

THE GOSPEL
and the
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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❧ Introduction ❧

Welcome to *The Gospel and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*! The purpose of this material is twofold. Firstly, it is intended to acquaint you with – or review with you – the basics of what the Bible teaches about the good news of Jesus Christ. Secondly, this study is intended to familiarize you with what it means to be a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

The format of this study is simple. On the following page you will find listed the five vows required of all professing members of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Following that you will find a section covering each question individually and in detail.

Membership Vows
of the
Orthodox Presbyterian Church

1. Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?
2. Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?
3. Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?
4. Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?
5. Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?

☞ God's Revelation in Scripture ☞

Vow:

Do you believe the Bible, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, to be the Word of God, and its doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation?

Goals:

- To understand what is meant by *the canon of Scripture*
- To define the *inspiration, inerrancy, preservation, and authority* of the Bible
- To grasp the *exclusive character* of the Christian faith

The Canon of Scripture

The word 'canon' comes from the Greek word *kanōn* ("a straight rod used as a rule") and means 'rule' or 'standard'. When we speak of *the canon of Scripture*, we use the word in a sense which means "the *list* of books which are acknowledged to be, in a unique sense, the *rule* of belief and practice."¹ This is what *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* means when it states that "The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is *the only rule to direct us* how we may glorify and enjoy him."²

Our first membership vow says that the canon of Scripture consists "of the Old and New Testaments." This is perfectly consistent with what the Bible says about itself. Let's see this for ourselves.

In **Luke 24:36-49**, we have an account of Jesus appearing after his resurrection to his disciples. Especially notable in this passage is what Jesus says in v. 44: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."³ Why is this important? Because the Hebrew Bible (what we now know as the Old Testament) was divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. "The Law" referred to Genesis-Deuteronomy. Under "the Prophets" the people of Israel had two divisions.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 17-18.

² *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Willow Grove, PA: OPC, 2005), 2 (emphasis added).

³ All Scripture references from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

The “Former Prophets” were what we think of as the historical books: Joshua-Kings. The “Latter Prophets” referred to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets. “The Writings” contained all the rest of our Old Testament, and was itself divided into the three sections. In the first section of the Writings was the Psalms. So when Jesus refers to “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” in Luke 24:44, he is recognizing the entirety of the Old Testament!

But what about the New Testament? Why does it count as part of Scripture?

The reason we consider the New Testament to be a part of Scripture is because the Bible treats the New Testament writings as equal to those of the Old Testament. We can see this clearly in **1 Timothy 5:18**: “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” In this verse the Apostle Paul cites two passages. The first of these is from the Old Testament (**Deuteronomy 25:4**). The second is from Luke’s Gospel (**Luke 10:7**). Paul links them together and calls both “the Scripture”! Another place where we see this same thing happening is **2 Peter 3:14-18**. Notice what the Apostle Peter says in v. 16 about the letters of the Apostle Paul: “There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.” Peter includes Paul’s letters with the “other Scriptures”!

How do we know which books belong in the New Testament? We rely not on the *authority* of the early church, but rather on her *testimony*. The difference here is very important. In **John 1:29-34**, we see that John the Baptist was sent by God in order to identify Jesus as the Son of God. John *recognized* Jesus as God’s Son, but John did not *make* Jesus into the Son of God! It is the same way with the New Testament. As those Christians living closest to the time of the inspired writers, the early church *recognized* all the books of the New Testament as having authority. But they did not *make* this authority. The first church proclamation listing all twenty-seven New Testament books is the Festal Letter of Athanasius (AD 367). But as we have seen from the passages cited earlier, the apostles treated the New Testament writings as Scripture as soon as they were written! Who convinces us of Scripture’s *authority*? **1 John 5:6-12** tells that the Holy Spirit does this – God himself.

It is for these reasons that our first membership vow defines the canon of Scripture as “the Old and New Testaments.”

Inspiration, Inerrancy, Preservation, & Authority

The next part of our first membership vow speaks of the Bible as “the Word of God.” What does this mean?

The first thing it means is that the Bible is *inspired*. Our English word ‘inspire’ comes from the Latin verb *inspirare* (to breathe). The Bible speaks of itself in these terms. In **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, the Apostle Paul writes that “all Scripture is breathed out by God,” (v. 16). In the original Greek the expression “breathed out by God” is a single word (*theopneustos*) made from a combination of the words *theos* (God) and *pneō* (to blow). This verb “to blow” is used in the New Testament to refer to the blowing of the wind (**John 3:8**). So Paul is saying that all Scripture is literally “God-blown” or, as the *New International Version* translates this word, “God-breathed.” The Apostle Peter says much the same thing in **2 Peter 1:16-21**. After recalling how he was a witness to the Transfiguration of Jesus (vv. 16-18), Peter writes that “we have something more sure, the prophetic word,” (v. 19). Urging his readers to “pay attention” to this word “as to a lamp shining in dark place,” he goes on to state that “that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit,” (vv. 20-21).

The second thing we mean when we say the Bible is “the Word of God” is that the Bible is *inerrant*. The word ‘inerrant’ literally means “without error.” This is what we believe about the Bible: that the original documents (the *autographs*) of the Old and New Testaments were absolutely without error. **Numbers 23:19** states that “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.” In **Malachi 3:6**, God declares that “I the LORD do not change.” The entire Bible, being *inspired* by the God who never lies and does not change, must necessarily be *inerrant*. Read **Psalms 19:7-9**.

Closely connected to inerrancy is the *preservation* of Scripture. How do we know that the Bible we have today is the Bible as it was written? In **Matthew 5:17-18**, speaking of his own work in fulfilling the Old Testament, Jesus declares that “until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” An ‘iota’ is a tiny letter in Greek, and stood for the tiniest letter in Hebrew, the *yod*. A ‘dot’ is a part of a letter, the stroke which distinguished certain Hebrew characters from another. Jesus’ point is clear: God guarantees the preservation of Scripture.

The final thing we mean when we say that the Bible is “the Word of God” is that the Bible is *authoritative*. When God speaks, he speaks truth – down to the last iota and dot. And where God commands, his word is final. But what does God command?

In **2 Timothy 1:13**, the Apostle Paul urges Timothy to “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” Two key words here are ‘faith’ and ‘love’: the Bible teaches us *what to believe* and *what to do*. Later, in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, Paul writes that “all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith offers a very helpful summary of the authority of Scripture: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”⁴ The last part of this statement is just as important as the first. The authority of Scripture is not limited only to what it states *explicitly*, but extends also to what it states *implicitly*. What does this mean?

In **Mark 12:18-27**, some of Jesus’ enemies devise a logical puzzle based on the Old Testament in an attempt to prove that there is no such thing as the resurrection of the dead. How does Jesus respond? He says his enemies’ problem was that they knew “neither the Scriptures nor the power of God,” (v. 24). He then goes on to say, “Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God spoke to him, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living. You are quite wrong,” (vv. 26-27). The passage Jesus cites here is **Exodus 3:1-12** (specifically v. 6). Although the primary point of that account in its original context was not to teach the resurrection of the dead, Jesus still faults his enemies for not making the logical deduction. If God can say “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have died, then the resurrection of the dead is *logically necessary*. The *authority* of Scripture therefore covers both all the words of the Bible and all the “good and necessary consequences” deduced from those words.

⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Willow Grove, PA: OPC, 2005), 1.6.

The Exclusive Character of the Christian Faith

In the last part of our first vow, we confess the Bible's "doctrine of salvation to be the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation." What does the Bible say about this?

Nobody speaks more clearly or more succinctly on this matter than the Lord Jesus Christ himself. In **John 14:6**, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." After his resurrection, the Apostles Peter and John reaffirm the exact same teaching in **Acts 4:12**: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Some years later, in **Galatians 1:6-8**, the Apostle Paul puts the matter in very stark terms: there is no other gospel but the "gospel of Christ," and "even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." The word translated 'accursed' here is the same word used in the Greek translation of **Joshua 6:17** to refer to the total annihilation of the pagan city of Jericho.

So the Bible is not wobbly on the question of religious pluralism. The Christian faith does not claim to be simply one valid option among many – one of many roads to the same summit. Rather, the Christian faith claims that it is the only valid option – "the perfect and only true doctrine of salvation."

Should this make Christians arrogant? To the contrary, "The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued and that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less."⁵

⁵ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 181.

☞ God's Revelation of Himself ☞

Vow:

Do you believe in one living and true God, in whom eternally there are three distinct persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – who are the same in being and equal in power and glory, and that Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh?

Goals:

- To examine the biblical teaching on the Trinity
- To examine the biblical teaching on the Incarnation

The Trinity⁶

The word 'Trinity' comes from the Latin word *trinitas*, which itself is a combination of the Latin words for 'three' and 'one.' The term was first coined by the early church father Tertullian (c. AD 160-220). Although this word is not found in the Bible, it accurately represents what the Bible says about God.

The first thing our vow confesses is that there is only "one living and true God." **Deuteronomy 6:4** clearly states there is but one God: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." The Bible uses the word 'LORD' or 'GOD' (in all capital letters) to translate the Hebrew name 'Yahweh.'⁷ **Jeremiah 10:10** insists Yahweh is the only true God: "But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King."

Yet we also vow that in the unity of the Godhead "eternally there are three distinct persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." The Bible suggests this in its very first chapter. **Genesis 1:26** says, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" What is hinted at here is made explicit in **Matthew 28:18-20**. When Jesus commands the apostles to go and make disciples of all nations, he commands them to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Notice that the word 'name' here is *singular*, yet associated with *three persons*.

⁶ The doctrine of the Trinity is treated in the second chapter of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, in *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, 8-11, and in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 5-6.

⁷ Some translations render 'Yahweh' as 'Jehovah.' The origin of the name is told in Exodus 3:13-15.

How do we know that all three persons are fully God, “the same in being and equal in power and glory”? The Bible treats all three as equally and fully God.

Nobody speaks more of the fully deity of God the Father than Jesus. In the four Gospels, Jesus uses the expression “my Father” thirty-eight times to refer to God the Father. For just one example, read **Matthew 11:25-30**.

Yet Jesus also sees himself as fully divine. In **John 14:8-9**, Philip asks Jesus to “show us the Father.” In response, Jesus answers, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Jesus also identifies the Holy Spirit as God. In **John 14:23** Jesus says, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” The Apostle Peter also assumes the full deity of the Holy Spirit in **Acts 5:1-11** when he asks, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?” (v. 3) He concludes ominously, “You have not lied to men but to God,” (v. 5).

Alongside of these personal distinctions, the New Testament maintains the unity of the Godhead. We see this not only in the baptismal formula commanded in the Great Commission, but also in the apostolic benediction of **2 Corinthians 13:14**: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

The Trinity is one of the foundational mysteries of the Christian faith. We do not believe it because we comprehend it, but because the Bible teaches it. It should not surprise us that we do not fully comprehend God; after all, he is the Creator and we are but creatures. What should surprise us is that this Creator – this Triune Majesty – loves us!

The Incarnation

Our second membership vow goes on to confess that “Jesus Christ is God the Son, come in the flesh.” We call this coming in the flesh the ‘incarnation.’ Where does the Bible teach this?

A good place to start is **John 1:1-18**. In vv. 1-3, we see the Apostle John writing of the eternal “Word” who “was with God” and “was God.” In v. 14 he

says, “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” In vv. 17-18 he identifies the eternal Son as Jesus Christ: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

So is Jesus God or man? The answer is ‘yes.’ As *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* states it, “The only redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.”⁸ The Apostle Paul speaks of Jesus’ divine nature in **Colossians 2:9**: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Paul also speaks of Jesus’ human nature in **1 Timothy 2:5**: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” In **Hebrews 7:23-25**, the writer explains that unlike the former high priests of Israel, Jesus “continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them,” (vv. 24-25).

How did God the Son become man? *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* tells us, “Christ, the Son of God, became man, by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her, yet without sin.”⁹ The facts of the virgin birth of Jesus are recorded in **Luke 1:26-38** and **2:1-21**.

Why is the incarnation by virgin birth an essential doctrine of Christianity? The necessity of the incarnation is discussed in **Hebrews 2:14-18**. In order to redeem man, Jesus had to be made man. The necessity of this incarnation occurring by virgin birth is explained in Hebrews **4:14-16** and **7:26-28**. If Jesus had been conceived naturally like all of us, he would have inherited the same sinful nature we have inherited! He would not have been perfect. Consequently he would not have been able to act as a perfect substitute for sinners. But this brings us to our next membership vow.

⁸ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 21.

⁹ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 22.

☞ God's Revelation of Good News ☞

Vow:

Do you confess that because of your sinfulness you abhor and humble yourself before God, that you repent of your sin, and that you trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone?

Goals:

- To define *sin*, *original sin*, and the *consequences* of sin
- To understand the *substitutionary work* of Jesus Christ
- To know what *response* God requires of us
- To grasp the *uniqueness* of the gospel of Jesus Christ

What is Sin?

The best definition of 'sin' is that found in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."¹⁰ This simply a reflection of what the Bible itself says in **1 John 3:4**: "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Lawlessness has two forms: failing to do what the law requires, or doing what the law forbids. The Bible teaches that both forms of lawlessness are sin.

The law in question here is the moral law of God. This law is summarized in the Ten Commandments, found in **Exodus 20:1-17**. Jesus further summarizes the whole law into two commandments in **Matthew 22:37-40**: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Who is a Sinner?

Ecclesiastes 7:20: "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins." **Romans 3:23**: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." All of us break the commandments not only in act, but also in our thoughts. Read **Mark 7:21-23**.

¹⁰ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 14.

Despite the Bible's warning, some people will still protest, "But I am a pretty good person!" They may be right. But the Bible says *God's standard is not pretty good, but perfectly good*: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it," (**James 2:10**). The Bible also says in **Isaiah 64:6** that even our best deeds are flawed: "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment." None of us is perfectly good.

Inherent Sinfulness (Original Sin)

The reason we sin is because we are *inherently sinful*. This inherent sinfulness is passed down from our first parents, Adam and Eve. The full story is recorded in **Genesis 2-3**, but the basics are pretty simple. God made the first humans, Adam and Eve. As head of the human race, Adam represented not only himself, but all his natural descendants. God told Adam to obey a very specific command, and warned him that rebellion would bring a death sentence. Adam rebelled against God.

Adam's rebellion brought ruin upon the human race. The Apostle Paul writes in **Romans 5:12**, "sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned." Sin corrupts all the parts and faculties of human nature, both soul and body. It pervades our thoughts, words, and actions. Read **Romans 3:10-18**.

Theologians call this sinfulness that we inherit from Adam *original sin*. **Psalm 51:5** says we are *conceived* in it. Paul describes it in **Ephesians 2:1-3** as spiritual death and bondage to the devil. It is because we are inherently sinful – the walking dead! – that we commit actual sins.

What are the consequences of sin? Besides every misery of this life, **Romans 6:23** says that the end result of sin is death: "For the wages of sin is death." But since we have immortal souls, Jesus says in **Matthew 25:46** that those who die in rebellion against God suffer "eternal punishment" for their sins.

Who is the only man who ever lived who was *not* conceived in original sin, who did *not* have an inherently sinful nature from which actual sins naturally sprang? Jesus Christ – precisely because he was supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin.

Substitution

The good news is that God did not leave us to die in our sins. Instead, he intervened radically. **Galatians 4:4-5**: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

We discussed the person of Jesus Christ in a previous section. Here we want to look at his work. The verses just cited speak of Jesus coming “to redeem” sinners. To ‘redeem’ is to buy back or ransom from bondage by payment.

What did Jesus do to redeem sinners? The answer lies in one word: *substitution*. Jesus substituted himself for sinners. He substituted himself in his life, and then he substituted himself in his death. By keeping God’s law perfectly, Jesus lived the life we cannot live. He is the only perfect man who ever lived. Of all people who have ever lived, only Jesus did *not* deserve to die. He alone had never earned the wrath of God. Yet Jesus willingly died. He willingly bore the wrath of God. Why? So that his people would not have to! In his death, Jesus made a full payment for all the sins of all his people in all ages.

Two passages from Scripture bring this home. Paul writes in **2 Corinthians 5:21**, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” John writes in **1 John 4:10**, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

What is ‘propitiation’? It is the removal of divine wrath through the satisfaction of divine justice. This is the essence of Jesus’ substitutionary work for his people: *by bearing their guilt, he turned away God’s wrath*.

Jesus’ substitutionary work provides the only grounds on which sinners can be *justified*: forgiven of their sins and accepted as righteous in God’s sight. It is only by the substitutionary death of God’s Son that sinners can become sons of God.¹¹

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the benefits of salvation, see *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 29-38.

Response

In light of what we have learned about our sin and Christ's substitution, our vow calls us to *recognize* our position and *respond* appropriately.

You are called to *recognize* your position as a sinner and "humble yourself before God." The Greek word for 'humble' means "to make low." In **Luke 3:5** this same word is used in the sense of leveling off a hill or mountain. In **Luke 18:9-14**, Jesus both warns and promises: "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Our vow next calls every one of us to *respond*. You are called to "repent of your sin." To repent is to turn from sin to God with the intention to live differently from now on. We see a perfect example of this in **Luke 19:1-10**, where Zacchaeus says to Jesus, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold," (v. 8). For a wealthy chief tax collector like Zacchaeus, this statement meant a radical change. This is precisely what repentance is, *a reorientation of our whole lives*.

But repentance never occurs in a spiritual vacuum. Zacchaeus didn't change his ways until *after* he had met Jesus. Neither did the Apostle Paul (**Acts 9:1-19**). Neither can you or I. Repentance can only happen when you "trust for salvation not in yourself but in Jesus Christ alone."

Trusting Jesus alone means trusting him for everything and yourself for nothing. You cannot bank on your intellectual or spiritual knowledge. You cannot trust your moral or spiritual performance. You cannot rest on your repentance, nor even on your act of believing. Faith is not about *how well* you believe, do, or understand. Faith is only about *who* you trust.

Consider an analogy. Suppose somebody offers to give you a brand new bed, free of charge. You may know everything there is to know about beds, or you may know very little about them. You may be a very deep sleeper, or you may be a very light sleeper. None of that matters; that isn't the question at all. The only question is: will you take the bed and lay down on it?

It is just so with trusting Jesus. The most important question you will ever answer is, "Do I trust him alone for salvation?" Read **Romans 4:1-5**.

Uniquely Good News

The last thing we want to consider is the uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What makes Christianity different from any other religion?

The answer is that gospel of Jesus Christ is different from every other religion because only the gospel proclaims “good news, not good advice.”¹² What does this mean?

Every other religion in the world burdens people with advice. This is true regardless of how it may define concepts such as ‘God,’ ‘sin,’ and ‘salvation.’ Divergent liturgies and variant rituals are only different shades of the same color. Ultimately, the message of every religion other than the gospel is the same: save yourself by your own moral or spiritual efforts.

Only the Bible tells the truth: we cannot save ourselves, nor do we have to try!

Only in the gospel do we hear truly good news: that in the person and work of Jesus Christ, God has already done everything necessary to save us. **Revelation 22:17** says that all we need do is come thirsty: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” Jesus guarantees this offer in **John 6:37**: “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”

What makes the gospel of Jesus Christ unique? Good news, not good advice. All you have to do is trust in Jesus Christ. If you’re not sure whether you’ve done this before, just trust him now.

The gospel message to sinners is simple: “Cheer up, you’re worse than you think – but God is better than you imagine!”

¹² This memorable expression has been attributed to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, minister at Westminster Chapel in London from 1939-1968.

☞ God's Revelation of His King ☞

Vow:

Do you acknowledge Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord, and do you promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you, forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life?

Goals:

- To know what the Bible teaches about Jesus' authority
- To understand what Jesus' authority requires of us
- To see that the Christian life involves spiritual conflict

Jesus is King

The first part of this vow asks whether we acknowledge "Jesus Christ as our sovereign Lord." The word 'sovereign' comes from the Latin word *super*, which means 'above.' The word 'Lord' means "one having power and authority over others."¹³ So when we confess "Jesus Christ as your sovereign Lord," we are saying that Jesus is our King: the supreme authority in our lives.

Old Testament prophecies taught that the Savior would be a King. **Psalms 2, 72, and 110** all speak of this coming King. So do the prophets in such places as **Isaiah 9:6-7** and **Jeremiah 23:5-6**.

In the New Testament, Jesus identified himself as this Savior King. In **John 4:24-26**. In this passage Jesus is instructing a woman of Samaria in how God is to be worshiped. In response, the woman says, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things," (v. 25). 'Messiah' is a Hebrew word meaning 'Anointed One' (see **Psalm 2:2**), and is translated by the Greek word 'Christ.' Jesus' response to the woman is unambiguous: "I who speak to you am he," (v. 26). Jesus is God's Savior King.

How far does Jesus' kingly authority extend? In **Matthew 28:18-20** he says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Jesus is not just King of the Jews. He is King of the Universe. Read **Philippians 2:5-11**.

¹³ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lord> (accessed October 18, 2011).

Serving Our King

What does it mean for Christians that Jesus is King? Our membership vow asks us to “promise that, in reliance on the grace of God, you will serve him with all that is in you.”¹⁴

To serve King Jesus means to do what he says. Jesus said in **John 14:15**, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” We obey Jesus not because we always understand *why* he commands us to do certain things, but because we always remember *who* it is who commands us. Jesus is no wicked tyrant. He is the unchangeably good and perfect King, who wore a crown of thorns so that we could wear a crown of life. Read **Mark 15:16-20** and **James 1:12**.

We do what Jesus says not just when it’s fashionable or popular, but *even when it conflicts with other loyalties, authorities, or priorities*. In **Matthew 10:37** Jesus said: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” When the Sanhedrin ordered the apostles to cease preaching in **Acts 5:29**, they replied, “We must obey God rather than men.” And though the Ten Commandments teach us that legitimate pursuits of life and prosperity are lawful,¹⁵ Jesus warns us that sometimes we may have to lose one or both for his sake. **Matthew 10:38-39**: “And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” **Luke 14:33**: “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.”

How can we find the necessary courage and strength to serve our King in these ways? Our vow tells us that we serve “in reliance on the grace of God.” We serve the King not in our own strength, but in the power of the Holy Spirit. God promised the Holy Spirit in **Ezekiel 36:27**: “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to all who trust in him. Read **John 14:23**.

The Holy Spirit encourages and enables us to serve King Jesus. **Philippians 2:12-13**, “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

¹⁴ See also the excellent definition of Christ’s kingship in *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 26.

¹⁵ See *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 67-69 and 73-75.

Spiritual Conflict

Our membership vow teaches us that the Christian life involves spiritual conflict. In serving the King, we promise to “forsake the world, resist the devil, put to death your sinful deeds and desires, and lead a godly life.”

All the elements of this promise are taught in the Bible. The Apostle John warns us in **1 John 2:15**: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” **James 4:7** commands us, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” The Apostle Peter echoes this exhortation in **1 Peter 5:8**: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” In **Ephesians 4:22-24**, the Apostle Paul calls believers to “put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Romans 6:1-11 teach us that the Christian life is one of uncompromising opposition to sin: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus,” (v. 11). Will we succeed perfectly in this life? No. Can we succeed at all in our own strength? Never. But with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, we *can and must* press on. **Romans 7:15-25** show us that the struggle is real – even in the life of an apostle. But progress, however imperfect, is also real. Read **Galatians 5:16-26**.

We conclude this section with two stirring passages. **Ephesians 6:10-18** show us the deadly nature of the spiritual conflict in which we are engaged – as well as the weapons with which we fight. In this struggle we will suffer. Yet **Romans 8:31-39** leaves no doubt as to the outcome.

☞ God's Revelation of His Kingdom ☞

Vow:

Do you promise to participate faithfully in this church's worship and service, to submit in the Lord to its government, and to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life?

Goals:

- To define the nature and work of the visible church
- To survey the biblical basis for church government
- To understand the dual character of church discipline

The Visible Church

The Bible speaks of the church from two different perspectives. From the first perspective, it speaks of the church as it consists of every Christian who ever has, does, or will live. For now only God can see the church in this way, and so theologians refer to it using the term *invisible church*. The second perspective uses the term *visible church* because it speaks of the church as it presently exists on earth.¹⁶

When our membership vow speaks of “this church,” it is referring to the visible church. At its lowest level, the visible church is organized into particular congregations. A particular congregation is an organized, distinct group of professing believers and their children.

The work of the visible church is summarized by our vow as “worship and service.” Both aspects of this work are evident in **Acts 2:42-47**. Though this passage contains some extraordinary elements, the basic pattern is still the same. Now and then, the visible church exists to *go forth* and *grow up*. Read **Matthew 28:18-20** and **Ephesians 4:11-16**.

¹⁶ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* provides excellent definitions of both the invisible and visible church. It defines the invisible church as “The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all,” (25.1). It defines the visible church as “The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation,” (25.2).

Biblical Church Government

In speaking of our obligations to the visible church, our membership vow asks us to “submit in the Lord to its government.” To what government does the vow refer?

The Bible teaches that the church is to be governed by select men known as ‘elders’ or ‘overseers.’ The term ‘elder’ has to do with rule. The term ‘overseer’ has to do with spiritual oversight. Read **1 Peter 5:1-4**.

In **Exodus 3:16** we see that elders have governed the visible church from its infancy. In **Ruth 4:2** we see that they governed as a group. The same pattern is visible in the New Testament. In **Philippians 1:1**, the Apostle Paul addresses his letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.”

The group of elders which oversees the particular congregation is called the *session*. Along with the elders, **1 Timothy 5:17** shows us that the minister(s) of the particular congregation also sit on the session. Under normal circumstances, all officers of a particular congregation are elected by the congregation. We see this principle demonstrated in **Acts 1:23** and **6:1-6**.

It is important to note, however, that we submit to church government only “in the Lord.” This means that final authority in the church does not rest with the elders. Both in **Ephesians 1:22-23** and **Colossians 1:18**, the Apostle Paul says that the only head of the church is the Lord Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is King in his church, only Jesus has the right to tell the church how to worship and serve him. Read **Acts 20:17-32**, noticing especially how Paul concludes his speech: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Church Discipline

In submitting to the King's government, our vow requires us to promise to "to heed its discipline, even in case you should be found delinquent in doctrine or life." Our English word 'discipline' comes from the Latin words *disciplina* (teaching, learning) and *discipulus* (pupil).

The language of our vow implies both two senses of 'discipline.' The first sense of 'discipline' is *formative*. This involves teaching and training. Read **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**. The second sense of 'discipline' is *corrective*. Read **Proverbs 3:1-12**. Notice that both senses of 'discipline' seek our good.

The standard for both formative and corrective discipline is none other but the Bible. Read **2 Timothy 3:16-4:2**.

Formative discipline takes place in the church through public preaching and teaching *and* through private visitation. Paul mentions both in **Acts 20:20-21**: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

Matthew 18:15-20 teaches us that corrective church discipline proceeds in three stages. The first stage is *private* (v. 15). If this fails, the second stage involves *witnesses* (v. 16). It is only when both of these fail that an offense goes to the *church* (v. 17). This final stage is the most serious, for if a person will not heed the session he is to be treated as an unbeliever (v. 17).

Because church discipline is very serious, a session will impose corrective discipline at three levels.¹⁷ The first level is *admonition* (**1 Thessalonians 5:12**). The second level is *suspension* from the Lord's Supper (implied by the seriousness of the sacrament in **1 Corinthians 11:28**). The final level is *excommunication* (**Matthew 18:17, Titus 3:10**).

Our final vow requires us to promise that we will be both *teachable* and *leadable* – not according to the traditions of men (**Mark 7:1-13**), but according to the revelation of God. Read **Hebrews 13:17**.

¹⁷ See *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 30. See also chapter 6 of the *Book of Discipline* in *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Willow Grove, PA: OPC, 2011).

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