God's creation is not a sort of divine puppet theater. The gift of love is always the gift of freedom. God allows creatures to explore and bring to birth the deep-seated fruitfulness and potentiality with which the world has been endowed. Because evolution is really a sort of shuffling exploration of potentiality, though that will bring to birth great fruitfulness, there will also be ragged edges and blind alleys."

**For Discussion:**

Do you find it plausible to regard evolution as an expression of God's creativity and bounty?

What are the implications of this way of thinking for belief in God as Creator? For example, did God willingly create a universe that would produce creatures such as humans? What about the “ragged edges and blind alleys”?

What does it mean for creation itself to have freedom?

**Points to Ponder:****The Shadow Side**

“A world in which creatures make themselves is a great good but it has a necessary cost, a shadow side. The engine which has driven the evolution of life here on earth has been genetic mutation, bringing into being new forms of life. But if germ cells are to be able to mutate and produce new forms of life, it's inevitable that other cells, body cells, will be able to mutate, and sometimes that will make them malignant. You can't have one without the other.

In other words, the fact that there is cancer in the world, which is undoubtedly an anguishing fact about the world, is not however a gratuitous fact; it's not something that a creator who was a bit more competent and a bit less callous could easily have eliminated. It is the shadow side, the necessary cost, of a creation in which creatures are able to make themselves.”

**For Discussion:**

As it was last week, Karl Barth's idea of “the shadow side of creation” is used by our speaker to help to understand the presences of evil, in this case, cancer. Most of us have lost loved ones to cancer. Does this explanation help?

Given this explanation, is it proper to say that God “took” someone or that it was “their time” to go?

Is the cost of creation worth its price? Who can make that judgment?

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**Segment Two****Points to Ponder:****Mathematical Beauty and Scientific Reality**

“There is a reason within, our mathematical thoughts, and a reason without, the deep structure of the world, [and they] fit together perfectly. Now why should that be? It's very strange and surely significant. Science is very happy that that's the way it is, and exploits the opportunity that it offers, but it doesn't of itself explain why mathematics is, as another Nobel Prize winner

once said, so “unreasonably effective” in explaining the physical world. But religious belief does explain that, because religious belief says that the reason within, the thoughts of our minds, and the reason without, the structure of the world, have a common origin in the will of God the creator, the rational mind of God, who is the basis both of our mental life and of the physical world of which we are a part.”

**For Discussion:**

Have you ever delighted in the beauty of an idea?  
Why did you respond in that way?

Do you agree that our ability to reason is evidence  
for the existence of a rational Creator?

**Points to Ponder:****Creation is Special**

“This world is a creation endowed by its Creator with just the properties that have allowed its history to be fruitful and allowed you and me to exist. Certainly, we should understand why the world is so special. We shouldn’t just shrug our shoulders and say we’re here because we’re here. It’s a deep question that demands an answer.”

**For Discussion:**

John Polkinghorne relates the story of physicist Fred Hoyle, who determined the process by which carbon is manufactured by stars and concluded that the universe is a “put-up job,” not an accident. What else is there within creation that strikes you as being unlikely to be accidental?

How do you respond to the idea that you are literally made of stardust?

Is a capital “I” Intelligence behind the working of the world an adequate way to describe God? What does your response tell you about the contributions science and religion can make towards answering questions about human origins?

**Points to Ponder:****Being “Two-Eyed”**

“I like sometimes to say that I’m ‘two eyed.’ I look at the world with the eye of science, and I look at the world with the eye of religion. I need to use both those eyes. And I believe that binocular vision enables me to see more and to see more deeply than I would be able to do with either eye on its own. Science and religion are friends and not foes, and I am very happy to enjoy some of the fruits of that friendship.”

**For Discussion:**

Stereoscopic vision (that is, seeing with two eyes) allows us to perceive depth. In what sense might that be true metaphorically as well as physically?

What does the world look like when viewed only through one “eye,” that is, only through the lens of religion and only through the lens of science?

How might religion and science counterbalance or even correct one another?

**Activity**

Choose a controversial issue (abortion, homosexuality, ecology, etc.) and look at it with both your scientific eye and your religious eye.

How does one vision inform the other? Where do you stand on the issue? Has your scientific or your religious perspective been more influential? (In other words, what drives your moral decision making?) Is there a way these perspectives can work harmoniously together to produce positive action on the issue you have chosen?

**For Further Discussion**

On All Saints Day in 1755, an earthquake struck Lisbon, Portugal, causing churches to collapse onto worshipers, killing 50,000 people. Voltaire cited this event as evidence for atheism. Austin Farrer, an Oxford theologian, had a different perspective, which Polkinghorne quotes in one of his books, *Quarks, Chaos, and Christianity*: Just as God grants free will to humans in the area of moral choice, so God grants “free will” to nature. The elements of the Earth's crust should behave according to their nature. They are allowed to act in their own way, just as we are allowed to act in ours.\*

Do you find this perspective on natural disasters to be a useful integration of science and religion?

**Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

\* John Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity. Questions to Science and Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), p. 46.

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*The Bible includes both exclusive passages, which seem to limit God's care to a single group, and inclusive passages, which tell of God's concern for all people. Examples of exclusive texts:*

*Deuteronomy 7:1-11*

**"When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him. He does not delay but repays in their own person those who reject him. Therefore, observe diligently the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that I am commanding you today."**

*John 14:6-9*

**Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."**

*Acts 4:10-13*

**"[T]hen know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone the builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."**



*Examples of inclusive passages:**Deuteronomy 10:17-19*

**“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”**

*Micah 6:8*

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

*Matthew 8:5-13*

**When Jesus entered Capernaum, a [Roman] centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress." And he said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion answered, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go," and he goes, and to another, "Come," and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this," and the slave does it." When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And to the centurion Jesus said, "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant was healed in that hour.**

*Luke 10:25-37*

**Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."**

*Romans 2:12-16*

**All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.**


- ☐ Which if any of these texts have influenced you? Why these?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ What do you think might be at stake in the exclusive texts? The inclusive ones?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ Are all of these passages compatible? Why or why not?

### ***Personal Reflection – Session 3: Other Religions***

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What percentage of the population of the United States would you estimate is Christian? Of the population of the world?
2. Do you know people who practice religions other than Christianity? How much have you learned from them about their religions? Did anything you learned surprise you?
3. Have you shared your faith with people from other religious traditions? If so, how did you do it and how was your sharing received?
4. Given a spectrum of opinions about other religions that runs from "they are satanic deceptions" to "they are all equally valid paths to God," where would you position yourself?

***This Week's Teacher:***

<p><b>Sathianathan Clarke</b></p> 	<p>Dr. Clarke is Professor of Theology, Culture, and Mission at Wesley Theological Seminary. He came to Wesley in 2005 from his native India, where he was Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at The United Theological College in Bangalore. He also served as Visiting Professor of World Christianity at Harvard Divinity School. He is the author of <i>Dalits &amp; Christianity: Subaltern Religion &amp; Liberation Theology in India</i> and co-editor of <i>Religious Conversions in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings</i>. Dr. Clarke holds a Th.D. from Harvard University, an S.T.M. from Yale University, a B.D. from United Theological College, Bangalore, and M.A. and B.A. degrees from the University of Madras. He is an ordained priest in the Church of South India and has worked with untouchable communities (Dalits) in India and Christian parishes in the Boston area.</p>
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***Background to This Week's Video Presentation:***

<p><b>Glocal</b></p>	<p>“Global” + “Local;” “a sociological term that attempts to capture a new web of relationships between global and local forms of the world that have come together to create a radically new social, economic, cultural and religious situation.”</p>
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## ***Class Session 3: Other Religions***

### **Opening Prayer**

Gracious and loving God, we find ourselves in an uncomfortably diverse world. We no longer have the luxury of thinking of those who worship you in different ways as interesting and exotic foreigners. Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Sikhs own stores in which we shop and live in houses near our own. They attend school with our children, and sometimes our children marry them. Grant us the grace to relate to those who do not share our faith in ways that will be both appreciative of their traditions and true to our experience of you in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In pairs, do the following for five minutes:*

Describe briefly a significant encounter you have had with a person of another faith.

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **The Christian and the Islamic Call to Prayer**

"It was amazing that something that I took as an encounter from another religion, which was threatening, full of disturbance and irritation, suddenly was turned into an invitation to start my day in the presence of God. God was calling me through another religious tradition to start my first waking moment with thanksgiving, honor, praise, and submission."

**For Discussion:**

How do you honestly feel about the culturally diverse world in which we now live?

What do you find difficult to accept or even to tolerate in another religion? What do you find admirable?

Have you ever experienced a "spark of that light we behold in Jesus" in the context of another religion? If so, how did you feel about that experience?

**Points to Ponder:****Jesus and the "Other"**

"In Jesus Christ we see an embodiment of graciousness and compassion in dealing with all concrete otherness. Jesus brought a presence of respect and hospitality wherever he encountered persons and communities that were different. He pronounced judgment much more often on those who were like him and were at the center of his own beloved religion than he did against other religious persons and communities. Rather than moving away from others, Jesus draws closer to them. This movement of Jesus from hostility to hospitality also involves being open to learning from others that were not thought of as having elements of knowledge and truth by the religiously learned of his day."

**For Discussion:**

What examples of Jesus' "graciousness and compassion in dealing with otherness" can you recall?

Citing one such example, what would you consider a modern-day equivalent of that story?

Why do encounters between people of differing faiths so often result in fear and even violence?

Would ridding ourselves of religion solve the problem? Why or why not?

**Points to Ponder:****Inter-Religious Relationships Need Truth *and* Love**

"The only principle of inter-religious relationship is truth, and the only way for it to succeed is love."

— Swami Abhishiktananda

**For Discussion**

What does this statement mean? Is it correct?

What might it mean to balance truth and love in our dealings with other people?

Is there truth in other religions? If so, what kind? Theological? Moral? Psychological? Social?

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***Segment Two*****Points to Ponder:****We Are Witnesses, Not Judges**

"My whole place in the transaction of grace gifted in Jesus Christ is that of a witness, not that of a judge."

— Lesslie Newbigin

**For Discussion**

Think of a time you have felt the power of God at work in your life. How might thinking of yourself as a witness rather than a judge help you share that experience with someone who follows another religious tradition?

Is there salvation in other religions? What do you mean by "salvation"? Is there a way of defining salvation that is both true to Christianity and also open to finding truth in other religious traditions?

**Points to Ponder:****Mission**

"Mission as a love affair of God with human beings and a love force to reconcile human beings with God and each other must be proclaimed and promoted. Mission as a love force also is open to the possibility that God may preserve the ways of love embedded in other religious faiths. Mission is not an elimination of religious others; it is a sharing of what has been concretely and astoundingly gifted in love to Christians."

**For Discussion**

In this "post-colonial" era, mission has a bad name, often being associated with political and cultural imperialism. Is "mission" salvageable?

How might today's missionaries avoid the pitfalls that beset some past missionary efforts?

Can you cite examples of Christian missions that are or were "a love force to reconcile human beings with God and each other"? What distinguishes these ministries?

**Points to Ponder:****Walk the Walk *and* Talk the Talk**

"Virtuous living alone cannot communicate our witness to the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Sharing by word is recalling the object of our joy, love and freedom. It becomes an ongoing invitation both for the listener and the speaker to the high calling of God for each of us in the world. Such sharing should be done with *bold humility*. Bold humility shares as well as receives, speaks as well as listens, serves as well as accepts hospitality, and transforms as well as modifies all things for the sake of the extension of God's kingdom and the glory of the Triune One."

**For Discussion:**

Do you agree that virtuous living alone cannot adequately communicate our witness to the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?



What would speaking about Christian faith with “bold humility” sound like? When might it happen?

### **Activity**

On one of his visits to the United States, the Dalai Lama was scheduled to attend a large inter-faith prayer service at a Roman Catholic church. When the organizational committee came to check out the space, they said it would be fine, but they asked that the crucifix be removed from the front of the church. The priest said that would not be possible. He told them that it was because of the church’s understanding of the openness of Christ to all people that the invitation had been extended, and that the congregation was welcoming the visitors in the name of Jesus. They did not feel that they needed to deny Christ to open the door to others. Their point was accepted, and the gathering was held “in the arms of Jesus.”

Do you regard the priest’s action as an expression of bold humility?

How would you characterize the request of the organizational committee? What about their response to the priest’s argument?

At what point does your church draw a line on the use of its facilities? For example, what expressions of religion might not be allowed? Who determines where the boundaries are? Why and on what basis?

### **For Further Discussion**

Dr. Clarke spoke of a new “glocality,” the merging of the global and the local. A common example is phoning a local number but actually being connected to a service representative in another country.

How has “glocality” affected our perceptions of other religions? How do you think it has affected their perceptions of us?

How would you predict the relationship between world religions will change over the next fifty years?

How ought the emerging “glocality” affect the church’s sense of its place and purpose in the world?

**Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*The latter chapters of Isaiah speak of Israel's becoming a light to the nations. This is Isaiah 60:1-3:*

**Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.**

- ☐ What "light" does the prophet challenge Israel to share with the nations?
  
- ☐ What status does the author assume for those outside of Israel? Do you agree?

*In Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 we find a famous comparison between unfruitful and fruitful evangelism:*

**Jesus told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"**

**"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."**

- ☐ This parable does not focus on the sower. What might that imply?
  
- ☐ What sort of "soil" are you? Has this changed over time? Why?

*Matthew 28:18-20 contains the so-called “Great Commission” of Jesus to his disciples:*

**Jesus came and said to them [the disciples], "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."**

- ☐ Does the Great Commission inform your own sense of purpose? Why or why not?
  
- ☐ Is it easier or harder to fulfill the Great Commission today than it was in the first century?

*1 Peter 3:13-16 speaks of the need for believers to explain the reasons for their faith:*

**Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.**


- ☐ What do you need to know to “make your defense...for the hope that is in you”?
  
- ☐ Can you think of someone who speaks to others about faith “with gentleness and reverence”? How do they do it?

### ***Personal Reflection – Session 4: Evangelism and Tolerance***

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What do you think of when you hear the words “evangelism” and “evangelist”?
2. Are there different kinds of evangelism? If so, which do you prefer? Which do you reject? Why?
3. Has anyone ever shared his or her faith with you? How would you characterize that experience?
4. With whom would you be willing to share your faith? With whom wouldn’t you share it?

***This Week's Teacher:***

<p><b>Scott Jones</b></p> 	<p>Scott Jones is Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Kansas. Jones attended Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University and served as a pastor in Texas churches for eleven years. During his local church ministry, Jones was adjunct faculty at Perkins, teaching United Methodist history. In 1997, Jones returned to Perkins as McCreless Professor of Evangelism and served as director of the Center for the Advanced Study and Practice of Evangelism. He has spent the past seven years preaching and teaching around the United States, Europe, Africa and Asia. He has written extensively on the subject of evangelism and mission. Jones was elected to the episcopacy in 2005.</p>
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***Background to This Week's Video Presentation:***

<b>Apologetics</b>	From the Greek <i>apologia</i> , “defense;” the branch of theology that concerns the intellectual defense of the faith.
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***A Note for Classes Outside the U.S.:***

In this week's video, Bishop Jones addresses an American audience, both commending American pluralism and critiquing the increasing isolation of American life. If you live outside the United States, please take this opportunity to compare and contrast your own situation with that described by Jones. Are traditional forms of community also under assault in your country? Why or why not? What does tolerance mean, for example, in a society in which Christians are a small (and perhaps even persecuted) minority? What assumptions does the speaker make about evangelism that do not seem to apply to your situation? What is said that transfers well to your context?

## ***Class Session 4: Evangelism and Tolerance***

### **Opening Prayer**

Loving and generous God, in you “we live and move and have our being.” The blessing of your presence in our lives brings us joy, regardless of the circumstances of each day. You give us a sense of purpose, even in the midst of frustration and disappointment. In you and in community with others, we find the hope and courage we need to face life's problems, to make necessary changes in our behavior, and to do the works of justice and mercy that are a part of making your kingdom come. Help us find effective ways of sharing this good news with those who are living in hopelessness and despair or whose lives simply feel empty. Help us know how to proclaim your offer of abundant living in ways that will attract people to your love and service. We ask for this guidance in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss your answers to the “Personal Reflections” questions above (page 43).*

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **From One Beggar to Another**

“If you as a Christian have found the ultimate meaning of life, if you as a Christian have a relationship with Jesus Christ that has given your life great meaning and purpose and provided you with a community of faith in your congregation...then don't you

want to share that with other people? You see, evangelism deep down is how we share the good news we've received, and the way of life that that's shaped in us, with people who really need that. D.T. Niles, the great evangelist from Sri Lanka, put it this way: 'Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where he's found food.'

"We as the church are in the business of forming community. Christianity is good for you; it's good for people's lives because it gives them meaning and purpose and direction, as well as limiting the sort of bad stuff we sinful human beings are likely to do. So it is that evangelism is a kind of community-building exercise."

**For Discussion:**

If we engage in evangelism as sharing food rather than as selling a product, what forms will it take? Are there methods we should avoid?

What prevents us from inviting others into our communities of faith?

Is your church a truly healthy and friendly community? What might you do to make it more so?

**Points to Ponder:****What is Tolerance?**

"Tolerance does in fact mean a respect for other people and a willingness to allow them to say no. When we invite somebody to a party at our house, we hope they'll say yes. But if they say no, we don't browbeat them or call them bad names or demonize them in some way. So it is that when we invite people into the Christian faith, we might indeed get a 'no' answer. And that's got to be okay. That's what being tolerant is all about. It's respectful of other people's choices."

**For Discussion:**

How would you define tolerance? Why is tolerance necessary? Are there limits to tolerance?



Is it really possible to believe that the world requires the Christian message and yet to be tolerant of the rejections of that message that we get from family or friends?

Where do you see examples of tolerant evangelism?

Are there valid reasons for us *not* to tell some people about our faith?

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### ***Segment Two***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **The Extreme Center**

"Christianity ought to stand in the extreme center. On the one hand, we Christians have a commitment to the ultimate truth of the Gospel. And yet we live in a world where there are lots of other ultimate truths being proclaimed. And so it is that we have to engage in the dialogues to understand these other versions better. At the same time that we need to engage in a sort of apologetics, that's the technical word for explaining ourselves. We need to be prepared to offer an account of our faith to other people throughout the world."

#### **For Discussion:**

Ought Christians to make claims about "ultimate truth"? If so, what are those claims? When might some believers claim to know too much?

Is it possible to make truth claims humbly?

How does your church engage in dialogue with those who affirm ultimate truths that are not Christian? How might it do it better?

What would it take to be prepared "to offer an account of our faith to other people"? How much does someone need to know to be able to talk sensibly and effectively about Christian faith? Does your church adequately prepare people for this task?

**Points to Ponder:****Churches as Mission Stations**

"Evangelism is the whole range of loving, intentional activities that help people enter into Christian discipleship in response to God's wonderful reign. God's grace is at work trying to save every human being, and God has decided to use you and me. That's why in a tolerant society churches cannot be simply gathering places for those who already know the answers. They've got to be mission stations to reach out and make a difference to their societies."

"When there are lots of different ideologies and philosophies and religions competing in the marketplace of ideas, we must respect and be tolerant of all people. At the same time, we must never shrink back. I think the church of Jesus Christ must be confident. We've got great news to share, and if we don't share that news with a needy world, can God say, 'Yes, you really have loved your neighbors well?'"

**For Discussion:**

Paul says that "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6b) and James argues that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17, 26). What works of love is your church doing to spread the Christian faith? What more should you do?

What does it mean to say that "God's grace is at work trying to save every human being"? What is grace? Salvation?

**Activity**

Imagine that your church has for the past decade sponsored a daycare center. Apart from the fact that the daycare uses the church's facilities, there is little that distinguishes it from the dozen or so secular daycare programs in the area. Some members of the church have begun to say that the daycare program should become explicitly Christian in its content, and that its mission should, in part, be evangelistic.

Briefly role play a meeting of that church's education committee, assigning the following roles to class members:

Moderator

Those favoring the change (including parents)

Those opposing the change (including parents)

Undecided church members

What did your discussion teach you about the mission of your own church?

### **For Further Discussion**

How important do you think church architecture and art are as agents of evangelism? What about music?

Where are the points of disagreement within the church with respect to the use of art (e.g., modern vs. traditional music)? Why are these debates so often heated?

How might your church do a better job of using art to invite others into your community of faith?

### **Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*According to one common stereotype, the Old Testament presents us with a religion of judgment, fear, violence, legalism, and nationalism. This view is based on texts such as the following:*

*Deuteronomy 20:10-14:*

**“When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace. If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it; and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, livestock, and everything else in the town, all its spoil. You may enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you.”**

*Deuteronomy 32:39-41:*

**“See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear: As I live forever, when I whet my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment; I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will repay those who hate me.”**

*Leviticus 7:19-21:*

**“Flesh [meat] that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten; it shall be burned up. As for other flesh, all who are clean may eat such flesh. But those who eat flesh from the Lord's sacrifice of well-being while in a state of uncleanness shall be cut off from their kin. When any one of you touches any unclean thing—human uncleanness or an unclean animal or any unclean creature—and then eats flesh from the Lord's sacrifice of well-being, you shall be cut off from your kin.”**

*Ezra 10:10-12:*

**Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, "It is so; we must do as you have said.”**

*A different selection of texts, however, can yield a different view of the Old Testament and its God:*

*1 Kings 8:41-43:*

**[Solomon prayed,] "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you..."**

*Psalms 40:6-10:*

**Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord. I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation."**

*Deuteronomy 6:4-6:*

**"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart."**

*Leviticus 19:18:*

**"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."**

*Psalms 23:*

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.**


- ☐ Are all of these passages compatible? Why or why not?
  
- ☐ Which texts most closely align with your own perception of the Old Testament? of God?

**Personal Reflection – Session 5: The God of the Old Testament**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What are your favorite biblical passages and where are they found?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What is your experience of the Old Testament? Is it in any way different from your experience of the New Testament?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What is your understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments? Are they equally important and authoritative?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How do you respond to the characterization of the God of the Old Testament as a God of wrath and the God of the New Testament as a God of love?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. Does it matter anymore that Jesus was a Jew? Why or why not?

**This Week's Teacher:**

<p><b>Amy-Jill Levine</b></p> 	<p>Amy-Jill Levine is the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of New Testament Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Dr. Levine also served as the Sara Lawrence Lightfoot Assoc. Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College. Holding a B.A. from Smith College and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Duke University, Levine has been awarded grants from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Her numerous publications address Christian Origins, Jewish-Christian Relations, and Sexuality, Gender, and the Bible. Her current projects include the editing of the fourteen-volume series, <i>The Feminist Companions to the New Testament and Early Christian Writing</i> (Continuum/Sheffield University Press).</p>
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**Background to This Week's Video Presentation:**

<b>Canon</b>	A Greek word that means a “rule” or a “standard of measurement.” A scriptural canon is collection of writings that is officially regarded as sacred and authoritative by a religious community and in relationship to which all matters of theology, ethics, worship and organization are judged.
<b>Lectionary</b>	A book listing weekly scripture readings used for worship services.
<b>Marcion</b>	Marcion was a second-century Christian teacher who concluded that the God of the Jews was a weak and foolish god and therefore not the God of Jesus. Marcion therefore rejected the Old Testament as Christian scripture. The term “Marcionism” is also used more broadly to describe attempts by Christians to “de-Judaize” Christianity.
<b>Supersessionism</b>	The belief that the church has superseded or taken over the place of Israel.
<b>Torah</b>	A Hebrew word that means “teaching;” formally, the Old Testament Law (the first five books of the Old Testament); or the whole of Old Testament scripture.

## ***Class Session 5: The God of the Old Testament***

### **Opening Prayer**

**Blessed are you, God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus. Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Forgive us, Lord, if we have neglected or belittled any part of your word. We have placed our faith in the Messiah of Israel. May we not disdain his heritage. May we respond to your call for love and justice as it comes to us in witnesses both Old and New. Amen.**

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:*

What images, stories, or verses come to mind when you think of the Old Testament? Why do these stand out?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **Marcion (2<sup>nd</sup> Century)**

"Marcion identified himself as a Christian but he came to the conclusion that the God of the Old Testament could not possibly be the same as the God of the New Testament. Marcion concluded that the God of Genesis was a weak and inept, foolish God who couldn't even find Adam and Eve in the garden. This God sought to keep Adam and Eve from obtaining knowledge. This God was so wrathful that he destroyed the entire world in a flood. This was a God who ruled by law rather than by love. Obviously, this couldn't be the same as Jesus' God, the God of love and compassion and mercy. And obviously therefore, according to Marcion, the Old Testament, the Bible of the synagogue, could not possibly be the Bible of the church. It could not be sacred scripture."



**For Discussion:**

Why do you suppose Marcion won so many followers? What is attractive about his position? What is problematic?

What might be the consequences of following Marcion in rejecting the Old Testament as a source of spiritual instruction?

Do you see any signs of modern-day Marcionism in the church today?

**Points to Ponder:****Jesus and the Law**

“Jesus himself clearly saw the scriptures of Israel as having ongoing value. He states at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, ‘Don’t think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets’ (the Torah and the prophets, called *Nevi'im*, in Hebrew). ‘I’ve come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them.’”

**For Discussion:**

In what ways does it matter that Jesus was Jewish?

The attitude of both Jesus and Paul toward the law of Israel is the subject of ongoing debate. In what ways did they observe the law? Intensify it? How, if at all, did they criticize it? What do your answers have to do with your own relationship to the Old Testament law?

**Points to Ponder:****The Old in the New**

"The entire New Testament canon mentions the Old Testament explicitly as well as implicitly, directly as well as by allusion. The Scriptures of Israel echo throughout the New Testament canon. The New Testament texts take on additional meaning when they are placed in conversation with their Old Testament antecedents."

**For Discussion:**

Does the Old Testament have value for Christians beyond that of pointing to Jesus as the Messiah?

Are some parts of the Old Testament more relevant and important for us today? If so, which?

What evidence can you cite for or against the claim that the New Testament is superior to the Old?

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***Segment Two*****Points to Ponder:*****Wrath and Love***

"What is important regarding the scriptures is that although they give us pictures of a God of wrath, they also give us pictures of a God of love. And what's important is that we don't stop simply with the word of scripture because that would be a form of biblical idolatry. Scripture takes on meaning when the covenant communities of church and synagogue interpret it."

**For Discussion:**

How ought modern believers, both Jews and Christians, think about those biblical passages in which God orders the destruction of the Canaanites or which anticipate a future destruction of unbelievers?

Was there evolution (or even progress) in Israel's understanding of God? In what ways does the biblical understanding of God seem to change over time? To remain constant?

Why must we interpret scripture? Why can't we just take it at face value?

**Points to Ponder:****An Old Friend**

"To understand the New Testament, it is essential that one understands the texts upon which the New Testament draws. To recover the Old Testament as a full part of the Christian story, to hold it in a cherished place, to turn to it for guidance and for inspiration, for challenge and for comfort, is to find a new and true friend or to rediscover one who had become lost. It's to inherit a treasure, for the Old Testament is just as much part of the canon of the church as it is the canon of the synagogue...It is to recover something that Jesus himself cherished and said would never pass away."

**For Discussion:**

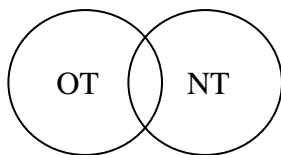
Which of the "problematic attitudes toward the Old Testament" mentioned in the video do you find most prevalent?

How might your "friendship" with the Old Testament be nourished?

**Activity**

Make a Venn diagram (see example). Draw two circles, one labeled "OT" (for Old Testament) and one labeled "NT" (for New Testament) in the space provided below. Draw the circles to represent the degree to which you think the two testaments agree or overlap.

Example:



Discuss your diagrams. Why did you place them this way?

**For Further Discussion**

Which parts of the Old Testament are used regularly in your church? Why these? In what contexts (e.g., preaching, Bible study)?

**Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*Many people do not realize that the earliest books of the New Testament are not the Gospels but the letters of Paul, which therefore contain our first written traditions about Jesus. For example, the oldest account of the Lord's Supper is that found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:*

**For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.**

*Similarly, the earliest account of the resurrection appearances of Jesus is also found in 1 Corinthians (15:1-11):*

**Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.**

*In both instances, Paul speaks of handing down traditions that he himself had received. Also, he repeatedly claimed (or, more often, simply assumed) essential continuity between his message and that of Jesus' earliest followers. For example, in Galatians 2 he affirmed the right of the mother church in Jerusalem to invalidate his message. Galatians 2:1-3, 9-10:*

**Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek...[W]hen James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized**

**the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.**

*Note that the controversies evidenced in Paul's letters do not concern basic Christian doctrine, such as the messiahship or resurrection of Jesus. As in the example of Galatians above, they focus instead on Christian practice, above all concerning the question of the ongoing validity of the Jewish law for Jewish and for Gentile Christian believers.*

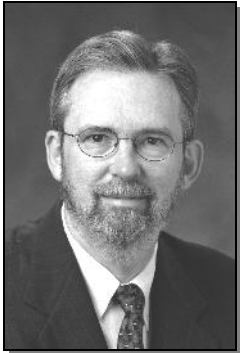
- ☐ How do the accounts of the Lord's Supper and resurrection in Paul compare with those of the Gospels? Does this surprise you?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ How would your view of Jesus change if you had only Paul's letters as your source? How would it remain unchanged?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ What is at stake, first for Paul himself and then for the Corinthians, in Paul's statements that he is handing on traditions that he himself received? What is at stake for us?

**Personal Reflection – Session 6: Jesus and Christianity**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. Does “the historical Jesus” matter? Why or why not?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. How would you go about trying to find out who Jesus "really" was?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. Choose an important historical figure, such as Abigail Adams or Abraham Lincoln. What types of sources could you consult for information about her/his life? How many such sources are available for the life of Jesus of Nazareth?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. The “Connecting with Scripture” section contains two traditions that Paul said he had received. It is notable that these both concern the death and resurrection of Jesus. What is it about Jesus’ death and resurrection that make them centrally important to all of the earliest Christian writers?

**This Week's Teacher:**

<p><b>Richard B. Hays</b></p> 	<p>A graduate of Yale University (B.A., M.Div.) and Emory University (Ph.D), Dr. Richard B. Hays, George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School, is internationally recognized for his work on the letters of Paul and on New Testament ethics. His scholarly work has bridged the disciplines of biblical criticism and literary studies, exploring the innovative ways in which early Christian writers interpreted Israel's Scripture. His book <i>The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation</i> was selected by <i>Christianity Today</i> as one of the 100 most important religious books of the twentieth century. Professor Hays has chaired the Pauline Epistles Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, as well as the Seminar on New Testament Ethics in the Society for New Testament Studies.</p>
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**Background to This Week's Video Presentation:**

<b>Atonement</b>	The means by which one is put into right relationship (made "at-one") with God, breaking the cycle of disobedience and estrangement. A number of conceptions of Christ's atonement exist, many built on ideas already present in the Jewish sacrificial system.
<b>Criterion of Dissimilarity</b>	Historical test that favors materials about Jesus that are thought to have no parallel either in Judaism or in Christianity. The principle is sometimes applied negatively: materials that have Jewish or Christian parallels cannot be accepted as historically authentic. It is this usage that Dr. Hays challenges.
<b>Pre-existence</b>	The belief that Jesus (or the Christ) existed in some form prior to human history. The idea is found in several New Testament texts, most famously in John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It is evidenced in a number of passages in Paul, including Philippians 2:6-7: "[W]ho, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." See also 1 Cor. 8:6; 10:4; 15:47, 2 Cor. 8:9; Gal. 4:4; and Rom. 8:3.
<b>Q</b>	Sayings and stories that Matthew and Luke have in common but that are not found in the Gospel of Mark. "Q" is short for the German <i>Quelle</i> , meaning "source."
<b>Sacrament</b>	A religious ritual thought to convey God's presence or grace. The Christian rites most commonly regarded as sacraments are the Lord's Supper, also known as Communion or Eucharist (from the Greek word for thanksgiving), and baptism.
<b>Synoptic Gospels</b>	Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar in many ways and so are often called the "Synoptic" Gospels, that is, Gospels that ought to be "looked at" ( <i>optic</i> ) "together" ( <i>syn/m</i> , as in "synagogue," "synonym," and "symphony"). The Gospel of John is sufficiently different in character to be regarded as "non-synoptic."



## ***Class Session 6: Jesus and Christianity***

### **Opening Prayer**

**O God, what we know is only partial. Help us not to use our limitations as an excuse for inaction.**

**What we claim to know is often wrong. Help us not to use our knowledge as an opportunity for arrogance.**

**What we choose *not* to know limits us greatly. Help us not to use argument to insulate ourselves from the harder truths you would teach us.**

**In the name of Jesus, who is your true word to us.  
Amen.**

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following:*

There is an almost limitless array of “Jesuses” on offer in popular books, movies, and other media. Why is this case?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **The Beliefs of the Earliest Christians**

“In Paul we find fully developed claims about Jesus as the pre-existent son of God, whose death brought about atonement for humanity. In Paul we find a well-developed understanding of the sacraments, of the Lord’s Supper and baptism. In Paul we find an account of the early Christian community as the locus of supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit which empowers members of the community. And perhaps most strikingly, we find that despite the fact that he had once been trained rigorously as a Pharisaic Jew, Paul seems to repudiate the

Jewish law and to call for a new kind of community, in which the law no longer in its particularity governs the lives of the people who are Jesus' followers."

"The testimony to Jesus that we find in the writings of the Apostle Paul is fully consistent with the testimony that we find from the other earliest Christian sources, including our canonical Gospels. The cross and resurrection stand at the center of all of our earliest documents about early Christianity."

**For Discussion:**

*Compare the following statement by the leading biblical scholar Wayne Meeks of Yale University:*

Perhaps the most significant discovery about Paul in this century's scholarship has been the recognition of his Christian precedents. Paul cannot be called 'the second founder of Christianity,' as Wrede named him less than seventy years ago. Christianity in the 'Pauline' form—with sacraments, cultic worship of Jesus as Lord, Gentile members, and the doctrines of pre-existence and atoning death of Christ—had already been 'founded' before Paul became first its persecutor and then its missionary. (*The Writings of St. Paul*. New York: Norton, 1972. Page 440.)

Why did these ideas about Jesus develop so quickly?  
Why were they so persuasive?

Do you tend to see Paul as a "lone wolf" or as part of a larger missionary enterprise? Why?

Why would the cross and the resurrection be found at the heart of all early Christian documents?

**Points to Ponder:****Giving Fantasy Free Reign**

"We do not escape the fact that we know Jesus only as the disciples remembered him. Whoever thinks that the disciples completely misunderstood their master or even consciously falsified his picture may give fantasy free reign."

— Nils Dahl

**For Discussion:**

In what ways was early Christianity in continuity with the historical Jesus? In what ways was it different? How can we tell?

What can be known with confidence about any historical figure is limited. Is what is *knowable* the same thing as what is *believable*? Give examples concerning persons other than Jesus.

Can you think of an example of a contemporary portrait of Jesus whose author seems “to have given fantasy free reign”? What, if any, factors should limit our conceptions about Jesus?

When it’s all said and done, what difference does it make who Jesus was and what Jesus did?

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***Segment Two***

**Points to Ponder:****The Criterion of Dissimilarity**

“The view that you can’t trust the Lord’s Supper tradition because it may have been read back by the church is part of a larger principle that’s sometimes applied by critics, who use something called *the criterion of dissimilarity*. The way this criterion works is that you take the whole body of Jesus material, and first you cut off anything that looks too much like the Judaism of his day, because it’s not distinctive. And you also have cut off everything that looks too Christian, because it may have been read back onto the tradition of Jesus later by the church. But that leaves you with a tiny sliver of material that describes a Jesus who is neither related to his own people and his own culture nor to the movement that he himself founded.”

**For Discussion:**

How would a rigorous application of the criterion of dissimilarity shape what conclusions it is possible to make about Jesus?

What other historical tests might be applied to the Gospels? What are the limitations of such tests?

Does historical study produce proof?

Different people look at the same body of evidence about Jesus and come to radically different conclusions. What are some of the factors that shape a person's view of Jesus?

**Points to Ponder:****The Jesus of the Gospels**

A brief account of the picture of Jesus that actually emerges from the Gospels:

- A Jew from Nazareth in Galilee
- Tried by Pontius Pilate
- Charged with insurrection
- Killed by crucifixion
- Not part of the religious establishment
- Knew Israel's scriptures
- Understood his mission in terms of those scriptures
- Baptized by John
- Expected a coming Kingdom of God
- Called twelve disciples, symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel
- Attracted a large following, especially among outsiders
- Known as a healer and miracle worker
- Proclaimed a message of reversal
- Challenged religious authorities
- Did not criticize the Jewish law
- Acted like a prophet
- Rejected violence as the way to bring in God's reign
- Understood his own vocation in terms of suffering and death
- Was proclaimed by his followers to have been risen from the dead

**For Discussion:**

Does anything about this list surprise you?

Is there something that you would delete? Add?

**Activity**

*For this activity, you will work by yourself to identify your key beliefs about Jesus.*

*On a sheet of paper:*

- ❑ List five (5) things you are confident that Jesus did
- ❑ List five (5) things you are confident that Jesus said.

*When you are ready, give your list to the facilitator.*

*The facilitator will read each list anonymously. As a class, discuss the following questions:*

- How do the answers differ?
- Are any trends evident?
- What sorts of things are not mentioned? Why?

**For Further Discussion**

Throughout its history, the church has struggled to effect a balance (or, some would say, to maintain a tension) between claims about Jesus' humanity and his divinity. What dangers lie on either side?

What would a too human or a too divine Jesus look like?

How do the churches in your community differ as to the way they conceive this balance?

**Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### **Connecting with Scripture:**

*The ideas of resurrection and eternal life are central to the New Testament, but they also appear in a small handful of places in the Old Testament. (The ideas became very common in Judaism during the centuries between the Old and New Testaments.) One example is the “Isaiah Apocalypse” in Isaiah 24:27.*

*Isaiah 25:6-9:*

**On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The Lord has spoken. In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”**

*Isaiah 26:19:*

**But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.**

*The clearest instance is perhaps Daniel 12:1-3:*

**At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.**

- ☐ What do these passages have in common? How are they different?
  
- ☐ How similar are they to passages you know in the New Testament?

*The New Testament authors were remarkably restrained in their teaching about the nature of the resurrected body. Here is Paul's discussion in 1 Corinthians 15:35-50, in which he attempts to convey his belief that resurrection is necessary for eternal life but that the resurrection body is different from the "flesh and blood" body we now know:*

**But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. So it is written: "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam [Christ], a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth, the second man from heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven. I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.**

*An especially modest-but-helpful comment is found in 1 John 3:2-3:*

**Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.**

- ☐ Why did Paul not simply believe in the immortality of the soul? Why did he think resurrection was necessary? (See "Background" below for definitions.)
  
- ☐ In what sense do both passages assert that "we shall be like" Christ?

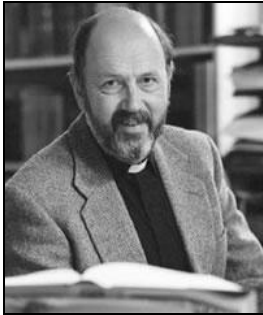
## ***Personal Reflection – Session 7: Resurrection***

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What is "resurrection"? Is it the same thing as immortality?
2. What do you believe happens after death?
3. Christians are sometimes criticized for being so focused on getting to heaven that they neglect to live in the present. Is this your observation? What if anything is the proper role for such a hope?
4. The early Christians appear to have been united in their belief in the resurrection of Jesus. Why was it important to them? Is it important for you personally?



***This Week's Teacher:***

<p><b>N.T. Wright</b></p> 	<p>N. T. (Tom) Wright is one of today's best known and respected New Testament scholars and Christian speakers. Born in 1948, he studied for the ministry at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and was ordained as Junior Research Fellow and Junior Chaplain at Merton College, Oxford. From 1978 to 1981, he was Fellow and Chaplain at Downing College, Cambridge, and then moved to Montreal as Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at McGill University. He returned in 1986 to Oxford as University Lecturer in New Testament, and Fellow and Chaplain of Worcester College, Oxford. He became Dean of Lichfield in 1994 and Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey in 2000. More recently, he was appointed Bishop of Durham, England. Dr. Wright has written over thirty books, including the award-winning <i>The Resurrection of the Son of God</i> and, most recently, <i>Simply Christian</i>.</p>
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***Background to This Week's Video Presentation:***

<b>Resurrection</b>	The belief that some or all dead persons will one day be given new and more glorious bodies. Resurrection of the body should be distinguished from immortality of the soul, the belief that the soul lives perpetually, with or without a body. In pure form, the concept of resurrection assumes that humans are a psychosomatic whole; eternal life is a gift of God, not a given (Romans 6:23: "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.").
<b>Resuscitation</b>	The giving of life back to a corpse, as in the story of Lazarus in the Gospel of John. Resuscitation differs from resurrection in that (1) the person retains a normal "flesh and blood" body, and (2) he or she eventually dies.

## ***Class Session 7: Resurrection***

### **Opening Prayer**

Gracious God, we proclaim the resurrection of Jesus, but we really don't understand what it means, either for Jesus or for us. We want to live the abundant life you would give us, but we define that narrowly and selfishly. May we trust that your love will never let us go, and may an enlivened understanding of the Easter message enable us to say of our lives and our world, "Behold, you have made all things new." Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following questions:*

What was the message on the last sympathy card you sent? Why did you choose that particular card? Which cards would you refuse to send? Why?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **Resurrection**

"It is not life after death that we're talking about when we say the word 'resurrection;' it's what I call 'life after life after death.' When you die, according to this theory, you go into a state that you could call life after death. The Bible actually doesn't say very much about that, to our surprise. But then after that initial sort of holding pattern, God will raise people to a new bodily life again, to live in a new world. After all, the Jewish hope was not for leaving this world and going off somewhere else. The Jewish hope always was for new heavens and new earth. And if you're going to live in this new world, then you'll need a new body to live there. That's a promise which is developed and indeed clung onto throughout the time of the last couple of centuries before the birth of Jesus, when the Jewish people were undergoing fierce persecution."

**For Discussion:**

How does this description of resurrection compare to your own description in the “Personal Reflection” (above)?

Bishop Wright says that when the idea that God is a good and wise creator meets the idea that God is a judge who will put the world back to rights, belief in resurrection emerges. Why would this be the case?

**Points to Ponder:****What Happened?**

"If you'd simply had an empty tomb but no 'seeings' of Jesus, or if you'd simply had visions of Jesus but no empty tomb, then they were pretty hard-headed in the first century, just like most people would be today. They would say, 'Nice idea, but no, it doesn't happen.' After all, resurrection is what God's going to do for all God's people at the end of time. We have a little conversation like that in John, chapter 11, when Jesus is meeting Mary and Martha after the death of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus says, 'Your brother will rise again.' And they say, 'Yeah, I know, he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' That was the Jewish hope. What we find in the Gospel stories is that hope coming to life, as it were, in one particular instance. So the question then is, how do we explain the empty tomb and the 'seeings' of Jesus?"

**For Discussion:**

What theories have you heard to explain (or explain away) the resurrection? Are they credible?

What evidence suggests that something that the first Christians called a “resurrection” really did happen?

Why would the early Christians have talked about Jesus' coming back to life as a *resurrection* and not, for example, a resuscitation, a visitation, or some other, more common and acceptable expression?

What is at stake in the claim that “Christ is risen?” Are Christians required to believe in the resurrection of Jesus?

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### *Segment Two*

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **Heaven Is Important, But It’s Not the End of the World**

“<sup>1</sup> John 3:2 says, ‘We know that when he appears, we will be like Him for we will see Him as he is.’ It’s as though at the moment, Jesus is separated from us, heaven itself is separated from us, not by millions of miles of cosmic dust, but by a very thin curtain, a curtain which sometimes becomes almost transparent—when we pray, when we read Scripture, when we come to the sacraments, and when we see Jesus in the faces of the poor. And sooner or later that curtain is going to be drawn back and the life of heaven will be integrated with the life of earth.”

#### **For Discussion:**

Would you say that resurrection means going to heaven or heaven coming to earth?

According to Matthew 4:17, Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming that “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near.” What is your understanding of “the Kingdom of Heaven”? Does what you have just heard about resurrection change or expand your ideas about this topic?

How do you picture the “Second Coming”? Does the way in which Wright describes Jesus’ appearing as the lifting of a very thin curtain appeal to you more than the idea of a “Rapture” that will sweep believers up into heaven? Which concept presents more of a challenge to you in your daily Christian life?

In your personal experience, what activities most powerfully lift the veil separating heaven and earth? Prayer? Scripture reading? The sacraments? Ministering to those in need? Something else?

**Points to Ponder:****So, Get to Work**

“Now, if you, like Paul, had just written a great chapter [1 Cor. 15] on what a wonderful, glorious hope we have before us, you might think he would end by saying, ‘So what are we going to do? Let’s just sit back and look up, because one day there’s a glorious future.’ He doesn’t say that at all. In the last verse of that chapter, he says, “Therefore, because of all of this, you must be steadfast and immovable and always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

“The resurrection gives shape and pattern and content to the whole Christian vocation in the present. What we are called to do and be in the light of the resurrection of Jesus is to be people through whom the Kingdom of Jesus comes to birth within concrete reality here and now.”

**For Discussion:**

Is there any difference between resurrection and eternal life? Can eternal life be experienced today?

What is the relationship between hope for the future and action in the present? What difference does (or might) it make to day-to-day life to believe in resurrection?

Practically speaking, how would you behave were you convinced that it is your role to bring to birth God’s reign here and now?

**Activity**

Distribute copies of the funeral liturgy/service used by your church. After taking time to review the text, discuss the following questions:

What key words and concepts stand out?

What does the service say about the future? Is it clear and consistent?

What hymns or songs are sung? Is their message compatible with that of the liturgy itself?

How does the liturgy compare to the perspective advanced by Bishop Wright?

What functions does the service perform? How well does it do them?

Is there anything about the liturgy you would change were you preparing your own funeral?

### **For Further Discussion**

Although a number of biblical texts speak of “new heavens and a new earth,” they provide relatively little by way of concrete description. Two of the more detailed passages are Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 21:1-5, written several hundred years apart. Read these two passages aloud and discuss the following questions:

Is the vision different in Isaiah and Revelation? If so, how and why?

How might your vision of a new heavens and a new earth be different? What would you emphasize?

How are our hopes for the future related to our experiences of the present?

### **Conclusion and Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*Controversies over what constitutes acceptable Christian teaching already existed at the time of the New Testament, although the precise nature of the disputes changed considerably over time. In the earliest New Testament texts, the writings of the apostle Paul, issues of Christian self-definition centered on the church's relationship to Judaism and the Jewish law. The most notable clash occurred at Galatia, where, in Paul's absence, interlopers began teaching the Galatian Christians that they must obey the Jewish law (the requirement of circumcision, in particular). Paul's response:*

*Galatians 1:6-9:*

**I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!**

*Galatians 2:15-16:*

**We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.**

*According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself had warned about false teaching:*

*Matthew 7:15:*

**"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."**

*Matthew 24:11; 23-25:*

**"Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray."**

*Later New Testament writings focus increasingly on the need to need to maintain “sound doctrine” or “right teaching.” This reflects a situation in which the church had grown more widespread and so was encountering and engaging a wider array of influences and interpreters. It also is a reflection of the fact that the mother church in Jerusalem was lost with the destruction of that city by the Romans in A.D. 70, and the first generation of Christian leaders as a whole was vanishing. Who now would determine which claims about Christ were true and which were false?*

*2 Peter 2:1:*

**But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.**

*2 Timothy 4:1-4:*

**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.**

*Revelation 2:12-16:*

**“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword: ‘I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.’”**

*One especially interesting passage is found in 1 John, probably written near the end of the first century. 1 John counters the heresy of Docetism (from the Greek verb meaning “to seem”), which is the belief that Jesus only “seemed” or “appeared” to be human; in fact, he did not have a physical body. Docetism later became a feature of a number of Gnostic systems. (In Gnosticism, the material world was not created by the true god. Indeed, “materiality”—the physical universe, including our bodies—is the thing from which we need to be rescued.)*



*For example, the second-century Gnostic Basileides taught that Jesus*

...did not himself suffer death, but a certain Simon of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; Simon was transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, and was crucified...while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and standing by, laughed at them...These then who know these things have been freed from the princes who formed the world, so they one must not confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man...If anyone therefore...confesses the crucified, that man is still a slave, and under the power of those who formed our bodies; but he who denies him has been freed from these things... (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book I, Chapter 24, Section 4)

*So, 1 John 4:1-3:*

**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.**

*Note how the physical body of Jesus is emphasized in the letter's opening verse, 1 John 1:1:*

**We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.**

*The teaching of 1 John is paralleled in 2 John 1:7-9:*

**Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! Be on your guard, so that you do not lose what we have worked for, but may receive a full reward. Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ, but goes beyond it, does not have God; whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.**

- ☐ Do any of these biblical texts surprise you? Why?
- ☐ On what basis do these texts claim to separate true from false teaching? Is their claim legitimate?
- ☐ Why did these controversies exist? Can you cite any contemporary parallels?

**Personal Reflection – Session 8: The Gnostic Gospels**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. What do you need to know to be a Christian?
2. What beliefs would you regard as incompatible with Christian faith?
3. Is it proper for a church or denomination to limit what is taught or preached? If so, who makes these decisions and on what basis?
4. What parts of Jesus' teaching do you regard as essential?
5. What is your attitude toward creation? Do you find it difficult to believe that a good God could have made a world such as ours?

**This Week's Teacher:****Ben Witherington**

A graduate of UNC Chapel Hill, Gordon-Conwell Seminary (M.Div.), and the University of Durham in England (Ph.D), Ben Witherington III is Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Witherington has also taught at Ashland Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt University, Duke Divinity School and Gordon-Conwell Seminary. Witherington has presented seminars for churches, colleges and biblical meetings not only in the United States but also in England, Estonia, Russia, Europe, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Australia. Witherington has written over thirty books, including the widely acclaimed *The Jesus Quest* and *The Paul Quest*. He has been interviewed by many network television programs, and his work frequently appears in a wide range of journals, magazines, and websites.

**Background to This Week's Video Presentation:**

<b>Ascetical</b>	A way of life that deliberately shuns physical pleasure.
<b>Canonical Gospels</b>	The canon ("rule, measure" in Greek) is the list of books considered authoritative. The canonical Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
<b>Eschatological</b>	From the Greek <i>eschatos</i> , "last," concerning the last things or end times. More broadly, eschatology has to do with belief in God's ultimate triumph over evil.
<b>Gnosticism</b>	From the Greek <i>gnosis</i> , "knowledge;" a religious system in which the material universe is thought to have been created by one or more secondary deities. Adherents receive secret "knowledge" that will allow them to leave behind the material world and be united with pure spirit.
<b>Gospel of Thomas</b>	The most famous of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts. Most scholars think that Thomas was written in the second century (that is, a century or more after the life of Jesus). Scholars disagree about the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus in Thomas that are not already found in the canonical Gospels.
<b>Irenaeus</b>	(ca. 130-202) Christian bishop; a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John. Most of his very influential writings were directed against Gnosticism.
<b>Jesus Seminar</b>	A group of scholars that voted on the authenticity of Jesus' sayings. Their findings, published in the book <i>The Five Gospels</i> , remain controversial both in academic as well as church circles.
<b>Materiality</b>	The physical world in which, according to Gnosticism, our spirits are entrapped.
<b>Muratorian Fragment</b>	Probably the earliest known Christian canonical list (ca. 170). The list is substantially like, though not identical to, the modern New Testament canon.
<b>Nag Hammadi</b>	A town in central Egypt where, in December 1945, a cache of Gnostic documents, written in the Coptic language, were discovered in a buried jar.
<b>Valentinus</b>	A prominent second-century Gnostic theologian.

## ***Class Session 8: The Gnostic Gospels***

### **Opening Prayer**

Search us, O God, and know our hearts. Help us to be “wise as serpents but innocent as doves.” Equip us to discern the truth but also to live humbly with and charitably toward others. Guide our thoughts, O God, and lead us in the way everlasting. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:*

What exposure have you had to modern-day religious groups that use (at least some) Christian terminology but whose beliefs reflect a significantly different theological perspective?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **It's What You Know that Counts**

"The basic claim of a Gnostic system is that secret knowledge is needed to be saved. Salvation is a matter of being in the know. It's not so much a matter of whom you know as it is of what you know. So it's a very esoteric approach to Christianity. You need this 'insider trader' knowledge to be saved. And if you don't have it, you are not among the elect."

#### **For Discussion:**

To what extent is Christianity a matter of *knowing*?  
What is it that makes someone a Christian?

Do you think that Jesus delivered secret knowledge that

was meant for only a select group of followers?

Is Jesus important only because of his teaching?

**Points to Ponder:****Gnosticism and Judaism**

"The Gnostic gospels are remarkably un-Jewish in character. If you read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus is presented as a Jew interacting and debating with other Jews about things like clean and unclean, Sabbath laws—those kinds of things. When you read the dialogues and the discourses in the Gnostic gospels, it's not really about things Jewish; it's about larger, more philosophical issues, like the battle between darkness and light on a cosmic scale, as if matter were evil and spirit were good. Now that is certainly not a Jewish theology of creation, which says that everything that God made, all of materiality, was good; indeed, it was very good. So the theological perspective that we find in Gnosticism does not blend well either with Judaism or with early paganism."

**For Discussion:**

Does it really matter that the Gnostic gospels aren't Jewish?

What do you make of a theology which says that matter is evil but spirit is good?

Can you identify any Gnostic tendencies in contemporary Christianity? In other religions?

What about the Gnostic perspective makes it attractive to so many people today?

**Points to Ponder:****Chronology Matters**

"The first thing to be said about these documents is that we don't have any evidence that they existed before the middle or latter part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. We have absolutely no evidence that they existed any earlier. They seem to have been

generated in response to mainstream Christianity. At the end of the second century A.D., we have church fathers like Irenaeus strongly criticizing the theology that's in Gnosticism. It was critiqued not only by Irenaeus but by Hypolatus and by Tertullian, who wrote in the latter half of the second century A.D. It's very important to understand that these documents are later."

(Note this comment from the second half of the lecture: "The four canonical gospels not only existed, but they circulated together as authoritative sources in the life of the church as early as 125 A.D.")

### **For Discussion:**

Why is it important to know when a document was written?

What considerations other than chronology should influence our judgment about a document's credibility?

Should the early church's decisions about what ought and ought not to be included in the New Testament matter to us today?

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### ***Segment Two***

### **Points to Ponder:**

#### **Constantine and the Council of Nicaea**

"Constantine did attend the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. He did not set the agenda; he did not call for a vote on the divinity of Jesus. In fact, the Council of Nicaea was not debating the divinity of Jesus. What it was debating was, what is the nature of the relationship between divine Father and the divine Son? That is a very different issue. Nobody was arguing, 'I think Jesus was just a man!' 'No, He was a man and He was God!' So it's absolutely false to say that what we get at the Council of Nicaea is a debate about the divinity of Jesus which was imposed on the church at that point, but before then nobody really believed in the divinity of Jesus...Already in our earliest source documents in the New Testament, it is perfectly clear that Jesus is presented as both human and divine. The divinity of Jesus is not an idea dreamed up in the fourth century A.D. and imposed on the church by Constantine."

**For Discussion:**

Were you surprised to hear that the belief in the divinity of Jesus dates not to the Council of Nicaea (or “Nicea”), but to New Testament times?

Why do so many people today find it plausible that Jesus’ divinity arose only centuries after his death?

Why do so many people today find it plausible that the early church conspired to cover up its true origins?

**Points to Ponder:****Jesus Married Mary?**

“Even in that text in the Gospel of Philip, it is not claimed that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married or that they had children. It simply says that she was one of the companions of Jesus, amongst many.”

From the first half of the lecture: “Gnosticism was ascetical in character. When I say ascetical, what I really mean is that there were these taboos about materiality and sensual pleasure...In Gnostic circles, sex in particular was something to be abstained from if you wanted to be spiritual...and so the depiction of Jesus and earliest disciples getting married, having relationships, sexual relationships, bearing children—physically born children—is not something that Gnostics were all excited about. Indeed, some of them would have seen it as anathema.”

**For Discussion:**

Many current proponents of a married Jesus think this would undercut the church's belief in his divinity, but Greek and Roman contemporaries told stories of married heroes who were regarded as divine, including some Roman emperors. Would a married Jesus have been a problem for them? Would his disciples (who themselves were married; 1 Cor 9:5) have repressed this information? Would it negate meeting God in Jesus in a unique way?

The modern world seems to believe that a life without sex is no life at all. To what extent do you think contemporary views of the good life play a part in

modern representations of Jesus? Does Jesus have to be like us to be relevant?

What do you think Christianity would be like today if the Gnostic version of the faith had triumphed?

**Points to Ponder:****The Quest for the Alternative Jesus**

“When you come at these materials with an already predisposed dissatisfaction with the canonical gospels or the traditional image of Jesus, you are then predisposed to having to find new visions of Jesus created out of some of these other gospels, even if the historical evidence of their earliness or their authenticity is very shaky indeed.”

**For Discussion:**

Why are many people dissatisfied with the Jesus they hear about in church? Is the problem with the church or with Jesus?

Which Jesus challenges you more—the canonical Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John or the Jesus of the Gnostic gospels?

**Activity**

Many people today are members of secret societies or exclusive clubs or associations. In a few minutes, list as many of these as possible on a blackboard or flipchart. When you're finished, answer the following questions:

Which of these groups seems most attractive to you? Why?

What do they offer to their members? Can it be found elsewhere? In the church?

How do they determine who gets in?



Do the various groups you've listed fit into natural categories?

Which if any of these groups would it be proper for Christians to join?

### **For Further Discussion**

Is there any legitimate reason for which a pastor might deny someone membership in his or her church?

### **Conclusion & Closing Prayer**

### **A footnote on the "Gospel of Judas"**

The publication of the so-called "Gospel of Judas" occurred after the filming of this lesson. What many news stories failed to note is the thoroughly Gnostic character of the text, which explains why Judas is treated so favorably. From the perspective of its author, Judas is the one who frees Jesus from his body, thus releasing his spirit from its captivity. It is most unlikely that Jesus himself, being thoroughly Jewish, would have viewed things this way. Moreover, the text itself is quite late. Using the Gospel of Judas to interpret the historical Jesus is "rather like studying the Watergate tapes to understand the Republicanism of Abraham Lincoln" ("Gnostics Find Affirmation in Gospel of Judas," *Los Angeles Times*, April 22, 2006).

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*The failures of God's people are mentioned frequently in Scripture, often followed by a call to repentance and restoration. For example:*

*1 Kings 8:33-40:*

**“When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray and plead with you in this house, then hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors. When heaven is shut up and there is no rain because they have sinned against you, and then they pray toward this place, confess your name, and turn from their sin, because you punish them, then hear in heaven, and forgive the sin of your servants, your people Israel, when you teach them the good way in which they should walk; and grant rain on your land, which you have given to your people as an inheritance. If there is famine in the land, if there is plague, blight, mildew, locust, or caterpillar; if their enemy besieges them in any of their cities; whatever plague, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever plea there is from any individual or from all your people Israel, all knowing the afflictions of their own hearts so that they stretch out their hands toward this house; then hear in heaven your dwelling place, forgive, act, and render to all whose hearts you know—according to all their ways, for only you know what is in every human heart—so that they may fear you all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our ancestors.”**

*Isaiah 1:11-18:*

**What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation— I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.**

**Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.**

*Revelation 2:1-5:*

**“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.’”**


- ☐ How would you characterize the tone of these passages?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ Is God’s acceptance unconditional?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ At which points do these three texts intersect?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ How do these passages compare to your own experience of God? Of God’s people?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ☐ Are these the sort of texts on which sermons are preached in your church? Why or why not?

**Personal Reflection – Session 9: The Sins of the Church**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

1. Have the sins of the church presented an obstacle to faith for you personally?
2. Think about the mixed record of many of the biblical “heroes” (e.g., Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Miriam, David, Peter). Does their presence in the Bible teach us anything about God’s attitude toward moral failure?
3. To what standards should church leaders be held? What actions should be punishable by the church, if not by the law? With what punishments?
4. Why do Christians (and other believers, for that matter) fail, sometime spectacularly?
5. Is there any sense in which Christians are responsible for each other’s behavior?

**This Week's Teacher:**

<p><b>Douglas M. Strong</b></p> 	<p>Douglas M. Strong is Professor of Church History and Associate Dean at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. A graduate of Houghton College (B.A.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Ph.D.), he is a specialist in the history of American religion and social reform. Dr. Strong is the author of numerous articles and two books, <i>Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy</i> and <i>They Walked in the Spirit: Personal Faith and Social Action in America</i>. He is also the co-editor of <i>Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Sourcebook</i>. Dr. Strong is past president of the Wesleyan Theological Society and a member of several academic governance boards. He is an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church.</p>
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**Background to This Week's Video Presentation:**

<b>Augustine</b>	(354-430) Christian theologian and Bishop in North Africa who wrote <i>Confessions</i> and <i>The City of God</i> , among many other highly influential works. His concept that the church is a <i>corpus permixtum</i> , a mixed body of sinners and saints, is discussed in the video.
<b>The Crusades</b>	A series of military campaigns in the 11 <sup>th</sup> through 13 <sup>th</sup> centuries, many of which were conducted with the approval of the pope. Although the Crusades were originally organized to capture the Holy Land from the Muslims, battles were fought against a range of enemies in several countries, even within continental Europe itself.
<b>Charles G. Finney</b>	(1792-1875) Leading American revivalist and outspoken abolitionist. Finney preached forcefully against slavery and denied communion to slaveholders. He was also president of Oberlin College in Ohio.
<b>Spirituality of the Church</b>	As articulated by the 19 <sup>th</sup> ce. Presbyterian theologian John Holt Rice, this doctrine claimed that “any church participation in public policy decisions, especially if those decisions would upset the status quo of slavery, were to be considered wrong” (from the video).
<b>Voltaire</b>	(1694-1778) French Enlightenment writer and Deist philosopher. He was well known for his satirical attacks on both church and state.

## ***Class Session 9: The Sins of the Church***

### **Opening Prayer**

O God, our manifold sins have alienated us from each other, and the hypocrisy of our lives has alienated us from those who yearn for your love, but fail to see it in us. Merciful God, grant us the grace to see our sins for what they are. Grant us the courage to confess our sin both to you and to those others against whom we have trespassed. May we not lose hope that when we do so, your power can still redeem and transform our lives. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:*

Which of the church's many failures most troubles you? Why?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **Cultural Captivity**

"Medieval Christendom represented an example of a cultural captivity of the faith, when the church became a domain of the state, and to become a Christian was a matter of political enforcement. These obvious inconsistencies between the church's practices and New Testament faith end up discrediting the church's witness."

#### **For Discussion:**

In what ways do you think the church is held captive to today's culture? How might the church overcome its captivity?

How can the church be an effective witness to the cultural world around it without being held captive by it?

Dr. Strong says that one form of "cultural captivity" is a subservient relationship of the church to the state. In what ways do you think the contemporary church could be found guilty of an unhealthy relationship to the state?

What ought we to do when there is disagreement about whether the church's actions are sinful?

**Points to Ponder:****Confession**

"The very ability of Christians to see that their acts are sins rather than just the way things are is owed to the church's ongoing practice of confession. It is our own desire for reconciliation that exposes the problem of hypocrisy in the first place. The virtue of the Christian tradition is that we're required to acknowledge our sin and then to seek repentance."

**For Discussion:**

Dr. Strong notes that there is little evidence that Christians have advanced in moral virtue over time. If this is true, what is the point of belonging to a church?

What ways of confronting sin does the church provide that are not available in the world at large?

How do you feel about public confession of the church's sins? Is keeping them private ever appropriate?

Have you ever witnessed what you thought was healthy confrontation of sin within the church? If so, what form did this take? Did it lead to repentance and renewal of life?

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**Segment Two****Points to Ponder:****What is the Church?**

"Much of the problem is that for too long, we've had a false conception of the church, viewing it wrongly as somehow above and distinct from other human endeavors."

"The church, embracing sinners to her bosom, is at the same time holy and always in need of being purified and incessantly pursues the path of penance and renewal."

**For Discussion:**

Which of the characterizations of the church in the video do you find most helpful? Why? Can you suggest a better alternative?

We have all read about serious mistakes being made in medical hospitals, but in the middle of an attack of appendicitis, we still choose to have surgery. Does this illustration suggest a valid reason for remaining in the church in spite of its sinful mistakes?

Some people are quite willing to regard the church as a hospital for the sick and weak, but they regard themselves as neither. What do you have to say to someone who thinks in this way?

Do you agree with St. Augustine that the church is a "corpus permixtum," a mixed bag of saints and sinners? If so, does one group predominate? Is the mix different in different churches or different times? Why?

**Points to Ponder:****Church and Society**

"The desire to perpetuate the lifestyle that slavery supported prompted a number of white Christians to fabricate and then to teach a specific doctrine that they called 'the spirituality of the church,' which argued that any church participation in public



policy decisions, especially if those decisions would upset the status quo of slavery, were to be considered wrong. This 'spirituality of the church' doctrine was articulated by a Presbyterian theologian named John Holt Rice.

However, at exactly the same time period and within the very same denomination as John Holt Rice, other Christian theologians used biblical arguments to repudiate slavery and to work to abolish it. Theodore Sedgwick Wright, for example, an African American Presbyterian pastor, spoke out forcefully for equal rights for all Americans."

**For Discussion:**

Prof. Strong argues that the church sometimes wants Christ only for his power and influence. What examples of this come to mind? Have you ever known your own congregation to choose "yieldedness to God's will" over opportunities for power and influence? Doesn't the acquisition of worldly power and influence open up bigger and better ways of spreading the Gospel?

Is the idea that the church should stick to spiritual matters and stay out of politics true to the biblical witness?

What are the dangers inherent in political activism on the part of the church? Does this mean we should avoid it? As individuals? As an institution?

The video challenges us to continue to talk about the church's failings and to face up to them. How can we do this in a manner that will lead to positive change?

How might individual Christians be made accountable to one another for their behavior?

**Activity**

This lesson has focused on the church's sins, but there are a great many things that the church has done and continues to do right. Using a blackboard or a flipchart, list as many of these as you can in only a few minutes.

What patterns are discernable in the list?

What do you wish was there that is not?

What does the list suggest about the priorities of your own church?

### **For Further Discussion**

Imagine that you are on an airplane and strike up a conversation with your seatmate. Along the way, she learns that you are active in the church and says, “I grew up in the church and attended until I was in high school. At that time the pastor left his wife and children and married a member of his staff with whom he had been having an affair. Although there was some talk about firing him, he was never punished for his actions. My family left the church in disgust, and I have never been back. Ever since, I have had a hard time believing in God. How can I, when the church is so full of hypocrites?”

How do you respond?

### **Conclusion & Closing Prayer**

### ***Connecting with Scripture:***

*The idea of forgiveness was not introduced by Jesus, of course, but it does occupy a vital place in his teaching. Consider these examples from the Gospel of Matthew:*

*Matthew 6:9-14:*

**"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."**

*Matthew 5:23-24:*

**"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."**

*Matthew 9:1-8:*

**And after getting into a boat he crossed the sea and came to his own town. And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." Then some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he then said to the paralytic—"Stand up, take your bed and go to your home." And he stood up and went to his home. When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings.**

*Matthew 18:21-35:*

**Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him**

ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

*Matthew 26:26-28:*

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

- [illegible]

**Personal Reflection – Session 10: Forgiveness**

*As you prepare for this class session, consider the following questions and be prepared to share your thoughts during class.*

***Because Questions 2 & 3 concern private matters, you might not want to provide a written answer.***

1. We have all heard the expression "Forgive and Forget." Is this always possible? Is it even safe to forget? What would forgiveness that cannot forget look like?
2. What is the most grievous or hurtful thing you have ever had to forgive? Is the process finished? What has been the result of your efforts to forgive?
3. What is the most serious offense for which you need or have ever needed forgiveness? Did you receive it? If so, did that enable a reconciliation? If not, what has the effect been on your life?
4. Is forgiveness compatible with justice? Why or why not?
5. It is often said, "To err is human; to forgive, divine." Why regard forgiveness as "divine"? Does God always forgive?

**This Week's Teacher:****L. Gregory Jones**

A graduate of the University of Denver (B.A., M.P.A.) and Duke Divinity School (M.Div., Ph.D), Gregory Jones has served as Dean of Duke University Divinity School since 1997. Dean Jones is widely recognized as a scholar and church leader on such issues as forgiveness and reconciliation, Christian vocation, and strengthening the church and its ministry. He writes a regular column, "Faith Matters," for *The Christian Century*, for which he is also an editor-at-large. Dean Jones serves on the board of trustees of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, N.J., and is president of the Association of United Methodist Theological Schools. He also is a member of the University Senate of the United Methodist Church. His newest book is *Resurrecting Excellence: Shaping Faithful Christian Ministry*.

## ***Class Session 10: Forgiveness***

### **Opening Prayer**

Merciful God, we come to you so often seeking forgiveness. We need to know that your love knows no bounds. We want to be freed from the hurtful consequences of our actions. We desire reconciliation. We are so ready to receive, but we must confess that we are so slow to give. We nurse old wounds; we rehearse old conversations; we want justice for old injuries. Lead us to a sincere desire, not just for forgiveness, but for repentance and new life. Lead us to a genuine willingness to extend the forgiveness you so generously shower on us to those who have sinned against us. We ask this through Christ our Lord, in whom we find redemption and peace. Amen.

### **Focusing**

*In groups of 2 or 3, discuss the following question:*

Why is forgiveness so difficult?

### **Video**

#### ***Segment One***

#### **Points to Ponder:**

##### **Trivializing Forgiveness**

"Too often we've trivialized forgiveness. We've made it seem as if it's simply an easy transaction that God gives to us without any expectations. As the philosopher Voltaire put it, 'The world is admirably arranged. God likes to forgive and I like to sin.'"

**For Discussion:**

What is the difference between saying, "I'm sorry," and, "Please forgive me"?

Does God "like" to forgive? What does forgiveness cost God?

What expectations go with God's offer of forgiveness?

As Jesus was dying, he prayed for the forgiveness of those responsible, even before they showed any remorse. Are you comfortable with the idea that forgiveness can precede repentance?

They say that "confession is good for the soul," but is confession of sin to some other person always the right thing to do?

**Points to Ponder:****Back to Egypt**

"Every one of us has a 'back to Egypt' part of our souls. We see who God is and what God is calling us to, and yet we remain trapped in habits, in patterns of sinfulness, of brokenness that lead us back into destructiveness. And so we become entrenched in sin, rather than discovering the power of God's forgiveness."

"In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we discover the power of God's forgiveness that calls us then to unlearn the patterns of brokenness, of sin, and to learn how to live into the fullness and wonder of God's creation, the God who loves us so much that He would forgive us."

**For Discussion:**

In what ways do you persistently go "back to Egypt," being unwilling to abandon the habits of thought or behavior that lead to sin and brokenness in your life? Have you found ways to break those hurtful cycles?



In what ways does forgiveness have power to change us? Can you think of specific examples?

Forgiving has many costs. What are its benefits?

**Points to Ponder:****Resolving Conflict God's Way**

"How can we resolve conflict and deal with difficulties and the brokenness that can occur even among followers of Jesus? Be truthful with one another; be patient; talk about wrongdoing in a way that can provide a future, a possibility for reconciliation that doesn't have to be bound by the brokenness of the past."

**For Discussion:**

Christians sometimes think that forgiveness means not confronting others about their hurtful behavior, especially in the context of congregational life. How could we practice healthy confrontation that leads to forgiveness and reconciliation within our churches?

What does it look like to "talk about wrongdoing in a way that can provide a future"?

What prevents us from behaving in this way toward others?

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**Segment Two****Points to Ponder:****Forgiveness Is a Way of Life**

"Forgiveness must become a habit, a way of life that we learn from others who've gone before us. Because the more often we forgive, the better we get at it. The more we practice it in Christian community—day by day, week by week, month by month—the more natural it will become to us. Forgiveness is a way of life."

**For Discussion:**

What would forgiveness as a way of life look like in very practical terms? Would it change the way you respond to your spouse? The way you discipline your children?

Does a “habit” of forgiving mean that we must become doormats for others to walk on? What is the relationship between justice and forgiveness?

Similarly, what should our attitude be toward those whom we have forgiven? For example, does forgiveness require a wife to stay with an abusive husband?

Are we ever allowed *not* to forgive?

**Points to Ponder:****Learning to Forgive**

"Sometimes the best way to discover the power of forgiveness is not to focus on the wrongdoing but to engage in worship, prayer, singing, in healing, anointing, confessing. Because that helps to work on our emotions, our thoughts, our lives, in ways that open us up to receive the power of God's forgiveness and thus to forgive others."

**For Discussion:**

What role has participation in the worship, sacraments, prayers and rituals of the church played in your ability to receive or extend forgiveness?

Are regular prayers of confession meaningful to you or have they just become rote exercises? If the latter, what could be done to make them more meaningful?

Why might we need to receive forgiveness before offering it to others?

**Activity**

Reconciliation is the ultimate, though not always the attainable, goal of forgiveness. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission offered amnesty to those who had committed gross violations of human rights, but it also required them to tell the truth and, where possible, to listen to the stories of those whom they had injured. According to its chair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

We have had a jurisprudence, a penology in Africa that was not retributive but restorative. Traditionally, when people quarreled the main intention was not to punish the miscreant but to restore good relations. This was the animating principle of our Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For Africa is concerned, or has traditionally been concerned, about the wholeness of relationships. That is something we need in this world—a world that is polarized, a world that is fragmented, a world that destroys people. It is also something we need in our families and friendships. For retribution wounds and divides us from one another. Only restoration can heal us and make us whole. And only forgiveness enables us to restore trust and compassion to our relationships. If peace is our goal, there can be no future without forgiveness.

(*Greater Good* magazine, Fall 2004, p. 12)

Take a few minutes to compose a list of social and political situations in your own community, country, and in the world today where reconciliation is badly needed.

Share your list with the rest of the class. (Ideally, the complete list should be written on a blackboard or flipchart.) As you look at the list, discuss the following:

What conditions made possible the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

In which of the situations you've listed might a process like that developed in South Africa work?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of this model?

Is forgiveness between whole peoples and nations possible? If so, how does it happen?

**For Further Discussion**

What does it mean to forgive ourselves?

How is it different from forgiving others? Is it easier or harder?

What prevents us from forgiving ourselves? What makes it possible?

**Conclusion & Closing Prayer**





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