

# PART 1

# Basic Commitments

## PURPOSE OF THIS SECTION:

To make sure that you have received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, and that you are committed to growing in him through God's word and God's family.

## OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS:

### 1. Commitment to Jesus Christ

- ♦ What are you living for?
- ♦ What does it mean to be a Christian?
- ♦ How does one become a Christian?

### 2. Commitment to Grow in Christ

- ♦ Is growth really that important?
- ♦ In what areas should we be growing?
- ♦ What will enable us to grow?

### 3. Commitment to God's Word and God's Family

- ♦ Getting to know the Bible
- ♦ Time alone with God
- ♦ Time together with God

# Introduction to Part 1

I grew up in a house that was built on what used to be a marsh (sort of a swamp without alligators). My family was not aware of this when we moved in, but it became evident shortly thereafter. Cracks appeared in the walls. Doors began sticking in their frames.

For a while, we faithfully patched the walls and planed the doors, but that got old after a few years. The foundation was the problem, and no amount of work on the actual house was going to achieve anything except our constant frustration!

Think of the Christian life in terms of building a house. Where should we begin? Of course, with the *foundation*. A good, strong foundation is essential for quality construction that will last, and this is certainly true as we “build” the Christian life as well. We must establish our faith before we attempt to live it out, and that calls for some foundational commitments.

Consider the following encouragement in Scripture:

*“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness”* (Colossians 2:6-7).

Our first and most important commitment is to Jesus Christ. What does it mean to “receive” him? This is the subject of Chapter 1. Secondly, we need to be committed to growing in Christ. What do we need to know in order to “continue to live your lives in him”? Chapter 2 explores this vital area. Finally, in Chapter 3, we take a look at the primary means of growth—God’s word, the Bible, and God’s family, the church.

# 1

## COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST

*“You can laugh at Christianity, you can mock and ridicule it. But it works. It changes lives. If you trust in Christ, start watching your attitudes and actions, because Jesus Christ is in the business of changing lives.”*

—JOSH McDOWELL, *More Than a Carpenter*

The speaker’s words rang in my ears as I eagerly took in his challenge: “What is the overriding priority of your life? The ultimate goal that guides the decisions that you make? The consuming passion that gives your life a sense of purpose and destiny?” Good questions!

I was attending a Bible conference, and the message that morning was based on Luke 12:15, where Jesus openly declared, “Life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” I had no inclination to argue with such a statement, but I couldn’t help smiling as I recalled the popular bumper sticker that says, “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

I wondered . . . Do people really believe that? Is life for some really nothing more than the accumulation of “toys”? And what exactly did they expect to “win” when they died? It seemed to me that people must have some idea that there is more to life than pursuing “an abundance of possessions”—especially when they discover how elusive contentment is in such a pursuit. But if life is not about getting more stuff, what is it all about? Significant achievements? Exciting experiences? Meaningful relationships?

## WHAT ARE YOU LIVING FOR?

This question was given a clear and confident answer way back in the first century by a man named Saul (later known as Paul, the apostle). At one time this zealous religious leader thought he was doing God a favor by seeking to rid the world of followers of Jesus Christ. But then he encountered this Jesus, and his life was radically changed (see Acts 9). Years later, while sitting in a prison cell, being persecuted for the very faith that he had previously sought to extinguish in others, Paul wrote this: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

To Paul, life was summed up in the person of Jesus Christ. In fact, he went on to declare, “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Philippians 3:8-9).

Wow! Everything else considered garbage? Sounds fanatical, but was he right?

### Whatever works for you, Paul

Initially, we might conclude that Paul’s definition of the meaning of life was merely what was right for *himself*, as he did say, “For *to me*, to live is Christ.”

We live in a world that basically says, “Whatever is true for you may not be true for me.” And the issue is not so much truth, but pragmatism. We don’t ask, “Is it true?” but rather, “Does it work?” Then, of course, we reason that what works for one person may not work for another. Such is our increasingly postmodern way of thinking (what one philosopher has cleverly labeled *Truth Decay*<sup>1</sup>), but let me emphatically state that Christianity is both true and it works—for everybody! At least this is what Paul believed and taught.

Concerning the issue of truth, Paul was crystal-clear: “God . . . wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” He then provided the essence of that truth: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Timothy 2:3-6). If this is indeed the case, then no other pathway to God can be accepted as equally true—regardless of the sincerity or apparent success of those who hold to other ideas. One God, and one mediator who can save us. That’s the truth—and the good news!—according to Paul.

Concerning the issue of whether Jesus makes a difference in people’s lives, Paul had this to say: “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15). While this may sound like a self-deprecating overstatement, Paul knew exactly what he was talking about. He had been transformed from a man consumed with self-righteousness, pride and even murder, into one who exemplified grace, humility and love. Quite a change!

What about you? What are *you* living for? The fact that you are reading this tells me that you either share Paul’s belief that “to live is Christ,” or you want to check it out to see whether he may be right. Nobody wants to waste their life. And if being a Christian is what life is all about, then we owe it to ourselves to find out what that really means.

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?**

If we were to ask people on the street what it means to be a Christian, we would undoubtedly receive a number of conflicting responses. So, let’s take a few minutes to clear up some of the confusion surrounding this important question.

## What being a Christian is not

First of all, *being a Christian is not the result of natural birth*. The thought goes something like this: “My parents used to go to church, so I guess that makes me a Christian.” But that’s not the way it works. The Bible says, “Yet to all who did receive him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13).

Second, *being a Christian is not merely agreeing with certain truths*. The Bible says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (James 2:19). So, obviously, affirming the truth about God doesn’t necessarily mean that one is a Christian. That truth must be embraced in the heart, not just acknowledged in the mind.

Third, *being a Christian is not primarily being a good person*. Christians ought to be the best people the world has ever known, but a virtuous life is not what makes us acceptable to God (besides, how good would one have to be?). In other words, good works don’t save us, as the Bible clarifies, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Finally, *being a Christian is not simply engaging in Christian activities*. As one old-timer used to say, “Going to church don’t make a man a Christian any more than going to a stable makes a man a horse!” Amazingly enough, a person can be heavily involved in Christian activities—even of a profoundly spiritual nature—and yet not be a Christian at all. Jesus made this point shockingly clear: “Many will say to me on that day [the day they expect to be welcomed into heaven], ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers’” (Matthew 7:22-23).

## **What being a Christian is**

Look again at Jesus' response. To those who felt that they had been doing all of the right things, our Lord said, "I never knew you." *That* is the issue. The apostle John put it this way, in a verse we looked at a few moments ago: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). You see, we don't ultimately receive a list of beliefs, a code of ethics, a philosophy of life, or a set of religious practices. We receive *him*—Jesus—and, upon receiving him, we become one of God's children! Let's put it this way:

**Being a Christian is having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ  
and, therefore, being a member of God's family**

It is from this great truth that all the other things being a Christian involves will flow—our beliefs, our lifestyle, and our activities. And I deliberately say "our," for being a Christian is not a private matter. Those who begin a personal relationship with Jesus Christ become "fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (Ephesians 2:19). But this raises a very basic question.

## **HOW DOES ONE BECOME A CHRISTIAN?**

One of the simplest and most helpful ways of explaining how a person can become a Christian follows the letters A, B, C and D.<sup>2</sup>

### **Something to Admit**

The A stands for something to admit, namely that there is something seriously wrong with us that only God can fix. To put it in more traditional terms, we must admit that we are sinners and

in need of God's forgiveness, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But what exactly are we admitting to? What does it mean to be a "sinner"?

To begin with, being a sinner means that we are moral and spiritual failures who indeed "fall short of the glory of God." Granted, we may look pretty good when compared to some people, but how do we compare with, say, Mother Theresa or, better yet, Jesus Christ? The Bible declares that "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10), and we must be willing to admit that we are no exception—no matter how hard we try to be.

Further, being a sinner means being a rebel in God's eyes, as we go about life generally without any regard for God himself—the One to whom we owe everything and must ultimately give an account. In our thoughts, as well as our actions, we reject God's authority over our lives as we go our own way and do our own thing, proving ourselves to be basically self-centered people. As the Bible says, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

All of this has a devastating effect on our relationship to God, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). By "death" the Bible means not only our inevitable physical death, but our ongoing spiritual death as well, which means being alienated from God and the life that he gives, and being "by nature deserving of wrath"<sup>3</sup> (Ephesians 2:3). In other words, we are "without hope and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12), and left incapable of finding true, lasting contentment on our own—no matter how committed we are to living life to the fullest.

Are we willing to admit that, in our failure and rebellion, we have sinned against a perfectly pure and loving God? Do we recognize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves from the consequences of our sin? This goes against the grain of our self-esteem

(“There’s nothing wrong with me”) and self-confidence (“I can take care of it”), but we will never know the joy of a relationship with Jesus Christ until we admit our need for God’s mercy and grace. “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10).

## **Something to Believe**

The B stands for the good news we are to believe. God loves us and is prepared to grant us forgiveness and a completely new life through his Son, Jesus!

Someone has well said, “You and your sins must separate, or you and your God will never come together,” and Jesus has resolved this dilemma for us: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God” (1 Peter 3:18). More specifically, “Christ died for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3)—yours and mine—paying the death penalty that *we* deserve, in order that we can be forgiven and reconciled to God. Incredible!

Think about the implications: First, our sin must be a deeply serious problem. It took nothing less than Jesus, the sinless Son of God, laying down his life for us, to save us from our sins and bring us to God. Let that sink in a moment. But, second, God must love us beyond our wildest imagination. God could have left us to face the judgment we deserve, but he didn’t. Instead, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). What amazing, undeserved love!

But, you might still wonder, couldn’t God love us and forgive us without sending his Son to die in our place? Was such a disturbing act really necessary? The answer is bound up in who God is in his innermost being, as respected Christian leader John Stott explains:

Of course he is love (1 John 4:8, 16), but his love is not sentimental love; it is holy love. How then could God punish sin (as, in justice, he must) without contradicting his love? Or how could God pardon sin (as, in love, he yearned to do) without compromising his justice? . . . This is the divine dilemma that God resolved on the cross. For on the cross,

when Jesus died, God himself in Christ bore the judgment we deserved in order to bring us to the forgiveness we do not.<sup>4</sup>

Who is this Jesus, anyway? How could the death of one man have such radical implications for all people? The last sentence in the quote above begins to reveal the answer: Jesus was no mere man. “The Son is the image of the invisible God . . . For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 1:15; 2:9). Jesus, amazingly, is both human and divine—uniquely qualifying him to be the very Savior we need. As God’s eternal Son, he alone can reconcile us to his Father, just as he said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Obviously, if Jesus was lying, or perhaps out of his mind, concerning who he was and what he could do, God would never have raised him from the dead. But as it stands, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11). And this brings us to the letter C, something to consider.

## **Something to Consider**

Jesus does more than offer us freedom from the consequences of our sin. He demands our allegiance as well. Second Corinthians 5:15 puts it this way: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” Jesus is both Savior and Lord, and we must receive him as such. Rebecca Pippert explains this as she reflects on Lois, a friend of hers who committed her life to Christ:

She came to see that if Jesus is Lord then the only right response to him is surrender and obedience. He is Savior and he is Lord. We cannot separate his demands from his love. We cannot dissect Jesus and relate only to the parts we like or need. Christ died so that

we could be forgiven for managing our own lives. It would be impossible for Lois to thank Christ for dying for her and yet to continue running her own life.<sup>5</sup>

We don't do anyone any favors by passing over this important truth. A personal relationship with Christ is a commitment, not just a blessing. Even some outside the faith have come to realize this, as one writer shares: "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing it is another kind of religion altogether."<sup>6</sup> We must be delighted not only to enjoy God's forgiveness in Christ, but also to follow Jesus as Lord or Master of our lives. As the Bible says, "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6).

## **Something to Do**

And this brings us to the D, which stands for something to do. All of the above can be regarded as true, but if we don't personally receive Jesus as our Savior and Lord, then we miss out on him completely. Have you asked Jesus to come into your life?

Paul explained that what we must do is "turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:21). What is "repentance"? The *New Bible Dictionary* explains it as "not just a feeling sorry, or changing one's mind, but a turning round, a complete alteration of the basic motivation and direction of one's life."<sup>7</sup> Faith, then, is the flip-side of repentance. We turn *from* our life of self-centeredness and self-reliance, and turn *to* God, believing that Jesus died for our sins and rose from the dead, and desiring now to follow him in our lives.

If you have not yet made this absolutely vital commitment, I would urge you to do so right now. God loves you—no matter what you have done in the past—and he longs for you to experience the life that is truly life. Jesus himself said, "I have come that [you] may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10).

While your own words are best, the following sample prayer may be helpful as you commit your life to Jesus Christ, beginning a personal relationship with him:

Dear Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner. Forgive me for my selfishness and pride and help me to change. I believe that you died for my sins—come into my life to cleanse me and make me new. I confess that you are now my Lord—take control of me and help me to live for you from now on. Thank you for who you are and what you have done for me. Amen.

## **How what do I do?!**

If you have sincerely prayed to receive Jesus Christ into your life, whether just now or in the past, some incredible things have happened to you—even if you didn't feel them. Here is a partial list of what is now true about you. I would encourage you to read it aloud:

I have become a child of God and have begun a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (John 1:12-13; Romans 8:16).

I have become a fellow citizen with God's people and a member of God's household (Ephesians 2:19).

I have been set free from the bondage of sin and become a servant of God (Romans 6:22).

I have been justified by God (completely forgiven and declared righteous) and reconciled to him (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:14).

I have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Galatians 2:20).

I have been made alive with Christ (when I used to be dead in sin), and raised up with him (Ephesians 2:5-6).

I have been given new birth into a living hope, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade (1 Peter 1:3-4).

I have received the Holy Spirit, a deposit guaranteeing my inheritance as I now belong to God (Ephesians 1:13-14).

I have been placed into the body of Christ, the church, and gifted by the Spirit to serve others (1 Corinthians 12:7, 12, 27).

I have become a new creation, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for me to do (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:10).

I have received eternal life, which is to know the only true God, and I will never lose that life because I am in Christ (John 17:3; 1 John 5:11-13).

Of course, there is much more to do than just take these statements to heart, and that is the point of the rest of this resource. But one of your next steps as a new believer, according to Jesus, is to make a public profession of your personal faith through water baptism. Shortly after his resurrection, our Lord said to his followers, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . .” (Matthew 28:18-19). The early church did exactly that: “Those who accepted [the] message [about Jesus] were baptized” (Acts 2:41).

The mention of baptism may raise all sorts of questions in your mind, and more help can be found at [www.encounteronline.org/baptized.htm](http://www.encounteronline.org/baptized.htm), but, for now, just know that this decisive step of commitment is a first step—not a declaration that you have mastered the Christian life! In other words, you don’t have to be “good enough” in order to be baptized. You just have to be serious about a commitment to Jesus Christ.

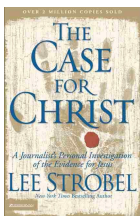
### Questions for review and reflection:

1. In your experience, what sort of things are people living for today?
2. How might you respond to someone who says, “Being a Christian might work for you, but that doesn’t mean it’s the right thing for me. I can experience life to the fullest without becoming a Christian.”
3. Of the four statements about what being a Christian is not, which one(s) have you tended to believe in the past? Why? Can you think of any additional misconceptions?
4. How would you explain the heart of what it means to be a Christian to someone who is not one?
5. When and how did you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord? Did you realize what happened to you at that time, or at some later time in our life?
6. What were some of the obstacles you faced in becoming a Christian, and what enabled you to get over them?

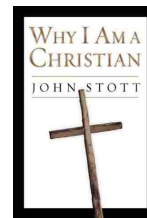
### Bible passages for further study:

Luke 12:15-21; Philippians 3:4-14; Acts 9:1-31; John 1:1-18; Psalm 32

### Helpful resources for further learning:



Is it reasonable to believe in Jesus? Check out Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ*. Similarly, John Stott, who has influenced me more than any other Christian leader, has summed up his commitment to Jesus Christ in *Why I Am a Christian*.



## 2

# COMMITMENT TO GROW IN CHRIST

*“Welcome, child,” he said.  
“Aslan,” said Lucy, “you’re bigger.”  
“That is because you are older, little one,” answered he.  
“Not because you are?”  
“I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”*

—C. S. LEWIS, *The Chronicles of Narnia, Prince Caspian*

There’s something about being alone in my car that gets me singing. I just love driving down the Turnpike singing my heart out as if I were on “American Idol”—that is, until I realize the attention I’ve attracted from the car next to me! At that point, I do my best to fade away in their rear-view mirror.

What gets you singing? A hot shower? A favorite CD? The end of a work week? The anticipation of a good time? For those of us who have begun a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we have something wonderful to sing about—whether we can carry a tune or not! The Bible provides the lyrics: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). What a great song!

Notice that it says we have been given “new birth.” Jesus, when speaking to an inquisitive religious leader one night, was the first to teach this concept when he told the man, “You must be born again” in order to enter God’s kingdom (John 3:7). There is much for us to learn here concerning our need to grow.

## IS GROWTH REALLY THAT IMPORTANT?

It's a remarkable thing about mature adults; they all start out as helpless infants. Spiritually, it is no different. At the moment we receive Jesus Christ into our lives, we are "born again"—starting out as spiritual babies. And just like our earthly parents expected us to grow after we were born, our heavenly Father has the same expectation, and we need to pursue this growth.

### **New birth means the start of a new life**

The Bible tells us that "if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17), and nothing delights our Father more than for us to live out our new life in Christ.

Paul briefly describes what this life is all about in incredibly lofty terms: We are "created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). Unbelievable! We are expected to display something of God's wonderful character in our lives! What's more, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him" (2 Peter 1:3). This is an extremely important truth for us to understand. Just as an infant possesses the capacity to grow into a mature adult, so we as Christians are fully equipped to grow up to be godly men and women. We have everything we need to live our new life.

### **New birth means the end of an old life**

However, our growth will not be automatic—nor will it come without a struggle. For, unlike a physical baby, our new birth marks the end of an old life, and that life can still be a problem for us if we allow it to be.

Before we received Christ, we were actually slaves to sin, “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Ephesians 2:3). But Jesus has set us free from this bondage and enabled us to live the new life that we have been speaking about. Therefore, we need to “count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus,” not letting sin control us any longer (Romans 6:11). We will explore this issue further in Chapter 8. For now, just realize that we need to be moving forward into our new life—not remaining in our old one any longer (Ephesians 4:17-24).

## **I refuse to grow up!**

Did you ever say that when you were a kid? What about more recently? A car I was driving behind one day proudly displayed the above declaration, and I suppose there is a certain appeal to it. Little kids are basically care-free, have nothing to do but play all day, seem to have an endless supply of energy, and are considered “cute” by virtually everybody! But to remain a small child—if that were possible—also presents some serious problems.

Have you ever noticed how easily little ones can be manipulated, deceived, or frightened? They are incredibly vulnerable. Further, as cute as kids are, they really aren’t very useful or productive members of society. They will be eventually, but only as they *grow*. Are you getting the picture? Being born anew by committing our lives to Jesus Christ, but then refusing or neglecting to grow, doesn’t make any sense at all. As spiritual infants, this only puts us at risk and renders us basically useless to God. And, on top of that, it denies the reality of our new birth. Our relationship with Christ, in order for it to be all that God wants it to be, needs to grow.

Is growth really that important? Billy Graham, perhaps the world’s most respected and admired Christian alive today, had this to say when reflecting on what he might do differently if

he had his life to live over again: “For one thing, I would speak less and study more, and I would spend more time with my family. . . . I would also spend more time in spiritual nurture, seeking to grow closer to God so I could become more like Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

## IN WHAT AREAS SHOULD WE BE GROWING?

Is it enough just to be committed to grow? No. We also need to have a basic understanding of what our growth should look like. There are certainly more than this, but here are four key areas of growth in the Christian life.

### Growing in grace

“Amazing Grace” is one of the classic hymns of our faith. The third verse concludes, “Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.” The point is an important one: We are not only saved by grace, but we are to live by it as well. Indeed, we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). But what does that mean?

Grace is basically love to the undeserving. It stands in direct opposition to the idea that we are somehow worthy of God’s love—or must try to be. And this is where we often struggle. As Christians, it’s easy to fall into the trap of basing our relationship with Christ on our performance rather than on his grace. Then, when we blow it (as we’re apt to do at times), we feel undeserving of God’s love and forgiveness. So we try to make it up to him. But we can’t seem to shake the sense that God is having a hard time putting up with us. In fact, we think he may even give up on us altogether. Is this any way for a Christian to live? No!

Growing in grace means learning to live confidently in God’s unfailing love.<sup>9</sup> We can *never* be deserving of his love, and yet *nothing* will ever separate us from it if we are in Christ

(really—see Romans 8:31-39). Jerry Bridges explains that “God is not keeping score, granting or withholding blessings on the basis of our performance. The score has already been permanently settled by Christ.”<sup>10</sup> This frees us to live for God because we love him—not because we have to measure up in some way. “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

## **Growing in Knowledge**

“A mind is a terrible thing to waste,” goes the slogan, and this holds true for the Christian mind as well. We are to be “growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). Of course, knowledge alone can lead to being prideful (1 Corinthians 1:8), but enthusiasm for the Lord that is not based on knowledge can be a serious problem as well (Romans 10:2). As John Stott puts it, “Whenever the heart is full and the head is empty, dangerous fanaticisms arise.”<sup>11</sup> What, then, does it mean to grow in knowledge?

Peter calls us to “grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18), and he is referring both to the deepening experience of Christ and the increasing understanding of his truth. That is to say, we need to be studying the Bible both for friendship with God and facts about him and his ways. This is exactly what Paul prayed for:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe (Ephesians 1:17-19).

Such knowledge is vital for successful Christian living, as we shall see in Part 2 of this resource.

## Growing in faith

Faith is at the heart of Christianity: “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). And by faith we mean *trusting God*, believing what he has promised and relying upon him at all times—even when life seems to be caving in on us. Paul told the church in Thessalonica, “your faith is growing more and more” (1 Thessalonians 1:3), and the same needs to be said of us.

How does our faith grow? By closing our eyes tightly and mustering up as much optimistic thinking as we can? No. Faith really has everything to do with what we were just learning about—knowledge. Our ability to trust God increases as we come to know him better (which is true of any relationship, if you think about it). Great faith is a result of great knowledge of God and his word.

Abraham, a believer who lived hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, is a classic example of this truth. God promised Abraham some pretty fantastic things—not the least of which was the birth of a son when he was about a hundred years old and his barren wife was not far behind. And yet, notice how the Bible describes his faith: “Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised” (Romans 4:20-21). Such faith should be increasingly evident in our lives as well.

## Growing in love

What is this thing called love? One popular song a number of years ago referred to it as “a second hand emotion.” Is that all it is?! When most of us think of the word, thoughts of romance probably dominate our minds. But if we are commanded to “love [our] enemies” (Matthew

5:44), then love has to be something altogether different than what we've been led to believe.

Let's allow the Bible to describe it for us:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for one another. If any of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth (1 John 3:16-18).

Real love, then, involves gladly meeting the needs of other people at our own cost (which includes the giving of money, possessions, encouragement, time to listen to others, and perhaps even our very life). This is the kind of love we are to see “increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else” (1 Thessalonians 3:12). It means living with our eyes open and off of ourselves, enabling us to become aware of other people in need and then serving them in love. Of course, this is a pretty tall order for creatures who struggle with selfishness, but God has made it possible for us to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2), and we need to be doing this more and more.

### **In a word: Christlikeness**

All four of the above areas of growth—grace, knowledge, faith and love—are most beautifully and perfectly expressed in Jesus Christ. And ultimately, the goal of spiritual growth (and for that matter, our whole life) is to be like Jesus, so that we may serve others in love just as he did. The marvelous spectrum of Christlikeness (which we could also call godliness or holiness; see 1 Peter 1:15-16) can be found in the following passage—along with some wonderful words of encouragement for us as we grow in Christ. Let these words penetrate deeply into your heart and mind:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance,

godliness, and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:5-8; 10-11).

Do you want to be an effective and productive Christian? Grow! Would you like to know without a doubt that you are in Christ? Grow! Do you long for spiritual stability and a rich welcome into God's kingdom? *Grow!*

## WHAT WILL ENABLE US TO GROW?

The commitment has been made. The goal has been identified. Now what do we do? What exactly will enable us to grow in our relationship with the Lord?

The answer to this question can be found in a proper understanding of what a newborn baby requires in order to grow. Think about it. What does that little life really need? A fancy crib for a good night's sleep? A stuffed Winnie the Pooh for a sense of security? A library of Dr. Seuss books for a little intellectual stimulation?! These are all nice, but I think we would agree that an infant really only needs two basic things in order to grow: Proper nourishment and loving care. And while these are particularly vital for a newborn, they are also necessary to be healthy and growing at any age. We will never outgrow our need for food or our need for relationships.

Spiritually speaking, our basic needs are identical. We need the proper nourishment of God's word, and the loving care of God's family.

### God's word, ~~the~~ Bible

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2). The “spiritual milk” in this verse

can be identified by the preceding verses, which speak of “the living and enduring word of God” (1:23), “the word of the Lord” (1:25), and “the word that was preached to you” (also 1:25).

Beyond that clarification, the message is simple and straightforward. If we want to “grow up in [our] salvation,” we need to feed on God’s word. And, notice, we are not speaking of some sort of food that we must be *forced* to eat because (as our parents used to say), “it’s good for you”! We have “tasted that the Lord is good,” and so we eagerly and frequently feed on his word. Job had the right attitude: “I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread” (Job 23:12).

## **God’s family, the church**

But, of course, newborn babies are not simply given a few years’ supply of milk and told to go out and make a life for themselves! They are immediately cared for by others who protect them and provide for them. In fact, it is impossible for infants to grow without this loving care.

Spiritual growth is no different, and this is where God’s family, the church, comes in.

Contrary to what we tend to think, a church is not a building or an organization; it is an expression of “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12), a family of brothers and sisters in Christ who belong to one another (Romans 12:5, 10). To attempt to survive outside of this family is to pull the plug on our spiritual growth and leave us vulnerable to the influence of an ungodly world.

Are you committed to God’s family? Have you found a church home where you can be nurtured in God’s word and brought to maturity in Christ? No other environment can do this. Paul explains that only as we are built up in the body of Christ can we “reach unity in the faith

and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). He goes on:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:14-16).

There we have it. The body of Christ is a family that grows together as we feed on the truth and live out what it says. To be committed to grow, therefore, is to be committed to God’s word and God’s family. We will take a closer look at both of these in the next chapter.

### **No pain, no gain?**

Before we proceed, though, let me add a final word of clarification: Our growth will not always come easy. In fact, it is often when we face difficult circumstances that we grow the most. But don’t lose heart at the thought of this. Rather, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4).

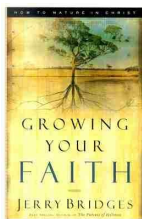
## Questions for review and reflection:

1. What would be some of the consequences of a new Christian not growing in his or her relationship with Jesus Christ?
2. Of the four areas of Christian growth mentioned in this chapter, which one do you struggle with the most? The least? Why?
3. What are some practical things you can be doing to experience more growth in each of the four areas mentioned?
4. How would you explain to someone why it is so important for Christians to regularly spend time learning and doing what the Bible teaches?
5. In what specific ways has involvement in a local church helped you to grow in your faith?
6. Who is someone who has influenced you in your spiritual growth, and what did they do that encouraged you?

## Bible passages for further study:

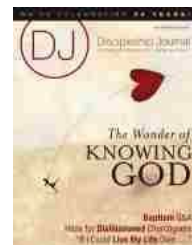
John 3:1-21; 1 Peter 1:3-2:3; Ephesians 4:1-16; Colossians 3:1-17

## Helpful resources for further learning:



Jerry Bridges has written many helpful books to help us grow. *Growing Your Faith* draws from all of them. A bi-monthly magazine rather than a book, *Discipleship Journal* has been helping Christians grow for 25 years.

[www.navpress.com/Magazines/DJ/](http://www.navpress.com/Magazines/DJ/)



## 3

# COMMITMENT TO GOD'S WORD and God's Family

*“Be disciplined in seeking God daily through Bible reading and prayer, and throw yourself wholeheartedly into the life, worship, fellowship and witness of your church. For these things will greatly encourage and strengthen you, and your spiritual growth will be natural and steady.”*

—JOHN STOTT, *Christian Basics*

**H**ave you ever walked into a bookstore or a library and realized the incredible number of books that have been written? You can find one on virtually any subject—from aardvarks to zymurgy (whatever *that* is!). And while many books can stir up our emotions, inform our minds, or modify our behavior, there is only one book throughout all of human history that can transform every area of our lives. That book is the Bible.

## GETTING TO KNOW THE BIBLE

As we emphasized in the previous chapter, the Bible is essential for our spiritual growth. There is no way around it, just as there is no way around having to eat regularly in order to live and grow. And besides, as I indicated above, the Bible is a life-changing book that you will *want* to read and study—once you figure out how to do that effectively (see Chapter 9 for a simple approach). Therefore, let me walk you through a basic orientation of this powerful best-seller from God.

## No library card needed

To begin with, the term “Bible” comes from a word simply meaning “book.” However, the Bible is actually a library of 66 books and letters written over a period of about 1,500 years by more than 40 human authors who came from a variety of backgrounds, writing in different places and at different times, and in three different languages.

This library that we call the Bible (or Scripture) is divided into two main sections. The first, called the Old Testament, contains thirty-nine books that were all written *before* Jesus Christ was born. The second, called the New Testament, contains twenty-seven books and letters that were all written *after* Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Further, each book in the Bible was later divided into chapters and verses, such as “John 3:16,” which means “the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16.” Think of these numbers as an address, telling you where a certain verse “lives” in the Bible.

All sixty-six books of the Bible are beautifully related to each other by a single, unifying theme: Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. He is the central character of the book, and his death on the cross for our sins is the central event. The Old Testament essentially declares, “The Savior is coming,” while the New Testament records that “The Savior has come.”

Jesus himself said, “You study the [Old Testament] Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you possess eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). The New Testament then continues this focus with even more clarity. The book of John, for example, was written “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Clearly, if reading or studying the Bible does not draw us closer to Jesus, then we must be doing something wrong.

## Who really wrote the Bible?

We have already noted that various human authors were involved in writing the books of Scripture, but this is only part of the story. For the Bible itself says, “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). So which is it? Did men write the Bible or did God? The answer, if you’ll allow your head to spin a bit, is *both*.

“Above all,” we read in 2 Peter 1:20-21, “you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophets own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” What this begins to reveal is that the Spirit of God directed the human authors so that, using their own individual personalities and experiences, they composed and recorded exactly what God wanted to say to us.

## Can we trust the Bible?

What support is there for the claim that the Bible is ultimately God’s word? Here are a few things to consider (for more detail, go to [www.encounteronline.org/trustthebible.htm](http://www.encounteronline.org/trustthebible.htm)):

1. *The claims of its authors.* As we saw above, the human writers occasionally testify that their teaching is from God. For example, Paul said, “you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).
2. *The unity of its parts.* How could so many authors (over 40 of them), with such different backgrounds (from educated kings to unschooled fishermen), and over so many years (1,500 or more), be in such agreement without God’s help?

3. *The accuracy of its transmission.* The biblical text we now have is reliable and accurate—essentially identical to the original documents. Nothing significant has been lost or changed throughout the years, contrary to what many people assume.
4. *The preservation of its existence.* The Bible is the all-time best-seller, throughout all generations and virtually all over the world—and this despite numerous attempts to destroy or discredit it. God has preserved Scripture for us.
5. *The uniqueness of its teachings.* What the Bible teaches about the nature of God, the person of Christ, the dignity and depravity of humans, and the plan of salvation, is truly wonderful, if not mystifying. Could we have come up with such ideas?
6. *The reliability of its history.* Archaeology has confirmed much of the history recorded in the Bible, proving it to be incredibly reliable. If we can trust it in on matters of history, then there is no good reason to doubt what it teaches about God and salvation.
7. *The soundness of its science.* While the Bible is not a science textbook, it does not contain any scientific absurdities. Rather, Scripture affirms many scientific facts long before humans figured them out (e.g., the earth being round rather than flat).
8. *The fulfillment of its prophecies.* Who but God can perfectly predict the future? (See Isaiah 41:22-23; 48:3.) The Bible contains hundreds of detailed prophecies, many of which have already been fulfilled (esp. regarding the promised Messiah).
9. *The testimony of its main character.* Jesus had absolute confidence in Scripture, believing it to be the authoritative word of God (see Matthew 5:17-18; 15:1-6; and John 10:35). Ultimately, we should trust the Bible because he did.

10. *The influence of its message.* The Bible has been changing lives for centuries, and in all corners of the world, and those changes are genuine and lasting—even in the face of persecution. How can this be explained unless God is really in it?

So, there are some good reasons why we can trust that the Bible is what it claims to be—the word of God. But it is not enough just to rest assured in this belief. For if the Bible is from God, we should be committed to knowing, living and sharing what it teaches. God’s word carries God’s authority, and our lives should reflect that fact. And this brings us to one last question about the Bible.

### **Why was the Bible written?**

The Bible is a precious gift from God. Without it, we could never discover what God is really like, nor could we find the answers to life’s ultimate questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What is going to happen to me when I die?

However, the two primary reasons why the Bible was written can be found in 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Here Paul is speaking to his close friend, Timothy:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from who you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

There we have it. The Bible was, first of all, written so that we can find “salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” Without this book, we would be hopelessly lost concerning how our sins could be forgiven and how we could enjoy a relationship with the God who made us. Second, the Bible was written in order that, once saved, we can be “thoroughly equipped for

every good work.” It is in God’s word that we discover what it means to love him and to love other people as he desires for us to do. No other book can tell us these things.

## TIME ALONE WITH GOD

In light of all this, let’s get intensely practical. We have a basic grasp of what the Bible is all about. We believe with confidence that it is God’s word, written for the purpose of pointing us to Christ and the life that he offers. What should we do now? *Read it!*—preferably in a good contemporary translation (I have been using Today’s New International Version, a recent revision of the popular New International Version; [www.tniv.info](http://www.tniv.info)). The most basic context for reading Scripture is in our regular time alone with God.

### Why spend time alone with God?

As A. W. Tozer explains, “The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring [people] to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God.”<sup>12</sup> Our Lord enjoyed such intimacy with his Father in heaven, as he “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). This was deeply important to him, and it should be a priority for us as well.

What should this time involve? There are no rules or limitations. Just remember that you are nurturing a relationship—not crossing something off of your “to do” list! Be creative as you seek to grow closer to God (lately, I have enjoyed praying while I go for my morning walk). At the same time, because God has revealed himself most completely in the Bible, you should probably always include some time of listening to God in his word, and responding back to him through prayer (topics we will explore further in Chapter 9). If you’re not sure where to begin, use the Bible passages listed at the end of each chapter.

## Some practical considerations

While you will want to avoid being legalistic about your time alone with God, there are a few questions you should ask yourself as you plan to meet regularly with the Lord:

1. *When is the best time of the day for me?* Some of you are “morning persons”; others of you don’t come alive until after dark. No particular time is more “spiritual” than any other. Just make sure you choose a time when you can be at your best (“quiet times” shouldn’t be so quiet that you fall asleep on God!).
2. *Where is the best location?* Some of you can read and think in the midst of chaos. I can’t. Jesus opted for “lonely places,” and that’s probably a good guideline. Find some place where you can shut everything else out and give God your complete attention for awhile.
3. *How can I prevent distractions?* For me, turning off my computer helps. If you have kids, let them know you are spending time alone with God for awhile, and have your spouse or someone else watch them. Whatever your situation is, do your best to protect that time.
4. *How much time can I realistically set aside for this?* I would strongly encourage you to set a small goal at first. It sounds great to say, “I’m going to spend an hour each day with God,” but you might get discouraged pretty quickly when you miss a day—and give up altogether when you miss another. Keep in mind that our Lord is not keeping score. He merely wants you to spend some time with him on a regular basis so that your relationship can grow deeper.
5. *What if I don’t feel like it?* Often your time alone with God will be great. But sometimes you may feel spiritually “dry,” or even wonder if God has abandoned you. Don’t give up hope! At those times, try reading Psalm 13 or Psalm 42 or Psalm 73, and know that you are in good company. Tell God how you are feeling, and ask him to restore your passion

for him and his word. Remember that healthy relationships require commitment and discipline.

## TIME TOGETHER WITH GOD

Having said all of the above, let's not lose sight of the fact that we are members of God's family—not spiritual loners. While time alone with God is vital for a healthy, growing relationship with Jesus Christ, time *together* with God is equally indispensable. If we are truly committed to God's word then we will make it a priority to be deeply involved together with our brothers and sisters in Christ, for the Bible knows of no other kind of Christian.

### Do we have to join a local church?

When we speak of God's family, we are referring to what the Bible calls “the body of Christ” or, quite simply, “the church.” Jesus himself declared, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18), and by that he meant that he would be continually working to “purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). We are part of his people, but so are Christians in every corner of the world, both now and throughout the ages (what is sometimes called the universal or invisible church). How then can we realistically be “deeply involved together” in such a huge family of believers?

The answer is found in a wonderful thing we call the local church. We are to regularly “come together as a church” (1 Corinthians 11:18), in a particular locale, so that we can “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24). There are no exceptions to this, as Paul clarifies: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Did you catch that? *Each one of you*. Elsewhere, the apostle says almost the

same thing: “So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). These realities are made visible only when we are active in a local gathering of people committed to Jesus Christ and to each other.

## **What should we look for in a local church?**

Because the church in which you end up sinking your roots will have a profound impact on your spiritual life, I would urge you to make a careful and prayerful choice. So what should you be looking for as you decide? Basic considerations might include denomination, size, worship style, what is offered for kids and youth, and distance from your home.

However, the most important thing to find out is what a local body believes about the Bible, for this will affect everything else about them. According to Scripture, the church is to be “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), and therefore any worshiping community that you are considering joining should believe that the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is God’s truth written for our learning and obedience.

But don’t stop there, for a high view of Scripture should reveal itself in a number of practical ways. Look also for the following commitments:

1. *A commitment to exalting Jesus Christ.* The Bible clarifies that “[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18). So, first of all, look for a church that is noticeably Christ-centered, seeking to obey Jesus in every area of life (Matthew 28:20), and worshiping him in various meaningful ways (including prayer, communion or the Lord’s Supper, and singing). “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (Colossians 3:16).

2. *A commitment to evangelizing the unchurched.* A healthy church also has a passion to share the good news about Jesus Christ with others—both in their own community and around the world. Jesus himself said, “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8), and “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning [right where you are]” (Luke 24:47). Find out what a church is doing to bring people into a saving relationship with Christ and how you can be an active part of this outreach (we’ll explore this in detail in Part 4 of this resource).
3. *A commitment to exemplifying Christ’s humility.* Every church has at least one leader, but a healthy church will have a team of leaders marked by humility and integrity. This team is to shepherd God’s flock, “not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3). Find a church whose leaders exemplify godly character (see 1 Timothy 3:1-12; Titus 1:5-9), setting the tone for the entire church as an authentic, loving community of Christians.
4. *A commitment to equipping God’s people.* The role of church leadership is “to equip God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12). This is accomplished through the study, teaching and preaching of God’s word (2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2), and therefore these activities should abound in the church. Further, a healthy church equips members for all of life—not just those areas we consider “spiritual.” Find out, for example, what a church is doing to help people build strong marriages and families and to live out their faith at home, at school, and on the job.
5. *A commitment to encouraging one another.* Opportunities for building deep and satisfying relationships should also abound in the church. People should be “meeting

together” for the purpose of “encouraging one another” (Hebrews 10:25). A healthy church provides for genuine fellowship (usually through smaller groups), prays with and for each other, and enables people to “use whatever gift [they] have received to serve others” (1 Peter 4:10). Find out if the church is marked by mutual love (John 13:34-35), and whether opportunities exist for you to use your gifts to serve others.

6. *A commitment to extending God’s love.* “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:9-10). A healthy church is, last but not least, one that truly cares about the needs of people, including the poor (Galatians 2:10). Find out what a church is doing to extend God’s love beyond themselves into their community by meeting various needs, and be prepared to join right in with your financial support and active service.

While you will never find a church that is perfectly fulfilling all of the above, do your best to find one that is actively seeking to do so, and *get involved!*

And let me offer one last piece of advice, courtesy of Joshua Harris, in his helpful little book, *Stop Dating the Church!*:

Find a church you can be excited about. Of course, you’ll want your church to grow and improve (as you yourself hopefully will!). But if it’s the one for you, you should be ready to join it ‘as is’—that is, join it with faith that God is at work. Leave your gripes and complaints at the door. Those attitudes will only detract from your experience, limit your involvement, and weaken the church’s unity.”<sup>13</sup>

In other words, give yourself wholeheartedly to a local expression of God’s family that is passionate about God’s word, and see how God will use you to make a difference in the world.

There is no better way to live!

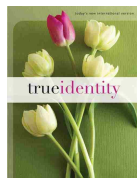
## Questions for review and reflection:

1. What would the Christian life be like if the Bible had never been written?
2. What compelling reasons would you share with someone who asks you why you trust the Bible?
3. In your personal experience, what have been the most persistent obstacles to spending time alone with God? How have you been able to overcome them?
4. How does your time alone with God impact the time you spend with other Christians? What about the other way around?
5. How would you respond to a fellow believer who feels that local church involvement is not that important?
6. A friend from out-of-town calls. Great news—she has just become a Christian and wants to get involved in a good church! What would you encourage her to look for?

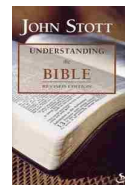
## Bible passages for further study:

Psalm 19; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Psalm 63; Acts 2:41-47; Hebrews 10:19-25

## Helpful resources for further learning:



If you don't have a Bible in a good, contemporary translation, start there. I recommend the TNIV, which comes in a special version for women, *True Identity*, and for men, *Strive*. You should also know about [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com), where you can access other translations for free (such as the ESV, NLT, NASB, and even the popular *Message*). To learn more about the Bible, see John Stott, *Understanding the Bible*. For encouragement regarding the local church, I recommend Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church! Fall in Love with the Family of God*.



## Endnotes for Part 1

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Groothuis, *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000). From a secular viewpoint, see Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> An approach first encountered in David Watson, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1982) 154-55.

<sup>3</sup> “Wrath” sounds pretty harsh, even cruel. But as John Stott explains, “The wrath of God has never meant that he is malicious, bad tempered or vindictive, but rather that he hates evil and refuses to compromise with it” (*Why I Am a Christian* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003] 84). And, really, this is good news! Would we really want a God who tolerates evil forever? Could there even be a heaven if God didn’t deal decisively with sin?

<sup>4</sup> Stott, *Why I Am a Christian* 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1979) 47-48.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 121.

<sup>7</sup> “Repentance” in *New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1982) 1018.

<sup>8</sup> Billy Graham, *Just As I Am* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 723-724.

<sup>9</sup> The subtitle for the deeply encouraging book by Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>11</sup> John Stott, *Christian Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 41.

<sup>12</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill: Christian Publications, 1982) 10.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church! Fall in Love with the Family of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004) 95-96.