

**An introduction to**  
***Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology***



**Worldwide Church of God**

Revised 4/1/2009

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# ***Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology***

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The mission of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) is to participate with Jesus in ***living and sharing the gospel***. Our understanding of Jesus and of his gospel of grace, was radically transformed through a ***doctrinal reformation*** that spanned the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, WCG's *Statement of Beliefs* now aligns with the biblical doctrines of the historic, orthodox Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

Now in the 1<sup>st</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the transformation of the WCG continues with a focus on ***theological reformation***.<sup>2</sup> This reformation flows from the *foundation* that undergirds WCG's reformed doctrines—the answer to the all-important theological question: ***Who is Jesus Christ?***

“Who” is a key word in this question. At its core, theology is not about a *concept* or a *system*—but about a ***living person***, Jesus Christ. Who is this person? He is ***fully God***—one with the Father and Spirit as the second person of the Trinity. And he is ***fully human***—one with all humanity through his Incarnation. Jesus Christ is the *unique union of God and man*. And he is not merely the focus of our academic inquiry, he is our *life*. Our faith is in him, not in ideas or doctrines about him. Our theological reflection is a profound act of wonderment and worship. Indeed, theology is *faith seeking understanding*.

Over the last several years, our understanding of the foundation of our reformed doctrines has been greatly enhanced as we have prayerfully studied what we refer to as ***Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology***. Part One of this paper summarizes our understanding of this theology, and Part Two addresses related questions and objections. Our goal is to inform WCG pastors and members about the continuing theological reformation of their denomination, and to invite their active participation. Together, we are on a journey of “growing deeper” with Jesus, and our prayer is for his guidance every step of the way.

In approaching this material, we confess the imperfection of our understanding and of our ability to communicate such profound truth. In one way, the most adequate and appropriate response to the stunning theological truth that we see in Jesus Christ would be to place our hands over our mouths and stand in reverent silence. But we also sense the Spirit's call to proclaim this truth—to shout it from the housetops—not in arrogance or condescension, but in love and with all the clarity we can muster.

It is our prayer that this paper not only informs with clarity, but also inspires as a true reflection of God's covenant love for us all. Our theology is about Jesus and about the love and life that he shares with us.

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<sup>1</sup> These doctrines are summarized in the Apostle's Creed, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon. All three may be read at [www.wcg.org/lit/church/pamphlet/3creeds.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/church/pamphlet/3creeds.htm). WCG's Statement of Beliefs may be read at [www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/default.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/default.htm). We view these creeds and our Statement of Beliefs as biblically faithful expressions of the truth that is found in the person of Jesus Christ—a truth we find faithfully established in Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology.

<sup>2</sup> Another vital emphasis of the on-going reformation of the WCG is the refining of our understanding of mission. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, theology informs mission. Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology must be expressed in Trinitarian, Christ-centered mission.

## PART ONE: BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

### Why theology?

Simply stated, theology is “God knowledge”—our understanding concerning God and matters pertaining to God. In one sense, we all have a “working theology”—our understanding about God. Even atheists have a theology—one that says, “there is no god.” And certainly every church and denomination has a theology—it’s the framework that undergirds and informs their doctrinal formulations.

As the doctrines of the WCG changed, it became clear that we needed to examine and refine our underlying theological framework. What is the relationship between doctrine and theology? Consider a core doctrine of the Christian faith—**salvation by grace**. This doctrine teaches that Jesus saves us through grace that is received by faith. Theology goes “behind” this doctrine to understand and explain not only the “how” and the “why” of salvation, but most importantly, the “who.” It asks, “Who is this Jesus Christ who saves?” And, “Who are we—the ones that Jesus saves?”

Our theology tells us that salvation is about personal *relationships*, not about mere declarations or transactions. God is a *covenant* God, not a *contract* God. We learn this from the Holy Scriptures where we find described the vital *covenantal relationships* that form the basis of our salvation. These relationships include God’s own triune *communion* (the eternal relating of Father, Son and Spirit) and the relationship between the Triune God and all humanity forged in and through Jesus Christ.

Thus the doctrine of salvation, and the theology on which it rests, is about *relationships*—real life in and through Jesus, the source and sustainer of all creation. This life of, by, through and in Jesus, is the focus of our theological inquiry and of this introduction to Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology—the theological vision now embraced by the Worldwide Church of God as a denomination.

### What are the alternative theologies?

All Christian theologies seek to uphold orthodox Christian doctrine, including the doctrine of salvation by grace. Therefore, in comparing and contrasting alternative Christian theologies, we are talking about different visions among Christian brothers and sisters who seek to serve the same Lord. Thus, our discussion should reflect respect and gentleness, not arrogance or hostility.

Within the Christian community, numerous theologies have arisen. Various forms of **Calvinism** and **Arminianism** have dominated within Protestantism.

**Calvinism** is a theology that derives from the teaching of the Protestant reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564). There are multiple forms of Calvinism, but most embrace two related precepts:

- *Limited atonement*—the idea that Jesus died only for the elect (those predetermined to be saved)
- *Irresistible grace*—the idea that the elect will be saved and this election cannot be resisted by those who are elected to salvation

Calvinism emphasizes God’s sovereignty in election and salvation. Many 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestant denominations and congregations embrace this theology, including most Presbyterians, Reformed churches, Particular (Reformed) Baptists, and others.

**Arminianism** is a theology that derives from the teachings of the Protestant reformer, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). He rejected Calvin’s ideas of a limited atonement and irresistible grace, insisting that Jesus died for *all* humanity, and that all people *can* be saved if they take necessary, personal action, which is enabled by the Spirit. This theology, while upholding God’s sovereignty in salvation, tends to rely on human decision/freedom. Many 21<sup>st</sup> century Protestant denominations and congregations embrace some form of Arminian theology, including most Methodists, many Baptists, and others.

## Trinitarian, Christ-Centered Theology

Though the WCG agrees with many aspects of Calvinism and Arminianism, it sees a fuller faithfulness to Jesus and to the Bible in Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology. Others names given to this theology include *Trinitarian Theology*, *Christ-centered Theology*, *Adoption Theology*, *Inclusion Theology* and *Incarnational Theology*.<sup>3</sup>

**This theology is Trinitarian** in that it begins with the understanding that the *one* God exists eternally as the inseparable union of *three* distinct persons: Father, Son and Spirit. Theology is knowledge of God, and the Trinity is who God has revealed himself in Jesus to be in his own divine nature. Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity lies at the heart of this theology.

**This theology is Christ-centered** in that it focuses on the centrality and preeminence of Jesus Christ as he is revealed to be: one (in union) with the Father and the Spirit; and one (in union) with all humanity.

These twin doctrines of the *Trinity* and Jesus' *Incarnation* (with his vicarious—representative—substitutionary humanity) are foundational, biblical truths concerning God and Jesus. They are the “truths of all truths”—the “logic,” if you will, with which this theology seeks to reason about *all* things, including doctrine, mission, worship, etc.

Think of this theology as the *glasses* by which we *read* and thus seek to *understand* our Christian faith. Rather than beginning with, and thus seeing through the glasses of human religious experience (with an emphasis on the personal and present moment of encounter with God), we seek to begin with and thus see through the glasses of the biblical truths of who God truly is in himself, and what this says about who

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<sup>3</sup> A word of caution: several widely diverse theologies use these or similar names. Some of them embrace ideas or values that the WCG does not.

we (humans) truly are in union with God in and through Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, we seek to think with “Christo-logic.” As noted by Thomas F. Torrance (a principal Trinitarian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), Jesus is both the *ground* (foundation/origin) and the *grammar* (organizing principle/logic) of the Godhead and of the entire created order—all humanity included.

As a denomination, the WCG embraces ***Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology*** because we see it as fully faithful to Jesus, God's *Living Word*.

### But is it *biblical*?

“But”, some might ask, “is Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology faithful to God's written word, the Bible?” We are convinced that the answer is “yes.” We see this theology as the most faithful to the Holy Scriptures, rightly understood.

Of course, “rightly understood” is an important key. You will recall Jesus' encounter with some students of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) in his day. They were carefully reading these scriptures, yet not deriving from their reading the Scriptures' God-ordained meaning. Note Jesus' words to them in John 5:39-40 (emphasis added): “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are **the Scriptures** that **testify about me**, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

Jesus, and salvation in and through him, is the true focus of Scripture (Old and New Testaments). It is Jesus' own mind—his “logic”—with which we must seek to read the entirety of the Bible so that it might be rightly understood. Jesus alone must be the basis and logic of our theology—for he alone is the *final* and the *full* revelation of God.

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<sup>4</sup> James B. Torrance offers a helpful assessment of the differences between competing theological systems beginning on page 24 of his very helpful book—***Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace***.

## Who else teaches this theology?

Some wonder if the Worldwide Church of God formulated this theology on its own, or adopted it wholesale from some other (perhaps unreliable?) source. Neither is the case.

Like Calvinism and Arminianism; Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology has been around a very long time. In fact, it was the theological vision that informed much of the teaching in the early church, was the basis of the early Christian Creeds, and the basis for determining the canon of the New Testament. Following is a summary of a few of the early and prominent Trinitarian teachers/theologians.

### Irenaeus (died A.D. 202)

Irenaeus was a disciple of Polycarp (who had studied with the Apostle John). Irenaeus sought to show that the gospel of salvation taught by the apostles and handed down from them is centered on Jesus, including the truth of Jesus' **Incarnation**. He saw that the Bible presents the Incarnation as an act of **recapitulation** by which Jesus became for all humanity a new "head" and thus a new point of beginning (see Ephesians 1:9-10, 20-23). Through the Incarnation, the Fall was reversed—the entire human race was "born again" in Jesus. Now humanity has in Jesus a new source, a new origin, and a new identity.

The biblical foundation of Irenaeus' thinking included Paul's statements in Romans 5 where Jesus is presented to us as the "second" (or "final") Adam of the human race. "In Jesus," wrote Irenaeus, "God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man [Adam], that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man..."

Irenaeus understood that Jesus took all humanity into himself and reversed the Fall by renewing the human race through his *vicarious* (representative and substitutionary) life, death, resurrection and ascension. We will see more later about the importance of this vicarious human role of Jesus.

The beauty and import of Irenaeus' teaching was to understand that this renewing (or re-creating) of the human race in Jesus (through the Incarnation) is far more than a work "by" Jesus—rather it is re-creation "in" and thus "through" Jesus. And this involves far more than the forgiveness of sin. It includes what Irenaeus calls mankind's "divinization."

Note how church historian Justo Gonzalez summarizes Irenaeus' thought in his book ***The Story of Christianity*** (volume 1, pp. 68-71) (emphasis added):

Irenaeus [saw God as] a loving being who creates the world and humankind...out of a desire to have a creation to love and to lead, like the shepherd loves and leads the flock. From his perspective, the entirety of history appears as the process whereby the divine shepherd leads creation to its final goal.

The crown of creation is the human creature, made from the beginning as a free and therefore responsible being. That freedom is such that it allows us to become increasingly conformed to the divine will and nature, and thus to enjoy an ever-growing communion with our Creator. The goal of this process is what Irenaeus calls "**divinization**" – **God's purpose is to make us ever more like the divine.**

This does not mean, however, that we are somehow to be lost in the divine, nor that we shall ever be the same as God. On the contrary, God is so far above us that no matter how much we grow in our likeness to the divine we shall always have a long way to go.

At the proper time, when humankind had received the necessary preparation [through God's working in and through Israel], the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the "Second Adam" because in his life, death, and resurrection a new humanity has been created, and **in all his actions Jesus has corrected what was twisted because of sin.**

Even at the end, when the kingdom of God is established, redeemed humanity will continue to **grow into greater communion with the divine.**

What we find in Irenaeus is a **grand vision of history**, so that the divine purposes unfold through it. **The focal point of that history is the Incarnation**, not only because through it God's Word has straightened the twisted history of humankind, but because from the very beginning the union of the human with the divine was the goal of history. **God's purpose is to be joined to the human creature**, and this has taken place in Jesus Christ.

Through his understanding of the gospel and of the Scriptures that reveal Jesus in all his fullness, Irenaeus was used of God to craft a stunning, Christ-centered theological vision.

### **Athanasius** (died A.D. 373)

As a young man, Athanasius defended the true gospel of God's grace in Jesus against false teachers (including Arius) who denied Jesus' divinity. This defense led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, affirmed at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. Athanasius was also a principal among those who helped settle the final canon of the New Testament.

It was thus a Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology, as propounded by Athanasius and others, that informed the formulation of core Christian doctrine and helped shape the final canon of New Testament Scriptures. In his treatise, ***On the Incarnation***, Athanasius writes the following (emphasis added):

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death **in the place of all**, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death **all might die**.... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection...

What then was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done, save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? .... The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, **Who could recreate man made after the Image. Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all** was consummated in the Lord's body; yet because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. Death there had to be, and death for all, **so that the due of all might be paid**. Wherefore the Word...being Himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as his own in the place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it, "might bring to nought him that had the power over death, that is, the devil, and might deliver them who all

their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15). By his death salvation has come **to all men, and all creation has been redeemed**....

The Word perceived that corruption could be not got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, he **assumed** a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word who is above all, might become in dying **a sufficient exchange for all**, and itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection.

Note the continuity between the thought of Athanasius and Irenaeus. Both emphasized Jesus' vicarious humanity through his Incarnation. Through the Incarnation, God accomplishes the salvation of humanity in Jesus. This is the gospel understood by the early church as revealed in the Scriptures.

### **Gregory of Nazianzus** (died A.D. 389)

Gregory (one of those referred to as the *Cappadocian Fathers*) wrote of Jesus' *assumption* of our humanity through his Incarnation as an *exchange* that accomplished salvation and healing for all humanity:

If anyone has put his trust in Him [Jesus] as a Man without a human mind, such a person is bereft of mind ... **for that which He has not assumed He has not healed**; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, **it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole**...

### **The loss of a Trinitarian vision**

Though a trinitarian vision of the gospel was dominant in the early church, it was eventually overshadowed by other visions. Particularly within Latin theology of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, there was a growing rejection of the fact that it was our alienated, fallen and sinful humanity that the Son of God assumed through the Incarnation. Instead, the idea was embraced that Jesus assumed our humanity only in its sinless (pre-Fall) state—receiving this pure nature from his mother

Mary, which involved her “immaculate conception.” In an ironic twist of history, the dominant Protestant theologies, while rejecting the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, retained the idea that Jesus assumed sinless (pre-Fall) human nature.<sup>5</sup> However, Protestant reformers did emphasize the Incarnation—seeing it as a “great exchange”. Such was the case for John Calvin who died in 1564. He wrote the following in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.16.5 / 4.17.2; emphasis added):

Now someone asks, How has Christ abolished sin, **banished the separation between us and God**, and acquired the righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the *whole course of his obedience* .... In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us...

This is the **wonderful exchange** which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, **becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him**; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that by taking our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us ....that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself [which oppressed us], **he has clothed us with his righteousness**.

### Contemporary Trinitarian theologians

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Trinitarian theology was advanced in the West largely through the work of Karl Barth and by his students, including Thomas F. Torrance and his brother James B. Torrance.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are hundreds of Trinitarian, Christ-centered theologians scattered among many denominations. These include Michael Jenkins, Ray Anderson, Elmer Colyer, Robert F. Capon, Gary Deddo, Gerrit Scott Dawson and others. Within the WCG, Joseph Tkach, J. Michael Feazell and John McKenna have been principal proponents of a Trinitarian, Christ-centered theological vision within our movement. We quote some of these theologians in this paper.

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<sup>5</sup> See T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, pp.39-40.

### When did WCG embrace this theology?

In the WCG, we have come to see Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology as most faithfully answering the all-important question: “*Who is Jesus Christ?*” This biblically anchored theology adds fullness of understanding to the gospel—and gives us a Christ-centered vocabulary to share the gospel with others in our contemporary world.

As the “dust” cleared from our doctrinal reformation of the 1990s, WCG leaders were faced with the inconsistent character of our underlying theology. Previously we had embraced a form of Arminian theology—but we found that it did not adequately account for the biblical revelation that salvation is solely “in Christ”—and thus through grace alone and fully relational.

We began to study theology in greater depth—seeking God’s guidance as we examined the alternatives more carefully. As a result, a new theological vision developed—one that has, increasingly over the last several years, been reflected in our official literature.

We are pleased here to present a synopsis of the basic principles and tenets of this vision. Our goal is not to ask our members (or even our pastors and teachers) to become academic theologians. However, we do invite all to celebrate with us the truth about God and about all humanity that is seen in the person of Jesus Christ, and so beautifully expressed in this theology.

Moreover, we want to give those who wish to study the basics of this theology a means to do so (including references to other more in-depth resources).

For those among us who prefer another theological vision, we extend respect and tolerance. We are not saved by the quality of our theology—but by God alone, through and in Jesus alone—and thus entirely by grace alone (thus apart from human effort or knowledge). However, we do want to share the joy of what we are learning, and invite all WCG pastors and teachers to study this material carefully and, as God leads, to embrace and reflect it in their teaching and preaching.

## ***Who are you Lord?***

This is the principal theological question—and note it is about a “who,” not a “what” or a “how.”

“Who are you Lord” was Paul’s anguished question on the Damascus Road, where he was struck down by the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:5). Paul spent the rest of his life answering this seminal question, then sharing the answer with all who would listen. Indeed, the answer, revealed to us in Scripture, is the heart of the gospel and the focus of Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology:

**Jesus is fully God**—the second person of the Trinity, the divine Son of God, in eternal union with the Father and the Spirit. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. And, further, Scripture tells us that it was the Son of God (Jesus Christ in his pre-incarnate state) who is the one who created the entire universe, including all humans (Col. 1:16), and who now sustains that universe, including all humans (Col. 1:17). When we say, “Jesus Christ” we are saying “God” and “Creator.”

**Jesus is fully human**—the Son of God (the Word) become human (“flesh,” John 1:14), while continuing to remain fully divine. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation. Scripture testifies that the Incarnation continues—Jesus is (still, and forever) fully God and fully human. When we say “Jesus Christ” we are saying “humanity.”

**Jesus is mediator and vicarious human**—as the one who is uniquely God (Creator and Sustainer of all) and also fully human, Jesus, in himself, is the unique ***union of both God and humanity***. In and through Jesus, all humans are *included* in the life and love of God. The man Jesus (1Tim. 2:5) is the representative and substitute for all people—past, present, future. He is the *vicarious* human. When we say “Jesus Christ”, we are saying “God in union with all humanity.”

In Romans 5 Paul speaks of these astounding aspects of who Jesus is. He is directly addressing believers, but he clearly implies that what he is saying applies to all humanity—believers and non-believers alike.

According to Paul, through Jesus, *all* are...

- ***justified*** through faith, yielding peace with God (v. 1)
- ***reconciled*** to God through the death of Jesus (v. 10)
- ***saved*** through Jesus’ life (v. 10)

When did this justification, reconciliation and salvation occur?

- “When we were still powerless” (v. 6)
- When we were “still sinners” (v. 8)
- When we were still “God’s enemies” (v. 10)

Clearly, these things occurred quite apart from our participation, let alone our good works. Jesus did these things for us and to us, and he did it within himself. As Irenaeus said, it occurred in Jesus, via his Incarnation, through a great “recapitulation.”

The benefit of what Jesus did so long ago, extends to the present and on into the future, for Paul says, “how much more...shall we be saved through his life” (v10b)—showing that salvation is not a one-time *transaction*, but an enduring *relationship* that God has with all humanity—a relationship forged within the person of Jesus Christ—the one who, in himself, relates God and humanity together in peace.

## **Jesus, the second (final) Adam**

Paul speaks further in Romans 5 of this stunning truth by comparing the first Adam to Jesus (who is seen as the “second” or “final” Adam). Note Paul’s main points (emphasis and bracketed comments added):

- “Just as sin entered the world through **one man** [Adam]... [and] **all** sinned...” (v. 12)
- “How much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the **one man, Jesus Christ** [the second Adam], overflow to the **many** [the same “all” as verse 12]?” (v. 15)
- And, “just as the result of one trespass [that of the first Adam] was condemnation for **all men**, [note again that we’re talking about everyone] so also the result of one act of righteousness [that of Jesus, the second or final Adam] was justification that brings life for **all men**” (v. 18).

## “All” really means “all”

It is our understanding that Paul is speaking of what Jesus did for **all** humanity. The scope of his vicarious human life—united as it was to God through his Incarnation—is **universal**: It pertains to all humans—all who have lived, who now live, and yet will live. But not all Christian theologies see “all” in this way:

- **Calvinism** says salvation is not truly for *all*—it is limited to the *elect* who are predestined to be saved. Jesus did not die for the non-elect.
- **Arminianism** says “all” does refer to the entirety of humanity; however, salvation is only *potentially* theirs, not *actually*. This is a key issue that we will return to later.

But (in our view) Scripture is quite clear that Jesus died for *all*—and that his death applies to all *now*. Notice a sampling of relevant passages (all quoted from the NIV, except as noted; with emphasis and bracketed comments added):

- John 12:32: “When I am lifted up from the earth, [I, Jesus] will draw **all men** to myself.”
- 1John 2:2 “[Jesus is] the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also **for the sins of the whole world.**”
- 1Timothy 4:9-10: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance...that we have put our hope in the living God, who is **the Savior of all men**, and especially of those who believe.”
- John 1:29: “The next day John [the Baptizer] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who **takes away the sin of the world!**’”
- John 3:17: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but **to save the world** through him.”
- 1John 4:14: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be **the Savior of the world.**”
- 2Cor 5:18-19: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God **was reconciling the world to himself in Christ**, not counting men's sins against them.”

- Col 1:19-20: “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him **to reconcile to himself all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
- 1Timothy 2:3-6 “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, **who wants all men to be saved** and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself **as a ransom for all men**—the testimony given in its proper time.”
- Hebrews 2:9 “But we see Jesus, who...suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might **taste death for everyone.**”
- 2Cor 5:14: “For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that **one died for all**, and therefore all died.”
- Romans 8:32: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but **gave him up for us all**—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”
- Titus 2:11 (NAS): “For the grace of God has appeared, **bringing salvation to all men.**”

From this scriptural evidence, we conclude that Jesus died for **all humanity**. In our view, this evidence overthrows the idea of a limited atonement.

But what about the view that this universal atonement is not *yet* given to all—and the giving awaits a future time when each person *actually* receives what is now only *potentially* theirs? This is a key issue for many in the WCG, given our history in Arminian thought and the prevalence of this thought in much of conservative, evangelical, North-American Protestant teaching.

### Salvation is re-creation not mere transaction

What Scripture tells us is that salvation is not to be seen as a mere *transaction* that involves a once-in-history event that pays for our sins—a gift that is “purchased” if you will—but is not given until there is a transactional exchange of the gift (salvation) for our personal repentance and faith.

The view of salvation-as-transaction, though bearing some truth, is a truncated view of salvation and is full of potential for error. Rather than a transaction, Scripture presents salvation as *re-creation*. In Jesus, who is fully God and fully human (and in his humanity the full representation and substitute for all humanity), ALL humans are re-created—and through this re-creation they are justified, reconciled and saved precisely because they are all included in who Jesus is and what he has done through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Jesus did all this *for us* and *to us* by doing it *with us* and *in us* (as one of us). Jesus is the One for the many—the many in the One. Thus, we understand from Scripture that...

- *When Jesus died*, all humanity died with him
- *When Jesus rose*, all humanity rose to new life with him
- *When Jesus ascended*, all humanity ascended and became seated with him at the Father's side

Where do we find this view in Scripture? Consider the following verses (from the NIV unless otherwise noted; emphasis and bracketed comments added):

- 2Corinthians 5:14-16: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that **one died for all, and therefore all died**. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."
- Romans 5:12-19: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came **to all men**, because all sinned...But the gift is not like the trespass. For if **the many died** [how many died? – *all*, see v.12] by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow **to the many!** [How many? – again all, see v.12]...For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. [Because God has *already* provided Christ's

sacrifice *for all* (v. 15) – it remains only for individuals *to accept it* (v.17) and thus to personally experience it—but this experience does not cause it to happen.]...Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation **for all men**, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life **for all men**. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners [How many? – *all*, see vv.12 and 18] so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" [i.e. justified (v.18); again, God has *already* provided the *gift* of righteousness thru Christ's sacrifice *for all* – it remains only for individuals to accept and thus to experience and enjoy this gift].

- Colossians 1:15-17: "He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together.**" [This is an astounding statement about the nature of Jesus— because he is both Creator and Sustainer of the entire cosmos (all humanity included), when he dies, all creation (all humans included) "go down" with him— "**therefore all died**" (2Cor 5:14). And when he rose, we all rose; and when he ascended, we all ascended. Jesus includes *everyone* ("all") in his incarnation, life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension].
- Romans 6:10: "The death he [Jesus] died, he died to sin once for all." [Note: it is not "will die" when they turn to him to "receive Jesus" but "once" (past tense) and not for some, but "for all"].
- Romans 8:1: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." [It is not our personal belief that places us "in Christ"—Jesus did that to all humanity long ago, and as a result is "not counting men's sins against them" (2Cor. 5:19) and there is "now no condemnation" (i.e. God has forgiven humanity). This reconciliation— this forgiveness—becomes "realized" for each person through personal repentance and belief].
- Ephesians 2:4-10: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in

transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

- 1Peter 1:18-20: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you... but with the precious blood of Christ...He [Jesus] was chosen [to save humanity] before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."

Dr. Joseph Tkach wrote about this re-creation in Christ in his donor letter of April 2008:

The gospel is about a **relationship**, a relationship with God made real by God's own action in Christ on our behalf. It is not about a set of demands, nor is it about a simple intellectual acceptance of a set of religious or Bible facts. Jesus Christ not only stood in for us at the judgment seat of God; he drew us into himself and made us, with him and in him, by the Spirit, God's own beloved children.

"[God's] divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may *participate in the divine nature* and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2Pet 1:3-4).

So we learn from Scripture of the universal scope of Jesus' work for our salvation. In this we see the HUGE importance of Jesus' Incarnation, through which our Creator and Sustainer—God's Word—"became flesh" (John 1:14). The one in whom all the cosmos (including all humanity) *lives and moves and has its being* (Acts 17:28), became fully human while remaining fully divine. Thus, what happens to Jesus happens to all humanity (and to the entire cosmos, which he continues to uphold).

Many theologies present a truncated view of the Incarnation—seeing it as a short-term accommodation

by Jesus to pay the penalty for human sin. But Scripture presents the Incarnation as a permanent change in God himself through Jesus, who as our representative forged a change in humanity itself.

And this new situation continues forever, for Jesus remains, forever, fully God and fully human. Thus, the miracle of the Incarnation is not something that happened "once upon a time," now past. It is a change in how the entire cosmos is "wired"—it is a re-creation. Indeed, the Incarnation changed everything, forever—reaching back to all human history, and reaching forward to encompass all time as it unfolds.

Paul makes a case for this in Romans 7:4, where he says that even while we are alive, we are already dead to the law by the body of Christ. Jesus' death in human flesh for us, though a historic event, is a present reality that applies to all humanity (past, present and future). It is this cosmic fact that underlies all history. This understanding is reinforced in Col. 3:3: "You died," Paul says to the historically *quite alive* Colossians, "and your life is hid with Christ in God." Even before we literally die, therefore, we are already dead in Jesus' death and alive in Jesus' resurrection.

The case is perhaps most clearly stated in Ephesians 2:5-6 where Paul asserts that since we are dead already in the mystery of Jesus' substitutionary death, all of us have also (right now), been "made alive together with him" and we are "raised up together with him" and "seated together with him in the heavenly realms." In other words, God in Christ not only intersects history at one moment of time, but also is the *eternal contemporary of every moment in time*, present there with all humanity included in him.

Here is how Trinitarian theologian Robert F. Capon speaks to this truth in his book *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment* (p. 410; emphasis added):

The mystery manifested in Jesus' death forgives us now because it is as **present now** as it was on the cross; the mystery manifested in his resurrection restores us now because it is as present now as it was when he left the tomb; and the mystery manifested in his judgment vindicates us now because it is as present now as it will be when he appears in glory

## *Perichoresis*

The relationship—the eternal communion of love—that Father, Son and Spirit share as the Trinity; and the relationship that is salvation (humanity in union with God in and through the God-man Jesus), involves a mystery of *inter-relationship* and *interpenetration* of persons that early Greek Church theologians described using the word **perichoresis**. They used this word to speak of how the three persons of the Trinity *interpenetrate* and *co-inhere* in an eternal act (motion) of mutual love—each emptying themselves into the other in an act of self-giving seen fully in Jesus Christ. In and through Jesus (who is both fully God and fully human), all humanity is drawn (adopted; included) into this *perichoretic union* of the Trinity. It is this perichoretic relationship forged within the person of Jesus himself, by which humanity is re-created and there reconciled to God and thus saved.

Here is how theologian Michael Jinkins describes *perichoresis* in his systematic theology written from a Trinitarian perspective (*Invitation to Theology*, pp.91-92, emphasis added):

In...trinitarian theology there is a word that describes the special kind of relationship among the persons of the Trinity: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The word is **perichoresis**. It is a Greek word that describes, literally, the *interpenetration* of each person of the Trinity in the other persons. Other theological words that describe the same relationship are *coinherence* or *circumincessio*.

These terms attempt to communicate a profound mystery of Christian theology: the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one another and [by extension] the sharing of this divine life and communion that God shares as God with humanity through the Holy Spirit. Ancient teachers of the church such as John of Damascus, Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Hilary of Poitiers and Augustine all provide important aspects of the development of this doctrine. But the doctrine itself is visible in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul and John [note especially the Gospel of John chapters 14-16].

The idea communicated by the word *perichoresis* is crucial but difficult to handle. We can best deal with it by focusing our attention on the incarnation.

**When the Word became flesh, God poured out his very life into creation while also and simultaneously taking into his own triune being our humanity in the supreme act of self-abnegation for the sake of others.** In this free act of self-surrender, God allows us to look into the very heart of his eternal being, into the Father's eternal outpouring *into the Son*, God's giving away of his own self without reservation. This act of self-giving is itself not merely some "it" but is God the Holy Spirit, flowing eternally from the Father to the Son and through the Son to humanity. As the Son in joyful surrender returns this love to the Father, the Spirit eternally returns to the Father, the Origin of all being.

On pp. 25-26, Jinkins discusses how the idea of *perichoresis* addresses everyday life. Indeed, *perichoresis* is about the *real life* of a real God into which we are drawn through the Spirit, in Jesus.

One week I asked the students to answer a kind of riddle for me. I played a live recording of the blues singer B.B. King, and then I asked them, "What do B.B. King and the doctrine of *perichoresis* have in common?" This was only the second class meeting, and I think it safe to say that none of the students had even heard mention of the doctrine of *perichoresis* before in their lives...But I let the question hang there, undefined and unexplained, and I resisted answering it for them.

The next morning, a student met me in the hall. She had spent most of the previous night in the library, reading everything she could find on *perichoresis*....The student had become so excited about her discovery she had hardly slept a wink. In fact, she spent most of the night writing a reflection paper that connected the doctrine of *perichoresis* to work she had previously done in analyzing Impressionist art.

A year or two later another student called asking me if I could tutor him through a project he was undertaking in a hospital chaplaincy. He was working with AIDS patients, and he wanted to utilize the same trinitarian doctrine of *perichoresis* to assist AIDS patients to deal with life qualitatively instead of quantitatively. What both of these students grasped is the profound relationship of theology to life, specifically the connections between the inner life of the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ and our life together in the image of this God. Gaining a personal understanding of this relationship is the purpose [the "chief end"] of our course in theology....In yet another way we are reminded that

theology is never an end in itself. *The goal of theology is always the deepening of our lives in relationship to God our Creator and Redeemer.*

Another Trinitarian theologian, **John of Damascus**, wrote the following in about A.D. 700:

For they [Father, Son and Spirit] are *inseparable* and cannot part from one another, but keep to their *separate courses* within one another, without coalescing or mingling, but cleaving to each other. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit: and the Spirit in the Father and the Son: and the Father in the Son and the Spirit, but there is no coalescence or comingling or confusion. And there is *one and the same motion*.

### Everyone, *IN CHRIST*

One of the things that is so astounding about the perichoretic union of the Father, Son and Spirit is that it is not a closed “circle.” In and through Christ, God reaches out to include others (that he creates) in his life and love. Thus, in and through Jesus (our Creator and Redeemer), all humanity is now *included—adopted* into the eternal fellowship of the Trinity.

As Jesus said to his followers the night before he died on the cross: “On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20).

He does not say that one day they *will be* included—they *are* included and one day will realize it. This statement speaks not only of believers—the flow of Jesus’ thought here is of all humanity now included, as a result of what Jesus was about to achieve for them in himself. But, of course, the day has not yet come for each individual to personally realize this inclusion. This “now included” but “not yet realized personally” is a key concept that we will return to later.

Salvation is about being “in” Jesus, not merely something done “by” Jesus, which we later accept (thus making it “real” or “actual” for us). Salvation is about a relationship, and that is why Paul so frequently in his letters (over 130 times) speaks of humanity as “in Christ” or similar phrases. Like Paul,

we must be careful to “locate” all aspects of salvation in Jesus alone (all humanity in union with him).

Salvation is ours fully and only in “union” with Jesus by which we share in what Jesus as a human did (and does) in us and for us. United to Jesus, we are “included” already in God’s triune life and love.

As we have seen already in Scripture, through union (inclusion) with and in Jesus, all humanity is...

- reconciled to the Father
- liked, loved and wanted by the Father
- accepted “in the Beloved” (Eph 1:6, KJV)
- forgiven (no record of sin and no condemnation)

The gospel is not about the *possibility* or the *potential* of these things being true for us *if* we believe in Jesus, but about the actual *accomplishment* already, *into* which we are bid personally to repent and to believe.

### The faith of Christ

Galatians 2:20 is a key verse in Paul’s thought about our inclusion in the life of Christ. Notice this verse in the King James Version: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by *the faith of the Son of God*, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”

This and other translations speak appropriately of our sharing in *the faith OF Christ* (rather than “faith in Christ”). It is Christ’s faith that saves us. Note what David Torrance writes about this on pp. 7-8 of *An Introduction to Torrance Theology* (emphasis added):

*We are saved by Christ’s faith and obedience to the Father, not ours.* My brother Tom [Torrance] often quoted Gal. 2:20, a verse which our mother loved: “I am crucified with Christ; yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live *by the faith of the Son of God*, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Such is the wording of the KJV, which I believe is a correct translation of the Greek which reads *‘en pistei zo te tou uiou tou theou’* (“by the faith of the Son of God). Other translators, like those of the NIV, apparently because they found it

so difficult to believe we can live by Christ's faith rather than our faith, have altered the text to make it read, "I live by faith *in* the Son of God"! – something altogether different! That translation takes away from **the vicarious nature of Christ's life of faith**. It is by **his faith** [not ours] that we are saved and live! **Our** faith is a thankful response to **his** faith. When we look back along our lives and ponder how disobedient we at times have been and continue to be, it is marvelously comforting to know that Christ gives us his life of obedience to the Father and that that is Christ's obedience which counts. **We are saved by his obedience, not ours.**

Notice Elmer Colyer's observation in *How to Read T.F. Torrance* (pp.113-114; emphasis added):

Torrance points out that often people view faith as something we do, or something we have, an activity we embody in our response to Christ and the gospel. There are places in the New Testament, Torrance acknowledges, where people are called to repent, have faith, and be saved. Yet Torrance argues that this does not mean that faith is "an autonomous, independent act" grounded solely in our human agency [*Mediation of Christ*, p.82]. Torrance sees faith in the New Testament as intensely personalized, for Jesus Christ in his personal being turns our wayward, unfaithful personal being back to God.

The radical character of what Torrance intends is revealed in the following statement: "Jesus steps into the actual situation where we are summoned to have faith in God, to believe and trust in him, and he acts in our place and in our stead from within the depths of our unfaithfulness and **provides us freely with a faithfulness in which we may share**...That is to say, if we think of belief, trust or faith as forms of human activity before God, **then we must think of Jesus Christ as believing, trusting, or having faith in God the Father on our behalf and in our place**" [ibid, p.82-83]. Torrance grants that this is difficult for many to accept, especially those from Western culture with its emphasis on the competent and autonomous individual.

Faith does entail a polar relation between God and people, but in the gospel the human pole is, in fact, actualized in Christ's vicarious faith and faithfulness on our behalf where "**thru his incarnational and atoning union with our faith is implicated in his**" [ibid., p.84]. Yet our faith is in no way depersonalized or dehumanized by Christ's vicarious human faith. Rather thru union with Christ's

vicarious humanity, our faith arises "freely and spontaneously out of our human life before God" [ibid.]. Torrance maintains that **the faith we confess is in the faith of the historical Jesus Christ** who lived in utter trust in God the Father in life and death.

### But what about human freedom?

If it is the life (faith and the obedience) of Jesus Christ that saves us and includes us in that salvation, what is our role? What happens in this viewpoint to the idea of human freedom? Consider the following truths:

- *All humanity*, by God's **sovereign** decision and action, is included (adopted) in Christ; this inclusion was predestined and has been accomplished in Jesus, apart from any action, belief, works, etc. of our own; *it's a done deal*.
- *Each person* is now *urged*, through the prompting of the Spirit, to believe God's word and personally accept his love.
- God forces this *personal decision/acceptance* upon no one – love must be freely given and freely received; it cannot be coerced, or it is not love.
- Thus human decision—the exercise of human freedom is of great importance, but only in this context.

### Universal vs. personal

When we talk about human *decision*—we are talking about *personal response*. And we must take care not to confuse what is universally/objectively true of all humanity, in Jesus, with an individual person's personal/subjective experience (encounter) with this objective truth. In the final analysis, it truly is all about Jesus: "It is **because of him** that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1Cor 1:30).

In that light, consider the following points shared by Dr. Dan Rogers, director of WCG Church Administration and Development, in his presentation at the 2008 WCG regional conferences:

- We do not “decide for Christ” in the sense that our personal decision creates (or causes) our salvation.
- Rather, through personal decision, we “accept” what is ours already in Christ—placing our trust in the one who has already trusted for us in our place and as our representative.
- This trust is itself a gift from God—by his Spirit, we are led to trust not in our faith, but in Jesus, who in union with us believes for us.
- This **objective union**, which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself, is thus personally and thus subjectively **realized** in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit.
- When we personally believe (accept), what is already ours, we begin to *enjoy* God’s love for us.
- When we personally believe that God has forgiven us, we begin to *enjoy* that forgiveness.
- This personal/subjective enjoyment of our salvation is key – it transforms us from the inside out as the Spirit baptizes our minds in Jesus.

As Dan points out, one of the key concepts of a Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology is to understand that there is the *universal* (or objective) truth about all humanity in Jesus, and also the *personal* (or subjective) experience of (or encounter with) this truth.

Objectively **all people** (past, present and future) are justified already; all are sanctified; all are reconciled in Jesus in and through what he has done **in their stead and for their sake**. In Jesus, objectively, the old self has **already** passed away; in him, objectively, we are **already** the new humanity, represented as such by him before and with God.

However, though the salvation of all people is already objectively accomplished by Jesus Christ, many (most?) have not *yet* personally (and thus subjectively) perceived and accepted (awakened to) what God has done for them and thus who they truly are in union with Jesus.

What is objectively/universally true must be subjectively/personally experienced or received. This experiencing - receiving does not, in itself, *create* or *cause* the person’s salvation, but it does make it *personally realized*. This personal realization, like the universal inclusion it points to, is God’s good work and is all of grace.

In the Scriptures, we find some verses that speak to the universal/objective; while others speak to the personal/subjective. Both are “real”—both are “true”— but the *personal* is true only because the *universal* is a pre-existing reality.

These two categories are found throughout Scripture—both sometimes occurring in one passage as is in 2Corinthians 5:18-21. Paul starts in verses 18-19 with the objective/universal: “All this is from God, who reconciled [past tense] us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them**. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

Here is a *universal truth* that applies objectively to all because all are (already) reconciled to God through what Jesus has done in union with all humanity.

Any theology that is faithful to Scripture and to Jesus himself, must account for this universal truth. Sadly, many theologies skip over this aspect and focus only or primarily on the personal/subjective. Doing so is a mistake, for it is the universal/objective aspect of who Jesus is and what he has done that is the base upon which the personal/subjective rests.

Having established the universal in verses 18-21, Paul goes on in verses 20-21 to address the subjective/personal: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We

implore you on Christ's behalf: ***Be reconciled to God.*** God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.”

Is there a contradiction here? How can *all* be “reconciled” (already) and yet the invitation go out to “be reconciled”—suggesting a reconciliation yet to occur? The answer is that *both* are true—these are two aspects of one truth. *All* are *already* reconciled in Christ—this is the universal and objective truth—but not all *yet* embrace and therefore *experience* their reconciliation with God.

To be reconciled, and yet not know (experience) it, is to continue to live as though one is not reconciled. Having one’s eyes opened by the Spirit to this reconciliation, choosing to embrace it, and then experiencing it, does not cause the reconciliation to *occur*, but it does make it *personally realized*. Thus,

the evangelistic invitation from Christ’s ambassadors (verse 20) is to “be reconciled.” But this appeal is not to do something that would bring about reconciliation; rather it is an appeal to *receive* the reconciliation that exists already with God in Christ.

Many contemporary evangelical theologies tend to overlook, or at least greatly minimize, the universal/objective. This is not to say that those who teach such theologies are heretics or even inferior Christians. Many people have been led to embrace Jesus with the assistance of well-meaning, deeply converted Christians who teach and preach out of a less than *adequate* theology. None of us has a perfect theology. However, it is our deep desire to embrace and to teach out of a theology that is fully faithful to Scripture and to Jesus who Scripture proclaims.

## PART TWO: QUESTIONS & OBJECTIONS

Given what we have said in Part One, the reader may have questions and even objections. We will now address several common ones—often examining verses of Scripture that seem to contradict what this theology asserts.

### What about repentance and faith?

If all are reconciled already to God in Christ, why does Scripture say so much about repentance and faith? In answer to this important question, let us begin with what WCG president, Dr. Joseph Tkach wrote in his letter to donors dated April 2008:

When they were coming to faith [many Christians] were told that unless and until they repent and believe, they are utterly separated from God and the blood of Jesus Christ does not and cannot apply to them. Believing this error then led them to believe another error—that any time they fall back into sin, God withdraws this grace and the blood of Christ no longer covers them. That’s why, if they are honest with themselves about their sinfulness, they worry throughout their Christian lives about whether God has rejected them.

***The gospel does not tell us that we are separated from God and that we must do something in order for God to extend his grace to us.*** The gospel tells us that in Jesus Christ, God the Father reconciled all things, including you and me, including all humans, with himself.

Dr. Tkach is alluding to Colossians 1:15-20: “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to **reconcile to himself all things**...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Jesus who *created* “all things” (including all humans) through his Incarnation, *included* all things (again including all humans) in his substitutionary, representative (vicarious) human life, death and resurrection. This inclusion, in itself, accomplishes the reconciliation of all things to God. There are no exceptions in this inclusive “all”—and the reconciliation accomplished is entirely by God’s own action—entirely by grace (not by any merit or works of ours). This is the stunning and universal *good news*.

However, there is a related issue—and it involves *personal* repentance and faith: individual people have not yet acknowledged that they are reconciled to God in Christ—they do not yet “see” it, and this ongoing blindness has horrific consequences.

Let us continue with Paul in Colossians 1, now in verses 21-23: “Once you were **alienated** from God and were **enemies in your minds** because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.”

Paul is showing that despite universal reconciliation, there remains in the minds of individual non-believers *alienation* toward God. Though included in Jesus, and thus in God’s love and life as his adopted children, they don’t “see” it—they don’t “get” it—they remain *alienated* in their minds toward God, though God is certainly not alienated in his mind toward them.

So the need for nonbelievers is not to “get reconciled to God” but to turn away from the alienation toward God that they hold in their minds. This “turning away” and “turning toward” is *repentance* and *faith*.

In the New Testament, the word “repent” is “*metanoia*” in Greek. “Repent” (which comes from Latin) is perhaps an unfortunate translation, because it suggests the idea of “penance.” The Greek word actually means “*change of mind.*” And all humanity is invited (and enabled) by the Spirit to experience a radical change in its mind...

- **...away from** a mind of *alienation* to God’s life – where, in our minds (but not in God’s), we are God’s enemies
- **...and toward** a mind that *accepts* (believes) and *trusts* in who God is and who we are in him through our union with Jesus

Notice Peter’s invitation to this change of mind in Acts 2:38-39: “Repent [*metanoeo* = change your mind] and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for [*eis* = into -or- with a view toward] the forgiveness [remission] of your sins. And you will receive [*lambano* = accept, take hold of] the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Does God grant the repentant person forgiveness in *exchange* for their repentance and belief? Or, as Scripture proclaims, is forgiveness an unconditional (free) gift that is thus entirely of grace?

The gospel truth—which is the truth about Jesus and about all humanity in union with God in Jesus—is that God has *already* forgiven all humanity with a forgiveness that is unconditional and thus truly free: “Therefore,” invites Peter, “repent and believe this truth – and be baptized by the Spirit with the mind of Jesus—which involves supernatural assurance that we truly are the children of God.”

Repentance (*metanoia*) is a radical change in thinking about who Jesus is and about who we are in union with him, apart from anything we have done or will yet do. Through repentance, which is God’s gift to us, our minds are “renewed” in Jesus through the Spirit.

The Spirit moves us to repent “because of” our forgiveness already accomplished in Christ, not “in order to” be forgiven. We repent “on account of” the understanding that, in Jesus, our sins *have been* forgiven and that, in Jesus, we *are* a new creation. In this repentance, we turn from the alienation within us as the Spirit baptizes our minds in Jesus’ acceptance and in the assurance that comes with it.

### **If the world is reconciled, why would Jesus say that he doesn’t pray for the world?**

Notice Jesus’ words in John 17:9: “I pray for them [his disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.”

It is important in understanding Jesus’ statement here to understand how John uses the word “*world*” (“*kosmos*” in Greek) in the flow of his gospel. At times the word can refer to all people (who are all loved by God; see John 3:15) while at other times it can refer to the worldly “system” that is hostile toward God.

It is apparently this system, which Jesus has in mind here in John 17. Since this system resists God, Jesus’ prayer to God precludes it. He is not praying for the world as it is, rather, he is praying for a group of people whom he can use to go out and help change the world. Note this in John 17:21, 23 where Jesus prays that all of his followers “May be one, Father...**so that the world may believe that you have sent me...**May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them [the whole world] even as you have loved me.”

Notice here Weymouth’s New Testament translation of verse 23: “I in them and Thou in me; that they may stand perfected in one; that the world may come to understand that Thou didst send me and hast loved them with the same love as that with which Thou hast loved me.”

Think of it: God loves *all* the world with the same love with which he loves his own Son, Jesus Christ. And that is truly *good news!*

### **Why then does Paul say that if you don't have the Spirit, you don't *belong* to Christ?**

Notice Romans 8:9: "You [Christians]...are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, **he does not belong to Christ.**"

Does Jesus not love the person who "does not belong to Christ"? Of course, Jesus loves this person—he died for all people. But because this person is not controlled by the Spirit (is not a believer), they do not *subjectively* "belong" to Jesus, though in an *objective* sense, the person certainly does belong to Jesus who created them and died to reconcile them to the Father.

Note Col. 3:11 in the Amplified Bible: "In this new creation all distinctions vanish. There is no room for and there can be neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, nor difference between nations whether alien barbarians or Scythians [who are the most savage of all], nor slave or free man; but **Christ is all and in all** [everything and everywhere, to all men, without distinction of person]."

And notice Eph. 4:6: "One God and Father of all, **who is over all and through all and in all.**" All are included—all belong to Christ; but not all know it and not all experience and live out of this truth.

### **Are you saying there is no difference between a Christian and a non-Christian?**

No. What we are saying is that because of who Jesus is and what he has done, *all humans*—believers and non-believers—are united to God in and through Jesus. Jesus forged this union within himself through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension. As a result, all people are reconciled to God; all have been adopted as his dearly loved children. All, in and through Jesus, are included in the Triune love and life of God: Father, Son and Spirit.

However, not all people know who they are in Christ. Thus, not all have experienced repentance (a change in their thinking about who God is and who they are) and have thus not turned to their heavenly Father in faith, trusting in Jesus, and "picking up their cross" to follow Jesus as his disciple.

Some Trinitarian theologians, noting this personal difference between believers and non-believers, speak of all humanity as being reconciled to God, and of believers as being both reconciled and redeemed. Whatever the terms used, believers have a *personal and realized participation* in the union that all humanity has with God in Christ.

Another way to speak of the distinction between believers and non-believers is to say that all people are *included* in Christ (universally) but only believers *participate actively* (personally) in that inclusion.

We see these distinctions spoken of throughout the New Testament, and they are important. However, we must not take these distinctions too far and think of non-believers as not *accepted* by and not *loved* by God. To see them in this way would be to overlook the great truth of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done (already) for all humanity. It would be to turn the "good news" (the Gospel) into "bad news."

When we see all humanity as in Christ, some of the categories we might have held in our thinking fall away. We no longer see non-believers as "outsiders" but as children of God in need of understanding how much their Father loves them, likes them, and wants them. We approach them as brothers and sisters. Do they know who they are in Christ? No—and it is our privilege to tell them of God's love for them and invite them to repent, to place their trust (faith) in Jesus, and to follow him as one of his disciples.

### **Why then is there final judgment and hell?**

If all are reconciled already to God by being included by grace in Jesus, why does Scripture say so much about final judgment and hell?

As with all questions, we must begin with the foundational truth, namely who Jesus Christ is. Jesus is our Savior and our Judge—both roles in the one person. And he does not have a “split personality.” There will not be a Jesus showing up at the final judgment different from the Jesus who died for us (and with us) on the cross. Think of this issue out of the framework of what we know to be true otherwise and the following points begin to emerge:

- Every person who ends up in hell will have been included already in Jesus and thus reconciled to God—forgiven; adopted; accepted. It is only their personal/subjective unbelief – their alienation and thus rejection of God’s forgiveness (God’s acceptance of them) that leads them to persist in their “no” to God’s resounding, freely given “Yes.”
- The final judgment involves the *general resurrection*, when *all* will see Jesus and themselves in Jesus, clearly; and this creates for alienated, non-believers a *crisis* that may constitute for some their first invitation to repentance and belief.
- And so the issue at hand and thus the “bottom line” question for all in the final judgment will be—“Do you accept God’s love, God’s forgiveness in Christ, God’s acceptance? Will you come into the wedding supper?” To refuse is to choose *alienation* from the source of a person’s very being and from fellow humans – and this alienation (which by their choice continues) is miserable “hell” – likened in Scripture to “outer darkness” and “ever-burning fire”.

C.S. Lewis (in *The Problem of Pain*), wrote this about hell:

I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully “All will be saved.” But my reason retorts, “Without their will, or with it?” If I say “Without their will,” I at once perceive a contradiction; how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say “With their will,” my reason replies “How if *they will not give in?*”

We’re dealing here with the mystery of evil in a universe where God is fully sovereign, and the reality

that God will never strip any person of the free will that he has given to them. They must remain free to say “no” as well as “yes” to God’s “Yes” to them given freely in Jesus (2Corinthians 1:18-20).

Consider what Robert F. Capon says in his book *The Mystery of Christ...and Why We Don’t Get It* (p. 10):

There is no sin you can commit that God in Jesus Christ hasn’t forgiven already. The old baloney about heaven being for good guys and hell for bad guys is dead wrong. Heaven is populated entirely by forgiven sinners, not spiritual and moral aces. And hell is populated entirely by forgiven sinners. ***The only difference between the two groups is that those in heaven accept the forgiveness and those in hell reject it.*** Which is why heaven is a party—the endless wedding reception of the Lamb and his bride—and hell is nothing but the dreariest bar in town.”

Back now to C.S. Lewis, this time from his book *The Great Divorce*:

There are only two kinds of people in the end; those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

Trinitarian theologians are often accused of denying the reality of hell. Karl Barth has often been accused along those lines. In rebuttal, he shared with a friend a vivid dream in which he saw hell as an...

...immense desert..[that was] unbearably cold, not hot. In this cold, forsaken desert, there was sitting one person, very isolated, and very lonely; so much so that Barth became depressed just observing the loneliness. Ending the narration of his dream, Barth said to his friend, "There are people who say I have forgotten this region [hell]. I have not forgotten. I know more about it than others do. But because I know of this, therefore I must speak about Christ. I cannot speak enough about the Gospel of Christ [from "*Memories of Karl Barth*," by Eberhard Busch, in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. by Donald McKim, pp.13-14].

Scripture speaks of final judgment and of hell precisely because God gives us freedom to respond to what he has done for us in Christ. We are included in Christ,

but we can refuse that inclusion. We are reconciled to the Father, but we can refuse that reconciliation.

Such refusal has horrific and eternal consequences, but it does not negate the universality of what God has done for all humanity in Christ.

### **But why are some names not in the book of life?**

In Revelation 13:8 it is said that “all inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—***all whose names have not been written in the book of life*** belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.” Then in Revelation 17:8 it says that “the inhabitants of the earth ***whose names have not been written in the book of life*** from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast.”

How is it that *some* names are missing from the “book of life” when *all* humanity is said to be included in God’s life through Jesus? Which is it—missing or included?

First consider the gospel context of these statements in Revelation. The New Testament elsewhere states clearly that God has reconciled all humanity to himself in Jesus. This is an *objective* and *universal* truth. However, we are also told that what is *objectively* true for all, is not *personally* (and thus *subjectively*) experienced by all. It seems that in the aforementioned verses in Revelation, John is speaking to this personal and subjective experience.

Next consider the literary context of these statements in Revelation. John writes using a literary genre (style) known as *apocalyptic*. This genre, which was commonly used by Jewish writers in John’s day, is highly symbolic. And John typically employs symbols borrowed from the Old Testament, particularly from the apocalyptic sections of the book of Daniel. Note, for example, Daniel 12:1 (emphasis added):

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.

Here Daniel speaks of a book of record, which is a symbol used to convey the idea of ***belonging***. This symbol comes from the ancient practice of keeping a list (“book”) of the names of citizens in a particular community. The issue behind this symbol seems to be that of ***identity***. John’s point in Revelation is that some people identify with Jesus and some with the Beast. Though this is a matter of personal and, therefore, subjective experience, it is, nonetheless, quite “real.” Some identify with Jesus, who is our life, and, tragically, some do not.

Elsewhere in Scripture, we learn that, objectively speaking, *all* humanity is included in the Lamb’s book of life through humanity’s union with God established in Christ himself. This universal truth was established “from the creation of the world” (Rev. 13:8)—for, indeed, from that point of beginning, Jesus was predestined to be “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

However, not all who are included and have had their sins taken away by Jesus, identify personally (subjectively) with Jesus. Instead, many succumb to, and thus identify with, “the beast” (17:8)—the dominant anti-Christian system that stands in opposition to Christ.

This beast is said to have power over “***all inhabitants*** of the earth” (13:8). And Satan is shown to be the power behind the beast—using his deception to lead “***the whole world*** astray” (12:9). “All inhabitants” and “the whole world” are broadly inclusive terms, but clearly, not *every* person is tainted by this deception. Perhaps John has in mind the incorrigibly wicked.

Whatever the case, it is clear that though *all* are included objectively in Christ’s life, *many* (most?) are blinded to their inclusion and thus fail to experience and thus identify personally (subjectively) with the true identity that is theirs in Christ. From the perspective of their personal experience in the

darkness of the Beast's deception, it is as though their names are absent from the "book of life."

Jesus took upon himself our humanity—and no less than the whole world is included in that union through Jesus' substitutionary, representative life, death, resurrection and ascension. In this objective sense, he has written all our names in his book of life. And because we are his, he does not forget us—even when we, in personal blindness, turn away and it thus seems (personally and subjectively), that our names are absent from his book.

It is our understanding in the WCG that God will give to every person the opportunity to understand the objective truth of their inclusion in Jesus—and through this understanding, have their eyes opened as Satan's deception is stripped away. But even then, each person, exercising their God-given freedom, has the personal choice to say either "yes" or "no" to God's "Yes" to them in Christ.

Objectively, this human response, is made by those whose names already are written in the Lamb's book of life. This reality is now seen clearly, and they must personally either embrace it or reject it. God forces his love on no one. Though this rejection does not change the fact of their inclusion with God, it does create a continuing and perhaps deepening alienation, tantamount (subjectively) to having their names removed from the book of life.

### **Why does Peter say it is *hard* to be saved?**

Notice 1Peter 4:17-18: "For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, ***"If it is hard for the righteous to be saved,*** what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" Here Peter is quoting Proverbs 11:31: "If the righteous receive their due on earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner!"

The issue is not salvation in the "hereafter" but in the "here and now." In one sense, it is not hard to receive

the salvation that is ours in Jesus – one simply repents and believes the gospel. However, in this world, because of hardness of heart, many don't want to do this. On the other hand, it's hard ***to live*** the salvation (kingdom) life here on earth in this time, especially if the world is persecuting you—which is the issue Peter is addressing (see 1Peter 4:12-16).

So the "hardness" which Peter talks about relative to salvation is not that it is hard to "get saved"—in fact, it is a free gift to us. But to live in this world the way of that salvation is often very difficult, particularly in times of persecution.

### **What about *everlasting contempt and destruction*?**

Doesn't Scripture teach that some will be condemned forever? If so, how can we say all are now reconciled?

Note Daniel 12:2: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to ***shame and everlasting contempt.***" And note 2Thes. 1:6-9: "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with ***everlasting destruction*** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power."

Both of these passages refer to the time of the final judgment when Jesus is "revealed" (the apocalypse, sometimes referred to as Jesus' "second coming" or Jesus' "return in glory"). This is the time when all humans will see clearly who Jesus is and thus who they are in union with Jesus. And this "revealing" presents to them a choice—will they say "yes" to their inclusion in Christ, or will they say "no"?

Their decision neither creates nor severs their inclusion, but it does determine their attitude toward it—whether they will continue in alienation (and thus

in shame and everlasting contempt and destruction) or enter fully into the joy of the Lord.

Perhaps for many (most?) this final judgment will be a first opportunity to learn of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not given to know the details. But in the meantime, many are locked in ignorance and all the devastation this ignorance brings.

We are reminded of Paul's own experience. Note what he says in 1Timothy 1:13-14: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."

If God shows mercy on a blasphemer and persecutor of Christians like Paul (formerly named Saul), will he not do so for all? The answer is, yes he will. God's grace will be poured out abundantly on them as well. However, God will never remove from them the freedom he has granted to them to say "no" to his "Yes." Why? Because love cannot be coerced. Our personal acceptance of God's freely given inclusion must be freely given.

Continuing in 1Tim. 1:15-16: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

Note that in turning, these sinners "receive" eternal life—a life they have already with God, in Christ, but a life they have not known, let alone embraced or lived out of. Prior to their eyes being opened, these rebels, though often perpetrating terrible evil, were living in ignorance. Remember what Jesus said in Luke 23:24 concerning those crucifying him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

But a time is coming when this ignorance will be removed. Note John 5:28-29: "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their

graves will hear his [Jesus'] voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."

The Greek word here translated "condemned" is *krisis*, which means, "judgment" (as "krisis" is translated in v.22). Note the translation of verse 29 in Young's Literal Translation: "And they shall come forth; those who did the good things to a rising again of life, and those who practiced the evil things to a rising again of judgment."

We must remember that the judge at this "rising again," usually referred to as the general resurrection, is none other than Jesus, the Savior of all humankind. Notice John 5:22: "...the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment ["krisis"] to the Son."

On Judgment Day, Jesus, the Judge who died for all of us in our ignorance, will reveal fully who he is—and in the light of that truth, all are called to decision—to "judgment" (*krisis*)—a point of crisis, if you will. Those who accept/believe enter into the fullness of the joy of the life they have with God in Christ. Those who reject it enter an even greater depth of alienation (and the horrific pain that goes with it).

### **What about the *narrow gate*?**

Notice Jesus' words in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that **leads to destruction**, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Jesus is speaking of this life now—on this side of the general resurrection. In this day, most are living on the "broad road" of destruction. Though included in Christ, they live as though this was not true. Only the "few" it seems have in this time embraced the truth that is in Jesus—and it is he who is "the narrow gate."

Jesus addresses this same issue in Matthew 7:21-23: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will

of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. **Away from me**, you evildoers!'"

These people have done miracles, and in doing so have deceived many. They claim to know Jesus, and though Jesus obviously knows them (he is omniscient!) he does not see himself in them with regard to their behavior, and so he proclaims, "*I never knew you.*" However, this does not mean that they have no future opportunity for repentance (perhaps coming on Judgment Day). Jesus died for them and thus reconciled them to God (2Pet. 2:1). Paul himself worked against Jesus and yet was still given an opportunity to repent. So it would seem Jesus is using hyperbole here (e.g. "*I never knew you,*" when he did) to express his unhappiness at their counterfeit works.

There will be no reward for these false works. But they can still turn in repentance to Jesus to experience the eternal life they have in him. Paul alludes to this in 1Corinthians 3:12-15: "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, **he will receive his reward**. If it is burned up, **he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved**, but only as one escaping through the flames."

But what about Jesus statement in Matthew 25:41: "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, **you who are cursed**, into **the eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels ....'"

As the verses that follow this statement show, these rebels have lived selfishly. But so have we all. The issue is not perfect behavior but the attitude of the heart—some turn to Jesus in repentance but others remain obstinately rebellious. All who stand before Jesus in judgment belong to him—they are included in his life and love, but some reject it, and in doing so separate themselves in their own hearts and minds.

Jesus acknowledges this fact and the consequences follow, namely "eternal fire."

This "fire," like "outer darkness," is a metaphor for the place (condition) of self-imposed misery that will be experienced by those who, in the final judgment, refuse the goodness and love of God that is theirs.

### **But don't we become God's children only at the point of belief?**

Notice Jesus' words in John 1:12-13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, **he gave the right to become children of God**—children born neither of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Note the same passage in the New Living Translation: "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to **become** children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God."

First, we need to recall what we have seen in Scripture already, namely that God has included all in the vicarious humanity of Jesus. When he died, we all died; when he rose; we all were born again in him. Thus the ones Jesus is speaking of, following his death and resurrection, are, from God's perspective, *already* his children. But to those who believe and in believing accept Jesus to be who he says he is, there is a profound, life-altering experiencing of the new life that has been theirs all along "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). What has been objectively true for them all along is now subjectively/personally realized (experienced).

In this important distinction between the universal and the personal we find the difference between the "already" (universal) and the "not yet" (personal). Thus, Jesus can proclaim a universal, wonderful truth: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into

the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16-17). Indeed, Jesus came and saved the world—that is the universal, “already” truth. But then comes the personal, “not yet” reality: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands **condemned already** because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son” (John 3:18).

Condemned already to what? To eternal hell? No. Condemned to continue living on earth in this life without Jesus in their lives from the standpoint of not being a believer with a personal, realized relationship with God. This is the condemnation that comes from continuing in spiritual darkness (see verse 19).

Jesus makes a similar point John 8:42: “If God were your Father, you would love me...**You belong to your father, the devil**, and you want to carry out your father's desire.” Those living in the darkness of unbelief, while objectively God's children in union with Jesus, are *subjectively* (in their personal experience) still in darkness and are thus under the influence of the father of that darkness, the devil.

Paul speaks to believers of this deception and darkness in Ephesians 2:2: “ In which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” So there is satanic influence in these non-believers' lives, yet they still belong to God in Jesus who is Creator, Sustainer and Savior of all humanity.

This influence of Satan and of our fallen human nature, which Satan inflames, are no mere trifle. Despite walking in the light, even believers wrestle with this darkness. And a battle rages between the two.

Peter was with Jesus—in that sense we can call him a believer—yet Jesus' said to him, “Get you behind me, Satan” (Mat. 16:23). Even as believers, there are occasions when we follow Satan's desires for us. At such times, who is our master? Overall, as believers, we yield to Jesus; but sometimes we yield to Satan.

But doesn't Jesus deny that non-believers have God as their Father? After all, he says, “If God *were* your Father...” Yes, Jesus says this speaking to people who should have known better. They were certainly not acting as though God was their Father—this, sadly, is their subjective/personal reality.

But note what Paul says concerning the objective/universal truth about God: he is the “Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:6). Jesus is referring to their present, subjective and personal attitude – he is not denying this universal truth proclaimed by Paul. The Pharisees at this point thought they were doing God's will in resisting Jesus and wanting him out of the way. As Jesus said, “a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2). But note as well that many of these same Pharisees later became followers of Jesus (see Acts 6:7).

### **But isn't this universalism?**

Some people misunderstand this theology and assign to it the label of “universalism.” But this is not an accurate assessment, for Scripture shows that though God, in Christ, has reconciled all humans to himself, he will never force any person to embrace that reconciliation. To do so would remove from them an important God-given gift, namely their freedom to choose (and thus to say “no” to God's “Yes” to them in Jesus).

God wants *sons* and *daughters*, not zombies who lack the freedom to think and to choose without coercion to love their heavenly Father.

Trinitarian theologian T. F. Torrance rejected universalism because he saw in Scripture that, in the end, some people will believe while others will not. We cannot fully explain why this is; but neither can we fully explain the presence of evil in a world under God's sovereign control (see *An Introduction to Torrance Theology*, by Elmer Colyer, p.54).

## If we are included already, why struggle to live the Christian life?

Some object to this theology because they see it as encouraging “easy believism” or a certain “I don’t care” attitude among believers. Is that the case?

First, we must understand, that salvation is freely and equally given to all based on Jesus’ merit and work, not on our own. This is what Jesus is speaking about in his parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Mat. 20:12:15): “When they received it [their payment for working in the vineyard], they began to grumble against the landowner.’ These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ ...[To which God answers:] ‘Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? **Or are you envious because I am generous?’”**

Some people do not like the idea that others who do not work as hard as they do will end up with the same reward as they. But this concern overlooks the truth that no one, no matter how hard they work, deserves salvation. That is why it is, for everyone, a free gift.

However, in Scripture we learn that our participation now in Jesus’ love and life bears personal benefits (rewards) that stretch into eternity. Consider the following passages:

- 1Cor. 3:11-15: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; **he himself will be saved**, but only as one escaping through the flames.”
- Galatians 6:7-8 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that

nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

- Revelation 22:12: “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone **according to what he has done.**”

God gives his free gift of reconciliation in Jesus to all, but those who, through the Spirit, embrace and live out of that gift, will experience rewards now and into eternity. Note what Michael Jenkins writes on p. 244 in his *Invitation to Theology*:

This leads us to understand that the life God desires us to live is the quality of life we see in Jesus Christ, the “passionate” life, as Moltmann described it, the life freely poured out for the sake of others, abandoning any self-filling security, **trusting instead to be filled by God, the eternal source.** This life, which is by definition *life in community*, reflects the inner life of God, the perichoretic life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the mutual penetration of divine persons in self-abandonment and mutual participation. It is this life of *perichoresis*, or coinherence, which forms the center of our ethics because it is also this life eternal that provides the meaning of our justification and our sanctification.

## What about Christian mission?

If all are included already in God’s love and life through Jesus, why would we have any concern about Christian mission—about proclaiming the gospel to the world and making disciples for Jesus?

First, we note that it is Jesus’ union with each of us that provides the basis and foundation for every aspect of our life, including our participation in mission (ministry) with Jesus.

As Dr. Dan Rogers stated in his address at the 2008 WCG regional conferences: “Our *realized* union with Christ is given to us personally and in community through the gift of the Holy Spirit and as such is the ground of the church and the practice of Christian faith and ministry. It is literally Christ’s ministry that he does in, with, and through us.”

So why devote ourselves to this ministry with Jesus? Because it is our life. The Spirit moves us to willing and active participation in what Jesus is doing in union and communion with us. And he is actively proclaiming his gift of grace already given to all humanity through what he has done for us all. The Spirit is at work in the world to share the truth that is in Jesus—and to invite all to receive and embrace it. In doing so, what is true of them already (in an objective sense), will become true for them personally (in a subjective sense). And that changes everything.

### **What about John 6:44?**

The Jewish leaders were seeking to deflect Jesus' seemingly outrageous claim: "I am the bread of life that came down from heaven" (John 6:41). This statement was tantamount to claiming divine status. And Jesus' reply to the Jewish leaders' complaint concerning this claim was to "stop grumbling" (6:43a) and to realize that "no one can come to me [the bread of heaven that gives true life] unless the Father who sent me draws him..." (6:44).

At times, this verse is misused to say that as followers of Jesus we have no role in evangelizing non-believers, because only the Father can draw people to Jesus. But this is not Jesus' point here. Rather, he is speaking of the *unity* that he has with the Father. The work he is doing on earth is not merely his own, but the direct accomplishment of the Father's will (6:38).

So united is Jesus and the Father, that what he does is to be seen as the Father's own will and work. When people follow the Son, it is because the Father has drawn them to him.

And so it is with our work as Jesus' disciples: The work we do in obedience to Jesus' command (the Great Commission) to "go and make disciples" (Mat. 28:19), is our participation in Jesus' own will and work in our world—which is the Father's own will and work.

Indeed, we cannot draw people to Jesus on our own. But as we, through the Spirit, participate actively in

what Jesus is doing, we are his instruments, agents of the Father in pointing people to the Son. Indeed, this is the Father's will and work.

### **If all are included, why is there still evil in the world?**

An objection sometimes lodged against the idea that all humanity is included already in Christ, has to do with the continuing presence of evil in the world. This objection tends to run along one of two lines:

1. Because God will not coexist with evil, and because there are so many evil people in the world, it follows that God has NOT already included all humanity.
2. If God has actually included all humanity already, we should expect to see in the world around us a corresponding and significant abating of evil since God accomplished this inclusion. But we don't see this abatement, and thus it follows that God has NOT already included all humanity.

In response to both objections, it should first be noted that Trinitarian Theology does not bury its head in the sand and deny that evil exists in the world. One need only note the very direct and courageous way that Karl Barth (and other theologians with him) confronted the evil of Hitler's Third Reich. It's clear that there remains in our world a great deal of evil. In fact, one might argue that the ravage of evil upon our world has increased since Jesus' Advent (an increase due, at least in part, to "advances" in the technology of warfare).

But that being said, the above-mentioned two lines of argument are grounded in human experience and observation. But the inclusion of all humanity in God's life and love in and through Jesus is not a truth that is learned through *observation* – it is understood only through *revelation*, namely the revelation of the person and work of Jesus Christ himself.

This universal inclusion has been accomplished in and through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. His Advent, constitutes the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in our world. And

Jesus likens this Kingdom presence to the "yeast" which infects the whole "lump of dough," yet is not visible to most (see Mat. 13:33). The full revealing (that all will see) of this inclusion awaits the *parousia* (revealing) of Jesus and of all humanity included in Jesus.

We know at this time of humankind's inclusion in God, because (and only because) it has been revealed to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is shown in the Holy Scriptures and in the formative Creeds of the Patristic Church to be, in himself, the unique and final union of God and all humanity.

"OK," you say, "but still you have to account for evil in the world!" And, indeed, the gospel does that. It declares that all humanity is included objectively and universally in Christ: no exceptions; no exclusions. Furthermore, it says that God is NOT separate from sinners; rather he has included all of them - adopted the whole lot of us—as his dearly loved children in Christ.

Argument #1 above is not correct in its assertion - God is NOT unwilling to coexist with sin; in fact, in Jesus he became sin for us (2Cor. 5:21). Jesus was (and still is) a "friend of sinners" (see Luke 7:34; and note here that God the Father is not of a different mind). God hates sin and thus he hates evil because it hurts his children. But he is not afraid of evil, nor is he put off by sin or by sinners. Rather he dealt with it all, "up close and personal" on behalf of all through the vicarious humanity of Jesus.

But when it comes to evil still in the world, there is more to be said. What is objectively and universally true of all humanity (from the "best" of us to the "worst"), is not experienced subjectively and personally by all. Paul makes this clear in Colossians:

"God [the Father] was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him [Jesus] **to reconcile to himself all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace **through his blood**, shed on the cross" (1:19-20).

This speaks to the universal and objective state of all humanity - all were reconciled (past tense) through

Jesus to the Father at the cross. As we would say, "It's a done deal!" But there is still more to be said, and next Paul addresses the personal and subjective aspect of this universal picture. Note that he is speaking to believers:

"Once you were **alienated** from God and were enemies **in your minds**, because of your evil behavior" (Col. 1:21).

When God reconciled us to himself at the cross of Christ, the alienation he held toward us was resolved for all and forever. In and through Christ, we are all God's dearly loved, forgiven, accepted and adopted children. But there remains in the minds of some (many?) an alienation toward their Heavenly Father—an alienation that spews forth in evil behavior. Thus for all to be included in Christ, does not mean that evil has been eliminated. Yes, evil was conquered at the cross, but its complete elimination from human minds and behavior awaits the completion of God's plan to destroy all vestiges of evil - the "yeast" of the Kingdom continues to spread and to conquer - one mind at a time, until "every knee shall bow" to Christ.

Our role as believers is to declare the truly *good news* that God has indeed accepted, included and adopted all in and through Jesus Christ. Because of Christ, God loves them unconditionally, and the Spirit invites and enables them to repent (change their thinking) concerning who God is and who they are in light of the truth of Jesus; and to place their trust (belief) in this Jesus who has indeed saved them - picking up their cross and following Jesus as one of his disciples.

The gospel of humankind's universal inclusion in God's love and life in Jesus truly is **good news**, and it deals directly and decisively with the issue of evil. It is not naive about evil. Unlike some liberal theologies, this truth does not sweep evil under the carpet, hoping that it will go away. No, Jesus has taken all evil upon himself, and has and is redeeming it - transforming the perpetrators of evil into his loyal disciples. This is the transformation that is the focus of the Holy Spirit in his ministry to conform us individually and collectively into the image of Christ.

## Tips on Biblical exegesis

In this paper, we have sought to address typical questions and objections that arise as people consider Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology. No doubt, there are other scriptures that bring similar questions or objections. What we have sought to do in this paper, is to demonstrate a Trinitarian, Christ-centered approach to reading (and thus to *interpreting*) all passages of Holy Scripture.

Now, it is true, that some object to the very idea of *interpreting* Scripture. They say, “I just let the Bible say what it means.” This idea, though admirable, is not tenable. The act of reading is, necessarily, an act of interpretation. So the issue is not interpreting or not interpreting; it is this: What criteria do we use in our interpreting as we read? The fact of the matter is that we always bring to Scripture certain criteria—certain ideas and presuppositions. What we are urging here is that we would come to Scripture with the truth of who Jesus Christ truly is as the point of beginning and the ongoing criteria by which we read (interpret) the Holy Scriptures. Jesus, himself, must be the “lens” by which all of Scripture is read.

Therefore, in reading Scripture, we recommend asking and answering the following questions:

- How does this passage that I am reading line up with the gospel truth, which answers the question, *Who is Jesus?*
- Is this passage referring to the universal, objective truth of all humanity in Jesus, or is it referring to the personal, subjective experience (or denial) of the universal reality?
- How is this passage worded in other translations? It’s a good idea to check multiple translations; many English translations have a built-in bias in favor of a theology that denies the truth of the inclusion already of all humanity in Christ. It’s also helpful to check Greek Lexicons and other translation helps—some of the richness and subtleties of the Greek text of the New Testament are lost in translations into other languages.

## Key points of Trinitarian, Christ-Centered Theology

Following is an eight-point summary of the basic precepts of the theology presented in this paper.

1. The Triune God created all people to participate through the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ in the love relationship enjoyed by the Father, Son and Spirit.
2. The Son became human, the man Jesus Christ, to reconcile all humanity to God through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.
3. The crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus is the representative and the substitute for humanity at the right hand of God, and he draws all people to himself by the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. In Christ, humanity is loved and accepted by the Father.
5. Jesus Christ paid for all our sins – past, present and future – and there is no longer any debt to pay.
6. The Father has in Christ forgiven all our sins, and he eagerly desires that we turn to him.
7. We can enjoy his love only when we believe that he loves us. We can enjoy his forgiveness only when we believe he has forgiven us.
8. When we respond to the Spirit by turning to God, believing the good news and picking up our cross and following Jesus, the Spirit leads us into the transformed life of the kingdom of God.

## Recommended resources for further study

To study Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology in greater depth, we recommend the following resources.

### Books<sup>6</sup>

- *Invitation to Theology*, by Michael Jinkins (InterVarsity, 2001; 278 pages)
- *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, by Robert F. Capon (Zondervan, 2002; 522 pages)
- *An Introduction to Torrance Theology*, edited by Gerrit Scott Dawson (T&T Clark, 2007, 179 pages)
- *The Mediation of Christ*, by Thomas F. Torrance (Helmets & Howard, 1992; 126 pages)
- *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, by James B. Torrance (InterVarsity, 1996; 130 pages)
- *The Great Dance*, by C. Baxter Kruger (Regent, 2000; 121 pages)
- *How to Read T.F. Torrance*, by Elmer Colyer (InterVarsity, 2001; 393 pages)
- *Dancing in the Dark*, by Graham Buxton (Paternoster, 2001; 310 pages)
- *Jesus and the Undoing of Adam*, by C. Baxter Kruger (Perichoresis, 2003; 72 pages)
- *Evangelical Theology: an Introduction*, by Karl Barth (Eerdmans, 2000; 210 pages)
- *Dogmatics in Outline*, by Karl Barth (Harper & Row, 1959; 130 pages)

### WCG articles

WCG has hundreds of helpful articles that address Christian belief and practice. Following is a list of articles (with web addresses noted) that unpack key aspects of WCG's Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology.

- *Good News for Bad People* [www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/goodnews.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/goodnews.htm)
- *The Gospel Really is God News* [www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/bestnews.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/bestnews.htm)
- *Getting a Grip on Repentance* [www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/repentance.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/gospel/repentance.htm)
- *Predestination—Does God really let you choose your own fate?*  
[www.wcg.org/lit/booklets/predestination.htm](http://www.wcg.org/lit/booklets/predestination.htm)
- *Why Study Theology?* [www.christianodyssey.org/god/theology.htm](http://www.christianodyssey.org/god/theology.htm)
- *The Trinity: Just a Doctrine?* [www.christianodyssey.org/07/ON07/0710-05.pdf](http://www.christianodyssey.org/07/ON07/0710-05.pdf)
- *Theology: What difference does it make?* [www.wcg.org/wn/05january/theology.htm](http://www.wcg.org/wn/05january/theology.htm)

### WCG video programs

- *You're Included*. This online program presents interviews from Dr. J. Michael Feazell (WCG vice president) with Trinitarian theologians<sup>7</sup> and authors. View or download these interviews at [www.wcg.org/av/YI.htm](http://www.wcg.org/av/YI.htm).
- *Speaking of Life*. This online program presents short discussions of Biblical topics from the biblical perspective of Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology. The main presenter is Dr. Joseph Tkach, WCG president. View or download these programs at [www.wcg.org/av/SPoL.htm](http://www.wcg.org/av/SPoL.htm).

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<sup>6</sup> Note that our recommendation of these books does not mean that we agree with every statement within each one. However, we are in *substantial* agreement with what each presents.

<sup>7</sup> Note that our interviews with these theologians are not to be construed as endorsing all that these individuals teach. We provide these interviews because we see these theologians and teachers as in *substantial* agreement with our understanding of Trinitarian, Christ-centered Theology.