

Prepare For Tribulation

*How We Need To Prepare For Persecution and Spiritual
Deception*

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Introduction

The purpose of this book is to encourage and help Christians prepare for tribulation, times of persecution, affliction and hardship which will test our faith in Jesus Christ. In particular this is intended for Christians in the Western world who have not had to endure persecution for over 500 years.

Today, world-wide, Christians are experiencing unprecedented tribulation through persecution, discrimination and political pressure to conform to the world's mould: politically, religiously and socially. Tens of thousands of Christians have perished for no other reason than for their faith in and loyalty to Christ.

This has become particularly evident in Islamic societies with the rise of a puritanical and militant Islam. In Nigeria over 60 thousand Christians have perished over the last 20 years at the hands of Fulani Islamic militants seeking to eliminate Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa. In India, a militant Hinduism has developed which seeks, first to prevent Hindus from leaving Hinduism, and secondly to purge non-Hindu faiths from the nation. In communist regimes, such as China and Vietnam, Christians are increasingly under pressure to conform to the ruling government's ideology.

Christians have become the most widely persecuted religious group in the world today. This is the greatly under-reported fact documented in the book: *'Persecuted: The Global Assault On Christians'* by Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea. See: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1400204410/>

In Western countries, where for five centuries we have enjoyed relative peace and security, Christians are now experiencing greater antipathy as society becomes increasingly secular and drifts from its Christian heritage. This is evident in the media, on Internet platforms and in educational and scientific institutions which no longer see the truth or relevance of Christianity. However we can be thankful that there are many Christians in these and government bodies who work to be a positive witness for Christ and the truth of God's word, often at personal cost.

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Many have noted that we have moved from being a post-Christian society to one which is increasingly pluralistic and relativistic. Diversity (all lifestyles are to be embraced) has become the foundational principle of the modern generation and traditional Christian values are seen as old hat or even oppressive.

A report by the Family Research Council in 2024: *Free to Believe The Intensifying Intolerance Toward Christians in the West* documents the marked increase in intolerance towards Christians, Christian churches and organisations over recent years by government officials and entities.

This should not surprise or alarm us. Jesus warned 2000 years ago: these are signs of the coming tribulation which will only increase in frequency and intensity, like birth pangs, as the time of the end draws closer (Matthew 24:8), culminating in a time of great tribulation. Jesus said we would *be hated by all nations* (Matthew 24:9). The temptation to compromise our faith in Jesus and the truth of God's word for the sake of peace, acceptance and our own security will be great. So we need to be aware, prepared and take to heart the many warnings given to us in the Bible of such times.

At the same time we have seen the rise in anti-Semitism, hatred of Jewish people, which is especially directed against the nation of Israel. It is the declared goal of many Islamic organisations and states to 'wipe Israel off the map'. More resolutions have been made by the United Nations against Israel than any other nation, despite it being one of the smallest.

When we see signs that a storm, a hurricane or cyclone (as they are known in the southern hemisphere) is approaching, we prepare by securing, strengthening and ensuring we have essential supplies to see us through. If we wait until the storm is on us, it will be too late. The signs of coming tribulation are evident and we need to prepare now.

Expect tribulation in this world

Jesus said we are to expect affliction as a Christian in this world:

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Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13, 14 ESV).

He said the way is *hard* that leads to life, the word 'hard' here meaning to suffer *affliction* (from the Greek verb *thlibo* meaning to be in pressing circumstances). As we also read in Acts:

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

This affliction, or tribulation, will be encountered as part of a spiritual battle against the world, our flesh and the devil which no child of God will be spared.

In Matthew chapter 24, Jesus instructs and forewarns his disciples what would happen in the end time and how they should prepare. He specifically told of a time of '*great tribulation*', a time of unprecedented trial, persecution, apostasy and spiritual deception such that, if it were possible, even the elect might be misled.

Jesus used the word '*tribulation*' (the Greek noun *thlipsis*) in describing this time. The word '*tribulation*' comes from the Latin word *tribulum* which was a wooden sledge used in Roman times to remove the husk from grain by pressure and friction.

Yet in such a time we can be encouraged, not lose heart and not fear. God's love for us will in no way diminish because through Jesus '*we overwhelmingly conquer*', as Paul tells us in his letter to the church in Rome:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor

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things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:35-39)

As David says in the beloved Psalm:

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me (Psalm 23:4).

In Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth he assures us of God's comfort in times of tribulation or affliction.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.

Ten times in this passage (2 Corinthians 1:3-10) Paul uses the word '*comfort*'.

Many times throughout the Bible we are told '*do not fear*' because God is with us. He will comfort us and be our comfort in times of tribulation or affliction.

While the focus of this book will be on preparing for persecution, we can expect, as the end of the ages draws closer, for natural disasters, epidemics and national conflicts to increase in frequency and intensity. Christians will also have to endure these (many died as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic) and in such times our faith and hope in God and Christ needs to be strong.

From the earliest days of the Church; from the time of the first Christian martyr Stephen, Christians have experienced persecution. The Roman empire of the first two centuries persecuted Christians who refused to make sacrifices to the Roman gods. Since that time persecution has occurred under many different regimes but for the same basic reason: our refusal to bow to the gods of this world.

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The Bible speaks of two times of tribulation: tribulation generally, which we can expect as followers of Christ at any time, and the time which Jesus forewarned us of as the Great Tribulation (as revealed in Matthew 24 and Mark 13). It will be a relatively brief time but one of unprecedented and intense persecution, trouble and spiritual deception (which I believe presents the greatest danger) such that many will fall away from the faith.

Though Jesus and the apostles warned of this time, many today believe true Christians, the Church, will be secretly raptured or caught up to be with Christ before the Great Tribulation and before his visible coming to earth. This will be examined more closely in *'Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?'*

Never-the-less, whatever you believe, it is evident that tribulation for Christians by persecution and through spiritual deception is increasing world-wide on multiple fronts.

The tribulation and associated persecution of Christians, in the past and in recent history, is well documented and there are many resources and organisation websites dedicated to this. While Western Christians have been spared persecution for some 500 years, our brothers and sisters in Asia, Africa and the Middle East have in recent decades not been. We would be wise to learn from their experiences (see Resources).

Western Christians need to take note and prepare, for the tide is beginning to turn. There have been many instances recently of Christians finding themselves on the wrong side of the law by coming into conflict with 'equality' and 'diversity' laws because they have spoken what the Bible plainly teaches or practised what they believe Christ would have them do. The Internet is increasingly becoming a battle ground for truth (see *'The Information War and Censorship by Big Tech'*).

We will need to face the fact that, despite seeking justice, we may increasingly not obtain it from the secular justice system. Our hope and trust must always be in God and in him alone.

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There are increasing instances of Christians who have fled persecution in their home nations and then experienced persecution at the hands of other citizens of those nations in the Western country of refuge ¹.

Most Western countries are now in a 'post-Christian' era. The foundations of Christianity: salvation through Christ alone, the truth and authority of the Bible as God's word and its moral code, are being challenged by secular humanism and what is known as 'woke' politics. While this is not surprising or unexpected, what is most troubling is the battle within the professing Christian church by revisionist theology. Revisionist theology has revised traditional Christian understanding of the past 1900 years to conform to modern ideas of what is moral and what is truth. The redefinition of marriage and the acceptance of evolution as scientific fact are two examples.

Knowing these things should not cause us to fear, become defensive and/or retreat from engaging with the lost of this world. This is because we have the love and power of Christ within and eternal life with him.

False Teachers and Prophets

The greatest and most insidious danger to Christians will be (and is now) spiritually from within the church by false prophets and teachers. These have and will cause many to depart from the way of Truth as taught by Jesus, the prophets and apostles. They unsettle Christians by questioning long held teachings of the church, casting doubt on the inspiration and truth of Scripture and re-evaluating certain parts of the Bible to conform to popular opinion. These false teachers reinterpret Scripture with novel interpretations contrary to sound and historical understanding.

False teachers typically find receptive ears by teaching what is comforting to our own desires, compromising with the world's consensus on morality so as to be 'inclusive' and avoid censure. The key emphasis of such teaching is that we show 'love' to all, but it is a humanistic love, not the love of God. They minimise or deny the

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need to take up our cross, to live a holy life and to suffer if needs be for Christ's sake. They give false assurances of peace and do not prepare their people for spiritual battle. Such teachers and false shepherds are described in the Bible as wolves in sheep's clothing who have crept in unnoticed (Matthew 7:15, Jude 1:4). The battle within the professing church will be one of the most difficult to contend with.

While we might lament the moral decline and antipathy towards Christianity in western culture we need to see that that, in part at least, it is because modern western cultural philosophies have infiltrated the church. At one time the Bible, as God's authoritative word, was the basis of Western society. This has, by and large, been abandoned and replaced with human wisdom 'reason' and 'enlightenment', effectively another religion: *secular humanism*. Marriage and gender, for example, are no longer what God's word plainly teaches, but now whatever someone feels is right for them.

Secular humanism denies the existence of God and says that man is accountable to no one except himself. As a consequence of this ideology man effectively becomes his own 'god' believing the age-old lie '*you will be like God* (or '*as gods*')' (Genesis 3:5) deciding for himself what is right or wrong.

Tragically within many churches this worldly wisdom has been mixed with or supplanted God's wisdom as revealed in the Scriptures. In particular the foundational book of Genesis is not considered real history. The importance of Genesis and the impact of not taking it as real history can be seen in "*Genesis and Creation*"².

How Should We Prepare and Respond to Tribulation?

All Christians can expect tribulation in some form. It is in fact promised (Acts 14:22, 2 Timothy 3:12). Jesus said Christians '*will be hated by all nations*' (Matthew 24:9). However, it is how we prepare and respond to tribulation that is most important. While we who are living now may not face the Great Tribulation, because the time is in God's hands, we can expect before that time for our faith

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to be tested. Jesus and Paul forewarned us there would be a time of great apostasy when many will fall away and depart from the faith. Such warnings need to be heeded, as also the reasons why many will fall away so we can be prepared to stand firm. Jesus specifically warns us with these words:

Don't be led astray; don't be alarmed; don't be anxious (Mark 13:5, 7, 11 ESV) and...

But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand. (Mark 13:23 ESV).

If we take Jesus' words to heart and are prepared we need not fear or be discouraged in tribulation but always have hope and peace. As he also said:

"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Furthermore we can be greatly encouraged by God's promise:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13).

References:

1. <https://radicalwithinreason.com/2020/10/30/driven-out-of-bradford-third-world-experience-in-first-world-britain/>
2. <https://preparefortribulation.com/genesis-and-creation/>

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Tribulation: What It Is and Its Purpose

Tribulation means affliction, hardship, difficulty or trying circumstances which can cause us pain, distress and test our ability to stay the course.

As mentioned previously, the word '*tribulation*' comes from the Latin word *tribulum*. This was a wooden sledge used in Roman times to remove the husk from the grain. Pieces of stone and iron were attached to the under sides of the sledge which was dragged over the ears of grain to separate the husks from the grain.

Tribulation in the life of a Christian, in a similar way, serves a purpose in God's plan to remove that which constrains or contaminates the fruit of his Spirit in us, to remove love for the world, grow in love and faith for God and Christ and purify us spiritually though the experience may be painful. Therefore, tribulation is not necessarily punishment or judgement from God:

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction (Isaiah 48:10).

Some of those who have insight will fall, in order to refine, purge and make them pure until the end time; because it is still to come at the appointed time (Daniel 11:35).

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgement to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:12-17)

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Note, Peter says judgement will begin with the household of God. So we should not be surprised when tribulation comes because it is God's desire that we become a holy and pure people through testing and purifying us in such times. One day God will present to his Son a bride, the Church, holy and blameless:

that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:27).

Scripture often uses illustrations from farming to teach us principles about spiritual growth. Jesus did so in the parables of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15) and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-43). Tares are a plant which in the early stages of growth looks very similar to wheat. When the seed head matures the difference becomes apparent. In the parable of the Tares Jesus teaches us at the end of the age angels will be sent to separate the wheat (representing the righteous) and the tares (representing the unrighteous). First the tares are gathered and burnt and then the wheat harvested.

So while good seed, soil and rain are necessary to produce a good crop it is also necessary for there to be a dry time when there is no rain for the grain to mature and ripen. Then the good seed (the wheat) will be distinguished from the bad (the tares).

In the same way we can see this in times when there is an out-pouring of God's Spirit which brings life and growth to God's people. Then inevitably follows a 'dry' time, a time of trial and tribulation when it may seem the presence of God is distant. But this is for a purpose: to test and mature our faith so we produce the fruit of his Spirit and Christ be formed in us (Galatians 4:19). In such times it will become apparent those who have steadfastly kept their faith in Jesus

It is probably true to say that we all experience some form of tribulation as we live in this world. First there is the normal suffering we can expect living in a fallen world: sickness, disability, personal tragedies and death. Second, Jesus and the apostles warned Christians to expect tribulation and suffering with

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a significant difference: it will uniquely come upon those who want to follow Christ and bear his name.

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name (Matthew 24:9).

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you (John 15:19-20).

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29).

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

Tribulation will clearly test our faith in God and this will be especially so in the time of the Great Tribulation Jesus forewarned us of in Matthew 24 (more on this in '*Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?*'). There will be times when God seems to be indifferent to our suffering but in reality he wants us to call on and seek him more as these scriptures show:

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all (Psalm 34:19).

But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble (Psalm 37:39).

Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honour Me (Psalm 50:15).

Therefore, when suffering and tribulation comes we should not fear or think God has forsaken us. We have been warned to expect it. In fact we should consider ourselves blessed and rejoice as the apostles did to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 5:41, 1 Peter 4:14). Through enduring tribulation we are refined so as to grow in faith and holiness.

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Tribulation Today: Hostility and Persecution

The 20th century ushered in a new wave of persecution for Christians and the 21st century has seen this continue unabated. In this section we will look at the principal sources of tribulation for Christians in the world today.

1. Communism

Communism, or more strictly known as scientific socialism, began with the ideology developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the mid-1800s. It was and is an atheistic ideology which sees religion (and Christianity in particular) as a collection of superstitions which serve only to give illusory comfort to the oppressed working class. The goal of the socialist revolution was (according to Vladimir Lenin) to create a man-made 'paradise on earth'. This was to be achieved through the propagation of 'scientific atheism' and the creation of a classless society. Religious belief, while not prohibited, was to be seen as backward and an obstacle to the socialist goal.

Clearly Communism, as it practised in countries such as China, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam and North Korea, opposes authentic Christianity. This is why Christians in these countries are continually persecuted. The former Soviet Union was also a communist state which relentlessly persecuted Christians who would not compromise their faith. In Communist ideology the teaching of Christ to love your enemies is absurd, illogical and counter-productive to the socialist goal. Consequently, Christians are seen as an impediment to socialist society.

2. Islam

Up until the middle of the 20th century Muslims, for the most part, co-existed with Christian minorities peacefully. Then arose a puritanical and militant form of Islam intent on fulfilling the Islamic goal of a world-wide reign by a successor of Mohammad. Despite some superficial similarities with Christianity, Islam is profoundly different: particularly as to who God and Jesus are, the authority of the Bible, the way of salvation and in ethics.

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The goal of Islam is to propagate Sharia law throughout the world. Sharia law is the moral, legal, and religious code that all Muslims are expected to live by, derived from the Koran and the Sunnah (the teachings and practices of Muhammad). Islam (as revealed in the Koran) is seen as the final revelation from God to mankind, given to Muhammad, replacing the preceding revelations given to Moses and Jesus Christ. This is why Muslims who become Christians are regarded with such hostility in Islamic societies, as apostates from the 'true' faith and therefore worthy of death. It explains why historically Islam has been so resistant the gospel of Christ.

Yet the last few decades, coincident with the resurgence in puritanical Islam, have seen thousands of Muslims come to Christ despite the great personal cost many of them have had to pay. Islam has grown considerably in western countries, particularly in Europe where in some cities Muslims now account for 40% of the population. As these populations have grown so has the desire and push for Sharia law to be implemented. Open Doors 'World Watch List'¹ reveals that, of the top 50 countries where it is most dangerous to follow Jesus, 34 are Islamic.

3. Hinduism

In recent years, especially in India and Nepal, Christians have been persecuted as Hindu followers sought to 'purify' their nation of 'foreign' religions, Christianity in particular. While tolerating Christianity, severe penalties and persecution are imposed on those Hindus who want to be Christians and on Christians who evangelise them.

4. Secular Humanism

This has arisen most predominately in western societies and is gradually replacing the Judaeo-Christian basis of society. According to the secular humanists, man is ultimately responsible to no one but himself, there is no God who created all things and to whom we are accountable. This idea fits with the post-modernistic view that all cultures and religions (or none), though different, have

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equal moral value. Tolerance and diversity are key words in secular humanist thought. There is no absolute right or wrong, only what happens to be the consensus opinion of the time.

Secular humanism is an atheistic ideology rooted in the theory of evolution as proposed by Charles Darwin. Prior to the publication of '*The Origin of Species*' in 1859, most naturalists (the biologists of today) saw the ordered complexity of living things as clear evidence of the Creator. As a consequence of Darwin's theory of a purely naturalistic mechanism from molecules to man, God, to many, became redundant. Darwin's theory was seized upon by those looking for a reason to throw off the Biblical and Christian basis of society in the name of scientific enlightenment.

Consequently, Christians who hold to Biblical creation are regarded as blind, naive zealots, opposed to science and akin to those who believe in a flat earth. Evolution is regarded as an indisputable fact, since anything less is seen as a concession to creationism and the existence of a Creator. So strong is the belief (and I call it a belief because it is not based on direct observation) in evolution within scientific and educational institutions, Christians who question it or merely point out some weaknesses in the theory are regularly censured and even dismissed from employment².

I am not anti-science. I have a great love and respect for science, having worked in scientific establishments for nearly 40 years and so have a good understanding of how operational science works in the real world. What is not appreciated by many Christians is the fact science itself does not determine the truth or otherwise of something. Science is a *method* by which *scientists*, utilising the scientific method, make such determinations. Scientists, like all of mankind, are fallen creatures and subject to all the vices known to man. It is science based on prejudice and a naturalistic world-view that is the problem.

Moral Relativism

As a consequence of secular humanism and post-modernistic ideology being adopted in our societies Christians are finding

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themselves on the wrong side of the law for no other reason than being faithful to Christ in word and deed. Antipathy and persecution of Christians in Western society has begun, but in a different way.

In Britain a Christian baker was charged with discriminating against a gay man because he would not make a cake with a message supporting gay marriage. In Germany many Christian parents who home school their children have been fined. In one case the children were taken from the parents because they were deemed to be indoctrinating their children with unsocial views. In Australia a church pastor (a Pakistani Christian who fled Pakistan because of death threats) was charged with religious vilification and taken to court after giving an educational seminar about Islam.

There are numerous other examples³ of Christians being discriminated against and taken before courts because they have spoken or acted according to their faith. Christians have and will be accused of hate speech, racial and sexual discrimination and being divisive. I expect that accusations and persecution of Christians in such ways will only increase in the days and years ahead. This does not mean we should passively accept such persecution but realise we are in a spiritual battle, that we need to speak what is true and right, with love, grace and humility, according to God's word and count the cost. The most important thing, I believe, is that we will have an opportunity to testify for the truth and our faith in Christ whether we win or lose.

But remember, people are not our enemy. Keep in mind that ultimately our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against unseen demonic powers who work through fallen men by sowing deceptive lies. So it is the false ideologies that need exposing, not the people caught up in them.

5. Spiritual Deception Today

Deception originates with the devil, the father of lies. He seeks to convince us that what is evil is good and what is false is true, what is good is evil and what is true is false. Therefore it is crucial we

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learn to discern the distinction between true and false, good and evil without which we will succumb to deception. More on spiritual deception can be read in the chapter: *Christianity in the Future*.

There have always been false prophets and teachers within the church, virtually from its infancy. Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus that '*after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock*' (Acts 20:29). Peter and Jude likewise warned about false teachers within the church (2 Peter 2:1-3 and Jude 1:4).

How can we know what is false? The answer is to test all things by God's word, the Bible. Therefore, read it diligently, humbly and prayerfully for ourselves, applying it to our everyday life. A common feature of false teachers is their claim to a new revelation, which has been hidden except to them. Such teachers then seek the following of others who will also believe the 'new' revelation. The difficulty in recognising such false teaching is because it mixes truth with error and, unless we are discerning, will swallow the error with the truth. By emphasising certain scriptures, while neglecting others, they mislead their followers, often through teaching that compromises with sin or by a different gospel and a different Jesus.

Because these false teachers use familiar terms and outwardly seem 'nice' people they readily infiltrate churches. A common theme these teachers emphasise is that '*God is love*' and so we also need to just *love* people. Yes, God is love (1 John 4:16), but the Bible also says that '*love ...does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth*' (1 Corinthians 13:6), that '*God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all*' (1 John 1:5-7) and that '*our God is a consuming fire*'. This means we cannot condone what the Bible says is sin in the name of 'love'.

The Grace Revolution

One deceptive teaching today is spreading under various titles such as "*The Grace Revolution*", "*God's One Way Love*", "*God's Inexhaustible Grace*" and "*Radical Grace*". The basic premise of

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such teaching is that once we receive God's love and grace, nothing we do or don't do from then on can in anyway impair our relationship with him. They teach that Jesus has done it all for us, '*It is finished*' and we need do no more than celebrate in the knowledge of his grace. There is no need to go on repenting of or confessing our sins because all sins: past, present and future, have been forgiven. No need to forsake sin and strive to be holy because we are already fully sanctified; God only sees Jesus' righteousness in us.

Understandably such teaching has great appeal: it relieves us of personal responsibility to live a moral life, but it is a dangerous deception. For while rightly teaching the greatness of God's grace, without which we would all be lost, (to which I can truly acknowledge) and that we can in no way earn his grace, it distorts the truth and neglects the many encouragements and commands throughout Scripture: that in response to God's grace, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are to '*deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age*' (Titus 2:11, 12).

In reality this 'grace' teaching is not new, as is often claimed by those who promote it. As the saying goes "*There is nothing new under the sun*". It has been taught in various forms since the days of the apostles. I remember in the 1980's a popular bumper sticker with the words '*Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven*' which in part is true. But the full truth is we are not '*just forgiven*'. We are saved, not just from the penalty of sin, but also its *power*. This is why Jesus said our goal is to be perfect (meaning complete or mature) as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48 and James 1:4). Complete perfection will not happen until Christ returns and we are finally freed of this body and the temptation to sin. In the meantime we are to strive towards that goal, as many other scriptures encourage us to do, in the power and strength that God gives us in Christ.

While such teachers/pastors say many true and good things and make some valid criticisms of contemporary church culture, it is

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the subtle mixing of truth and error while neglecting or ignoring other truths of God's that is the problem. It is not enough to teach some truths but *all* of God's word and with impartiality. As has been said: "*When a half truth is presented as the whole truth, it becomes an untruth.*" Below is a quote from one 'grace' pastor:

"The message of the Christian faith is that because Jesus was strong for us we are free to be weak. The Gospel of grace, in other words, frees us to let people see us at our worst so that they can see God at his most gracious best." ⁴

It sounds good, and like the 'Christians aren't perfect...' bumper sticker, is in part true but presents a false implication. Consider someone who has been a victim of sexual abuse from a church member reading or hearing '*The Gospel of grace..... frees us to let people see us at our worst so that they can see God at his most gracious best*'. Would they embrace such a 'gospel'? I think not! Jesus was 'strong' for us, but how? Yes, he secured our forgiveness and made us right before God, by his grace, through his death on the Cross. However, what this 'gospel' omits is that we also were *crucified with him* and our body of sin *rendered powerless*. We have *died to sin*, been freed from sin and made servants of righteousness through Christ's death and resurrection. In other words we have not only been freed from the penalty of sin, but also its power.

So to say '*we are free to be weak*' is in reality saying we are free to sin, which is simply not true because in Christ we are not weak. As the apostle John says: *No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God* (1John 3:9). John is not saying one born of God is no longer able to sin but that he is not free to do so. A child of God becomes a servant of righteousness, not of sin.

Jude warned of the grave error of thinking God's grace gives us an excuse to live an immoral life. (Jude 4). Such people will face the judgement of God.

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Like all false teachers and cults, the Bible is quoted to make their particular twist on what is 'the Gospel' but they fail to teach the '*whole purpose of God*' (Acts 20:27). It is not sufficient to quote some of the Bible but all that is relevant. We cannot pick and choose which parts of the Bible suit us. When truth is mixed with error we need discernment, because false teaching, if not checked within the church will spread, and like leaven or cancer, corrupt and even destroy her members. What do we need to equip us to discern false teaching? Simply this: know your Bible and listen to the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said "*You will know them by their fruits*" (Matthew 7:15-20). Bad teaching will produce bad fruit.

The UFO Deception

Before I came to Christ in the early 70's I began to consider the possibility of extraterrestrial life. After all, if life had evolved on this planet, surely there must be other life forms elsewhere in the universe. Reports of UFO (or UAP: unidentified aerial phenomenon) sightings captured my interest. I began collecting press reports and searching library catalogues for books on the subject. I became convinced that there was intelligent life elsewhere in this universe. There were a great number of sightings which exhibited intelligent signs and could not be explained by known phenomena. There were also accounts of individuals such as George Adamski who claimed to have had direct contact with extraterrestrials. Eric von Daniken, author of *Chariots of the Gods*, presented seemingly convincing evidence that the earth had been visited by extra-terrestrial beings in the past. I became convinced the God of the Bible was a super intelligent extraterrestrial. During this time I joined and was an enthusiastic member of a UFO research group in Perth, Western Australia.

However, when I came to Christ I gained a totally different perspective on everything and began to wonder how UFO's fitted into the picture. So I re-examined the evidence with the Bible as my reference point and came to these conclusions:

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1. UFOs were a real phenomenon. There was sufficient evidence to show that many are not explainable in terms of natural or man-made objects.

2. However, there is no conclusive scientific evidence of life elsewhere in this universe. Despite the many attempts and billions of dollars spent by organisations such as NASA and cooperative programs such as SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence), space probes to Mars and other planets, no evidence has been found of existing or past life. The Bible records God creating life on the Earth and nowhere else.

3. UFOs, while showing signs of intelligence by their movements, have been seen to execute manoeuvres which defy the laws of physics. For example, they have been observed to turn 90 degrees almost instantaneously while moving at apparent speeds in excess of 1000 km/hr and accelerate at rates which defy aeronautical physics. This suggests UFOs are not physical material.

4. Alleged messages from the 'occupants' of UFOs had decidedly religious themes. Furthermore, much of what was stated was contradictory to the Bible. They often spoke about God and Jesus but not the God and Jesus we know as revealed in the Bible.

5. Consequently I concluded, as many other Christians have also, that the UFO phenomenon is real but a *spiritual*, occult deception by fallen angels, causing many to fall into bondage to a different Jesus and a different gospel.

Most people, as a result of the prevailing scientific opinion that there must be life elsewhere in the universe (based on the theory of evolution), are open to the idea that one day, even now, we will make contact with extraterrestrials. Even former US presidents have stated their belief in UFOs. Ronald Reagan in 1987 said:

“Perhaps we need some outside universal threat to make us recognise this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.”

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Bill Clinton similarly stated in 2014:

"It may be the only way to unite this increasingly divided world of ours, think about all the differences among people of Earth (they) would seem small if we feel threatened by a space invader."

So, with this widely held belief, any such supposed 'contact' would have an immense, life-changing impact on those involved. Any words of 'advice' (or even implied threat) from these supposed extraterrestrials, with presumably greater intelligence and wisdom than man, would be believed and taken very seriously as the words of God (or a god). Therefore the danger of the UFO deception is very real.

Up until recently most governments have denied or downplayed the UFO phenomenon. Now a growing number, including, the US government are admitting that many UFO (referred to now as UAP: unidentified aerial phenomenon) sightings are not explainable as natural or man-made. So the stage is being set.

For more on this subject I'd recommend the books *UFO: End-Time Delusion* by David A. Lewis and Robert Shreckhise and *Alien Intrusion: UFOs and the Evolution Connection* by Gary Bates. You can view a trailer of the documentary based on the book

⁵.

Attacks on the Bible

The Bible, more than any other book, has been the subject of controversy and criticism. For centuries (up until the 16th century) the Bible was virtually unattainable by most people and, if it was obtainable, most probably written in Latin not their native language. Then with the advent of the printing press and the Reformation, the Bible became readily available or accessible and in commonly used languages. In more recent times (especially since the 19th century) the Bible has been the object of academic criticism: that it is not the inspired word of God and is not accurate scientifically or historically. To demonstrate the inspiration, reliability and truth of the Bible would require much more than I can say here, but I will briefly deal with two common attacks.

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1. Scientifically. As referred to earlier, the Darwinian theory of molecules to man has become the modern creation story and the Biblical account relegated to the status of myth. However a straight forward reading of Genesis 1-11 cannot be harmonised with the theory of evolution without grave injustice to the Biblical account and the authority of Scripture.

The age of the earth and a global flood have become crucial matters in the war on the Bible. Many Christians think the time since creation is irrelevant to the Bible's message, but this is a mistake. It is clear, from a straight forward reading of the Bible, that creation occurred approximately 6000 years ago over six normal days. Once the deep time narrative of millions of years is accepted, the trustworthiness of the Bible as a truthful account of history, is seriously compromised. The great flood which destroyed all mankind except those on the Ark, as recorded in Genesis 6-9, was clearly global, not just local.

When man's own wisdom and ideas have greater weight and authority than God's word, then the relevance of the Bible quickly falls and it becomes merely a book of ideas open to reinterpretation according to human wisdom. Critics argue science has proven the earth is billions of years old and evolution is a 'fact', living things are the product of random, undirected natural processes and man was not uniquely created in the image of God but evolved from ape-like creatures. These ideas are in reality statements of faith, not science, since the supposed evolution of the earth and life are no longer observable or testable. For that reason these ideas are not demonstrable science but historical conjecture.

While it may be said that there is considerable evidence which demonstrates evolution, it is more truthful to say there is evidence that is *consistent* with the theory of evolution, but that does not necessarily make it a fact.

There are many Christians who believe an old earth and evolution are compatible with the Genesis account of creation but, as stated previously, there are major problems both logical and

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scriptural. For a more in depth treatment on the subject of origins, on science and Genesis see *Genesis and Creation* ⁶

2. Historically and in popular media. While there have been many attacks by academics, archaeologists and historians on the authenticity and historical accuracy of the Bible, there has at the same time been a more insidious attack through popular media. This includes novels (in particular science fiction), documentaries and movies. Through implied and overt statements within these novels, documentaries and movies is the message that evolution is an undeniable fact, that the Biblical narrative is a myth and Christians are anti-science. As a consequence many in Western society have been indoctrinated with these ideas and believe them to be true.

As an example, one recent novel proved to be hugely popular and very influential, in the guise of a thriller drama: Dan Brown's "*The Da Vinci Code*". It sold over 40 million copies and made the author a multimillionaire. While written as a work of fiction Dan Brown claims the historical basis of his novel is fact: that the New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ are fraudulent, that Jesus was not the Son of God but a mortal prophet, married Mary Magdalene and their descendants became kings of France.

As expected, Dan Brown's theories raised a storm of controversy. The troubling fact was that the faith of some Christians was shaken by his claims while others accepted them as historical fact. When the movie based on the book came out in 2006, a friend and I handed out a small pamphlet drawing attention to the false claims of Dan Brown. On one evening I was outside the theatre when an angry woman stormed across the car park, with an embarrassed young daughter in tow, incensed that I had rejected Dan Brown's theories. My friend overheard one woman say to another "I told you Mary was the leader of the Church". Such is the power of false ideas sown into an undiscerning public. See Appendix B "*The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?*"

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Dan Brown's latest book '*Origin*' continues the conspiracy theme, only this time targeting the creation account of Genesis ⁷. As with '*The Da Vinci Code*', this book is a mixture of truth and error which will deceive the undiscerning. In 2005, TIME magazine named Dan Brown as one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World, whose editors credited him with “keeping the publishing industry afloat; renewed interest in Leonardo da Vinci and early Christian history; spiking tourism to Paris and Rome; a growing membership in secret societies; the ire of Cardinals in Rome; eight books denying the claims of the novel and seven guides to read along with it; a flood of historical thrillers; and a major motion picture franchise.”

Similarly, the late Carl Sagan's (who was an avowed atheist) novel '*Contact*' was made into a movie of the same name and both proved to be hugely popular. In the book and movie the themes of the 'facts' of science versus the myths of the Bible and the Christian faith were frequently portrayed through the characters.

The interesting and disturbing fact is that Dan Brown's (and Carl Sagan's) novels have been so influential in shaping many people's perception of the church, by exploiting scepticism, suspicion and ignorance of true Christianity. Consequently, Christians need to be equipped and have answers to the many false ideas arrayed against the truth.

The greatest danger Christians will face in the days ahead will be spiritual deception. Discrimination and physical persecution are to be expected, are readily identified and the challenge to us will be how to respond. Spiritual deception, however, will not so readily be identified since it invariably is a mixture of truth and error. Furthermore, the most insidious deception will come from within the professing Christian church. Therefore we need discernment by the wisdom of God which comes through a vital knowledge of his word and walking with him.

True and False Unity

There have been many movements over the last 100 years or so to bring about unity among the numerous Christian churches and

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denominations. The rationale, of what has become the ecumenical movement, has been that unity will bring about a greater witness of the gospel of Christ to those outside the church. On the face of it this seems a good and honourable goal as Jesus himself said:

"...that they may be one" (John 17:11)

Yet a number of important questions need to be asked:

What exactly do we mean by unity and, most importantly, what is the unity that Jesus wants to see?

How is unity to be achieved?

Is unity to be achieved at the cost of compromising the truth?

These questions will be considered in '*Christianity in the Future*'.

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Apostasy in the Church

Apostasy is when a professing Christian no longer remains faithful to Christ by not trusting and obeying his word as revealed in the Bible. Today we are witnessing many Christians abandon faith in Christ and what he plainly taught. While there has always been apostasy in the Church it is occurring at an unprecedented rate especially in Western societies with a long Christian heritage.

While at one time it was happening in mainline (historical denominational) churches it is now happening to an alarming degree in conservative evangelical churches. Apostasy, departing the Christian faith, is one of the greatest tragedies: that one for whom Christ died is no longer walking in the truth and his sacrifice for them in vain.

Why and how does apostasy occur?

1. Apostasy can occur when a Christian becomes deceived by believing false teaching. This may happen through spiritual deception originating from the spirit realm. Because it originates with deception such Christians don't believe they are wrong but in fact have made a choice which is more enlightened and liberating. This is because the very nature of spiritual deception is that it does not seem evil. It may seem more logical and appealing to our human nature but in reality contradicts what God has plainly stated. When man's wisdom supplants God's wisdom as revealed in the Scriptures and Christians seek man's approval over God's there is a danger apostasy will be a consequence.

2. Apostasy can occur when Christians, in the face of persecution or threat of death, choose to deny the Faith to save their own lives, possessions or status in society. If we fear losing our lives, possessions, relationships or our reputation more than God we are in danger of apostasy. Jesus warned us to fear God and not man (Matthew 10:28).

3. Apostasy can follow when God's word, the Bible, is no longer considered inerrant (and by inerrant I mean it does not contain

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factual or historical error). Some claim to hold to 'inerrancy' but then say the Bible needs to be 'interpreted' to take into account 'science' or 'cultural norms'. This need not be an outright rejection of God's word but a selective belief, where parts of God's word are ignored, disobeyed or reinterpreted because they seem hard or contrary to human wisdom and cultural norms.

There are two errors here: 1. That man's wisdom becomes the judge of what is true and right, not God's word. 2. The Bible needs to be 'interpreted'. In truth the Bible needs to be *understood*, not interpreted. When there is more than one 'interpretation' they can't all be right!

4. Apostasy rarely happens in one step but through little by little departures from and trust in the truth of God's word as it plainly reads. Each departure builds on the other until, like a ship off course by one degree, over time its destination will be missed completely.

5. Up until the end of the 18th century few Christians questioned what the Bible plainly taught. Then the 19th century saw the rise of so called 'higher criticism' which rejected the 'supernatural' events of the Bible and essentially made the Bible the writings and opinions of fallible men rather than the word of God. The 20th century saw the rise of many so-called Christian leaders who rejected the basic doctrines of the Christian faith. For example Episcopal Church bishops James Pike and John Spong. As a consequence of their false teaching many have followed them into rejecting historical Christian teaching of the last 1900 years.

6. Many, it seems, have departed after witnessing hypocrisy in church leaders who don't live what they teach. If leaders don't speak and live the whole truth of God's word, by showing love, humility, forgiveness when it is needed, faithfulness, purity, holiness and a vital, prayerful relationship with God and Christ, how can they expect other members of their church to? Others have left after finding '*cognitive dissonance*' (intellectual conflict) between what they have been taught is the truth and what seems to

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be the supposed 'facts' of science which contradict that truth (such as the Genesis account of creation).

Particular departures

1. Genesis: the creation account not taken as it plainly reads.

The creation account, as recorded in Genesis, is not taken as real history. For example, the 'days' of Genesis 1 were long periods of time and there was death before Adam' supposedly because science has demonstrably 'proven' the earth is billions of years old. Some (e.g. Biologos) have gone so far as to accept Darwinian evolution and reinterpreted Scripture to conform, even denying a literal Adam and Eve and their Fall in the garden of Eden. Without these basic truths of Scripture the purpose of Christ's death and resurrection are in danger of being meaningless.

2. The departure from marriage being a covenant relationship between one man and one woman for life.

Despite Jesus' (and Paul's) clear teaching that divorce and remarriage was adultery, this is now condoned in many Christian churches. Many pastors and church leaders have been divorced and remarried multiple times. Pre-marital sex (fornication) is also being condoned despite Scripture's clear teaching that it is sin.

3. The respective roles of men and women in the home and in the Church.

While the Bible teaches us men and women are equal in status and worth, both made in the image of God, the Bible also teaches us that the *responsibility* (which does not mean *superiority*) of leadership in the home and in the Church (elders, shepherds/pastors, overseers) was given by God to men. In recent times this has been challenged by many Christians who have re-interpreted Scripture to reject God's order in the home and Church in the name of 'equality'. The consequences of this are seriously damaging for Christians personally and for the Church's witness in this world.

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4. God's created sexual order for men and women

Following closely the rejection of God's order for men and women in marriage and the Church, has been the rejection of God's created sexual order for men and women: the acceptance of homosexual acts as legitimate expressions of 'love', same-sex marriage, trans-sexuality and the ordination of 'gay' clergy. This is despite the clear teaching of Scripture which says same-sex sexual intimacy is sin. This departure is not surprising since it logically follows the practice of appointing female pastors and elders in the church. The same types of arguments to justify revision of God's revealed order for marriage and in the Church have been used to justify homosexual relations and same-sex marriage. It is reasoned that it is all in the name of equality, love and compassion.

In a private survey of Christian denominations which approve of same-sex relationships, it is significant that every instance was preceded by the appointing of women to pastoral leadership of the Church.

Christians should be ready to show love, compassion and forgiveness towards those who have same-sex attraction. They are not worse sinners than hetero-sexual sinners. Some Christians have expressed their opposition to same-sex relations in hateful and unloving ways. To such people there only two options with regard to same-sex relations: affirmation or condemnation. Yet both options are wrong. We are all called to repent, whether we are gay, straight or anywhere in between. The truth, according to God's word, needs to be spoken in love and in a spirit of gentleness.

5. The lack or absence of Church discipline.

In the name of love and not being judgemental, discipline of a member who is sinning maybe weak or absent. Consequently, because of the reluctance to administer church discipline when it is needed, sin can and does spread like a cancer. And even if an offending member is disciplined by the church, they simply can leave and go to another church that will 'forgive' and accept them.

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Of course the whole issue of church discipline (as Jesus taught in Matthew 18:15-17) is a very difficult one. Sometimes discipline can be overly strict and not give opportunity for forgiveness and reconciliation. At other times it can be lacking when it shouldn't be. Failure to discipline stems from a wrong concept of love. To overlook or condone sin is not love in action. It is not the love of God. What is more loving: to tell a truth which maybe painful or to tell a comforting lie?

The guiding principle must be to *speaking the truth in love*.

Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, looking to yourself so that you too will not be tempted (Galatians 6:1).

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19-20)

Conclusion

In drawing attention to these particular departures I am not suggesting that if a Christian or a church believes or practices any one or more of these that apostasy has occurred or will occur. What I am saying is, any departure from the plain statements of God's word sets a precedent which can or will lead to further departures from the truth. Scripture should interpret scripture not man's ideas imposed on scripture. Once we doubt or reject one truth it is easier to doubt or reject another.

This is the fundamental cause of apostasy and what has been going on in many churches for decades. All five preceding departures would not have occurred had there been a clear belief in and adherence to the authority of Scripture.

It is therefore crucial church leaders uphold the authority of Scripture and impartially teach the *whole* truth of God's word. When parts of Scripture are ignored or neglected, especially regarding God's righteousness and judgement and the reality of

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eternal suffering in hell, the fear of God will suffer to the detriment of Christians in their church.

Apostasy Today

Surveys conducted in recent years have shown a marked change in religious affiliation in the USA and other western nations, especially Europe. The Pew Research Centre in the USA reports that over the last 50 years the percentage of people who claim to have no religious affiliation has gone from 5% to nearly 30% in 2023. These religious 'nones' now make up the largest segment of the population in the USA.

Over the last decade many well-known Christians have abandoned Christianity. This abandonment or 'apostasy' has been relabelled as 'deconversion' or 'deconstruction'. Some Christians who have 'deconstructed' their faith have adopted what is called 'progressive' Christianity (which holds some of the basic beliefs but rejects others). Others who have 'deconverted' have abandoned faith in Christ altogether, often becoming atheists (as seems to be in many cases) or agnostics.

What I have noted is that most of those who have left the Faith were second, third or more generation Christians. That is, they were bought up within the Church and in a Christian culture but the question is: how many had a genuine faith in Christ? At least some may have known *about* Christianity but not had a vital, living faith in Jesus himself.

While there has always been apostasy in the Church throughout its history, we can learn from those who depart the faith and why, so we are prepared and not fall into the same error. This is particularly of concern today when historic Christianity is being challenged from many quarters. In the Western world this is coming predominantly from secular humanism with its roots in evolutionary philosophy and moral relativism (there are no absolute standards of morality). Evolutionary philosophy claims certain 'facts' of science falsify the biblical narrative of creation and its

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record of history. Consequently if the Bible is wrong then it cannot be trusted.

However the greatest challenge to authentic, historical Christianity is coming from professing Christians who teach a new or 'progressive' Christianity. In reality it is not new at all but just another variation of Gnosticism of the 2nd century. It outwardly looks and sounds Christian, seems logical, appeals to many but in truth is another gospel (see Resources: *Another Gospel*).

What we are witnessing today has all the indications of the beginning of the final apostasy Jesus and the apostles Paul and Peter warned would come about near the end time. (Matthew 24:10, 1 Timothy 4:1, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, and 2 Thessalonians 2:3)

Why Do Christians Depart the Faith?

There is usually more than one reason a Christian departs the faith but, as I see it, they broadly fall into three categories:

1. Experiential
2. Theological
3. Rational or scientific

It's not wrong to have doubts. To tell someone "*Don't doubt, just believe*" is to do them a disservice. Doubt is healthy if it drives us to find the truth, reality and assurance.

We all need a reason to believe. There are and will always be questions. But as Jude 1:22 says, we should show mercy to those who doubt. And it seems these reasons for doubt are stated with regular frequency. This poses a challenge to the Church today: are we equipping people to answer these challenges to faith?

Christian faith is not blind. There are good rational reasons to believe so seeds of doubt can be overcome and faith strengthened.

I will address in more detail the rational and scientific reasons for abandoning faith in Christ. But first I'll briefly describe two other reasons: experiential and theological.

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1. Experiential

This typically happens when a Christian has been deeply hurt by a personal tragedy, a life crisis, by hypocritical, unloving or abusive actions of another professing Christian, especially a pastor or leader of a church. Because of their previous trust in that person, who, to them has been a supposed example of a Christ follower, their faith in Christ and God is severely tested. Jesus gave a dire warning to Christians who cause others to stumble or fall away:

whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6).

In other words it would be better for such a person to have died than to face judgement after causing someone to stumble in their faith.

Evil, Suffering and Injustice

Doubts of God's justice often arise when a personal tragedy or crises occur, in a time of persecution or when there is great physical and emotional trauma (which is happening today in many places around the world).

One of the most common objections to the existence of God is the presence of evil, death, suffering and injustice in this world. It is reasoned: 'If God is good, all powerful and loving why doesn't he prevent or intervene to address these wrongs?' It may then be thought: 'If God is not good he cannot be God' and so faith in God and his goodness is seriously challenged.

Such thoughts are understandable but stem from an unrealistic expectation of life and a misunderstanding of how God works in this world. The reality is this world is a *fallen* world as a consequence of man's sin (beginning with Adam) and a world ruled by the prince of this world, Satan, who seeks to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). Death, disease and suffering are a consequence and therefore to be expected.

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Yet the Bible tells us God does care for us in this fallen world though we may not sense it. God will at times allow what he hates to achieve what he loves. Through enduring suffering we can learn to become more like Jesus. The good news is there will be a day when true and complete justice will come. One day there will be a new heaven and a new earth in which there will be no more death, suffering or injustice. This future restoration is God's plan of redemption which will be fulfilled when Christ returns. That is the real hope of every Christian.

Censure and Rejection

We may experience censure or rejection by another Christian. Questions may form, such as: 'I've faithfully served God so why didn't he prevent this, or why hasn't this person been brought to justice?' Such unresolved questions then lead to doubt God himself, that he doesn't love us or even that he doesn't exist.

In such situations our experience of Christianity has been negative and so the hopes, benefits and joys of being a Christian are no longer felt. For such people, life as a Christian became an ordeal, just a ritual or even an illusion.

Though this may be the experience of some, the reality is as we live in this world and especially as a Christian, we will all experience hurt, injustice and tribulation in some form. In such times it is crucial we keep our eyes on Jesus, on the eternal perspective, just as he did and for the glory before him endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2). It is our faith in Christ and in him alone that will enable us to stay the course, not our church, its members or our expectation of them.

The Danger of Unforgiveness and Bitterness

The danger of 'bitterness' taking hold in a Christian's life when tragedy or hurt happens (especially by another Christian) is one we must be on guard against. As the writer of Hebrews warned:

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled (Hebrews 12:15).

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Bitterness and unforgiveness are deadly. The lesson here is not to allow them to take hold. To forgive can be very difficult especially if the hurt has been from someone we once trusted. Yet we can, knowing how great our forgiveness is in Christ. Trust God, for there will come a day when Jesus will render justice for all.

Two things we should keep in mind: 1. Forgiveness is not an option. Jesus said if we don't forgive we can't expect to be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15) and 2. That we love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:27-28).

2. Theological

These reasons typically question God's character: if he is good and loving why does he allow suffering of the innocent?; why did God sanction the destruction of the nations who inhabited the Promised Land?; how could a God of love cause those who don't believe to be tormented in hell for eternity?; how can the Bible be trusted and be believed as the inspired word of God when there are so many contradictions?

These are reasonable questions. However, in essence, all these either question or doubt the goodness of God and the truth of his word as revealed in the Bible. These questions are addressed in some measure in the chapter *'Why Does God Allow Suffering?'*

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us of the necessity of building our house on the Rock (Matthew 7:24-27). He gives us an allegory for building our faith on the truth of God's words as opposed to the disastrous impact of disobeying or rejecting them. Building on man-made ideas or philosophy has similar consequences (Colossians 2:8).

Though we may not fully understand God's ways, unless we believe God is good and his word is true we are in danger of departing from the Faith. Therefore, we need to be equipped to counter these arguments against God's word so that we can trust him in times of testing.

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3. Rational or scientific

I believe this is one of the underlying reasons for apostasy in this generation. The previous two reasons, of themselves, need not be cause for someone to abandon their faith, but when rational or scientific doubts arise, then the foundations of faith are weakened and eventually fall. For if there isn't a *factual* basis for Christianity, that God exists, he created the world and all living things, that the historical events described in the Bible happened, that Jesus lived, died on a cross and rose again; if these things are not true and can be shown to be false, then whatever faith we might have had is based on a falsehood. It's all just an illusion in the mind and therefore in vain.

Having reviewed many accounts of those who have abandoned faith in Christ and become agnostics or atheists, rational and scientific reasons are, without exception, given as one of the main reasons for their journey from faith to unbelief. Of the rational and scientific reasons the one which ranks most often is the idea science has shown unequivocally that the Earth and the universe are billions of years old and that life has evolved from non-living chemicals into complex organisms, including man, by unguided naturalistic processes.

This idea contradicts the Biblical account of creation as it plainly reads. Consequently, because it is believed the scientific account is true, then the Biblical account is false and must be rejected. If the Bible has been shown to be wrong it cannot be relied upon as an authoritative source of truth.

A number of recent surveys have shown young people are leaving the Church in significant numbers. What is of particular note are the reasons why they leave. Of these the most common was some form of *intellectual skepticism*. For example:

“Learning about evolution when I went away to college”

“Rational thought makes religion go out the window”

“Lack of any sort of scientific or specific evidence of a creator”

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“I’m doing a lot more learning, studying and kind of making decisions myself rather than listening to someone else.”¹.

The studies showed that on entering college or university, young Christians encountered scientific evidence that seemed beyond dispute for evolution, a universe and earth billions of years old and, by implication, the Biblical account of creation was a myth. The concerning thing was these young people did not receive adequate teaching and scientific evidence upholding the Genesis account of creation while attending church. Tragically, many churches held the view that the details and mechanisms of origins were unimportant to faith in Christ.

There are others, who have grown up within the Church, participated in its culture but never fully known the truth or actually put their faith in Christ and him alone. For such people, Christianity, though having many merits, is largely irrelevant to everyday life.

The Seeds of Doubt

There are many accounts of how and why Christians have departed the faith. I will relate two here to illustrate how the supposed facts of science, the age of the earth and the universe, created doubt and led to apostasy.

John Loftus

This is adapted from a review: ‘From *Apologist to Atheist: A Critical Review*’ by Norman L. Geisler of John Loftus’ book ‘*Why I Rejected Christianity: a Former Apologist Explains*’ Trafford Publishing, 2007.²

John Loftus was a former Christian evangelical apologist. His cousin Larry was a bio-chemistry teacher in the Air Force. Loftus had tried unsuccessfully to convince him of the truth of creation over evolution. Instead, he said:

“He did convince me of one solid truth; *the universe is as old as scientists say it is*, and the consensus is that it is 12-15 billion years old. Now that by itself isn’t too harmful of an idea...but it was the first time I

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really considered the theological implications of it. Two corollaries of that idea started me down the road to being the honest doubter I am today.

The first is that in Genesis chapter 1 we see that the earth existed before the sun, moon, and stars, which were all created on the fourth day. This does not square with Astronomy....The second corollary for me at the time was this. If God took so long to create the universe, then why would he all of a sudden snap his fingers, so to speak, and create human beings?" (22-23) "Nearly two years later, I came to deny the Christian faith. There were just too many individual problems that I had to balance, like spinning several plates on several sticks, in order to keep my faith. At some point they just all came crashing down." Ref 1. (Emphasis mine).

While there were other incidents in his life which contributed to his final rejection of Christianity, it was the contradiction between the supposed fact of an ancient universe and what the Bible plainly stated which caused his final foundation to crumble.

Drew McCoy is another young atheist who was a Christian and now runs a popular YouTube channel (nearly 700k subscribers) dedicated to spreading skepticism about Christianity and alternative medicine. It was learning about the evidence and supposed fact of an ancient universe while studying astronomy in college that began his journey to atheism.³

Charles Templeton and Billy Graham

This account⁴ of Charles Templeton and Billy Graham in the late 1940's is another example of how doubt in God's word can lead to loss of faith and how trust in his word leads to strength and assurance:

Charles Templeton was a popular evangelist working with Billy Graham in the 1940's. In 1946, he was listed among those best used of God by the National Association of Evangelicals in bringing thousands to faith in Christ. However, despite his popularity and seeming success as an evangelist, all was not well with Charles Templeton. The more he read of the claimed scientific

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fact of evolution, the more he questioned the essentials of the Christian faith. Science had, for Charles Templeton, disproved God's Word.

In a conversation with Billy Graham in early summer 1949, concerning Templeton's desire to attend Princeton Theological Seminary, Templeton stated:

"But, Billy, it's simply not possible any longer to believe, for instance, the biblical account of creation. The world wasn't created over a period of days a few thousand years ago; it has evolved over millions of years. It's not a matter of speculation; it's demonstrable fact."

Templeton warned Graham that it was 'intellectual suicide' to not question the Bible and to go on preaching God's Word as authoritative.

In August that year Charles (Chuck) Templeton and Billy Graham had been invited to speak at a conference east of Los Angeles. During the conference Templeton told Graham:

"You're fifty years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as inspired the way you do."

Billy Graham was greatly disturbed by these words. He had to resolve his doubts and questions concerning the Bible once and for all. If he could not trust the Bible he could not go on.

Graham sought the counsel of Henrietta Mears, a Bible teacher and evangelical visionary who had founded the retreat centre. Mears reassured Graham and reminded him: the truth and inerrancy of Scripture was foundational to Christianity. Undermine that foundation and the whole structure collapses.

Billy Graham wandered into the countryside surrounding the retreat centre. By an old tree stump Graham fell to his knees, laid down his opened Bible, and began to pray.

"O God! There are many things in this book I do not understand. There are many problems with it for which I have no solution. There are many seeming contradictions. There are some areas in it that do not seem to

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correlate with modern science. I can't answer some of the philosophical and psychological questions Chuck and others are raising."

"Father, I am going to accept this as Thy Word by faith! I'm going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts, and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word!"

When he rose from his knees his eyes filled with tears and he felt the Spirit of God flooding his soul. He sensed the presence and power of God that he had not known for many months. The following evening, Henrietta Mears knew Graham was a new man. There was a confidence, a sense of authority to his preaching that was new and powerful. A month later, the response to Graham's Los Angeles crusade was so overwhelming that organisers were forced to add several nights to accommodate the crowds. Billy Graham never looked back.

The lesson learnt from these two men.

The tragedy is that during Templeton's time at Princeton Theological Seminary his doubts about the Bible were further increased through men such as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield. They supposedly held to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture but taught that the ancient age of the earth is a fact and so Genesis had to be reinterpreted to harmonise with 'science'.

Charles Templeton left the ministry in 1957. In addition to his doubts about Genesis, Templeton wrestled with the problem of evil in the world and could not reconcile this with his concept of a loving God. Eventually he rejected faith in God altogether and wrote *'Farewell To God'* (published in 1996). He died in 2001.

Billy Graham, by contrast, went on to become the most effective and well-known evangelist in modern history. Why? Though he didn't have all the answers, he trusted God's word. "*The Bible says...*" was Graham's authoritative phrase in his evangelistic messages.

(Note: Although Billy Graham accepted the old-earth interpretation of Genesis he never doubted the Bible was the ultimate source of truth. There are now widely available sound

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Biblical and scientific evidences for a 'young' earth and a global flood).

These examples show how seeds of doubt can be sown once we accept man's wisdom over God's word as revealed in the Bible. This is particularly a danger if we accept the consensus of science on origins and the age of the earth and universe as opposed to that plainly revealed in Scripture.

Why We Can Trust God's Word in the Face of a Skeptical World

We can trust the Genesis account of creation as it plainly reads despite the prevailing scientific explanations for origins and age of the universe. This is because these explanations rest on two faulty assumptions:

1. That science can reconstruct the past with certainty.
2. That scientists are totally objective and infallible.

1. The limitations of science to investigate the past

First we need to appreciate the limitations of science. In saying this I am not anti-science. I have had a great and active interest in science since my youth. Having worked in science for most of my working life (40 years), in the area of analytical chemistry, I have a great appreciation of how science works in the real world and what it has and can achieve.

We regularly hear from those opposed to biblical Christianity a false dichotomy: *science vs faith* interpreted as *fact vs myth*. It is false because there is no contradiction between science which is demonstrably true and the biblical narrative. It is false because there are limitations of science to determine our origins.

We often hear the phrase “*Science tells us ...*” Yet we should understand that science itself does not tell us anything. Science is the *means* or *method* by which scientists investigate the natural world. It is *scientists* who, through the scientific method, endeavour to explain the working of the natural world. Secondly, scientists

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can only investigate directly, by observation, things in the present. If something is observable and testable we can be confident it is a scientific fact.

The observable and testable laws of physics, for example, give us the confidence to travel to the moon and back and explore other planets. However, if something is not observable it is not testable and if it is not testable it cannot be held to be a scientific fact. For that reason there are limitations of the scientific method. It cannot directly investigate the past, but only through observations made in the present and making certain assumptions, scientists may make a proposition or hypothesis of what happened in the past.

So we need to appreciate the limitations of science and not give undue confidence to the statements of scientists. They are not infallible, nor should consensus be taken to mean a fact has been established. A scientific statement is not necessarily the truth. This is particularly so where there is an underlying philosophy which bears on the interpretation of observed evidence.

Wrong ages

It is an established step in the scientific method that to determine or quantify the age (value) of something, the method to determine that age must first be *validated* with things of *known* age. This, of course, cannot be done for prehistoric things. So while scientists do make estimates for the age of prehistoric things, they are all based on a number of assumptions which cannot be held conclusively (such as radiometric dating and sedimentary rates).

A major problem with the supposed ‘fact’ of an ancient earth are the many independent scientific evidences which give ages orders of magnitude less than the prevailing evolutionary time scale. Furthermore, when objects of known historic age have been dated by the most commonly used methods they have given erroneously high ages. This shows the current scientific hypothesis of history is false (the test of falsifiability).

Therefore it is not an indisputable scientific fact the universe, the Earth and life evolved billions or millions (or for that matter

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thousands) of years ago. It is not possible for science to prove or validate prehistoric events such as the origin of the universe and the earth and how life first arose because they are no longer observable or testable.

There is, however, considerable scientific evidence which is *consistent* (not proof) with the intelligent design of living things and creation which occurred less than 10,000 years ago (See: <https://creation.com/en-au/articles/age-of-the-earth>). But this is ignored by most scientists.

2. The fallibility of scientists

Second, scientists, like all of fallen mankind, are fallible, subject to sin, prejudices, pride, self-interest and foremost a resistance to acknowledge their Creator to whom they are accountable. Unregenerate man is said to *‘walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart’* (Ephesians 4:17-18). Therefore we would expect scientists, like all mankind in general, to resist the Bible’s revelation of creation and cast doubt on its historical truth.

When it comes to examining the origin of life and the universe, we should expect prejudice and an unwillingness to be objective. It has become almost axiomatic that the findings of contemporary science *must* preclude the role of a supernatural creator (this idea in reality is a philosophy known as naturalism) even if there is evidence which points to that. Naturalism has become the dominant scientific philosophy of this time and strongly resists attempts to question it.

The subject of origins is one which would need a book in itself to address adequately (and many have done this). My reason to mention this here is simply to show how uncritical acceptance of current scientific theories can lead to Christians abandoning faith in Christ and God's word.

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The philosophical bias of the science of origins

Professor Richard Lewontin (1929-2021), a geneticist, was one of the world's leaders in evolutionary biology. He wrote this revealing comment (*italics were in the original*):

‘Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism.

It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.’⁵

Lewontin's statement here illustrates the philosophical bias of many scientists against the Genesis account of creation, regardless of whether or not the facts support it.

Where do we draw the line?

So, if we allow ‘science’ to re-interpret Genesis, where do we draw the line? Science has ‘proved’ dead people can’t be resurrected, that water can’t be turned into wine and that over 5000 people cannot be fed from 5 loaves and 2 fish. The virgin birth of Christ and his miracles all stand in contradiction to the consensus of scientific opinion. There is clearly no way science, as it is popularly taught, and Scripture can be harmonised in a consistent manner.

Many Christians, lacking the specific knowledge required, are reticent to challenge the prevailing views of the scientific establishment. While rightfully opposing science’s naturalistic philosophy and observing the plain evidence of design in God’s

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creation, the idea of a 6000 year old earth is seen to contradict established scientific fact and is therefore untenable. However, we must discern between what is conclusive and what is just conjecture in science. We should not just accept the consensus of scientific opinion without question since consensus in science does not determine the truth of a matter.

The Bible plainly teaches us God created the heavens, the earth, all that is in them, including man, in six literal 24 hour days and rested on the seventh (Exodus 20:11). Scripture also reveals that creation occurred about 6000 years ago and the global flood about 4500 years ago. Yet many Christians do not believe this to be historically true and have reinterpreted the Genesis account to accommodate the opinion of contemporary science (see Ref 6).

The Conflict

This belief creates a serious and unnecessary conflict with the plain reading of Genesis and sound exegesis. Those who hold this view, I believe, have accepted the consensus of scientific opinion and not been sufficiently critical of the naturalistic underpinnings of scientific methods to determine the age of the earth. The evidence shows such belief carries potential dangers not only for our own faith in Scripture but also for those we teach and disciple and, in particular, young Christians who are in the process of growing in the Faith.

This is why I believe God has raised up many Christian ministries which, beginning with the Bible as our ultimate reference for truth; examine what is fact and what is conjecture. Christian ministries such as Creation Ministries International, Answers In Genesis and Institute for Creation Research (see Resources) have written thousands of articles and done independent scientific research which confirms the Biblical account of creation and a global flood. There will never be conflict between what are truly facts and Scripture. For a relatively brief overview about Genesis, creation and science see Reference 7.

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Conclusion

The issue ultimately at stake is the trustworthiness of Scripture's record of history as it plainly reads. The teachings of the Scriptures are not disconnected doctrines but form an interwoven fabric. Therefore, once we allow man, on the authority of 'science' to question and re-interpret one part of Scripture's record, every other doctrine we hold as sacred and true is also in danger of being challenged and rejected. Once we accept man's word over God's we are in danger of sowing seeds of doubt and apostasy.

This is why the age of the earth and the universe are not incidental or irrelevant details but integral to an enduring faith in God, the authority of Scripture and a true understanding of the Genesis account of creation. There is considerable evidence (both within and outside Scripture) that upholds Genesis as a literal narrative of history. If the clear teaching of scripture is for a (relatively) young earth and creation as an event (not a prolonged process), then science, true science, will ultimately be found in harmony with the Scriptures. In that I have every confidence.

1. Why young Christians leave the Church

<https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/young-christians-are-leaving-the-church-heres-why>

2. From Apologist to Atheist: A Critical Review' by Norman L. Geisler

<https://normangeisler.com/from-apologist-to-atheist-a-critical-review/>

3. Drew McCoy: <http://faithlessforum.com/drew-mccoy/>

4. Adapted from: Billy Graham's shadow: Chuck Templeton and the crisis of American religion by Alan Bean, <https://friendsofjustice.blog/2015/08/03/billy-grahams-shadow-chuck-templeton-and-the-crisis-of-american-religion/>

5. Richard Lewontin, 'Billions and billions of demons', in a review of 'The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark' by Carl Sagan, 1997), The New York Review, p. 31, 9 January 1997.

6. <https://creation.com/old-earth-or-young-earth-belief>

7. Genesis and Creation: <https://preparefortribulation.com/genesis-and-creation/>

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Christianity in the Future

The greatest danger Christians will face in the future will be spiritual deception. But first we will look at the trends from the visible sources which we can expect to continue unabated.

Communism

In China Christians are experiencing increasing persecution from Chinese authorities, motivated by it seems a renewed fervour to foster national harmony and compliance to the goals of atheistic socialism. Over 600 million CCTVs (2024) and sophisticated facial recognition technology are being used as part of the so called "Social Credit" scheme which ranks individual Chinese citizens according to their trustworthiness. Those who are deemed "unstable elements" (especially those Christians who belong to China's house churches) will find life very difficult, unable to travel, obtain credit and many more things we in the 'free' West take for granted.

In September 2017, the Chinese government announced new draft measures to control online religious activity that will ban the live streaming of church services, requiring organisations publishing religious information online to obtain a licence. The regulations also prohibit foreign pastors from preaching online. Earlier that month, authorities shut down one of the largest unofficial churches in Beijing (such congregations are known as "house churches") after church leaders had refused to allow government authorities to install CCTV cameras inside the building. Christian leaders have witnessed a pattern of increased pressure since new religion regulations came into force in February 2018 (From "*China's church leaders take a brave stand for freedom of religion*" BarnabasFund.org August 2018).

While the Chinese government does allow 'official' churches to exist as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, they are heavily monitored and restricted. Pastors and their teaching are controlled and must defer to the government.

For more on the recent persecution in China see Asia Harvest's report¹.

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Islam

There is no indication puritanical and militant Islam will diminish, in fact the opposite. Though there are other voices from within Islamic communities which seem to offer hopes of peaceful co-existence with religious minorities, they are not the ones who are making an impact. Much could be said on this subject and many have already drawn attention to the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism. I am not 'Islamophobic' but have soberly examined this for over 20 years. While the majority of Muslims may not subscribe to the methods of the fundamentalists, many do sympathise with their goals. As I stated before, Muslims are not our enemy. It is the ideology which governs them that is the cause of persecution.

We can expect Islam to have greater impact in Western countries, especially in Europe with more immigration from Islamic counties and higher birth rates. Two books I'd recommend are:

1. *The Challenge of Islam to the Church and its Mission* by Patrick Sookhdeo and

2. *The Challenge of Islam To Christians* by David Pawson.

You can hear audio or view video of David Pawson's talks upon which this book was based ². Most importantly he reveals how Christians should respond: through demonstrating the three qualities that make Christianity unique: reality, relationship and righteousness.

Secular Humanism

As stated previously, the Judaeo-Christian foundations upon which Western society was based is rapidly being eroded and replaced by secular humanism with its moral and cultural relativism. For that reason we can expect Christians to increasingly be marginalised from society as governments pass legislation that conforms to the moral and cultural relativism. Christianity can no longer expect to be the preferred or favoured religion. We should

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expect that increasingly we will find ourselves in conflict with government legislation and even in court.

Christians can expect not only to be marginalised by government legislation, but also by corporate media giants ('Big Tech') who exercise great control over Internet content. Already Christians have been censored through merely stating an opinion which does not conform to the new morality (even though given truthfully and without malice).

Yet in all this we should not fear for it will be an opportunity to witness for Christ, as he said:

"But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. The gospel must first be preached to all the nations. When they arrest you and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:9-11).

Christophobia

Christophobia, also known as Christianophobia, refers to the fear, hatred, discrimination, or prejudice directed at Christians, Christianity, or aspects of the Christian religion.

With the increase in anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews) in recent times we have also seen the rise of Christophobia. This has been seen in attacks on churches, such as arson, graffiti and in some cases shooting of congregations and pastors. While the perpetrators often claim justification, because of some perceived offence, it inevitably stems from an irrational hatred.

The media, in general, rarely portray authentic Christianity in a positive light. Many scientists and atheists regularly claim the Bible is a work of ancient mythology and Christians are just naive fundamentalists who need to get into the 21st century. This is evident on social media where anti-Christian material is very prevalent.

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I expect such fear, hatred, discrimination and prejudice will only increase in the future. Jesus did warn us: *You will be hated by all nations because of My name* (Matthew 24:9). Yet we must not fear, hide or respond in kind but with forgiveness and love. This is what is required to be a witness for Christ.

Remember, the battle is ultimately a spiritual one, against unseen spiritual powers aligned against God and his people, not humans.

Spiritual Deception

While spiritual deception has always been present it will pose an even greater challenge for Christians in the future. It will present the greatest testing for it is not so readily identified or expected and much of it will come from within the professing Christian church. Jesus, Paul, Peter and Jude all warn of spiritual deception within the church.

The rise of organisations such as Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) in the 19th century have shown how persuasive false ideas can be. The common theme emerging from such organisations is that their founders were appointed by God to 'restore' the Church to its true foundations. According to their teachings they alone are the true followers of Christ. They typically gain members by appealing to nominal Christians or those who only have a superficial knowledge of the Bible. More on this in the chapter '*What is a Christian, who is my brother and what is the Church?*' page 133.

Spiritual deception will mark the end-time. Only those who trust Christ, who know and obey his word will persevere and remain true. The final deception will be so convincing to many that we will not be able to trust what we see, hear, our own wisdom or feelings. We must have implicit trust in what Jesus said, walking by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). He specifically warned of this time:

See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and

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wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect (Matthew 24:4-5 and 24).

And Paul likewise warns us of the coming deception:

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4:1).

...the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness (2 Thessalonians 2:9-12).

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4).

Peter warned of false teachers within the Church:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. Many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of the truth will be maligned and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgement from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep (2 Peter 2:1-3)

And Jude:

For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 4).

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Deception and false teaching will reach a zenith in the end-time. It will be marked by two developments:

1. The revealing and rule of a man referred to by various titles: the Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, the son of destruction and the beast.

He will come in through great deception, smooth and appealing words, political skill and be seen by most as the answer to a troubled world. But Christians have been forewarned in the Bible of his coming and how he can be identified.

2. An apostate church referred to as 'Babylon the great' (Rev 17:5) which will persecute the true followers of Jesus Christ.

Spiritual deception within the professing Christian church will be one of the most difficult to deal with because we will have to contend with those who profess to be our brothers and sisters. Note that both Peter and Jude say that false teachers will creep in *unnoticed* and *secretly* introduce destructive heresies. Paul says such teachers tell people what they want to hear, things which are pleasing to their own desires.

This is the bait of spiritual deception: it appeals to our human desires. False Christs and false teachers gain a following because they are eloquent (and often visually appealing), who claim to have a new revelation which promises a better way. They give seemingly convincing answers and hope for peace in troubled times.

This natural desire for acceptance and peace can itself lead to deception. When we want peace, but at the cost of compromising the truth of God's word, we put ourselves on the path to deception.

Therefore, more than ever we need to be aware and prepared. This is why it is essential we not just have a Bible but know and memorise it so the Holy Spirit can bring to our remembrance the words which will counteract deception. The common feature of false teaching is the mixing of truth with error. Only those who

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have received the *love of the truth*, who know and obey God's word and listen to the Holy Spirit, will discern error.

The UFO Deception

In '*Tribulation: Today*' the potential danger of the UFO deception was examined. We can expect that this deception will continue and grow as the end draws near.

This quote from *UFO: End-Time Delusion* by David Lewis is noteworthy:

“For Satan to succeed in the last days, he must work a deception so subtle and so powerful that it will overwhelm the human race both with its rationality and attraction.” “An offer by visitors from an advanced civilisation on another planet for assistance to a perishing human race confronted with war, crime, violence, pollution, global warming, genocide, and a host of other ills that man’s rebellion have produced will seem irresistible. That the mainstream scientific community is taking the UFO question seriously, as evidenced by the heavy-funded, government sponsored SETI programs, demonstrates that we must look at the subject in a very serious light. Any person who is well-grounded in the Bible and takes the word of God as the ultimate basis of truth will not be prone to fall for the end-time delusion.”

Before I came to Christ, as a 'believer' in UFOs, the appeal of having a highly advanced extraterrestrial civilisation bringing a new order of peace, health and security to mankind was immense. In my mind 'salvation could come from the stars'. But it was a deception, which to this day still has great influence.

The Final Deception?

Could Satan stage a counterfeit second coming of Christ by an apparent UFO visitation to usher in the final deception? Speculative, but Jesus warned that there would be a time during the Great Tribulation when it will be said Christ has come:

Then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ,' or 'There He is,' do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if

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possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. So if they say to you, 'Behold, He is in the wilderness,' do not go out, or, 'Behold, He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe them. For just as the lightning comes from the east and flashes even to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be (Matthew 24:23-27).

The final deception will be great *'so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.'* This is why Jesus forewarned us his coming will *not* occur in secret or at a certain place on Earth, but visibly all over the world, just as lightning shines from east to west. This is why we need to know and remember all that Jesus taught us lest we be deceived through ignorance and false teachers.

The Moves to Create Global Unity and One Faith

The aftermath of two world wars saw a concerted effort to bring about global unity and peace between nations. The League of Nations, established in 1920 was followed by the United Nations in 1945. 1948 saw the formation of the World Council of Churches whose goal was initially to establish cooperation and unity amongst the many Christian churches and denominations. More recently it has moved towards 'dialogue' with other faiths such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism so as to foster understanding and common beliefs. 1948 also saw the commencement of the building of the United Nations headquarters in New York.

True and False Unity

In the previous section the quest for unity among the numerous Christian churches and denominations, through what is known as the ecumenical movement, is seemingly an honourable goal. But some important questions need to be considered:

1. What is a Christian, who is my brother and what is the Church?

Basic questions but there are many different views.

(See chapter: *What is a Christian, who is my brother and what is the Church?* which seeks to answer these questions).

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2. What do we mean by unity and most importantly what is the unity that Jesus wants to see. Is it important and is unity to be achieved at the cost of compromising the truth?

While the goal of the ecumenical movement is to see unity among Christian churches, there is another movement to see dialogue and unity among the different religions of the world, the idea being that '*all roads lead to God*'. Christians, therefore, to remain faithful to Christ, who alone is *the way, the truth and the life*, through whom all must come to God the Father (John 14:6), must be on guard against efforts to syncretise the different faiths. Unity and peace at the cost of the truth must be resisted without compromise.

It can be expected those efforts to bring together the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, will intensify as the end draws closer.

The Bible even speaks of a time when the nations will say "*Peace and safety...*"

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labour pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief (1 Thessalonians 5:2-4).

This passage is saying Christ will come at a time when the world seems at peace and in safety, achieved through a deceptive unity. But it will be a time of great tribulation and testing for those who remain faithful to Christ.

A Final Great Revival?

There have been many times through Church history when God has, in his grace, poured out his Spirit to revive, purify, strengthen and embolden his people such that many have been swept into the Kingdom.

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Could there be a final great world-wide revival before the great tribulation and the return of Christ? While there is no specific scriptures which state such, many believe that there will be. In such a revival the Holy Spirit may enable and motivate Christians to fulfil the great commission by taking the gospel to every nation (ethnic group). Should God, in his grace do so, it may happen during a time of great persecution for Christians, as has happened in countries like China and Iran.

Conclusion

In the very end time we can expect a time of great spiritual darkness, when it may seem that all is lost and God has forsaken us. These are some of the scriptures which speak of this time:

Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved (Matthew 24:9-13).

For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short (Matthew 24:21-22).

It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him (Revelation 13:7).

I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them...he will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time (Daniel 7:21 and 25).

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We can see that in those final days (limited by God to three and a half years) the people of God, the saints, will be overcome, not spiritually but physically. This time parallels when Jesus was on the cross, when darkness fell over the land for three hours and he called out in anguish "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*"

However, this should not be a time to fear but rather a time to have great hope and faith for:

1. We have been told and forewarned that this would happen. Jesus said:

You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved (Matthew 10:22).

This is why it is crucial we have a good knowledge of the Bible, while we still have one. The time may come (and has in other countries) when the Bible will be a banned or restricted book.

2. At the end of this time Jesus will come suddenly, as a thief in the night, in glory. As Luke records Jesus' words: "*But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*" (Luke 21:28).

So it is of utmost importance that we prepare for such a time, that our faith remain strong and not fear, whether it comes in our lifetime or not. That is the subject of the next chapter.

References:

1. <https://asiaharvest.org/special-china-issue-please-pray-for-christians-in-china/>

2. <https://davidpawson.org/resources/series/the-challenge-of-islam-to-christians>

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Tribulation: How to Prepare and Respond

First we need to recognise that we will all experience some form of tribulation as we live in this world. There is the normal suffering we can expect living in a fallen world: sickness, disability, personal tragedies and death. Second, Jesus and the apostles warned Christians to expect tribulation and suffering with a significant difference: it will uniquely come upon those who want to follow Christ and bear his name. It is how we respond to tribulation, in whatever form it may come, that is most important.

Preparing will not mean retreating into off-the-grid communes. The most important way of preparing us is to grow in Christ-like character: *faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love* (here 'agape' love). If we have these and are growing in them God promises we will be prepared for whatever may come and not stumble (2 Peter 1:4-11).

The sources of tribulation are two-fold: first that which we in common with all humanity, living in a decaying and fallen world and secondly, as Christians, we become participants in a spiritual battle, between the dominion of Satan and the Kingdom of God; between the prince of this world and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Satan works against God's purposes and against Christians through our flesh (the sinful nature), through the world system in which we live, those who belong to the world and within the church through false teaching and sowing discord.

The Mind Behind the System

Over 80 years ago Watchman Nee (1903-1972), a Chinese Christian who spent 16 years in prison and died for his faith, had this to say in '*The Mind Behind the System*':

Satan is utilising the material world, the men of the world and the things that are in the world to head everything up eventually in the kingdom of Antichrist. At that hour the world system will have

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reached its zenith; and at that hour every unit of it will be revealed to be anti-Christian.

(*Love Not The World*, Chapter 1, The Mind Behind the System, p 14 Kingsway Publications 1970).

All the things of the world Nee referred to: politics, education, literature, science, art, law, commerce, music, in themselves seem neutral, even innocent. But we have seen and will see all these facets of this world system being used to fulfil Satan's schemes and increasingly find ourselves in conflict with them if we are faithful to God.

As the apostle John says:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and [also] its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever (1John 2:15-17).

Though we live in this world we are not to be 'of it'. We are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven and so, while we live in this world, we live in tension and often in conflict with it. What may seem innocent in this world, even what seems to be right in the eyes of those who don't know Christ, can in fact be something hostile to the will of God.

One of the most alluring 'gods' of this time is entertainment. At one time people had to go out of their homes to be entertained. Now it is literally at our finger tips and in our homes through the Internet. Inevitably much of this entertainment portrays life and morality which is contrary to God's way.

Therefore we have to tread carefully. While we are, as far as it depends on us, to be at peace with all men we will inevitably come into conflict with this world system and those of it while doing the will of God. As Jesus warned us:

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These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Satan's chief weapon against us is deception: by attempting to convince us that what is evil is good and what is good is evil. Because our battle is ultimately a spiritual battle we need to prepare in a spiritual way so we can stand and overcome with the armour of light (Romans 14:12) and of God (Ephesians 6:10-18) with the power and strength God supplies (see '*We need the armour of God*' p 75).

The key to standing and overcoming is through faith in Jesus and obedience to his words. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 to 7) Jesus tells us:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell-and great was its fall (Matthew 7:24-27).

The rain, floods and wind represent the trials and tribulation we face in this world. Christ and his words are our rock, and only as we hear, believe and do what he has asked of us in the power of his Spirit will we be able to stand and overcome. In other words, preparation for tribulation is to know and take to heart the warnings he gave and do what he said.

What are the specific things we can expect now and as the end draws nearer?

1. Spiritual deception through false religion, false Christs, prophets and teachers.

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Jesus' first warning is of spiritual deception; false religion which comes through false Christs, false prophets and teachers, and *angels of light* as the apostle Paul also warned (2 Corinthians 11:14). While there have been many false Christs over the centuries since Jesus ascended, the 20th century saw a virtual explosion (over 20) of those who claimed to be Christ or a reincarnation of him¹. Numerous people, including many professing Christians, were and have been deceived by their claims and erroneous teachings.

As in the previous chapter, the deceptive nature of false religion is it outwardly appears good, appealing to our desires for love, inclusion, greater purpose and pride of having exclusive knowledge. The leaders of false religion use terminology that is familiar: they talk of God, Christ, love, a new and better life etc and, to the undiscerning, sound like the real thing. They often claim to be instruments of God appointed by him to restore or build the one true church. They selectively quote Scripture to 'prove' that they are God's chosen vessels. But the insidious nature of the deception are the lies mixed with the truth. They preach a different Jesus and a different gospel. Only if we love and know the truth of God as revealed in the Scriptures, the foundation of truth, will we be able to withstand deception. Church leaders have a great responsibility here to teach and prepare Christians for spiritual deception

2. Conflict between nations. The 20th century saw world wars on an unprecedented scale. The First World War claimed the deaths of over 15 million and the Second over 60 million people. As the 21st century progresses further major conflicts can be expected despite efforts for peace, especially over the state of Israel.

3. Natural disasters such as earthquakes, storms, famine and epidemics (such as Covid-19) increasing in frequency and intensity. These should not be interpreted as particular judgement on Christians. Though we share these things with the rest of humanity, we can show strength and give reason for hope in the midst of despair.

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4. Increasing hatred and hostility towards Christians because of our refusal to compromise the truth to conform to the world's standards resulting in marginalisation and persecution. This is occurring on an increasing scale today in Western societies from secular humanists and especially in Islamic, Hindu and Communist societies.

5. Apostasy and betrayal by professing brothers and sisters in Christ. This apostasy will be led by those who were or claim to be Christians but spread deception through false prophecy and teaching. We can also expect the greatest hostility from people such as these and this will be very difficult to contend with.

Over 300 years ago, Matthew Henry, in his commentary on Matthew 24:10 said this:

One false traitor in the garrison may do more mischief than a thousand avowed enemies without..."Those that have treacherously deserted their religion shall hate and betray those who adhere to it, for whom they have pretended friendship."...Apostates have commonly been the most bitter and violent persecutors.

This is certainly what I have observed: many of those who have at one time professed Christ and then rejected the Faith have become its most severe critics.

6. Love will grow cold because of lawlessness. When false prophets and teaching abound there is inevitably division, suspicion and as a consequence, our love will be put to great test. When love of the truth declines, love for others declines also. This is why Jesus commands love more than any other virtue, yet it must be love that is firmly rooted in the truth.

Jesus gave us clear warnings of what to expect and how we should prepare:

Don't be led astray; don't be alarmed; don't be anxious (Mark 13:5, 7, 11 ESV) and...

But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand. (Mark 13:23 ESV).

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Christians and conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories arise when people believe government or other organisations with power have attempted to deceive the public about a matter from a hidden agenda. Recent research has shown evangelical Christians in the USA (and no doubt similarly in other Western countries) are more likely to believe conspiracy theories than the general public.²

It seems many such conspiracy theories evolve out of a distrust of secular authorities and a particular interpretation of end-time prophecies. This is despite the scriptural warning '*to test all things*' and to confirm evidence on the basis of two or more reliable witnesses. We are to fear God, not man. Remember: God is in control!

While there may be truth in such theories, God's people are never to bear false witness (Exodus 23:1) or as the New Living Translation reads: '*You must not pass along false rumours.*' As children of light it is essential we ensure what we believe is actually true lest we end up being propagators of error and lies.

We are to be of the *truth*. When we gullibly swallow conspiracy theories without checking their truth, we destroy our witness as children of light and truth or, at best, end up appearing foolish.

This is a quote from: '*Too many evangelical Christians fall for conspiracy theories online, and gullibility is not a virtue*', Dallas Morning News, May 17 2020:

"At the core of the issue is the need for Christians to recognize how conspiracy theories actively hurt our Christian witness. When evangelical Christians indulge in conspiracy theories, we damage our credibility. While some might see this as unimportant, our credibility to know and profess the truth lies at the core of our witness, whether we are effective evangelists for what we believe is the truth. Central to our faith is our profession that Jesus dwelt among us as fully God and fully man, died on the cross that we might be forgiven, and was raised and now reigns. We believe these things in truth, not as a moralistic story.

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Thus, when Scripture calls us to be wise in resisting the temptation to foolishness and warns against those who “turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4:4), its point is not only in how this hurts us, but rather how it reflects the Gospel we profess. Christians have a responsibility to not be fooled. As we’ve argued before, gullibility is not a Christian virtue. Believing and sharing conspiracies does not honor the Lord. It may make you feel better, like you are in the know, but it can end up harming others and it can hurt your witness.”

Therefore, Christians ought to be purveyors of truth and hope, not conspiracies based on fear, half-truths and anecdotal evidence. There is a real danger for those who fail to discern truth from error in these conspiracy theories. They end up in a rabbit hole leading away from God, not to him. If we succumb to one error or lie we are more likely to succumb to another. Then we may end up losing sight of the real and most important conspiracy: the unseen spiritual battle overseen by Satan as described in Ephesians 6. This conspiracy began in the Garden of Eden and continues to this day. It will eventually lead to everything of this world bringing about the kingdom of Antichrist (see page 64).

A Lesson to Be Learned

There is a lesson we ought to learn in such times: how do we determine what is the truth? Who should we trust? Do we just trust those who affirm our suspicions? Clearly this isn’t wise; we need objectivity, so we ought to seek the truth from a number of independent, credible sources (not just one or two). This is not an easy task in a world where so much information is at our finger tips through the Internet. Disinformation and outright lies spread literally at the speed of light, especially on social media sites. Therefore we should be guided by trusted Christian news sources and leaders and pastors who have a track record for sound teaching. As the Proverb says:

'In a multitude of counsellors there is safety' (11:14, 15:22, 24:6).

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Yet even our Christian leaders and examples are still fallible men. It is not good for them or us if we put them on pedestals. They can stumble in many ways just as we all do (James 3:2). Therefore, it is our responsibility to test all things by God's word as revealed in the Bible. That is our ultimate reference for truth, not man.

The greatest battle will not come through an obvious temptation to sin or even persecution but through deception in a religious guise. Jesus tells us that at the end time satanic deception will be at its zenith, *deceiving, if it were possible even the elect* (Matthew 24:24). This is why it is essential we know God's word through reading the Bible and personal communion with him in prayer.

We need the armour of God

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, tells Christians to *put on the full armour of God*. While we live in this world we will battle against unseen spiritual forces and therefore need the armour and strength that God supplies:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places Therefore, take up the full armour of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm (Ephesians 6:10-13).

Before we '*put on the full armour of God*' we need to come to God with a humble heart, loving, trusting and depending on him:

But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:6-7).

Love and trust God

When we are in adversity it is very easy to lose sight of God. Yet he is in control and in all circumstances works for our good

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(Romans 8:28). Note, it doesn't mean what happens is necessarily good but in adversity we learn to love and trust God, persevere and grow spiritually. Many Christians have suffered terribly at the hands of evil people, yet through learning to forgive we grow to be like Jesus.

Peter encourages us that we are protected by the power of God through our love for, hope and faith in Christ:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to [obtain] an inheritance [which is] imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, [being] more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3-9).

James says:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12).

Fear God not man

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7).

When we face temptations in this world and pressure from man to compromise our faith and obedience, it is God we are to fear, not man. The fear of God is said to be the beginning or *foundation* of

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true wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 9:10 and 1:7). Without the fear of God whatever wisdom we profess to have is on shaky ground.

First, what is meant by *fear God* needs to be determined by context. Sometimes it will mean being afraid and at other times it will mean an unwavering trust and respect for God's authority and sovereignty. Secondly, we can only have a right fear of God when we have a right perception of who he is. He is *love* (1 John 4:16) but also a *consuming fire* (Hebrews 12:29). He is *Saviour* but also *Judge*. A right fear of God stems from love for him, not just fear of judgement. A child of God will fear doing that which displeases our Father because we love him and God loves those who fear him:

But the lovingkindness of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him and His righteousness to children's children, to those who keep His covenant and remember His precepts to do them (Psalm 103:17-18).

Living in this world we will inevitably have to choose at some time whether to obey man or God. We are told to be subject to secular authority (Romans 13:1-5) but clearly only as far as it depends upon us. Where a direction by man contradicts what God has commanded then we have no choice but to obey God rather than man and endure the consequences. The lives of Daniel and his companions (Daniel 3:16-18) and that of Peter and the other apostles (Acts 4:19 and 5:29) are examples of this principle.

By fearing God we show that we trust, love and want to obey him, even at personal cost or loss. If we love life and the things of this world, if we fear losing health, possessions, relationships or our reputation more than God, we are in danger of falling away.

As Jesus said:

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

And David in the Psalms:

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In God I have put my trust, I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Psalm 56:11)

The Armour of God

If we have prepared our heart and mind through humbling ourselves before God, trusting and having a healthy fear of him, we can be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.

Then as we put on the armour of God we will:

...be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil for our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:11-12).

1. Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth

To 'gird our loins with truth' means to be prepared, dressed in readiness with truth for whatever challenges we may face. The devil's chief tactic is deception; lies which superficially seem right and good. Of course this will mean not just knowing the truth but living it:

The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth (1John 2:4 & 3:18).

Peter tells us to *gird our mind's* for action (1 Peter 1:13). That is, to prepare our minds for battle. Therefore, we cannot be content with a superficial knowledge of God's word. It must be, as far as it depends on us, our daily sustenance.

In Psalm 119 we are taught to meditate and treasure God's word, delight and rejoice in it. God's word is *truth* (v 160), *a light* to our path and *a lamp* to our feet (v 105), a source of *strength* (v28), of *comfort* in times of humbling circumstances (v 50).

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2. And having put on the breastplate of righteousness

Like truth, we are to put on righteousness, here meaning living and doing what is right according to God. Unrepented sin or not doing what is right leaves us vulnerable to attack by the devil.

3. And having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace

Even in the midst of trial or battle we are to be and can give witness to the gospel of Christ, which brings peace with God.

4. In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one

There will be times when it seems we have no answer, or in time of great suffering, seemingly have no hope. This is where our faith in God, trusting in his promises and the hope not yet seen, will shield and extinguish doubts, fear, despair and disappointment, which come from the devil.

5. And take the helmet of salvation

The knowledge that through faith in Christ we have received deliverance from both the penalty and power of sin gives us assurance and hope.

6. And the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

While the other armour are defensive, the sword of the Spirit, God's word, is both defensive and offensive. With God's word we are able to counteract the lies of the devil and his deceptions. Jesus repelled Satan's temptations through knowing and quoting Scripture: "*It is written*" (Matthew 4:4 on). This is why we must be on guard against any novel 'interpretations' that effectively undermine the truth and authority of the Bible and so weaken this weapon as an instrument of defence and offence.

7. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints (Ephesians 6:10-18).

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Prayer which perseveres must underlie all we do, since our dependence and strength is in God's power not our own.

No pit too deep

I am often encouraged by the words of Corrie Ten Boom who suffered greatly in a Nazi concentration camp during World War 2:

“That God's love is stronger than the deepest darkness, that Jesus is Victor, that there is no pit so deep the love of God is not deeper still”.

With the armour of God we will be able to face and overcome whatever comes against us.

Expect persecution and suffering as a disciple of Jesus

Jesus said:

A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you (John 15:20)

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

The apostle Paul spoke of *the fellowship of Christ's sufferings* (Philippians 3:10); because suffering is a part of living for Christ.

Throughout Church history persecution has been the norm rather than the exception. The last few decades has seen persecution of Christians in many nations increase greatly. Christians in the Western world should not think they will be spared, nor should we think of persecution as purely of the devil. God allows persecution to refine and purify his church. Persecution is coming and we need to be prepared. It is how we respond to persecution and suffering that is crucial.

Peter likewise forewarns and encourages us with these words:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the

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revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Note here, Peter says times of tribulation are for our testing as we share in Christ's suffering. Though this runs counter to our natural way of thinking, we are blessed and to rejoice and keep on rejoicing.

Peter goes on to say:

Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgement to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:15-19).

Therefore, suffering as a Christian is not something shameful but a time when we can glorify God through our patient witness. Peter also tells us that judgement will begin with the household of God for the purpose of refining and purifying us so that we might be holy as he is holy (1 Peter 1:16). God is faithful and his intention is always for our ultimate good.

So when we face or have to endure tribulation (in all its forms), let's first examine our own hearts in the light of God's word' humbly and prayerfully and where necessary, repent.

Endure suffering with patience, hope, joy and peace

Are we prepared to bear the world's ridicule and hate, the loss in this world of all we hold dear for the sake of Christ and the glory to come? Therefore, like Jesus, we need to patiently endure injustice, suffering and persecution without retaliation. While it is of course not wrong to seek justice we may not receive it. We can then only

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leave judgement to God. But be assured, God loves and cares for us in times of testing:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able to endure. Therefore we need never despair. By keeping in our heart and mind the hope before us we can always know joy and peace. Many times we are encouraged to rejoice in the midst of trial and count ourselves blessed.

Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer (Romans 12:12)

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Mt 5:10-12).

These words of Jesus teach us the right attitude in times of persecution. First Jesus says we are *blessed*, that is we are favoured. This understandably may be difficult to appreciate when we are insulted, mistreated, misunderstood, falsely accused and persecuted because we bear the name of Christ.

Keep an eternal perspective and fix our eyes on Jesus:

For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly tent which is our

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house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens (2 Corinthians 4:17-5:1).

In times of trouble and darkness, even when it seems we are in the valley of the shadow of death, keep the hope of eternity in view for this life is temporary. Our real home is prepared for us in heaven. Through all, keep our eyes on Jesus:

Let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Worship, Prayer and Praise

When we worship God our heart is fixed on him, whether we feel good or bad and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. He is in control, he reigns. To worship God is to love him (1 John 2:15), to serve him (Matthew 4:10), to honour his word in our hearts and lives (Matthew 15:7-9) and in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24).

Prayer shows our dependence as a child on our Father in heaven. It ascends as incense before the throne of God (Revelation 5:8). In times of trouble we are encouraged not to be anxious, but to give thanks and make our requests known to God:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

One hundred times in the Psalms we are exhorted to praise God for what he has done and what he will do. Like David, praise is the outflow of a heart of gratitude and love for God:

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I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth (Psalm 34:1).

While prayer shows our dependence on God, praise shows our gratitude. We can praise God as part of prayer, through song (Colossians 3:16) for there is always a reason to give thanks:

The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will extol Him (Exodus 15:2).

We should note that Paul's encouragement to be '*filled with the Spirit*' is in the context of '*singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*' and '*giving thanks always for all things to God*' (Ephesians 5:18-20). When we are at the end of our own strength God's strength will sustain us. As he also says:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (Philippians 4:4).

And in the Psalms we read:

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:26).

Love one another

Jesus forewarned us that in the end-time, because of the intensity of persecution, suspicion and self-interest will cause conflict among Christians. Many Christians will be misled by false teachers and prophets who compromise the truth by pandering to sinful and selfish interests (Matthew 24:9-12). As a consequence the love of many will grow cold and we may be tempted to seek our own welfare over our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When we show 'agape' (unconditional, sacrificial love) for our brothers and sisters in Christ we show the world that we are his disciples and that we have been saved and born again:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all

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men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34, 35).

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:22-23).

For this reason we need to foster meaningful relationships with other Christians while we have opportunity. We cannot be lone Christians disconnected from our brothers and sisters. We can't claim to love the brethren if we don't want to spend time in fellowship with them and care for those in need. It takes resolve and effort, not feeling. It means more than just going to church on a Sunday and why we are urged not to neglect meeting regularly with other Christians in church and home settings. Through such meetings we learn to grow, be encouraged and encourage and care for one another.

Fellowship with other Christians

Fellowship with other Christians is essential for our growth, edification and mutual encouragement. The scriptures teach us that the Church, those who are Christ's, are one body with Christ as the head. As a body we depend on others and others on us for growth and spiritual health. It is a part of how we love one another.

This is why one of the devil's tactics is to prevent or hinder Christians from meeting. If our fellowship and contact with other Christians is limited to meeting in a purpose built building we will be seriously hindered should restrictions be imposed on such gatherings (as is already happening in many parts of the world). The early church (of the first 200 years) had no buildings purposely built or used exclusively for meeting, but met in homes or public places as the opportunity arose. This was in the midst of severe persecution but the church still grew phenomenally.

Therefore, we should be prepared to adapt to circumstances in times of restrictions on church buildings and meetings. The church

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in China has demonstrated this over the last 70 years. Most of the growth of the church has occurred in unregistered, underground or house-churches.

Test our hearts: who do we prefer to keep company with: other Christians or non-Christians? We can't profess to love God while at the same time hating a brother or sister in the faith. It is hypocrisy:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).

And hate is not just having negative thoughts but being indifferent to a known need of a brother or sister (1 John 3:17).

Nor should we fall into the error of thinking we are only responsible to care for members in our particular church or who share our unique doctrinal position. We need to ask here “*Who is my brother?*” Jesus tells us:

Whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:35).

(See: *What is a Christian, who is my brother and what is the Church?* p 125)

This is why love for our brothers and sisters who are suffering under persecution is of particular importance. We are told to remember those in prison, as if with them:

Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body (Hebrews 13:3).

What we do or don't do for them is the same as we do or don't do to Jesus (Matthew 25:35-45). We may not be able to physically visit them but we can support them practically, and most importantly, pray for them.

Love your enemies

But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants

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to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:39-45).

It is one thing to endure unjust suffering, but to love and pray for those who are responsible for the suffering, that, for many, is ridiculous. Yet that is what God expects of his children, because he is kind and merciful to the undeserving. It is the way of those called by Jesus to inherit the kingdom of God. Loving those who love you is natural. Loving your enemies is supernatural but it is the love he expects of his followers in the power of his Spirit.

This love means we are to pray for and forgive those who sin against us, never seek vengeance and never repay evil with evil but with good. If our enemy is hungry we are to feed him, if thirsty to give him a drink and as far as it depends on us, be at peace with all men (Romans 12:17-20). In so doing we show ourselves to be children of God.

These words of Jesus teach us to act in ways, which to most, seem counter intuitive: do good to those who hate and mistreat you, bless them and pray for them. The next instruction of Jesus: to offer our other cheek to be struck also is one, which to the natural mind, does not seem to make sense at all. It is one thing to endure hurt but is Jesus saying we should deliberately seek more hurt? No, I don't believe this is what Jesus is saying here.

What we learn here is that we do not respond in kind, we do not retaliate and do not take revenge. By offering our other cheek is to say '*Strike me again, but I will not strike you*'. '*Strike me again but I will not deny Christ*'. It is an initiative by the power of God's Spirit within us which is other-worldly and demonstrates the way

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of God's kingdom here on earth. Many have been convicted and bought to faith in Christ through seeing a Christian endure unjust suffering, insult and mistreatment and responding, not with complaint, but with love and grace.

False Accusation

False accusation is one of the chief means the devil uses (through other people) in an attempt to destroy our witness. We may be accused of sexual misconduct, financial wrong-doing, association with dubious organisations or individuals, and crimes against society.

We may be falsely accused of an offence such that we face a hefty fine, imprisonment or even the death penalty. This is a common tactic used by the enemy in Islamic and Hindu societies against Christians.

When we are falsely accused we must stand our ground and not be pressured into making a false confession and so compromise the truth. God will ultimately vindicate us as we continue in good conscience to live and love as Jesus taught us. As Peter encourages us:

and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behaviour in Christ will be put to shame for it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong (1 Peter 3:16-17).

Be a witness for Christ

Our mission in this world is not so much to change it but to be salt and light in it:

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men (Matthew 5:13).

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As salt we are the 'taste' of God on earth. Like salt as a seasoning its influence is great though small in amount. Our lives should exhibit the character of Jesus, but if we live in a way indistinguishable from the unsaved our witness is ineffective and we become neither good for God or man.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

In the same way, as light in the world we show the righteousness and love of God through our deeds and living. We bear witness for Christ in our life and testimony, whether we are free or in jail. Whether we live or die we must be faithful to Jesus and his words, calling others out of the world and into God's kingdom.

Through our participation in preaching the gospel of Christ, by the power and conviction of the Holy Spirit, we make disciples of every nation. Jesus will not return until the gospel has been preached to every nation (Matthew 24:14).

To be a faithful witness for Christ means we ought to live a holy life above reproach and so be salt and light in the world. The name of Christ suffers greatly when Christians, and particularly leaders, fall into sin. As Paul says:

*...so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, **among whom you appear as lights in the world**, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain (Philippians 2:15-16).*

Invest in the kingdom of God not the world

While we live in this world we are urged to not be of it and put our 'treasure', our possessions and assets into God's kingdom. As Jesus said:

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But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).

Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Luke 12:33-34).

First we should minimise or eliminate debt in whatever way possible. I think Christians can achieve this, especially in wealthy countries, by adopting a minimalist lifestyle. We ought to ask ourselves: what do I really need? So much of our western life style is taken up with unnecessary possessions and time needed to maintain them.

We can also help our brothers and sisters in need and invest in the kingdom of God, that is, invest in projects and missions which advance the kingdom of Christ on earth. One day we will have to give an account for the assets and possessions God has entrusted to us.

As Jesus taught us in the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:14), the greater our debt and possessions, the greater will be the temptation to compromise and fall into bondage

Read, know, memorise your Bible

Northern Africa had a vibrant Christian church for eight centuries, producing outstanding leaders and theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine. However, when Islam spread from the Middle East through to Africa it virtually disappeared. Why? There are a number of reasons but one which was significant was that the indigenous people of northern Africa did not have the Scriptures in their own language. They were only available in Latin and Greek. In contrast, the Coptic Church of Egypt translated the Scriptures into their own language by the 5th century and strongly survives to this day. Clearly this teaches us a fundamental lesson: knowing God's word gives us the strength to endure great trials.

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This is why it is crucial in times of tribulation that we know God's will and know what he is saying to us through reading the Bible. We cannot rely on our own wisdom. We mustn't make excuses such as 'I don't have enough time' or 'I find it hard to understand'. Like any discipline it takes effort but with time we will, by the Holy Spirit, understand. It is our infallible guide and reference. As the Psalmist says:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2).

The Bible is our indispensable source of truth by which we can discern error and not be deceived. Again, as the Psalmist says:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

More than a superficial knowledge of the Bible is needed to test inner voices. The Holy Spirit will never contradict what is written in the Scriptures. Thoughts and ideas which contradict Scripture are not of God.

Therefore, by God's word and the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to discern truth and error. Through the Scriptures we are corrected and trained in righteousness so that we will be equipped and prepared to do every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Clearly the Bible has a very practical purpose and not for intellectual curiosity or gratification.

As the end of this age approaches, truth will become increasingly hidden or corrupted. We will not be able to rely on secular media or the Internet for objective truth. So it is essential our reference is God's word, not what we see or hear through the media. Like the Berean Christians (Acts 17:11) we will also need to check what we have heard from other Christians against God's word as revealed in the Bible to ensure that it is the truth.

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If we neglect to do these we are in danger of deception, unable to test and discern false teaching from men or from the spirit realm. The greatest threat in this day and those ahead is not from another religion such as Islam, but in a counterfeit Christianity, which outwardly looks and sounds good but lacks the substance and power of the true Faith and the Holy Spirit.

The leaders of such 'Christianity' selectively quote Scripture (and so did Satan) to prove their case but inevitably fail to declare the *whole* counsel of God's word. It may sound good, logical and appealing but is a distortion of the truth, a half truth which is more dangerous than an outright lie. False ways find receptive ground in those who know something of God's word, but not enough to discern error. This will be particularly true as the time of the end draws near when there is great tribulation for God's people.

As the writer to Hebrews encourages us, we need to feed on the *solid food* of God's word, the word of righteousness, not just the milk (the basic and pleasant things), if we are to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Therefore we ought to have a passionate commitment to the truth of the Bible if we're going to avoid being deceived and we can only do that through knowing and obeying what is written. So I encourage you to do everything possible to fill your hearts and minds with God's Word. Read it daily, study it, meditate on it and if you find reading difficult, then there are many ways to listen to the Bible. We need more than Sunday morning sermons and occasional online messages. Our faith will only survive if we are connected to the true Vine, Christ, through prayer and relying on the Scriptures for our daily spiritual food.

Shepherds of the flock have a great responsibility to teach the whole counsel of God impartially and will be held to account by Jesus on the day of judgement. It is a serious neglect to not teach truthfully parts of Scripture for fear of offending people.

Treasure your Bible

For Christians in the West having a Bible is an assumed right. But for others in the world it is a privilege and in many places a

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restricted, even unobtainable book. We therefore should not assume here in the West that the Bible will always be obtainable. The media and governments are becoming increasingly antagonistic towards traditional, authentic Christianity. Censorship in various forms is becoming a reality and we can expect that even on the Internet Christian content will be restricted or censored (as it already is in a number of countries around the world).

I would suggest that we store Biblical and Christian information off-line (for example on a smart phone, a portable hard disc or solid state drive, a USB flash drive or SD card) in the event online sources are inaccessible. This is also why memorisation of scripture pays great dividends now and in a possible future time when the Bible becomes a restricted book and even access to storage devices becomes difficult.

Final words

From the apostle Peter to encourage Christians in the end-time:

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2 Peter 3:14).

The words of Paul below give us hope and strength in times of trouble for God himself gives us the strength to endure through our faith in him:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:11-14).

If we are prepared, if we have built our life on the rock, that is, Jesus, through knowing God's word, the Bible, and doing what he has asked us to do, we need have no fear of what is to come. Then we won't be deceived and will stand through the coming storm. Jesus promised us:

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"In Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world." *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* (John 16:33, Matthew 28:20).

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Why Does God Allow Suffering?

Why does God, who is love, allow suffering?

This is a question that has been wrestled with over the centuries. It seems many have found the existence of suffering and injustice in this world incompatible with the existence of an all powerful and loving God.

It is understandable how people have come to this conclusion. Undeserved suffering is one of the most common reasons why many reject belief in God. If God is love and he loves his children, then why, so it may seem, does he not answer our call for help when we need it most? Why does he allow such things to happen to those who love and serve him with all their heart?

As much as we try to avoid it, suffering is everywhere and no one escapes suffering in some form while we live on this earth. Some suffering results from the actions of evil men and women while other suffering is the consequence of accidents, natural disasters and ill-health. The loss of a loved one, especially that of a young child or baby is especially hard. Suffering is deeply painful.

If God is not good, then does that suggest maybe there is no God, as some say? Are the atheists right and there is no reason or purpose in life, just blind, pitiless indifference? If there is no loving God then suffering is meaningless, aside from the sole purpose of avoiding it so one can pass on their genes. To ask the question "Why?" is therefore pointless. A world without God cannot offer any lasting comforts.

Yet we all intuitively sense needless suffering is wrong. So is there an answer? Yes. The Bible addressed the issue of undeserved suffering a long time ago. The book of Job, believed to be one of, if not the oldest, book of the Bible tells us the story of Job who suffered greatly and how he endured through it.

The book begins with a challenge made by Satan to God regarding Job. Job was a righteous man, *blameless and upright who feared God and turned away from evil* (Job 1:1). Satan

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claimed Job was only righteous because God blessed and protected him. God allowed Satan to test Job's faith through a series of calamities. Job, unaware of what Satan had said to God, had no idea why he was suffering so greatly. His friends, who at first sympathised with him, began to accuse Job that his suffering was because of sin in his life. Job denied this but wanted to know why God had inflicted him so severely. Understandably he expresses bitterness to God for his suffering. Finally God reveals himself, speaking to Job of his justice, power, knowledge and sovereignty but not why Job suffered. Job finally admits he is wrong in blaming God and *repented in dust and ashes* (Job 42:1-6).

There is a crucial lesson here which we need to learn in responding to suffering beyond our control (which inevitably will happen at some time and in some form). Suffering comes in many forms and there isn't always an answer why. Instead of searching for a reason, of asking "Why?" we must in the end trust God's sovereignty, that he is ultimately in control and that he is good, just and loving. He is not indifferent to our suffering.

There is also a lesson here about a wrong idea, quite common in some church circles: that suffering is a consequence of sin or because we lack faith in God to save us from suffering. Such 'counsel' can be most unkind to someone who is suffering.

The Bible and Suffering

God reveals in the Bible that sin and suffering began in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. As a consequence Satan became the ruler of this world who seeks to kill, rob and destroy. Since that time sin, suffering and decay have reigned and so suffering can come in many ways: from man, sickness, loss, accidents and natural disasters.

Suffering caused by man is obviously unjust and so we might ask "Why doesn't God bring justice?" Yet, like Adam and Eve, we have been made with a free will and with that we can choose to do either good or evil. The suffering of the innocent and of children who are abused, raped, contract HIV or murdered is especially

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abhorrent, but is the result of the actions of fallen men. For God to prevent such evil, as much as he abhors it, he would have to physically restrain them and control their thoughts (where all crime begins). Should God intervene? Should God override their free will and where would we draw the line as to when he should intervene? This would vary according to our own standards, but to be consistent and show no partiality, God would have to intervene in all wrong according to his standards not ours.

As fathers if we prevented our children at every waking moment from doing anything wrong, including their hurting others, they would end up hating us and want to be as far from us as they could. Is that the kind of God we want to love, who controls our every thought and all we do? It is not my idea of a loving God and Father.

We have a tendency to think of others as being evil but not ourselves. People might say "I'm not a murderer", but in God's eyes even hating someone is murder; "I'm not a paedophile or an adulterer", but even to think lustfully of a child or another man's wife is wrong. Should God prevent a man from committing rape but not from viewing pornography on the Internet? These are both clearly wrong, but the cause of wrong and suffering, to some degree, lies in each one of us, not just the rapists, paedophiles and terrorists. It is true that many evils have been perpetrated in the name of God. Yet this does not reflect on God but rather on the hypocrisy and evil of man. Jesus certainly did not justify such, rather the opposite, as we all know.

This is not to say God has given free reign to evil. Thankfully we have government and justice systems, though imperfect, which keep evil in check. The existence of such systems is a foretaste of a time when there will be ultimate justice, when all wrong will be judged. That is part of the hope to which Christians aspire to, and not only justice but a time of no sickness, suffering or death. There is coming a day when, according to the Bible, he will say "That is enough" and through Jesus Christ (who knew suffering personally) judge mankind and bring an end to all that is evil.

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Then there is suffering caused by sickness, a terminal illness or a disability which many suffer their whole life as a consequence. Though God at times heals people in a miraculous way, in most cases this is not his way.

At this present time God not only allows but, in his greater purpose for us, may bring about long periods of real trial. As a consequence, unbelievers seeing Christians suffer may mock at Christianity as if God is some cruel sadist. "Look at how their so-called loving God treats his devoted followers!"

Yet contrary to expectation, such Christians, on whom God has sent trial after trial, have not complained. Instead of being angry and bitter towards God who allows their suffering, they have responded with praise to him. That is the witness of a life totally dependent on God, of one who has put their hope, not in this life but in the one to come. Our witness to the world is most powerful when we endure suffering, loss and disability with peace and joy because of our faith in God.

So while some find suffering a reason to deny God's existence and move away from him, others have found suffering and adversity draws them closer to God. The Bible, more than any other book, addresses the subject of suffering and why it exists. The Psalms frequently express anguish for suffering and injustice in many different situations:

Why do You hide Your face and forget our affliction and our oppression? (Psalm 44:24)

Faith in God Enables Us to Endure Suffering

The existence of suffering does not defeat faith, but rather it is faith in God that enables us to endure suffering in this world. The early Christians, along with those in many parts of the world today, suffered greatly and had little comfort other than the belief there is a far better life beyond this one. Nor should it be thought that having faith in a future world, where there will be no suffering or injustice, mean that we should not endeavour to seek it here and now. Christians bearing the love of God have been and are

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instrumental in bringing relief from suffering and injustice through humanitarian aid organisations. It is largely through the influence of Christian ethics we in the western world enjoy fair and equitable justice.

Though suffering and premature physical death is grievous, it is not the ultimate injustice. For if this life was all there is then, yes, we could truly despair. But it is not. Does this mean we just endure suffering without emotion? No. Sorrow and depression are all the normal emotions of life in this world.

David says this in the Psalms:

Sing praise to the LORD, you His godly ones, and give thanks to His holy name. For His anger is but for a moment, His favour is for a lifetime; weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:4-5).

God knows intimately our suffering. When Jesus hung on the cross, naked, in agony and forsaken by the Father he knew suffering more than we ever can. Yet for the joy before him Jesus endured the cross and its suffering. The crucifixion of Jesus to the natural mind seems so wrong and so pointless. Yet we know that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that we who believe in him might have eternal life. Love and suffering can co-exist. God's love does not spare us suffering but his promises to comfort and bring us into his glory are certain. God sometimes permits what he hates to achieve what he loves.

The apostle Paul was well acquainted with personal suffering yet he knew the comfort of God. In his second letter to the church at Corinth he wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

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He goes on to say:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a death, and will deliver us He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

Clearly Paul experienced great suffering, yet he steadfastly hoped and trusted God that one day there would be deliverance. So we too, in our deepest suffering and affliction, know that God is faithful, his love never fails, and his comfort is always with us through Christ.

But note what Paul says here: that, in his suffering, because he has been comforted by God, he is able to comfort others. That is the other-worldly love and comfort we as Christians can show to others.

Suffering will always be a part of life in this present world and particularly for Christians who will experience, in addition, the hate of Satan and the world. It is a mistake to believe that life as a Christian will be easier in this world. It won't, as thousands across the globe are finding at this very time.

In times of suffering we may *feel* God is distant, but it is not the reality. He may not prevent our pain but he is with us through it as he has promised; *I will never leave you nor forsake you*. So in times of suffering our need of him is greater and through such times we can find ourselves closer to God than before. Yet, as in all relationships, it takes effort and time. The hardest thing I find is *deciding* to do things God's way. But having made that choice God's grace and strength were freely given. I found talking to God, in prayer, from your heart brings a greater sense of his presence and comfort than anything else, especially prayer that begins with praise for what he has done before we express our own needs.

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Jesus said:

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great (Matthew 5:10-12).

Paul said to the church at Philippi:

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29).

Yet he also said:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

This is why it is essential in times of great trial or suffering that we keep in mind our hope in Christ. Suffering is for a time but his joy and peace are eternal. This is where Scripture and spiritual songs can play a crucial role in keeping our spiritual health. Take for instance Jeremiah:

He (God) has driven and brought me into darkness without any light; He turns his hand again and again the whole day long. He has besieged me with bitterness and tribulation; He has walled me about so I cannot escape; He has put heavy chains upon me; though I call and cry for help, He shuts out my prayer; He has blocked my ways with hewn stones, my soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, "Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the Lord." (Lamentations 3.2-18, excerpts).

Jeremiah sounded very depressed and in total despair. Yet this is what he goes on to say:

My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I will call to mind, and therefore have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, therefore I will hope in him. (3.20-24).

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Notice Jeremiah does not deny the reality of his circumstances, but calls to his mind the hope he has in God: his steadfast love never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is his faithfulness. He meets my deepest needs. My hope is in him.

Therefore, if we remind ourselves daily of these things, even speaking aloud to ourselves the great hope we have, then suffering, grief and depression will not overwhelm us.

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Will the Church Go Through the Great Tribulation?

Will the Church be raptured before or go through the Great Tribulation? I believe Scripture reveals, in many places, that the Church will go through this relatively brief but great time of tribulation. Yet many sincerely believe it won't, but be taken from the earth before the Tribulation in an event known as the Rapture. This belief is based (with others) on God's promise that Jesus' followers will not be subject to his wrath which will be poured out on the earth nor experience the judgements revealed in the book of Revelation.

Jesus taught his disciples what would happen in the end time and be prepared for the time of the Great Tribulation (Matthew 24). So it would be inexplicable that he would warn his followers to be prepared for such a time if they didn't have to endure it. Notably there is no scripture which explicitly says Christians will be taken from the earth before the Great Tribulation.

How can we reconcile God's promise to save us from the wrath to come (1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9) and be present on earth during this time? This apparent problem will be examined later, but very briefly it is resolved by the fact tribulation and wrath are not the same. Scripture also reveals we will be protected during this time.

So the purpose of this chapter is to examine what Scripture says about the end-time and in particular whether Jesus will come for his Church before or after the time of the Great Tribulation. What we believe about this time does have major implications, the most important being whether those Christians alive at the time will be prepared.

It is my hope that these words will inform and encourage you to prepare and not fear; to persevere through tribulation and suffering at all times and in all its forms, because in Jesus we overcome.

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The Blessed Hope

In the heart of every Bible believing Christian is the blessed hope: the personal return in glory of Christ from heaven (Titus 3:13) to resurrect those who have died in him, gather those who are living and establish God's kingdom on earth.

Though we all have this common hope, there are different sincerely held interpretations as to the order of the prophesied events. There is no dispute that there will be a rapture of believers in Christ (as described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). But the question is when? Will the Church, the body of all believers in Christ, be taken to be with him before or after the time known as the Great Tribulation? To put the question another way: are the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ two events separated by a period of seven years?

In 1972, as a new Christian, the Rapture, our being caught up secretly to be with Christ before the time of the Great Tribulation, was a very popular and intriguing topic (known as the pre-tribulation rapture view). The first of the end-time/rapture movies '*A Thief in the Night*' made quite an impression on me. I had, at that time, no reason to question the pre-tribulation rapture which seemed to be the most popular view amongst evangelical Christians. However as I began to read the Bible and study the subject for myself I could not reconcile the pre-tribulation view with the end-time scriptures as they plainly read.

What I hope to achieve here is to show that the pre-tribulation teaching lacks a clear and consistent scriptural foundation. There is no scripture, or scriptures, which explicitly teach that Christians will be taken from the earth in an invisible (to the world) coming before the time Jesus described as the Great Tribulation. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus plainly said his coming for his elect, the Church, will happen *after* the time of the Great Tribulation:

*But immediately **after** the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will*

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fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. (Matthew 24:29-31 and also Mark 13:24-27).

But I do understand why many believe the Rapture will occur before the Great Tribulation. One prominent reason is based on 1Thessalonians 1:10 and 5:9 in which Paul says we will not be subject to the wrath of God. I will address this reason later in: '*The Pre-tribulation Rapture Considered*' p 114.

I also found that the pre-tribulation rapture teaching, as it is known today, was not explicitly taught until the early 19th century. While there are a few historical references prior to this time that could be interpreted as indicating a pre-tribulation rapture they are the exception. For more detail on the origin of the pre-tribulation rapture teaching see Appendix: *History of the Pre-tribulation Rapture*.

Does it really matter whether the rapture happens before or after the time of the Great Tribulation? Certainly this is not an issue Christians should divide over and nor is it one which bears on our salvation in Christ. There should always be love and respect for one another despite differences such as these. This is most important. For there is a danger of becoming so focused on end-time topics (and a particular interpretation of them) that we neglect to preach the gospel, be salt and light in the world, do justice and show the love of God. Jesus admonished the Pharisees for such an error (Luke 11:42).

Our greatest hope should be in Jesus' coming and our being united with him, not that we will escape tribulation in general or even the Great Tribulation. Jesus told us of what will happen before his coming and how to prepare for that time. As mentioned

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previously, it would seem to me inconsistent with Jesus' character that he forewarn us of these things and encourage us to persevere and remain faithful in the midst of tribulation if, in the future, his followers did not have to go through that time.

Consequently I see two potential dangers of the pre-tribulation rapture teaching: 1. Christians will become complacent because they will only prepare for what they are expecting to encounter. 2. Christians who believe they will escape but then find themselves having to endure the Great Tribulation and the reign of the Antichrist, may be greatly disheartened, to the point of turning away from the Faith.

What does Scripture teach us about the End-time?

Scripture must ultimately be our guide, not historical teaching. So what I intend to do here is quote the relevant scriptures in full to show why the Church will go through the Great Tribulation and endure the reign of the Antichrist.

The first teaching of Jesus of the end-time appears in the Parable of the Tares:

*Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "**First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn** (Matthew 13:30).*

*So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will **gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness** and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. **Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.** He who has ears, let him hear (Matthew 13:40-43).*

We should note here the order: at the end of the age it is *first* the unbelieving or the unrighteous who will be taken and judged and *then* the righteous (the wheat) who will shine and be gathered to

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him. (Note: Tares is a plant which looks very similar to wheat while growing. Only when the grain-head forms can they be distinguished).

Similarly we read in Matthew 13:49:

So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous.

So according to these scriptures, the righteous are present on earth at the time of the judgement of the unrighteous before being taken to be with him.

Rapture of the unrighteous or the righteous?

This verse is often quoted as a reference to the Rapture:

Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken and one will be left (Matthew 24:40 and also verse 41 and Luke 17:34-35).

But we need to note that in Matthew 24:37-44, where Jesus gives the example of the world-wide flood in Noah's day, it is the *unprepared* and *unrighteous* who were taken by the flood in judgement. This is also revealed in Luke 17:26-37, where the people of Sodom and Lot's wife were taken in God's judgement. Also in this passage the disciples asked where those taken would go. Jesus answers: "*Where the body is, there also the vultures will be gathered*" which also is a reference to judgement.

Jesus warns us to be ready, alert and on guard so that we *won't* be taken. So this passage is not a reference to the rapture of Christians but the taking of the unrighteous to judgement.

Jesus' Teaching on the Mount of Olives

The next teaching about the end time was on the Mount of Olives in response to his disciples asking about the destruction of the temple and the end of the age:

"Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3).

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Jesus answered these two questions: 1. When would the temple be destroyed. 2. What would be the sign of his coming again and the end of the age.

In response Jesus first warned them not to be deceived:

See to it that no one misleads you for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many (24:4-5).

He then gave a detailed revelation of events which would precede his coming (Matthew 24:4-51). Mark also records the same revelation (Mark 13:1-37) while Luke, though different, records much of the main features of Jesus' end-time teaching (in chapters 12, 17 and 21).

In both Matthew's and Mark's account Jesus forewarns his followers to be prepared for tribulation and deception in the end-time.

Events *before* Christ returns

Here, briefly, are the events before Christ returns (more detail will be seen page 120 on):

1. False Christs who mislead many (Matthew 24:5)
2. Wars and rumours of wars, international conflict, famines, plagues (Luke 21:11) and earthquakes (v 6-7).
3. A time of tribulation and persecution for his followers (v 9)
4. A time of apostasy when many will fall away from the faith (v 10).
5. The gospel will be preached to all nations after which the end will come (v 14).
6. The fulfilment of the prophecy of Daniel regarding the abomination of desolation in the temple (v 15).
7. Then a time of great and unprecedented tribulation for the elect, with great spiritual deception (false Christs, prophets and signs and wonders) when it will be said Christ has come.

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Jesus specifically warns us: *don't be misled* (v4), *don't be afraid* (v6), *be on the alert* (v42), *be ready* (v44) and "*Behold, I have told you in advance*" (v25) these things would happen.

Just as these warnings applied to his disciples living at the time so they must also apply to us today since all the events foretold have not yet happened.

Events *after* the Great Tribulation

*But immediately **after** the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*

***And then** the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the son of man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.*

And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matthew 24:29-31).

1. The sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light, stars will fall from the sky and there will be great cosmic changes.

2. Then Jesus will appear, visibly as lightning shines from one end of the sky to the other (v 27), coming in the clouds, sending out his angels with the sound of a great trumpet and gathering his elect from the four corners of the world (v 29-31).

3. The actual day and hour of his coming no one knows except the Father but Jesus tells us that when we see all these things we will know the time is very close (v 32-34).

4. Jesus tells us to be on the alert; prepared at all times by doing his will (24:42-25:13). The disobedient will be spiritually unclothed, asleep and unprepared to meet him (Mark 13:35, Luke 12:35 and Revelation 16:15).

In Luke's account Jesus says:

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"But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." and "So you also, when you see these things happening, recognise that the kingdom of God is near." (Luke 21:28 & 31)

This outline of events in Matthew 24 (and 25) preceding Christ's coming is the key to understanding the order of events given in the prophecies of Daniel, Revelation and many other scriptures describing the end-times. In this revelation by Jesus we should note the keywords: *when*, *then* and *after* which indicate the order of the end-time events. Matthew 24-25 has been referred to as '*the spine of Biblical prophecy*'.

A straight forward reading of these scriptures show that Christ's coming for his own, his elect, will be: 1. **Visible** as lightning, in the clouds. 2. **Audible** with the sound of a trumpet. 3. **In power and glory** with his angels. 4. **After** a time of apostasy and great tribulation.

However the pre-tribulation rapture teaching says Christ's coming for his Church will not be preceded by any prophesied events nor be visible to the world. But both Jesus and Paul tell us of events which must happen *before* he comes to gather us to be with him: the great apostasy, the coming of the Antichrist and the time of the Great Tribulation.

Some say that the 'elect' Jesus spoke of in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 are not the Church but the elect of Israel who will come to Christ during the Great Tribulation. This idea will be examined later.

The pre-tribulation rapture requires that Christ's return be in two stages: the first without forewarning, invisibly *for* his church and the second visibly, in glory *with* his church to bring judgement on the earth. But is this what we find in Scripture?

How Will Jesus Come Again?

The two words most used: **coming** (Greek: *parousia*) and **come** (*erchomai*) occur 16 and 18 times respectively in reference to

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Christ's second coming. Nowhere in the New Testament are these words used of an invisible coming. The words coming (*parousia* and *erchomai*) and *appears* or *appearance* (the Greek word *phaino* meaning made visible) are used together 4 times (Matthew 24:27 and 30, 2 Thessalonians 2:8 and 1 John 2:28) and plainly refer to one event not two.

While someone can find support for the pre-tribulation rapture by quoting certain scriptures, I hope to show here that when all the relevant scriptures are considered it is difficult to objectively show a two stage second coming of Christ. My concern is that the pre-tribulation rapture teaching is based on *eisegesis* (that is, reading and interpreting *into* the text) rather than *exegesis* (reading and interpreting *out of* the text). According to the Bible Jesus' coming for his own will be:

1. Visible

*For just as the lightning comes from the east and **flashes** even to the west, so will the coming (*parousia*) of the Son of Man be* (Matthew 24:27). Note: the Greek word translated as '*flashes*' in this verse is translated as '*appear*' in verse 30 below.

*And then the sign of the Son of Man **will appear** in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and **they will see** the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory* (Matthew 24:30).

*Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the **same way as you have watched Him go** into heaven* (Acts 1:11).

*For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will **be revealed** from heaven with His mighty angels in **flaming fire*** (2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

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*Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the **appearance of His (Christ's) coming** (2 Thessalonians 2:8).*

*...that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the **appearing** of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 6:14).*

*So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will **appear** a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28 ESV).*

*Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every **eye will see Him**, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen (Revelation 1:7).*

Note: In 1 Timothy 6:14 and Hebrews 9:28 Jesus, at his coming, will appear visibly (not in secret) to Christians who are waiting for him.

2. In or on the clouds

*And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man **coming on the clouds** of the sky with power and great glory (Matthew 24:30).*

*Then they will see the Son of Man **coming in a cloud** with power and great glory. But when these things begin to take place, straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:27-28).*

*Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them **in the clouds** to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17).*

*Behold, He is **coming with the clouds**, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen (Revelation 1:7).*

3. Audible

*And He will send forth His angels with **a great trumpet** and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matthew 24:31).*

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*Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for **the trumpet will sound**, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed (1 Corinthians 15:51).*

*For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven **with a shout**, with **the voice** of the archangel and with **the trumpet** of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thessalonians 4:16).*

4. As a thief, unexpectedly

But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will (Matthew 24:43-44).

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labour pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day would overtake you like a thief; for you are all sons of light and sons of day. We are not of night nor of darkness; so then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober (1 Thessalonians 5:2-6).

So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you (Revelation 3:3).

These scriptures teach us Christ's coming will be unexpected, as a thief in the night, to those not waiting and to those spiritually unprepared and asleep. For those who are waiting, spiritually awake and prepared, his coming will be sudden but anticipated.

5. It will be the time when Christ will gather his elect.

*And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will **gather together His elect** from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other (Matthew 24:31).*

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*If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and **receive you to Myself**, that where I am, there you may be also* (John 14:3).

*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that **those who are Christ's at His coming*** (1 Corinthians 15:22).

*When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then **you also** will be revealed **with Him in glory*** (Colossians 3:4).

*Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds **to meet the Lord** in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord* (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

*Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our **gathering together to Him*** (2 Thessalonians 2:1).

*So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but **to save those who are eagerly waiting for him*** (Hebrews 9:28 ESV).

There is no indication in any of these scriptures that the gathering of Matthew 24:31 is a different event and separated in time from our being caught up (that is, the Rapture) and gathering to Christ in 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

In summary

Christ's coming for his own will be **visible** to every eye, not just those who believe in him. Paul makes this clear in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 when he says that when Christ comes for his own he will be revealed with angels in flaming fire.

It will be **audible** with a shout, the voice of the archangel and the trumpet.

It will be **in the clouds** as Christ went into heaven after his resurrection.

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It will be ***sudden and unexpected*** to an unbelieving world, and to those who are spiritually asleep and unprepared. The gathering of his own and being caught up (raptured) will be at his coming, his appearing and revealing.

When all these scriptures are considered, Christ's coming for his own, being caught up (the rapture) and his coming to earth visibly (to every eye) and audibly is one event, not two.

Events Which Precede Christ's Coming

God has revealed in the Scriptures that certain events would happen before Jesus comes for his own; to raise those who have died and gather those who are alive. This is given, not just for our knowledge, but to forewarn and prepare Christ's followers who would be alive at the time. He said "*See to it that no one misleads you*" and "*I have told you in advance*" (Matthew 24:4 & 25). Clearly given to warn his disciples and in particular of deception in the end time. Jesus said seven signs would precede his coming:

1. **False Christs, spiritual deception** (Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 24; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; 1 Timothy 4:1).

2. **Wars and rumours of wars.** While there have always been wars and conflicts Jesus reveals that as the end approaches there will be great international conflicts which will cause fear in those without hope (Matthew 24:6-7).

3. **Natural disasters: famines, plagues and earthquakes.** Jesus forewarns of times of unprecedented frequency and magnitude of these events (Matthew 24:7; Luke 21:11, 25-26).

These are not the end but just the beginning of the birth pangs (Matthew 24:8).

4 **A time of tribulation and persecution** of believers in every nation. While the church has always experienced persecution through the ages, we are seeing today a great increase in animosity towards Christians in many nations. This has become particularly evident in Islamic societies with the rise of a puritanical and militant form of Islam. In Western countries, where for five

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centuries Christians have enjoyed relative peace and security, we are now experiencing antipathy by society and governments which no longer uphold or are sympathetic to Christian values. Increasingly Christian morality is being portrayed as discriminatory and even being legislated against. (Matthew 24:9).

5. **A time of apostasy** when many will depart from the faith (see chapter '*Apostasy in the Church*'). There will be hostility and betrayal within the Christian community. With apostasy lawlessness and immorality will increase and the love of most will grow cold (Matthew 24:10, Luke 18:8, 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 1 Timothy 4:1, 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 2 Peter 3:3).

6 **The gospel preached to every nation.** Despite persecution the gospel of Christ and God's kingdom will be preached (Matthew 24:14). Note: the end will not come until this is fulfilled.

7. **The coming of the Antichrist and the abomination of desolation** as described by the prophet Daniel (Matthew 24:15, Daniel 12:11). From this we must conclude the Jewish people would be in their own land (not fulfilled until 1948) and that there would be a temple (not fulfilled as yet). Paul tells the church at Thessalonica what must happen *before* the coming of Christ and our gathering to him:

Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, that you not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

So from Paul's words to the Thessalonians we can see two things must happen *before* the day of the Lord when Jesus comes and gathers us, the members of the Church, to be with him:

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1. The apostasy, when many will fall away from the faith (see also Matthew 24:10, Luke 8:13 and 1 Timothy 4:1).
2. The revealing of the man of lawlessness (the Antichrist. See also Daniel 7:25 and 8:25).

Some have said that '*apostasy*', as it appears in most English Bibles, translated from the Greek word *apostasia*, should be translated as '*departure*' (meaning the rapture). Thus, according to this interpretation, our '*departure*', or the rapture, must happen before the revealing of the man of sin', the Antichrist.

I see two problems with this interpretation. First there is no instance in either the New Testament or the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) of *apostasia* meaning a *physical* departure. It is consistently translated as **apostasy**, meaning a departure *from the faith*. Secondly, such an interpretation in the context of Paul's words would have him saying, in effect, that our departure (the rapture) will not occur before our departure (the coming of Christ, our gathering to him and the day of the Lord) which, of course, makes no sense.

8. Then will arise **a time of great tribulation** such has not occurred since the beginning of the world which will be cut short for the sake of the elect.

9. **False Christs and prophets** will lead many astray through deceiving signs and wonders. The depth of deception will be great so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect.

10. Immediately after this time of great tribulation there will be **signs in the heavens**: the sun darkened, the moon not giving its light and the stars falling.

After all these things happen then Jesus said he will return for his own, appearing in the sky, in the clouds with his angels in glory. Therefore these words of Jesus clearly show his coming for his elect will be after the Great Tribulation and not before.

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The pre-tribulation rapture considered

Next we will consider the common reasons offered to support the two stage coming of Christ: the first invisibly for his own before the Great Tribulation and the second visibly, in judgement, to an unbelieving world.

1. That the Church will not be subject to the wrath of God but be taken out of the world to be with Christ before the great tribulation according to God's promise (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

As mentioned previously, there is no scripture which clearly says the Church, Christ's own, will be gathered to him before the time of the Great Tribulation. Rather, Jesus says it would be after the tribulation that he would come and gather his elect, both Jew and Gentile (Matthew 24:29-31).

So how can we reconcile this with Jesus' promise to save us from the wrath to come? First we need to realise that experiencing tribulation is not experiencing wrath. The church has always experienced tribulation, in fact it is inevitable (2 Timothy 3:12). During the Great Tribulation the difference simply being that it will be great and unprecedented (though for the sake of the elect the time will be shortened).

Secondly should we assume the Church must be removed from the earth during the time of God's judgement on an unbelieving and evil world? Just as Israel was divinely preserved and protected when God's judgements were brought upon Pharaoh and Egypt at the time of the Exodus, we can also expect, likewise, Christians to be divinely protected during the final judgement on the world. God's wrath will be on the disobedient, not faithful followers of Christ (Colossians 3:6).

God protects his people in times of great tribulation

Do we find in Scripture that God will protect his people in a time of his wrath? Yes, and here are some which indicate this:

Come, my people, enter into your rooms and close your doors behind you; hide for a little while until indignation runs its course.

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For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity (Isaiah 26:20-21).

Seek the LORD, all you humble of the earth who have carried out His ordinances; Seek righteousness, seek humility. Perhaps you will be hidden in the day of the LORD'S anger (Zephaniah 2:3).

From these we can take assurance and comfort that God's people will be protected during his judgement on the world. Indeed there are many scriptures which give us encouragement, hope and strength during times of persecution and tribulation such as these:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

...strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13).

After the out-pouring of the 6th bowl of wrath on the world we should note that Jesus encourages his followers with these words:

Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame" (Revelation 16:15).

These words are very similar to the ones Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 24:43-44, Mark 13:35-37, Luke 12:35-40 and Paul's to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5:2-6).

Another scripture which has been given as indicating the Church will not go through the Tribulation says:

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Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth (Revelation 3:10).

Yet I see two problems with this idea:

1. It assumes this promise is for all Christians of all times. But it was given only to Philadelphia, one of the seven churches. I am aware of the teaching that the seven churches represent a seven period history of the church, but this is an interpolation, not what was plainly stated by Jesus. The simplest interpretation is the seven churches represent the church of all ages.

2. While Jesus promises the members of this church they will be kept from the hour of testing, it does not necessarily follow that the church must be taken out of the world.

In John 17 Jesus, in his prayer to God for his disciples, asks that they be kept safe from the evil one, not that they be taken from the world (John 17:14-16).

Peter assures us that we *'are are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time'* (1 Peter 1:5).

Jesus has promised to save us from the wrath to come and to keep us through times of tribulation, not by removing us from the world, but by his Spirit empowering and strengthening us to persevere. Through steadfast faith in him we can have courage and peace until the very end because Jesus has overcome the world.

2. The Rapture is the Blessed Hope

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, says that they can be comforted with the knowledge of being reunited with those who have died in Christ at his coming (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). It is reasoned that if Christians have to go through the Great Tribulation, before his coming, how can his words be a comfort and a blessed hope? (Titus 2:13)

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In both scriptures the hope and comfort is clearly of the dead in Christ being raised and united together with those who are alive when he comes, not that we escape tribulation (which is not mentioned). That we may have to endure suffering and even death before we are taken to be with Christ does not detract in any way the blessed hope we have in him, as Christians through the ages have joyfully believed.

The Church, Christians through history have always experienced tribulation and persecution. Jesus and the apostles warned us to expect persecution, be prepared for tribulation and remain faithful, even if our earthly life be at stake. We should not fear tribulation and persecution because we are promised we will not be tested beyond what we are able (1 Corinthians 10:13).

So the blessed hope is not our escaping tribulation, but to be with the Lord. There is a clear distinction between tribulation (which believers go through) and the wrath of God (which is on an unbelieving and unrepentant world).

3. The Rapture, our gathering to Christ, will be imminent and without warning

This is based on Jesus' words "*But of that day and hour no one knows...*" (Matthew 24:36) and that he will come as '*a thief in the night*' (Matthew 24:43-44). It is these words, I believe, have been misinterpreted to mean Jesus' coming for us will be imminent, that is, could occur at *any* time without warning. Yet this is not what Jesus said. He said we will not know the exact day or hour, but when those who are waiting and prepared see *all* these signs they will know the time is *near* (Matthew 24:33, Luke 21:28). It is only to those who are spiritually unprepared and asleep or in darkness (that is, those who are disobedient) that he will come unexpectedly and as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:4).

Another reasoning is that the imminence of Christ's coming is a major motivation for Christians to live a pure and holy life. Yet the many encouragements throughout Scripture to be pure and holy are not because Christ may come suddenly at *any* time, but rather that

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we be faithful and obedient should he delay and not come for a *long* time (Matthew 24:45-51, Luke 12:35-46). The reality is Jesus wants us to be pure and holy at *all* times, for none of us know how long our life will be in this world.

4. That the 'elect' of Matthew 24 (and Mark 13) are not the Church but the remnant elect of Israel

Jesus' words are addressed to his disciples, his followers, Christians of all nations with the intention that they be warned and prepared should he return in their life-time. Jesus through his teaching of the end-time says *you* (plural) not *they* and we can safely assume the disciples were members of the Church! For example he says "*so, you too, when you see all these things, recognise that He is near, right at the door*" (v 33) clearly indicating that his followers at some time in the future would see all these things happen.

The idea Jesus' words are directed to a future Jewish elect remnant and not the Church elect and that the elect of the Church and the elect of Israel are separate bodies has no clear and consistent Scriptural basis. Paul says that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, we are all one body, joined to the one root and there is no division between the two (Ephesians 2:14-22, Romans 11:24).

The pre-tribulation rapture teaching also draws attention to Jesus' words in Matthew 24:

But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath (verse 20).

It is reasoned, because of reference to the Sabbath, these words only apply to the Jewish elect during the time of the great tribulation. However, it should be noted Mark (who wrote to Gentile believers) *omits* 'Sabbath' in his parallel account (Mark 13:18). Therefore Jesus' words must apply to both Jew and Gentile believers living at that time.

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5 That 'the Church' is not mentioned in Revelation after Chapter 4 and therefore not on earth

I see this as an argument from silence. In fact we find that several other books of the New Testament also do not mention the Church. 'Church', from the Greek word *ekklesia* (meaning *called out ones*) does not appear in many other books of Scripture (Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and Jude). We would not say for that reason the church did not exist at the time those writings were composed.

A number of different words are used to identify members of the body of Christ: saints (holy ones), believers, bond-servants, brothers (of Christ), elect (or chosen), his people, the called of Jesus Christ, children of God and the Church. The first word used in Revelation to address Christ's followers is 'servant' or 'bond-servant' from the Greek word '*doulos*' and is used 7 times from 1:1 to 22:6. The most common word is 'saints' or 'holy ones' which is used 13 times from 5:8 to 20:9 (and also the word used most frequently throughout the New Testament in reference to Christ's own).

Therefore because the word 'church' does not appear after chapter 4 does not mean members of the church are not on earth.

The Revelation given to John begins with this instruction:

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near (Rev 1:3).

These words tell us to heed and pay careful attention to all that is written, unless there were clearly reasons not to. They are written to inform and prepare us for what is to happen, not just for our curiosity about the future.

It is also interesting to note that 'church' (*ekklesia*) does not appear in Revelation chapters 19 to 21. Yet it is clear from the context of these chapters that members of the church are present. If the word 'church' is significant then why is it not used in chapters

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19 to 21? These chapters cover the second coming of Christ, the marriage supper of Christ, the fall of Satan, Judgement Day and the New Heavens and New Earth. Therefore the absence of the term 'church' in Revelation 4 to 18 does not mean members of the Church, Christ's followers are not on earth.

6. That in the Rapture Jesus comes *for* his church but in the Second Coming comes *with* his church.

This idea is based on two scriptures. The first is Jesus' coming *for* his Church (the Rapture):

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord (1Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Here we are told that Jesus will bring with him those who have died in him and raise their bodies. Then those still alive will be caught up to meet them and him in the clouds.

The second is said to be Jesus' coming *with* his Church at the end of the Great Tribulation, seven years later:

and may the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all people, just as we also for you so that He may establish your hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints (1Thessalonians 3:12-13).

Here it is said '*holy ones*' or '*saints*' refers to Christians who will come with Christ to earth to execute judgement. This assumes 'holy

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ones' or 'saints' in this verse are Christians. However we need to note that there are many scriptures which reveal Jesus coming *with His angels* (Mat 13:41, 16:27, 24:31, 25:31) or holy angels (Mr 8:38 and Luke 9:26).

That 'holy ones' can refer to angels is also revealed in Jude:

It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with ten thousands of His holy ones (Jude 1:14)

This refers to Jesus coming and the 'holy ones' are angels. Therefore it can't be said with certainty that 'holy ones' in 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 refers to Christians. When all scriptures are considered it is most likely '*holy ones*' here refers to angels, not Christians. Therefore the distinction of two comings; one for the Church and one with the Church is a tenuous one which doesn't hold when all relevant scriptures are considered.

7. That, according to 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, *the Restrainer* holding back the revealing of the Antichrist is the Holy Spirit.

It is reasoned that because the Holy Spirit inhabits the Church, the body of believers, then the Church itself, all Christians must be removed, taken out of the way before the Antichrist can be revealed.

However, that 'he' in this verse 7 is the Holy Spirit is an assumption, not what is plainly stated. Two things should be noted: 1. The Holy Spirit is never referred to as just 'he' except in the immediate context about the Holy Spirit. 2. The role of Holy Spirit is not said to be a 'restraining force' on evil in Scripture.

The 'restrainer' is more likely to be a reference to a powerful angelic being such as in Daniel 10:13.

Does it matter what we believe?

Does it matter whether we believe Jesus will come for us before or after the Great Tribulation? As mentioned earlier, this is not a matter which has bearing on our salvation in Christ. However the

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teaching that the Church will be raptured before the Great Tribulation has no clear scriptural basis, but rather based on inferences drawn from a number of scriptures.

The fact Jesus specifically warns us not to be misled and that his coming would be after the Tribulation should strongly encourage us to be prepared for such a time. If we believe we will not go through the Tribulation, not see the man of lawlessness revealed (2 Thessalonians 2:3) nor have to endure his persecution, then there is a real danger of becoming complacent, unprepared and even be a cause for many to abandon their faith when or should that time of testing come.

These words from Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who survived a Nazi concentration camp in World War 2 and who knew personally what it means to suffer:

'Sometimes I get frightened as I read the Bible, and as I look in this world and see all of the tribulation and persecution promised by the Bible coming true. Now I can tell you, though, if you too are afraid, that I have just read the last pages. I can now come to shouting "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" for I have found where it is written that Jesus said:

"He that overcomes shall inherit all things and I will be His God, and he shall be My son."

This is the future and hope of this world. Not that the world will survive, but that we shall be overcomers in the midst of a dying world.

There are some among us teaching there will be no tribulation, that the Christians will be able to escape all this. These are the false teachers that Jesus was warning us to expect in the latter days. Most of them have little knowledge of what is already going on across the world. I have been in countries where the saints are already suffering terrible persecution. In China, the Christians were told, *"Don't worry, before the tribulation comes you will be translated, raptured."* Then came a terrible persecution. Millions of Christians were tortured to death. Later I heard a Bishop from China say, sadly,

"We have failed. We should have made the people strong for persecution, rather than telling them Jesus would come first. Tell the

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people how to be strong in times of persecution, how to stand when the tribulation comes, to stand and not faint."

I feel I have a divine mandate to go and tell the people of this world that it is possible to be strong in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are in training for the tribulation, but more than sixty percent of the Body of Christ across the world has already entered into the tribulation. There is no way to escape it. We are next.'

Those last words '*We are next*' should be taken to heart. The increasing antipathy and hostility towards Christianity in the West should be seen as warning signs of coming persecution which will only intensify as the end-time draws closer. Further it is not just physical persecution but spiritual deception which will be the greatest danger. Therefore any teaching which might cause us to be complacent and unprepared must be examined closely. In particular the teaching that the final generation of Christians will not go through the Great Tribulation is potentially a serious stumbling block. For those at that time who believe they will escape, but find themselves having to endure it, may be greatly disheartened, to the point of turning away from the Faith.

When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?

Luke 18:1-8

The Bible tells us the final time just before Christ returns will be the most perilous and spiritually the darkest. It will be a time when the Antichrist has reached the zenith of his reign and power. God's people, Christians will have experienced unprecedented persecution and physically been overcome. To many believers, Christ's coming may seem past expectation, prayers unanswered and in this time of spiritual darkness, may think God has forsaken them.

Jesus' question "*When the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?*" (Luke 18:8) is a rhetorical one, that is, when Jesus returns faith will be severely tested and many will have turned away from the Faith. So the lesson we learn from the parable of the widow and unrighteous judge is that we must *always pray and not*

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lose heart. In the time of our extremity and spiritual darkness will we still have faith in God, that he will keep his promise and continue to pray as Jesus asked us? That is the question we must ask ourselves. It is those who persevere until the end who will be saved.

Be prepared and don't be afraid

We must not fear but trust God like Habakkuk, who anticipating the invasion by the Babylonians and the appalling destruction that would result, is given assurance by God: *'But the righteous will live by his faith'* (Habakkuk 2:4).

When and exactly what will happen in the future we know only in part but we do know the promise of Jesus: he will be with us to the very end:

"In Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (John 16:33 and Matthew 28:20).

Therefore let's put our hope in being with Jesus, not in escaping the Tribulation. Let us keep our faith in him and what he has taught us to the very end. Then he will come in glory and take us to be with him forever. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

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What is a Christian, who is my brother and what is the Church?

Three important questions need to be asked and answered so we will not be led astray. Jesus, Paul and other writers of the New Testament warned us of false Christs, false brothers and false shepherds who would seek to draw away Christians to follow them (Acts 20:28-31). Therefore we need to discern the true from the false: what is a true Christian, who is a true brother or sister and what is the true Church?

While we need discernment we also need to exercise humility and grace to those we may differ. Instead of building unity we may end up causing division and animosity where there shouldn't be with a brother for whom Christ also died. More on this later.

What is a Christian?

The term '*Christian*' only occurs 3 times in the New Testament. Its first use is in Acts:

...and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

So a Christian is simply a *disciple* of Jesus, one who believes in him and who seeks to learn and do what he says.

A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus Christ

This is the essential qualification, repeated numerous times throughout the New Testament and especially in the gospel of John where believing in or having faith in Jesus is used over 50 times.

But what does it mean to '*believe in Jesus*'? Believing in Jesus is more than acknowledgement of his existence and historical facts about his life. It is more than mental agreement to the truth about him. It involves two aspects: believing *that* and believing *in*.

We are to believe that:

1. **He is the Christ**, the Son of God (not a son but *the* Son) and so we become a son (child) of God.

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But these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31) .

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the [child] born of Him (1John 4:15; 5:1).

2. In his resurrection; that he died and rose again and that we too will rise again at his coming.

And that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:4).

For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus (1Thessalonians 4:14).

3. Christ died for our sins

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1Corinthians 15:3).

4. Salvation is by his grace, not by what we have done.

But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are (Acts 15:11).

Because we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, that he rose from the dead and that we are saved and receive forgiveness by his grace, God accepts us as his children.

We are to believe *in* Jesus:

To believe *in* Jesus takes us deeper. In the original Greek, where we are told to believe in Christ, it literally says we are to believe *into* (eis) or *upon* (epi) Christ. It is a complete, personal trust and confidence in the One whom we have put our faith. As an illustration, if I were to say I believed in the prime minister of Australia it would imply I trusted him completely, his judgement, his decisions, his wisdom and be prepared to do whatever he asked.

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So when we say we believe in Jesus we are saying we completely trust him, his word, his promises (though not yet all fulfilled), his judgement and are prepared to do whatever he asks of us. It means we trust in *him*, not in our own wisdom or ability. We might be a 'good' moral person who has been baptised and attends a church regularly but that does not necessarily mean we are a Christian; one who *believes* or *has faith in* Christ.

When we believe, trust in Christ, in that initial step of faith, so much is given to us by the grace of God through Christ's death and resurrection.

Believing in Jesus we receive:

1. Eternal life

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

2. The right to become children of God

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name (John 1:12).

3 The Holy Spirit

"He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water'. But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:38-39).

4. Forgiveness of our sins

Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43).

5. Salvation

They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31).

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6. Justification

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness (Romans 4:5).

That is, we are made right before God on the basis of our faith in Jesus and what he accomplished on the cross.

Upon this foundation of faith we are to work out our salvation:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

Note: Paul is not saying we are to work *for* our salvation but to work *out* of it.

James says: *'faith without works is dead'* (James 2:26).

So a living faith is never passive but shown in what we say, do and how we live. Here are some of the ways we believe in Jesus.

To believe means to confess him

Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32).

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved (Romans 10:9).

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God (1 John 4:15).

To believe also means that we repent

When Jesus began his ministry his first recorded words were:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

And that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

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To repent simply means to change our mind about our way of life and live God's way.

The Gospel message calls us to repent and believe. Without repentance forgiveness is meaningless and faith is in vain.

Jesus told those who heard to *"repent and believe in the gospel"* because the kingdom of God was at hand. That was the good news. He was proclaiming the coming of a kingdom ruled by God, supplanting all human rule and in which we are to live according to God's way, not man's.

To believe means to obey him

Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46).

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).

We can't claim to believe in Jesus and be his disciples if we are not willing to obey him.

To believe means to follow him

Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, *"I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life* (John 8:12).

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me (John 10:27).

To follow Jesus is to both obey him and live by his example at whatever cost personally.

To believe means to eat and drink of Christ

Jesus used the metaphors of eating and drinking to illustrate what it meant to believe in him:

So Jesus said to them, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in*

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yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live (John 6:53-57).

As food and water are essential for the life of our body, so Jesus himself is our true life. Therefore, we draw our spiritual sustenance from him, and without him we are spiritually dead.

To believe means to love him

Believing in Jesus will be shown in our love for him, in our obedience and deepest joy:

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him (John 14:21).

Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? (James 2:5).

and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory (1 Peter 1:8).

A Christian then is someone who:

Believes that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed One of God, that he is the Son of God, that he was crucified and rose again from the dead, that through him, by his grace and not by what we have done, we receive forgiveness of our sins. A Christian is a disciple of Jesus who learns from him, loves, trusts and seeks to obey him at all times. A Christian puts their hope in his promises even when facing the loss of all we hold dear in this life and that their true life, eternal life is in him alone.

Faith will be tested

In scripture where we are asked to believe it is, in most cases, the present tense (as, for example, in John 3:15-18 and 36 where a

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literal translation would read ‘*is believing in*’), that is faith which begins and continues. In the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:13) Jesus says there would be those who ‘*believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away*’. So we can expect our faith to be tested.

The danger of shallow and weak faith: the Parable of the Sower

Those on the rocky [soil are] those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no [firm] root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. The [seed] which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of [this] life, and bring no fruit to maturity. (Luke 8:13-14).

Here Jesus teaches us that faith needs to run deep, to hold fast to his words so as to endure the inevitable trials and temptations of this life. Faith in Jesus is needed to resist the pressures, possessions, pleasures and distractions of this life.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10).

To be faithful to Jesus may cost our reputation before men. It may even cost us our life as is now happening to Christians in many parts of the world.

Paul urged the Corinthians to hold fast to the truth so that their faith will not be in vain, that is to no effect (2 Corinthians 6:1).

Our faith will be tested through trials to prove it is real and through endurance we will grow in spiritual maturity:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:6).

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Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

So whatever we may endure as Christians let us keep eternity in perspective: the hope and joy that will one day be ours.

Those who continue to have faith in Jesus are protected by the power of God.

Though trials will come, Jesus tells us to be faithful and assures us that God, by his grace, power and patience will keep us safe:

...who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:5).

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you (2 Peter 3:14-15).

Therefore we need never despair when our faith is tested (and we can expect at some time it will be). Trust in God, his promises and his strength.

Who is my brother?

Is my brother only someone who is part of my church, excluding others? Or is he anyone who claims to be a Christian?

Jesus answered this question:

While he was still speaking to the crowds, behold, his mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to him.

Someone said to him, *“Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You.” But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers! “For*

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whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:46-50).

Luke, recording the same incident says this:

My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it (Luke 8:20).

Our brothers are those who do God’s will; those who trust and obey him. Which brings the next question: what is the will of God?

Jesus tells us:

For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (John 6:40).

We believe in Jesus and all that means. If you believe he is the Son of God, that he is the Christ, that he rose again on the third day, confess him as Lord, that you are saved and forgiven by his grace alone, have repented of your sins and old way of life, obey and love him; you are my brother.

Yet we should be on guard against the common idea that only those who are a part of our church or who agree with us on every point of doctrine are our brothers. But this does, I believe, give us the right and responsibility to speak the truth, *in love*, to anyone who professes to be a Christian, especially if they are walking in error according to God’s word.

This means there is a line which we must draw: those who don't believe, who have not put their faith *in* Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, that he is the Christ, the Son of God who was crucified and rose again from the dead, are not Christians and not a brother in Christ. Scripture also warns us of those who preach another Jesus and another Gospel (2 Corinthians 11:4). Such we must expose and separate from.

We are also told to separate from those who claim to be Christians but are living unholy and immoral lives, because to tolerate or condone their sin will cause sin to spread in the Church.

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Yet we are not to regard them as an enemy, but to warn them as a brother (1 Corinthians 5:11 and 5:6, 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 14-15).

What is the Church?

While we commonly associate the word ‘*church*’ with a building used for Christians to meet in, or an organisation based on particular interpretations of the Bible, this was not the case in the early church. The word translated in English as ‘church’ comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* (meaning *called out ones*). A better, more meaningful word would be *congregation*. It refers to an assembly or gathering of *people*, not a building or organisation, who have been called by God, out of the world system and into Christ’s kingdom through his death and resurrection. The church, assembly, body of all believers in Christ collectively is simply referred to as ‘*the church of God*’. Today we have numerous denominational ‘Church of xxx’, some even claiming to be the ‘one true church’.

In the New Testament, whenever a letter was addressed to a church, it was to the Christians within a certain city or locality. In the early church Christians met, either in public places or in private homes for the first three hundred years. It was only after the Roman emperor Constantine embraced and legalised Christianity throughout the Roman Empire that buildings dedicated for Christian meetings were constructed. In recent times many Christians have sought to return to the early church structure through what is known as the house church movement^{1,2}.

The Church: the body of Christ

Scripture reveals a mystery, something that was once hidden but now revealed: that the church, the household of God is the body of Christ, he being the head and the chief cornerstone upon which the body, the church, is built.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having

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been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything (Colossians 1:18).

The Church as a Spiritual Building

Peter, as Paul previously, reveals the Church as a spiritual house, built with living stones, Christ being the cornerstone:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (1 Peter 2:4-6 ESV).

The church was founded by Christ when he rose from the dead after his victory on the Cross. Each believer becomes part of his spiritual body, as living stones joined to him. Jesus lives in us, not in a building (a 'church') or organisation. Every believer is a priest in the sense of offering to God spiritual sacrifices (see also Romans 12:1 and Hebrews 13:15). As members of his body we each have unique, individual abilities and functions given to us by the grace of God for the purpose of edifying one another, building up the church, motivated by humble, selfless love not pride or desire for power and control.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:15-16 ESV).

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For this reason (as in the chapter *Tribulation: How To Prepare and Respond*) we can't be lone ranger Christians. One of the values of the world which has crept into the Church is individualism. This is the idea of being accountable to no one but Christ and where my perceived personal needs prioritise anyone else's. Jesus has made us to be *one* body and we are mutually responsible and accountable to one another. That is the practical love Jesus requires of us.

The Church as a Vine

Jesus said we are branches of a vine, he being the vine:

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

Jesus is using metaphorical language here, but the message is clear: the Church is not made, grown or held together by man-made rules, a hierarchy or organisation but by each believer being joined to Christ through believing and obeying him and loving his brother (and sister) in Christ. Church leaders have the responsibility under Christ to first be an example and secondly to shepherd, watch and teach those under their charge to follow Christ and keep the faith in word and deed. This is not done by 'lording it over the flock' or for personal gain but humbly in love and gentleness. As Peter says:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to [the will of] God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-3).

The church is therefore the whole body of those who believe in Christ, living stones built into the spiritual body of Christ, under the direction of him as the head. It is not any one visible church organisation here on earth. We are joined to Christ, to his body, not through another man or earthly organisation and not a certain 'one

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true church'. When we are baptised we are baptised into Christ, into his spiritual body, not a church here on earth.

Therefore it is not *what* church on earth we belong to but *who* in heaven we belong to. This is a most important fact to recognise, for to believe we are responsible to another man or organisation here on earth so as to be joined to Christ and God the Father is to effectively put that man or organisation in place of Christ.

Our faith and allegiance therefore must be in Christ, and in him alone, not in a particular church or by the fact we are a member of that church. If our faith and security lies in any organisation or person other than Christ our faith will be in vain.

What should the Church be in this world?

First we should keep in mind the Church is not a man-made organisation, though to those outside this is what it often appears. Jesus is the foundation, the corner-stone, the head and Lord of the Church. Therefore we live by the standards of the kingdom of God as Jesus taught us.

As referred to earlier, we are to be *the salt of the earth* and *the light of the world*. That is, we are to be a holy people, not just in name but in our living (1 Peter 1:14-16). For this reason we will be a counter-cultural community who live, not by the world's standards, but by Jesus'. We will be seen by those outside as those who challenge and contradict many of the world's values and ways. We are, as '*aliens*' in this world (1 Peter 2:11) and so it should not surprise us we are regarded as such. As such a community the foundational quality by which we relate to one another and other people is by love, agape love, not the love as the world knows. As John says:

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

And we are able to live and love as Jesus asks us because he has given us his Spirit.

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Leadership of the Church

The early church was led or governed, as revealed in the book of Acts and through the writings of the New Testament, by elders who fulfilled the role of overseeing and shepherding the church within a locality. The later development of having a 3 or 4 level hierarchy of pope/patriarch/archbishop; cardinals/bishops; priests/pastors and deacons has no firm basis in the God's word. In the New Testament those who had the responsibility to lead the church were called elders, overseers and shepherds or pastors. Though different terms they all referred to the *same* function within the church. Historical church tradition later made distinctions between these terms but this was not the practice in the early church. While God has worked, in his sovereignty, through all church structures, there have been many times through history where man-made authority structures have hindered the growth of the body of Christ on earth.

A Word of Caution

Differences of opinion between Christians on many issues have existed since the Church began. In one sense this is healthy as Paul stated:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you (1 Corinthians 11:18-19).

We may have sincerely held positions on church government, the Millennium, end-time prophecy, the age of the earth, gifts of the Holy Spirit, the role of women in the church etc. These may be valid issues which in our understanding have serious implications. Yet the Church should be a place where Christians can have differences of opinion and be able to express them. But we need caution: we may well be 'right' but totally wrong in the way we express it.

While it is true Jesus used some strong language in correcting and even condemning those who were in error we need to be

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cautious in imitating the same. Very simply: we are not Jesus! Because we still live in a body and mind influenced by sin, such correction must be done, first from a position of humility and inner inspection. Ensure we don't have a log in our own eye while trying to remove the splinter in our brother's. Second, it must be done out of love and in a spirit of gentleness. As these scriptures instruct us:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such as is good for edification according to the need so that it will give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29).

Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person (Colossians 4:6).

Jesus and the apostles emphasised our need to strive for unity, but not a unity imposed by church authority. It is that which is achieved through love for one another and unity of the Spirit but never at the cost of compromising the truth. And in not compromising we should be on guard against another error: emphasising one truth while neglecting another (which Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for doing). We need to know and obey *the whole counsel of God*. It is Scripture which must give the final word, not a long-held church or theological tradition.

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2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_church

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The Information War and Censorship by Big Tech

How Big Tech and the Internet are filtering the truth

‘Big Tech’, Internet giants such as Google, Facebook, Twitter (now ‘X’), Amazon, eBay and Apple have all grown from modest beginnings. They initially provided free and relatively unrestricted access and control over content. As a consequence Internet users and commerce have benefited greatly, being able to search for information and buy and sell items on a huge, world-wide platform.

The Monopoly of ‘Big Tech’

However, with their popularity, they have now gained a virtual monopoly over Internet searches, social media and e-commerce. This in itself need not be a problem, but what has been happening recently is ‘Big Tech’ exercising censorship over content. While of course this is their right (and they responsibly ought to remove content which is clearly harmful) they are beginning to control or censor content which is deemed politically incorrect to our increasingly secular society. This has become particularly noticeable with content which reflects traditional Christian understanding of marriage, sexual morality and God created distinctions between man and woman. What has developed can be termed an information war between secular humanism and the Christian world-view.

However Christians need to be careful about complaining of ‘Big Tech’ censorship. These ‘giants’ are not public companies and therefore are not obliged to publish or link to what they might deem unacceptable. After all would a Christian website or platform be obliged to publish what it deems unacceptable? Nor should this surprise us, for Jesus warned us 2000 years ago that we would be hated by all nations and history teaches us this has been the case for all who faithfully follow him.

What is happening, and will increasingly happen, is for Christian content and viewpoints to be censored. Therefore we need to realise we can’t depend on these Internet giants to be objective

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sources of truthful information. While they may not necessarily publish false information, by filtering or censoring information we may learn only a half truth. This is particularly crucial for the next generation of Christians as AI, Artificial Intelligence, becomes increasingly used as an information source. If we depend on 'Big Tech' and AI for objective, truthful information we may end up deceived.

The Power and Control of 'Big Tech'

Many Christians, justifiably, have expressed concern that these Internet giants are not only controlling content on their platforms but accumulating personal information of their users. While at this point in time there may be no malevolent intent, it is apparent that such information could be used at some time in the future to identify and censure people they deem against the social order. This is already happening in China.

Therefore we need to be wise, but not fear, for we were told thousands of years ago such would happen. Jesus said: don't be alarmed, don't be afraid, I have told you in advance. God is in control, not Google!

The Rise of AI

The growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has given cause for great optimism but also great concern. Much has already been written on this and one book I'd highly recommend is '*2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity*' by John Lennox. Lennox, a Christian professor at Oxford University, describes in depth both the positives and potential negatives of this growing technology.

From what I've learnt about AI, it certainly promises to be a great asset but the question is: will it be our servant or our master? AI is not 100% objective since it only uses information that it can access and that information processed using algorithms made by fallible people. Therefore we cannot rely on AI for truth. For a Christian there is only one source of infallible truth: the word of God as revealed in the Bible.

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Be Prepared

Therefore we need to be prepared. We need to source information from a number of trusted and unbiased sources other than those of ‘Big Tech’ and popular news media. We need to set up independent means of communicating the gospel and the truth of God, boldly and without fear. This may even mean going back to distributing free paper media or short-wave radio (still used in many places around the world) as a means of proclaiming the gospel of Christ and Biblical truth.

A final word: while need to speak the truth in love, we first must ourselves walk in love and the truth or we, as Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13:1, *‘have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal’*.

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Appendix A: History of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Teaching

Was the pre-tribulation rapture teaching, as it is known today, taught before the 19th century? Some Christian teachers and writers have presented evidence of historical references to a pre-tribulation rapture before the 19th century. What does church history show us?

Here are some quotes by early church fathers:

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-168):

Two advents of Christ have been announced: the one, in which He is set forth as suffering, inglorious, dishonoured, and crucified; but the other, in which He shall come from heaven with glory, when the man of apostasy, who speaks strange things against the Most High, shall venture to do unlawful deeds on the earth **against us the Christians**. (First Apology of Justine, Chapter 110).

Irenaeus (A.D. 140-202; a student of Polycarp, taught by the apostle John):

And then he (Daniel) points out the time that his tyranny shall last, during which **the saints shall be put to flight**. (Against Heresies V, XXVL, 1) And they shall lay Babylon waste, and burn her with fire, and shall give their kingdom to the beast, and **put the church to flight**. After that they shall be destroyed by the coming of our Lord. (Against Heresies V, XXVI).

Tertulian (A.D. 160-220):

That the beast Antichrist, with his false prophet, may **wage war on the Church of God**. (On the Resurrection of the Flesh, 25).

Cyprian (A.D. 200-258):

The Lord has foretold that these things would come. With the exhortation of His foreseeing word, instructing, and teaching, and preparing, and strengthening the people of His Church for all endurance of things to come. He previously warned us that the

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adversary would increase more and more in the last times. (Treatise 7).

For you ought to know and to believe, and hold it for certain, that the day of affliction has begun to hang over our heads, and the end of the world and **the time of Antichrist to draw near, so that we must all stand prepared for the battle...**The time will come, that whosoever kills you will think that he does God service...Nor let any one wonder that we are harassed with increasing afflictions, when the Lord before predicted that these things would happen in the last times. (Epistles of Cyprian, LV, 1, 2).

Nor let any one of you, beloved brethren, be so terrified by the fear of future persecution, or the coming of the threatening Antichrist, as not to be found armed for all things by the evangelical exhortations and precepts, and by the heavenly warnings. (Cyprian, LIII).

So for at least the first 300 years of church history it was understood and taught that Christians, the Church, would have to prepare for and endure the persecution of the Antichrist during the time of the great tribulation before Christ returned in glory.

The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephraem

Some who teach a pre-tribulation rapture claim support prior to the 19th century from a medieval (7th century) document known as *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Ephraem* (which exists in Syriac, Greek and Latin texts). In the Latin version are these words:

For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, **prior to the tribulation that is to come**, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins.

These words, taken in isolation, appear to support the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture. However elsewhere in his writing it is clear the author anticipates Christians enduring the time of the great tribulation and then meeting Christ as described in Matthew 24:

In those days people shall not be buried, neither Christian, nor heretic, neither Jew, nor pagan, because of fear and dread there is

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not one who buries them; because all people, while they are fleeing, ignore them.

...and there will be **a great tribulation**, as there has not been, since people began to be upon the earth...

...when this inevitability has overwhelmed all people, just and unjust, the just so **that they may be found good by their Lord**; and indeed the unjust so that they may be damned forever with their author the Devil.

...after the resurrection of the two prophets, in the hour which the world does not know, and on the day which the enemy of son of perdition does not know, **will come the sign of the Son of Man**, and coming forward **the Lord shall appear** with great power and much majesty,

...as the angelic trumpet precedes him, which shall sound and declare: **Arise, O sleeping ones, arise, meet Christ**, because his hour of judgment has come! Then Christ shall come and the enemy shall be thrown into confusion, and the Lord shall destroy him by the spirit of his mouth.

It should be noted that the Syriac version makes no mention of the elect being gathered to Christ before the tribulation. So because of internal inconsistencies and differences between the different texts, this document ought not to be taken as clear evidence of an early teaching of the pre-tribulation rapture.

The Modern Pre-tribulation Rapture Teaching

While there is some dispute as to whether the pre-tribulation rapture teaching originated with Edward Irving in 1831 or John Darby about 1839, it was Darby who popularised the teaching (an integral part of a theological framework known as Dispensationalism) and made it into a formal doctrine as it known today. Darby's teachings were incorporated in the Scofield Reference Bible in the early 1900's which was highly influential in disseminating the idea of the pre-tribulation rapture (especially in the USA). More recently the teaching has gained popularity

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through books such as Hal Lindsey's '*The Late Great Planet Earth*' (1970), which has sold over 15 million copies and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins' '*Left Behind*' novel series (began 1995) which have sold 80 million copies.

There is no question the pre-tribulation rapture teaching is taken seriously and appeals to many with the idea Christians will not have to endure the time of the Great Tribulation. However the teaching fails to take into account all of Scripture concerning the return of Jesus and our going to be with him. As a consequence there is a real danger Christians who believe this teaching will be unprepared for the final time of tribulation Jesus warned us of.

Appendix B: The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction?

Dan Brown's "The Da Vinci Code" (also a movie) has achieved remarkable status in publishing history, becoming the "the biggest selling adult hard back fiction book of all time". It has sold over 40 million copies and made the author a multimillionaire.

Why such interest in what would seem just another intriguing thriller? It's no secret. Written into the plot of Dan Brown's book is the mother of all conspiracy theories. The Church (and Dan Brown targets the Roman Catholic Church in particular) has conspired to suppress the true nature of Jesus Christ. 2000 years of Christian history is, according to Dan Brown, based on fraud. Through the characters in the story he claims:

Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene and their descendants became kings of France.

Jesus was not the Son of God but a mortal prophet. His status as Son of God was passed by a close vote at the council of Nicaea.

The emperor Constantine destroyed the true accounts of Jesus and embellished the four gospels to make him appear more "god-like".

However the truth about Jesus has been kept through a secret society known as the Priory of Sion, the Knights Templar and hidden in the artwork of Leonardo Da Vinci.

While stopping short of saying these are historical facts, it is clear from his official website that he believes his theories deserve serious consideration. Is there any truth in Dan Brown's theories? We will check three key claims. At the end of this article are links to some websites which give more in depth critique of his theories.

1. The Priory of Sion

Dan Brown says: the Priory of Sion is a secret society founded in Jerusalem in 1099 whose members included Sir Isaac Newton, Botticelli, Victor Hugo, and Leonardo da Vinci. This society has guarded the secret of Jesus' marriage to Mary Magdalene.

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Reality: The Priory of Sion was a social organisation formed in 1954 by a Frenchman called Pierre Plantard who later admitted making a number of bogus documents which "proved" the Jesus-Magdalene theory. This in itself undermines the whole infrastructure of Dan Brown's theory.

2. Jesus and Mary Magdalene

Dan Brown says: the marriage of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is a part of historical record.

Reality: Dan Brown bases his claim on a Gnostic document, the Gospel of Philip, written as late as the second half of the third century, over two hundred years after the events it describes. It makes reference to Jesus showing affection for Mary Magdalene. However, taken at face value, this document does not suggest Jesus was married to her, let alone had a child. The fact there is no mention of Jesus being married in any of the four New Testament gospels or in the writings of the apostle Paul cannot simply be dismissed. There is no real historical evidence Jesus was married.

3. The Bible

Dan Brown says: the New Testament is based on fabrications; more than eighty gospels were considered for the New Testament, and yet only a relative few were chosen for inclusion: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The emperor Constantine commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned.

Reality: The four New Testament gospels were not only written (60-70AD) long before the earliest of the gnostic gospels, the gospel of Thomas (150AD), but were already recognised by the early church as authentic records and widely distributed. The Gnostic gospels (written between the 2nd and 4th centuries) are in fact not gospels at all in the sense of the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John which give a coherent historical account of Jesus' life from his birth to his crucifixion and resurrection. One

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only has to read a Gnostic "gospel" and one of the four to see this is self evident. The early church had rejected these Gnostic gospels as bogus long before Constantine and the council of Nicaea. The idea he influenced which books should be in the Bible has no foundation.

The authenticity of the New Testament writings has been confirmed through decades of objective scholarship. Literally thousands of partial and complete ancient manuscripts of the New Testament exist, some as early as 200AD. Anyone can confirm this to be the case.

If Dan Brown had offered his theories in the form of a non-fiction historical treatise they would be rejected as pure speculation. But in the guise of a thriller novel he and his publisher have appealed to the public at large, exploiting the average person's lack of knowledge of Christian history. One could accuse him of dishonesty, but he appears to seriously believe his ideas. The Da Vinci Code may, even so, serve the purpose of arousing interest in discovering the real Jesus Christ. And this where the evidence of history, objectively considered, comes down squarely in favour of the Jesus Christ of the four gospels, as I discovered as an atheist in 1972.

Internet Resources for Dan Brown's 'The Da Vinci Code' (updated Jan 2019)

The Da Vinci Code (Wikipedia)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Da_Vinci_Code

Criticisms of the Da Vinci Code (Wikipedia)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criticism_of_The_Da_Vinci_Code

Crash Goes the Da Vinci Code (Ron Rhodes)

<http://www.leaderu.com/theology/crashdavincicode.html>

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Da Vinci Code (review by Bethel Chapel)

<http://www.bethelchapel.net/Da%20Vinci%20Code.htm>

The Da Vinci Code (review by Russell Grigg)

<https://creation.com/the-da-vinci-code-fiction-masquerading-as-fact>

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Resources

Here are some Internet links and recommended books about persecution and the end-time. While interpreting the prophecies in the Bible can be speculative, as the time of fulfilment draws closer so the picture will become clearer. Most importantly though it is what we need to do now to prepare for tribulation. There is much we can learn, especially from those who have endured persecution.

Internet:

Open Doors

Open Doors was established in 1955 when Brother Andrew, a newly committed Christian, began smuggling Bibles into Eastern Europe. Since then Open Doors has expanded to work in over 70 countries, providing Bibles, training and practical support to the persecuted church.

<https://www.opendoors.org>

Barnabas Fund

Barnabas Fund is an aid agency for the persecuted Church which works in over 60 countries around the world where Christians are marginalised because of their faith.

<https://barnabasfund.org>

World Watch Monitor

World Watch Monitor reports the story of Christians around the world under pressure for their faith. World Watch Monitor is particularly concerned with reporting on the underlying causes of persecution. It aims to connect the dots to reveal the forces behind acts of violence and injustice.

<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org>

Radical Within Reason

Anniesa Hussain and her family sustained a prolonged and violent persecution in Bradford, England, from Islamic purists as a

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consequence of her father's conversion from Islam to Christianity. Anniesa writes a 'deliberate heterodoxy in a world encouraging conformity' and draws attention to the persecution of Christians (and in particular women) within Islamic societies.

<https://radicalwithinreason.com>

British Pakistani Christian Association

The British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA) was born from a single event: in the ashes of churches and homes razed to the ground by angry Islamists who persecuted Pakistani followers of Jesus Christ. It happened in the city of Gojra on August 1st 2009 when a married Christian couple were wrongly accused of using torn shreds of the Koran as confetti at their wedding. This false rumour grew in popularity following a hate message preached by a local mosque. Mob violence then led to the deaths of nine innocent people, 100 destroyed homes and two churches set on fire.

<https://www.britishpakistanichristians.org>

Voice of the Martyrs

Voice of the Martyrs exists to help, love and encourage persecuted Christians by providing Bibles, ministry resources, medical aid and practical assistance. VOM's ministry is inspired by Hebrews 13:3: "Remember the prisoners as if chained with them, those who are mistreated, since you yourselves are in the body also."

<https://vom.com.au>

Creation Science Ministries

Creation Science Ministries International: <https://creation.com/>

Answers In Genesis: <https://answersingenesis.org/>

Institute for Creation Research: <https://www.icr.org/>

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Video

The Final Facts by David Pawson. David addresses the key questions of the end-time: When will Jesus return? How will he return and why? Will it be in secret?

<https://www.davidpawson.org/resources/series/the-final-facts>

Books:

Beyond Suffering Bible NLT (New Living Translation)

Highly recommended.

The Beyond Suffering Bible is the first study Bible to directly address those who suffer and the people who love and care for them. From bestselling author, singer, and radio host Joni Eareckson Tada and the experts at Joni and Friends Christian Institute on Disability, the Beyond Suffering Bible is filled with thousands of notes and features that invite readers into a conversation about suffering and its place in each person's life.

While addressed mainly to those who suffer physically this Bible has much that relates to suffering and persecution generally and how we can respond to it in the strength and grace that God supplies.

<https://www.amazon.com/Beyond-Suffering-Bible-NLT-Struggles/dp/1414395582>

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New Leaf Press, 1991 (this book is out of print but may be available through second-hand book sellers such as Thrift Books).

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