

# Section Two: Our Concepts of Christ

## 7. ***GOD BECAME A HUMAN*** (INCARNATION)

**God became JESUS CHRIST to show us...**

- **what God is like and**
- **what we can become.**

The doctrine of the Incarnation is universally accepted as one of the two or three most critical doctrines of Christendom. Regardless of how the doctrine is defined, it is a focal point of Christian belief. Although Christian doctrine has been necessarily vague about the way in which the mystery of the Incarnation happened, it has been consistent in affirming that it did happen. God loves us so much that God chose to come to earth as a man so that we might come to know of God's love for us and of God's will for our lives.

Jesus was, therefore, a God/man, both fully human and fully divine. In scripture, the doctrine of the Incarnation is never worked out explicitly, although the two natures of Christ are certainly mentioned enough to say that the Christ of scripture had both a divine and a human nature. However, for persons who had known him, there was little need to describe or explain his nature. It was not important for the biblical writers to explain that Christ was human; their readers knew he was. Neither was it necessary to affirm his divinity—they knew that too.

It was in the next few generations after the writing of the New Testament that the church found it necessary to formally articulate the details of the Incarnation. The doctrine is, therefore, largely a product of the community of faith. It is a mysterious way of explaining a mystery that Christians have sensed as truth for nearly 2,000 years.

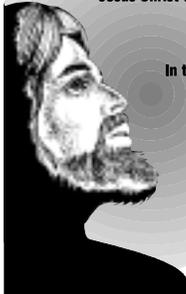
## GOD BECAME A HUMAN

God became JESUS CHRIST to show us...  
what God is like and  
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Jesus Christ was, at the same time, both...  
fully GOD and  
fully a HUMAN BEING.

In the CHRIST, we see that God's  
NATURE is to be  
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In the human JESUS,  
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INCARNATION ⑦

## **Jesus Christ was, at the same time, both**

- **fully GOD and**
- **fully a HUMAN BEING.**

Incarnation, or God becoming flesh, is not a specifically Christian concept. Several eastern religions had beliefs in gods which came to earth and assumed human form. However, in Christianity, the concept has taken on meaning which uniquely sets us aside from other faiths. We affirm that there is only one God who became incarnate in only one man, Jesus, to reveal to us both God's actual nature and our potential nature.

This dual purpose of the Incarnation (revealing both God's nature and our potential) is reflected in another uniquely Christian idea that the incarnate Christ was both fully human and fully divine, both completely God and completely man. That these two natures (human and divine) could exist at the same time without one nature limiting or changing the other is another of the great paradoxes in Christian doctrine.

The classic Christian concept of Incarnation was the subject of much debate in the early church particularly during the 126 years between the two great councils of church leaders held at Nicea (325) and at Chalcedon (451). At the latter council, it was finally affirmed that Jesus Christ was one person "in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the distinction of the natures by no means being annulled through the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved."

Even though this definition of the incarnate Lord has been generally accepted across Christendom, the definition fails to explain how the dual natures could exist in one person. Consequently, Christians tend in actual belief to lean toward one nature at the expense of the other. A few of these deviations from the classic doctrine are common enough and affirmed by large enough numbers of Christians to justify explanations.

Some Christians emphasize the divine nature of Christ. They believe he only seemed to have human limitations, that his suffering and physical attributes were only apparent. This concept, called *docetism*, is common in our piety and devotion where Christ is often more divine than human, where God is merely disguised as a human being.

The Jesus of Hollywood movies, radio dramas, novels, Christian art, and mystical poetry has frequently been docetic—more God than man. Halos, aurioles, radiance, and sacred music have often surrounded Jesus in our art forms to such a degree that his humanity is obscured.

Opposite to docetism is a concept, called *ebionitism*, which affirms Jesus as a deified man. The belief emphasizes the human nature of

Jesus at the expense of his divine nature. Jesus was a prophet and teacher who had all the limitations of other humans but who had a special inspiration, a holy dignity, a godlike quality which set him aside as different from all other humans.

Two theories that try to explain how the Incarnation happened, but which also tend to emphasize the human nature of Christ are *kenoticism* and *adoptionism*. Kenoticists believe that God laid aside God's divine attributes such as omnipotence and omniscience when God assumed the attributes of a human being. Therefore, God actually changed into a human being and assumed all of the limitations that go with being human.

Adoptionists believe that God adopted the man Jesus at some point in his life to be a divine being. Most adoptionist beliefs focus on Christ's baptism by his cousin John as the time when he took on a divine nature. Others argue that he was chosen at the time of his birth, at his death, or even after his death but before his resurrection.

Of the two natures, the human nature of Christ is most widely affirmed and needs little proof. Virtually all historians accept the fact that a prophetic teacher named Jesus lived at some time during the Roman occupation of Palestine. There is ample evidence that he was the leader of a small group of disciples and that he was tried and executed by the combined authority of the Jewish and Roman governments. That Jesus was a human being is universally accepted.

However, Christ's divine nature is largely a matter of faith in the truth of the Bible and the teachings of the church. Therefore, Christians have tended to develop more elaborate proofs of the divine nature of Christ.

Some of the proofs of the divinity of Christ affirmed by Christians are physical, such as his miraculous birth without human conception, his performance of superhuman feats—converting water into wine and walking on water—his resurrection from the grave, and his ascension into heaven.

Other proofs are primarily theoretical, such as the fact that he was called "Messiah," the references to his exaltation (being seated at the right hand of God the Father), and his preexistence as the mind of God, the *logos*. For some Christians, Christ's divinity is also affirmed by the semi-divine attributes of his mother, including her complete sinlessness, her perpetual virginity, and her bodily assumption into heaven after her death.

## **In the CHRIST, we see that God's NATURE is to be TOTALLY LOVING.**

The existence of God is not the critical question for the majority of persons. And, even when it is a critical question, it is difficult to prove through rational argument without the utilization of complicated philo-

sophical arguments. The area of controversy about God, for most Christians, is not how much we believe in God but how much God believes in us; and “God believing in us” includes our faith in a loving, forgiving, ever-present, and active relationship between God and persons.

The attitude of love which God exhibits toward all persons is normally called God’s grace. Grace is favor and kindness freely shown by a superior to an inferior. In Christian belief it is, specifically, the kindness, favor, love and forgiveness of God freely extended to humans. God’s grace is both unmerited and universal. Nothing we can do can earn God’s favor and, conversely, nothing we can do will cause it to cease. God’s grace is consistent, totally unrelated to our lack of merits. It is universal and extended equally to every person.

For most Christians, God’s grace is linked absolutely with God’s great gracious act, the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ. God’s grace is available to us because of, and only because of, this event. For others, grace is an ongoing independent feature of God’s nature, and the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ was just one example (the highest example) of his gracious relationship to us.

Although God tried to show us the extent of God’s totally loving nature through the creation, the patriarchs, and the prophets, we continued to turn our backs on God. Until God came as one of us, Jesus the Christ, we were unable to fully understand the total, unyielding nature of God’s love for us.

**In the human JESUS, we see that our POTENTIAL is to be LIKE GOD.**

Although the nature of every human is to be excessively self-interested (sin) the potential of every person is to be fully loving like God. If the “imago dei” (made in the image of God) has any meaning for us at all, it is that we are created with the potential to be fully like God. In the loving human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, we see an image, an ideal, of what we can become and, indeed, an image of what God wants us to become.

## 8. JESUS LIVED FOR US (MESSIAHSHIP)

**Jesus lived, loved, learned, suffered, cried, and died—all for the sake of OTHERS.**

It is common for us to focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus as the means by which he made our salvation possible. We say, “Jesus died for us” and often overlook the fact that his entire life was part of the atonement process. In fact, for many Christians, Christ’s death on the cross was just the natural extension of the sacrificial life he was living from the beginning of his ministry.

**Jesus was BAPTIZED by John, COMMISSIONED for ministry, and EMPOWERED by the Spirit.**

Even though Jesus was a man who lived, loved, learned, suffered, cried, and died, he was a special man. The New Testament does not talk about just another man—it describes a special man, God’s son, the Messiah.

Jesus, the Christ, was a mysterious man. Mark’s account portrays a man who angered his accusers by refusing to acknowledge that he was the Son of God. He refused to give signs to prove to people that he was the Son of God. Yet, the biblical account testifies that he was the Son of God.

He was Jesus, the Christ, the anointed Son of God for an entire nation—indeed, the whole world. He came declaring a new kind of kingdom—a kingdom for the poor in spirit and those who were persecuted for righteousness’ sake. He came to those who had nothing that they might have abundant and eternal life.

Mark tells of God’s unique relationship to Jesus through a description of his baptism:

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.’”

The Gospel writers sought to express the mystery of his nature by recounting the events of his life. Matthew and Luke tell of the unique event of his birth. They affirm that Jesus’ birth was by God’s design.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John attest to the uniqueness of Jesus by describing the incredible events of his ministry. The power of his presence among the people was so striking that he could



**JESUS LIVED FOR US**

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Jesus lived, loved, learned, suffered, cried, and died--all for the sake of OTHERS.

Jesus was **BAPTIZED** by John, **COMMISSIONED** for ministry, and **EMPOWERED** by the Spirit.

- He **LIVED** without **SIN**.
- He **MINISTERED** to the **POOR** and **OUTCAST**.
- He **ANNOUNCED** the coming **KINGDOM OF GOD**.
- He **TAUGHT** us to love **GOD** and **OTHERS**.
- He **CALLED** us to be his **DISCIPLES**.

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MESSIAHSHIP 8

not be regarded as an ordinary man. The magic of his touch and the sound of his voice caused miracles of healing, understanding and faithful response among the people. He was no ordinary man, he was the Son of God.

Messiah was the title given to Jesus primarily by Jewish Christians. At the time of Jesus' physical existence in Palestine, there existed a substantial hope in a soon-to-come Messiah. The Jewish people, who were suffering under Roman occupation, believed the ancient kingdom of David would be reestablished through a new ruler. In II Samuel 7:12, God promised David that his kingdom would be eternal, and other passages, especially in Isaiah, pointed to a future king who would usher in the new age.

Even though Jesus was extremely reluctant to ascribe the title of Messiah to himself, it was obviously the focus of the testimony of the earliest Christians.

However, the very unkingly nature of Jesus made even the suggestion of his messiahship offensive to Jewish leaders. In his life of humility and service to others the very meaning of Messiah was transformed, and, even though we refer to him in messianic terms as prophet, high priest, and king he certainly failed to fulfill the political expectations of the Jewish people.

As Christianity became more and more Gentile, the Greek term for Messiah ("Christos") gradually changed from Jesus the Christ (meaning "the Messiah") to Jesus Christ (a proper name).

- **He LIVED without SIN.**
- **He MINISTERED to the POOR and OUTCAST.**
- **He ANNOUNCED the coming KINGDOM OF GOD.**
- **He TAUGHT us to love GOD and OTHERS.**
- **He CALLED us to be his DISCIPLES.**

The life and ministries of Jesus leave us with many different images. Jesus was a prophet, teacher, minister, social worker, healer, and priest. Although the New Testament refers to him, in many different ways, no single term fully summarizes the complexity of what he was and is.

There are more than 100 names and titles for Jesus in scripture. It is obvious from the variety of attempts at identifying him that he was both mysterious and dynamic. Furthermore, it is clear that the mystery and dynamism which surrounded him continued to grow following his death and the miraculous event which the New Testament writers call the resurrection.

## Son of Man

*Son of Man* is the term which Jesus used often to identify himself. In fact, in the Gospels, the term “Son of Man” appears exclusively in sayings attributed to Jesus. He speaks of himself both as the Son of Man who will suffer and be rejected and as the Son of Man who will return one day in glory. Even though some Christians understand this designation as an affirmation of his humanity, others see it as a cryptic reference to his messiahship, which Jesus seemed reluctant to state openly.

In the earliest writings of the church, the term carried substantial apocalyptic connotations because of its frequent use in Daniel and Revelation. In fact, the “heavenly man” of Daniel seems to have gradually gotten mixed with various doses of gnostic, Mandaean, and Manichean thought in the writings of the early church to such a degree that it is difficult to understand exactly what was meant by the term. However, by the Second Century, it had come to be used frequently in tandem with “Son of God” to illustrate the dual man/God nature of the incarnate Jesus.

## Son of God

*Son of God* is a frequent designation of Jesus in Mark, the earliest Gospel. The first verse reads, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It is the title given to Jesus by both his followers and his enemies. Demons, Satan, and pagans formally address Jesus regularly as “Son of God,”

Son of God was also widely used as a title for Jesus in the early church because it decisively summed up the major doctrine that Christ was more than just “a man of God” like many other men of God. He was the Son of God. He was different from the patriarchs, different from the prophets, and different from the most dedicated of his followers. He was God’s only Son in whom there was divine being. Something of the very substance of the Father was born into the Son.

## Son of David

*Son of David* is used occasionally as a messianic reference by the Gospel writers, ostensibly as further proof that Jesus was the Messiah who was expected to be of the lineage of David.

## Logos

*Logos* (Word) is the Greek word for discourse or reason which became widely used as the name for the mind or reason of God in the

Second Century. The early church affirmed that this perfect mind of God became completely embodied in the man Jesus through the event we call the Incarnation. The Word (as “logos” is translated in the New Testament) “became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and peace.” This familiar passage might liberally be translated to say “the mind of God became a graceful, truthful man who came to live with us.” Because the logos concept was common in Greek thinking, the early apologists and evangelists of the church utilized it as a means of illustrating the very complex concept of the Incarnation—that God somehow “became flesh” in Jesus Christ.

### **Rabbi**

*Rabbi* (Master) was a title of respect in New Testament times addressed to a learned layman, a master of servants, or a teacher. It is used several times in the Gospels as a title of honor for Jesus, generally by his disciples.

### **Savior**

*Savior* is one of the most common identifications for Jesus today just as it was in the early church. It is not, however, a common designation in scripture. And, this is not surprising, because, unlike many of the other titles, it is a post-resurrection designation by the people of faith. Also, unlike the others, it is a statement of what Jesus did rather than what he was. In some mysterious way, God’s total love for us came to full expression in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus so that we are set free—saved—“from” the bondage of self-interest and “for” eternal and meaningful life. As Christians look back on the actions that Jesus took in order to bring about our salvation, it is natural to call him “savior.”

### **Lamb of God**

*Lamb of God* is also an action-oriented title, but it identifies Christ specifically in terms of his sacrificial death on the cross. In New Testament times, the lamb was a symbol of innocence and gentleness and, therefore, the most desirable victim for sacrificial offerings. The more pure and innocent the victim, the more efficacious the sacrifice was believed to be. Therefore, Jesus’ death, which was memorialized by the resurrection, came to be thought of early in the life of the church as the ultimate sacrifice of a pure and innocent man—the Lamb of God.

### **Lord**

*Lord* is unquestionably the most common title for Jesus used in the church today. We talk of the Lord’s Prayer, the Lord’s Day, the Lord’s

Supper, and Our Lord Jesus Christ so frequently that the term, like “Christ” is coming to be used as much as a common name as it is as a title. In scripture, a variety of Hebrew and Greek words are translated by the English word “Lord.” However, they all have similar meanings indicating a person (or god) deserving courtesy, respect, and general obedience. The title is used of God, primarily in the Old Testament, but its most common New Testament designation is for Jesus. “Jesus Christ is Lord” was obviously one of the earliest credal affirmations of the church, and, in the epistles, phrases like “Lord Jesus” and “Our Lord Jesus Christ” are so common that they must have been part of the daily vernacular of the earliest Christians.

Although “Lord” is occasionally only a title of courteous respect, like “sir” (as it is sometimes used in the Gospels), it usually takes on much greater meaning. It carries with it both an ultimate expression of civil authority (Lord was a title for the Roman Emperor) and an affirmation of divinity (the Lord our God).

In modern usage, Lord is the parallel of “Savior.” We use the term savior to designate Christ’s work in rescuing each of us, individually. Savior is a highly personal term. “Lord,” on the other hand, is a social term which designates our call to obedience to Christ as Lord and Master of our lives. When we say “Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” we have testified to the full breadth of our faith in Christ.

## **Prophet**

*Prophet* was a term that was destined to be attributed to Jesus from the beginning of his earthly ministry. Even though not all of his followers identified him as the Messiah, many saw him as another in the line of great men whom God called to be prophets. Indeed, Jesus’ teaching and his obedient and sacrificial life was in the Old Testament prophetic tradition. He was his own person, independent of the authority of those around him. He brought the message of God’s will. He was, however, distinctly different from the chain of Old Testament prophets because, instead of bringing God’s word, he was God’s word! He was God in human form.

## **High Priest**

*High Priest* was a term for the chief sacrificial authority and mediator between God and human beings. Early Christians soon came to understand Christ as the new high priest who was, in himself, the ultimate sacrifice and who, in himself, is our ultimate mediator with God.

## **Teacher**

*Teacher* was one of the common designations of Jesus as he was addressed by his disciples. Even though the teachings of Jesus are of

critical importance to us today, we rarely refer to him as teacher because he was and is so much more to us than the term implies.

## Jesus Christ

The two terms, which we use together as a common name, Jesus Christ, are each filled with symbolic meaning themselves. “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua” which means “Yahweh is salvation” or “God will save.” This symbolism was important enough for Matthew to mention specifically (Matthew 1.21), “for he will save his people from their sins.” “Joshua” and the Hellenized “Jesus” were both common names in the First Century.

“Christ” is the English equivalent of the Greek “Christos,” which is a translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” “Messiah” indicated the expected fulfiller of the hope of Israel, the one through whom the nation’s destiny would be realized. Messiah literally means “the anointed one” and is used in the Old Testament for King Saul, King David, and even King Cyrus of Persia when he was used as an instrument of God’s will for Israel. Therefore, the common name Jesus Christ means “savior and lord.” The common name in itself is a full expression of our faith.

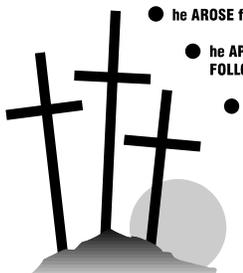
Probably the most unique concept about the nature of Jesus Christ is the mystery of the Incarnation. In some not fully comprehensible way, God became totally present in the life of Jesus Christ so that we could come to know, once and for all time, the full nature of God. The exact way in which this miracle happened is approached in many different ways by Christians, but the fact that Jesus Christ was the ultimate revelation of God is a nearly universal affirmation.

### JESUS DIED FOR US

The lifestyle and teaching of Jesus led to his **ARREST**, **TRIAL**, and **EXECUTION**.

SALVATION became possible for all persons because of the **SINLESS** life and **SACRIFICIAL** death of God’s SON.

To give ultimate **MEANING** to the life and death of Jesus...



- he **AROSE** from the **GRAVE**,
- he **APPEARED** to his **FOLLOWERS**,
- he went to **REIGN** with God forever.

ATONEMENT 9

## 9. JESUS DIED FOR US (ATONEMENT)

**The lifestyle and teaching of Jesus led to his ARREST, TRIAL, and EXECUTION.**

For many modern Christians, the concept that “Jesus died for us” is understandable only through the affirmation that his sacrificial death was the natural result of his sacrificial lifestyle.

A variety of *atonement* theories center on Christ’s life and death as an example for us. Christ’s life of total commitment, love of others, love of God, complete obedience, and voluntary suffering for the ben-

efit of others is an example of the potential life available to all persons. In Jesus' life and death, we see what God wants each of us to be and are influenced to live the same way. We assume that because Christ's exemplary life and death led to his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation, something similar, including a restored relationship with God, is possible for us if we turn obediently toward God and away from ourselves in the same way. In this concept, the death of Jesus was neither required nor desired by God or Satan. His violent death came as the inevitable and supreme example of a life lived entirely for the benefit of others. And we discover both a meaningful existence and a restored relationship with God when we accept this and commit ourselves to the same kind of living-for-others.

**SALVATION became possible for all persons because of the SINLESS life and SACRIFICIAL death of God's Son.**

The most unique and most important concept of the Christian faith is that, in some way, the restoration of our broken relationships with God, with other people, and with ourselves has been made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Since the fall of Adam, humans have been trapped by their own sin, turning toward themselves and away from God. However, even in our rebellion, God loves us so much that God provides for our atonement (at-one-ment) with our creator. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

That the life and death of Jesus Christ has made the *atonement* (the restored relationship between God and a human being) possible is a universal Christian belief, fundamental to virtually all doctrinal systems. However, just what this means is defined in many different ways. That the atonement happened is widely accepted. How it happened will frequently be defined in as many ways as there are parties in a conversation about it.

The theory described above is widely accepted in varying forms by many modern Christians and is usually called the *Moral Influence Theory*. In essence, it says that the way in which Christ "died for us" is that he lived a life of total love for others which naturally led to his sacrificial death. As he challenged the existing establishment which was oppressing God's children, the natural result was his sacrificial death.

However, the more conservative wings of Christendom normally adhere to some form of the classical "satisfaction" or "ransom" theories of the atonement.

*The Satisfaction Theory* (sometimes called the Juridical Theory) was most clearly articulated by St. Anselm (1033-1109) and has been the cornerstone of formal Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy since then.

Christians who believe in the Satisfaction Theory explain that our sin is an affront to the infinite majesty and honor of God. Because of our sin, we owe a penalty to God for our disobedience. We must satisfy God's wrath against our sins. In much the same way that a criminal appears before a judge, we stand before God and are guilty of turning away from God and toward ourselves. Being guilty, therefore, we owe recompense for our disobedience before a good relationship between us and God can be restored. And the amount of the recompense is much more than we are able to pay ourselves. Therefore, God, because of compassion for us, allowed the wrath against our sin to be satisfied for all humankind by Christ's sacrificial suffering and death on the cross. God satisfied God's own demands on our behalf. God came and died in the form of a man on the behalf of all humankind. Christ paid the penalty that was assigned to us.

*The Ransom Theory* (sometimes called the Classical Theory or Dramatic Theory) was the view of the early Greek Fathers, Paul, and Martin Luther (1483-1546). It is also widely believed today, particularly by those persons who posit the cause of evil in a personified devil. This theory assumes that Satan (or, in some cases, the non-personalized "forces of evil") have us in bondage. We are held captive and separated from God by these forces. The possibility of freedom has been made real only through Christ's death. Some believe this death was a ransom paid to Satan, but, generally, the theory focuses on the fact that, in Christ, God did battle with the forces of evil and won. Christ's victory over death broke the forces of evil in such a way that escape is possible for us. In many ways, the Ransom Theory would be understood more clearly if it were called the "Victory Theory," because this is its primary emphasis.

### **To give ultimate MEANING to the life and death of Jesus...**

- **He AROSE from the GRAVE,**
- **He APPEARED to his FOLLOWERS,**
- **He went to REIGN with God forever.**

The primary meaning of the resurrection for most Christians is that it is the evidence, the final proof, that everything else we believe is true. Without the resurrection, it appears that the community of followers of Jesus would have quickly fallen apart because they had no dramatic story to tell the world. Their leader had been executed as a criminal and had suffered and died like anyone else. Even if they believed that the obedient life and sacrificial death of Christ had nothing to do with their own salvation and even if they believed Jesus was God, his dishonorable death certainly had the effect of canceling or, at

least, confusing their beliefs. However, God chose an ultimate kind of illustration to verify everything else. Jesus rose from the grave.

The ultimate truth to which the scriptures testify from beginning to end is that God loves us—totally, consistently, and eternally. God said it through the covenant God made with Abraham. God said it by coming as Jesus. God said it by going to the cross for us. And, finally, this long and consistent story of God's love for us was made memorable by a dramatic event, the resurrection. When we talk of the doctrine of the resurrection, we are not indicating just "coming-back-to-life." In fact, just returning to life to go on living for several years only to die again would have been nothing different from what had happened to Lazarus. Instead of returning to continue living like other men, Jesus returned to prove something, to give some last minute instructions, and, most of all, to be exalted in his rightful place at the right hand of God. The *resurrection* as an event and as a doctrine is complete only if it includes the *ascension* and the *exaltation*. The three concepts are inseparable.

Our own rebirth as resurrected persons in a new and meaningful relationship with God was made possible by Christ's life and death. But the knowledge of the incarnation and atonement has been passed on through the church to billions of people largely because of the evidence of the resurrection. Without the resurrection as a focus of the good news of the early church, the loving acts of God would likely have been forgotten. Virtually all Christians see hope for their own resurrection in the evidence that it happened to Jesus who was the ultimate symbol of human potential.

The resurrection served to highlight the transfer of Christ's mission to us. If Jesus had only commissioned the church to action and then died, his mandates to us would have been no more than the mandates of any popular leader who asks his followers to continue his movement after his death. It is doubtful that the teachings of a carpenter's-son-turned-preacher-and-executed would have carried much weight across the Roman Empire. However, the resurrection verified all of the commissions to us and even provided the opportunity for a dramatic post-resurrection set of instructions to the church.

Most Christians affirm belief in a "flesh-and-bones" biological resurrection of Jesus in a tradition following most of the biblical evidence and most of the doctrinal traditions of both Catholics and Protestants. However, some biblical evidence (the fact that Jesus appeared only to believers and in ways which can in some cases be interpreted as non-fleshly) points to a spiritual resurrection, and there have always been substantial bodies of Christians who affirm that the resurrection was a spiritual rather than a biological event. Still other Christians believe that something momentous happened shortly after the death of Jesus which revived the commitment, energy, and courage of his followers. And, this momentous but mysterious change that overcame Jesus' disciples began, gradually, to be defined as Christ's resurrection. This

proclamation of his resurrection from the grave and ascension into heaven was linked to the proclamation about his soon-expected return from heaven back to earth to establish the kingdom of God. Therefore, the resurrection may or may not have been a historical fact. The important thing is that a cosmic act of God comparable in magnitude to the act of creation took place shortly after the death of Jesus. We call that cosmic act the resurrection.

The resurrection is mentioned in every New Testament book, and, in many, it appears on almost every page. No other doctrine has as much specific biblical evidence. In addition, it is the dominant theme in the other existing writings of the early church. It was clearly the focus of the message that First-Century Christians spread throughout the Roman Empire.

Just before Jesus' death on the cross, his disciples were afraid and denying him, instead of disbanding, they set out a few weeks later and changed the world. Something momentous happened after the death of Jesus which turned a bunch of rag-tag disciples (who had consistently failed to do anything very impressive during Jesus' lifetime) into a dynamic mission force. This "resurrected community" may be the most powerful objective evidence of the resurrection of Christ.

Even though it is not objective evidence of the resurrection, the new birth we sense within ourselves and which we witness in others is comforting subjective evidence that Christ lives. The miracle of Christ's resurrection is easily affirmed by persons of faith who sense the reality of his resurrection in their own sense of new life.

## **SECTION TWO: OUR CONCEPTS OF CHRIST**

### ***DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS***

1. To begin this session, have class members call out as many designations for Christ as they can. Begin by putting up a few of the most common ones, such as "savior," "lord," and "king" yourself. Almost any group should be able to come up with a dozen. A group familiar with the New Testament might get fifty or sixty.
2. Have persons share what they understand when they hear terms like "Messiah," "the Christ," or "Lord."
3. Do you believe it is important to discover the historical Jesus?
4. If the group lists the things they believe to be really important to them about Jesus Christ, they will have a better feel for whether they are concerned about the historical Jesus or the Christ of faith or both.
5. It will not be uncommon to discover that a substantial number of

people in your group have never thought much about the incarnation and the intellectual problems connected with the doctrine may be very new to them. Begin by pushing them to identify whether or not they believe Christ was fully human. Then, whether or not he was fully divine. Then, how he could have been both at once.

6. Do you believe God became a man or that a man became God?
7. How important is the Christmas story to your understanding of the incarnation?
8. Most modern Christians are quick to affirm that “Christ died for me” but cannot articulate what they believe that means. They know, subjectively at least, that they have been “reborn” or “set free” or “saved” but are unclear about exactly how Christ’s death affected their rebirth. If you press a group to struggle with this question, they will eventually come up with ideas that fit into the three areas of Moral Influence, Satisfaction, and Ransom.
9. Two of the three theories of the atonement are based on an inherent Old Testament understanding of the sacrifice of an innocent victim as an expression of love and obedience to God — a concept that is intensely offensive to modern Christians, even though it is biblical. Discuss the impact of this on our acceptance of Christ’s sacrificially death for us.
10. Ask the group “why God caused the resurrection?” Most persons focus undue attention on the resurrection as the promise of eternal life and fail to deal with the more significant meaning of the doctrine.
11. Is it important to you whether the resurrection was bodily or spiritual? Why or why not?

