



International Church The Garden

“Essentials of Our Identity”

June, 2024

I. Core Essentials: “We consider belief in these essentials to be the core and summation of our Christian identity”

- a. The Word of God
- b. God the Father
- c. Jesus the Son
- d. The Holy Spirit *[includes Spiritual Baptism and Gifts]*
- e. The Human Condition
- f. Salvation Through Faith *[includes New Birth and Resurrection]*
- g. The Church *[includes Communion, Physical Baptism, Marriage]*
- h. A Historic Summation of the Christian Faith: “The Nicene & Apostles Creed”

II. The Word of God

What is the Word of God?

A personal understanding of God is available to human beings in the special revelation of the Christian Bible, which describes God’s activity in nature, history, and time. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction and reveals the principles by which God expects us to live. It is, therefore, and will remain, the supreme standard by which all human conduct and religious opinion should be judged. Further, all Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the ultimate focus of this special revelation. Thus, the Bible is the foundation upon which the Christian faith is built, and from which the core values and worldview of the Christian are derived.

By special revelation, we mean that God empowered the authors of the Bible, enabling those persons to receive the knowledge (revelation) of God’s redemptive plan for humanity. Additionally, both the authors of Scripture, and Scripture itself, were and are inspired. By inspired, we mean that the influence of the Holy Spirit on the authors of Scripture enabled them to record this special revelation accurately and faithfully. These two manifestations of the Holy Spirit, revelation and inspiration, thus render Scripture, the Word of God.

The Christian Bible is comprised of two parts and sixty-six individual books. The two parts consist of the Old Testament (OT), written in Hebrew and the New Testament (NT), written in Greek. The Old Testament is divided into three parts: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

The New Testament is itself divided into four parts: the Gospels and Acts, the Letters of Paul, the

General Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. Finally, the Word of God is inerrant, meaning it is without error in the truths that it affirms.

III. God the Father

Who is God the Father?

God the Father is the first person of the Trinity. By Trinity, we mean that God exists in three forms: God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three persons comprise the one unique and true God: “Hear, O’ Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

We may know, in some small way, the nature of God the Father as both His attributes and actions are described in Scripture. First, the Father possesses certain attributes: spirituality, personality, life, omnipotence, constancy, moral purity, integrity, and love. By spirituality, we mean that God is spirit, not comprised of matter or of a physical nature. Thus, God is not bound by physical limitations. God possesses personality, in that He is a unique individual, and not an abstraction (God has given Himself a name, for example: “I am” [YHWH]). Therefore, because God is a personal being, we may enter into a personal relationship with Him. God is characterized by life: a “Living God.” God exists, has existed, and will always exist. However, as we derive our life from God, God does not derive His life from any other creature but is the wellspring and creator of life. God is infinite, meaning that God is not only unlimited and can not be limited. God is thus omnipresent (not bound by space nor time), timeless (God has no beginning or end, but exists in perfect eternity), omnipotent (unlimited in power, knowledge, and capability), and constant (unchanging, undiminishing, and unfailingly faithful). Finally, God is the essence and highest standard of purity, integrity, and love. Therefore, our standards of holiness and conduct are derived from the Godly examples of such as described in Scripture.

We may also know God through His actions. God is Creator, meaning that God created all existence. Indeed, the first line of the first book of the Bible states that, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). All things, all matter, all spirit, all the universe is thus a creation of God. As God created all things, God also preserves and guides all things to His intended purpose. This includes God’ providential work of mercy in the person of Christ, His continual act of shepherding His church, Scripture, and creation, and the abiding presence of His Holy Spirit.

IV. Jesus the Son

Who is Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, yet God, the second person of the Trinity. Jesus was begotten from the Father. Thus, He is fully divine. However, He was also born of the virgin Mary, lived a mortal life, and died upon the cross. Thus, He was also fully human. Christ, as a person of the Trinity, was co-equal with God, yet forsook this divine status for the sake of humanity: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5–8). However, Christ was not bound by death, rose on third day, was witnessed by many, and once again ascended unto God: “Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the

name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9–11).

The death and resurrection of Christ accomplished the Salvation of humanity. Christians refer to this act as the Atonement. By Atonement, we mean the payment of a debt. In this case, the payment for sins committed against a holy God. To be more specific, it is fully defined as Sacrificial Atonement. Christ functioned both as High Priest, who offered the sacrifice (an OT office), and the sacrifice itself, a once-for-all substitutionary offering made to God for the repentance of sins, all sins, the sins of the world. We are thus reconciled to God, and able to enter a relationship with Him, despite our own sins and failings: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). The Atonement, therefore, also demonstrates God’s love, His justice, and His triumph over the forces of sin, death, and evil.

V. The Holy Spirit

Who is the Holy Spirit, what are the Gifts of the Spirit, and what is Baptism in the Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, and the divine agent in our personal relationship with God. The Spirit is active within the lives of believers and is resident within the believer. It is primarily through the Holy Spirit that we feel God’s presence, and through which the Christian life is given a special tangibility. The Spirit is co-equal with the Father and the Son, and shares in the attributes of each. For example, the Spirit was at work during creation: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:1–2). The Spirit was also at work in the prophets of the OT: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things that have now been announced to you through those who brought you good news by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look!” (1 Peter 1:10–12). The Spirit is also the source of scriptural inspiration: “All scripture is inspired by God, God breathed [literally in Greek, “God-spirited”] and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Additionally, the Holy Spirit is responsible for the believer’s Baptism in the Spirit. This spiritual baptism (accompanying, yet distinct from physical baptism) is a renewal and quickening of the Christian’s inner-self: “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4–7). The Holy Spirit, in full measure, was poured out upon the church during Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), and has bestowed upon the Church the Gifts of the Spirit, which are intended for both the edification of the individual and the community: “Now there are ***varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit***; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who distributes all of them, just as He determines. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit ***the message of***

wisdom, and to another *the message of knowledge* according to the same Spirit, to another *faith* by the same Spirit, to another *gifts of healing* by the one Spirit, to another *the working of miracles*, to another *prophecy*, to another *the discernment of spirits*, to another *different kinds of tongues (languages)*, to another *the interpretation of tongues*. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses” (1 Corinthians 12:1–11).

VI. The Human Condition

What is the human condition?

Human beings were created by God in the Image of God. That humans are created means that humanity has no independent existence; we came into being because God willed that it be so. We may declare ourselves to be “independent,” and conduct our lives as if we are, but this belief does not alter the fact that our very lives, every breath we take, is a gift of the Creator. Humanity, therefore, is an integral part of God’s creation. However, we are not the pinnacle of creation, nor are we unlimited in our power and capabilities. Rather, we are limited beings, of limited will and capability, and each one of us is dependent upon God for our lives and destiny.

Humanity is, however, distinct among God’s physical creation in that we are made in the Image of God. This likeness did not change as a result of sin; its presence is inseparably connected to the human condition. By Image, we refer to something that the human is, not has or does. Thus, although through this Image we bear some of the attributes of God to a lesser degree, ultimately it is a reminder that we belong to God. Scripture illustrates this in Mark 12:13–17. Jesus asks for a Roman coin. Upon it was stamped the image of Caesar, his own likeness, his personal image. Thus, Jesus says, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” As the coin bore the image of Caesar upon it, ultimately it belonged to him. As we bear the image of our Creator, so too do we belong to that Creator. This also means that we are able to enter into a personal relationship with God. Indeed, we are only *fully human* when we do so. Finally, this Image is universal in humankind: no race, tribe, people, or culture bear the Image more so than another.

Despite this, humanity still exists under the power of sin, and within a fallen world. The Bible is explicit concerning the universality of this sin: “What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written, ‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one’” (Romans 3:9–12). We all need a savior.

VII. Salvation

What is Salvation through Faith?

As humanity exists under the power of sin (fallenness), the Atonement of Christ was, and remains, necessary for its Salvation. There are two major aspects to the human problem of fallenness. First, fallenness indicates a broken relationship with God. Humanity has failed to fulfill divine expectations by transgressing the laws of God and offending His justice. These transgressions result in a state of guilt before God (we stand guilty of sin in a legal/judicial sense). Second, the very nature of humanity has

been corrupted by sin, both individually and corporately. However, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ made it possible for human beings to be declared innocent before a holy God and enables us to re-enter into communion with Him. This declaration of innocence and re-establishment of relationship is called Salvation.

Salvation has five primary aspects: Conversion, Justification, New Birth, Sanctification, and Glorification. Conversion is the first step in the Christian life and involves the turning away from all sin in repentance and turning toward Christ in faith: “Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19–20). Conversion, then, includes both repentance (the unbeliever’s turning away from, and rejection of, sin), and faith (turning toward Christ, acknowledging His Atonement, and accepting His sovereignty over our lives).

The result of Conversion is Justification before God. By Justification we mean that as a consequence of the believer’s repentance and faith, we stand before God no longer as guilty of transgressions, but as one declared innocent (a “not-guilty verdict”). Justification is thus the pronouncement of God that the sinner is now righteous (innocent) in His sight. This is our new identity. It is critically important, however, to note that the Justification comes by faith through grace; it is not something we earn, but is available to us through the atoning sacrifice of Christ: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Accompanying Conversion and Justification, the believer experiences a New Birth. By New Birth, we mean God’s transformation of the inner-self, and the giving of a new spiritual vitality and life direction. New Birth thus results in a new creation: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:17– 19). New Birth, therefore, involves the reversal of a person’s natural tendencies, is a gift of God, and results in the restoration of the intended human condition: in relationship with God. Based on biblical precedent and Christian tradition, this New Birth is symbolized by total immersion in (and emergence from) water: Physical Baptism.

Salvation also involves the ongoing work of Sanctification. By Sanctification, we mean the continuing work of God, through the Holy Spirit, in the life of the believer. Through the process of Sanctification (a lifelong process), the believer is made more holy. By holy we mean that the believer’s moral status is brought into closer alignment with their new legal status. We have been declared innocent through Justification, yes. But we are all still simply human and susceptible to sin (we do not become “superhumans”). However, following Conversion, a newness of life is bestowed upon the believer. This newness instills within us the desire to become more morally aligned to God: we wish to sin no more; we wish to grieve the Holy Spirit no more; we wish to narrow the distance between us and a perfectly holy and righteous God. Through Sanctification, the work done by Jesus Christ is applied to the life of the believer with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We can become more able to resist sin, although we ourselves will never become perfect.

Finally, we as Christians hope for the world to come, the life everlasting. This final state is called Glorification, although it is a manifold concept: both individual and corporate. It is individual in that it involves the spiritual perfection of the believer, which takes place at death, when the Christian passes into the presence of the Lord. This presence is what we call Heaven (or Eternity): the dwelling place of God, the spiritual realm. Additionally, it involves the perfection of all the bodies of all believers at the end of time (*the end of the world*). This perfection begins with the Second Coming of Christ, proceeds to

the bodily resurrection and transformation of all believers, and concludes with the perfection of all of creation: “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:18–25).

VIII. The Church

What is the role of the Church, and what are its responsibilities?

The Church is the earthly manifestation of relationships among believers (at the local, denominational, and universal levels). It is through the Church that the believer may enter into corporate worship, study, service, and fellowship. Indeed, the significance of the church in a post-Christian Netherlands has never been more important.

The Apostle Paul utilizes three main images for the Church (a trinitarian model), which demonstrate this importance: the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

First, the Church is comprised of the people of God. We as the people of God are distinct from those who belong to the world. This is of critical importance in the 21st century, a time in which Christians are bombarded with messages of conformity:

“Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with the Devil? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore, come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty’” (2 Corinthians 6:14–18).

Second, the Church is described as the body of Christ. This image emphasizes that as Christ’s physical body was the center of his earthly ministry, the church as Christ’s metaphorical body continues that work. It also illustrates the believer’s connection to Christ and Christ’s lordship over the Church: “But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15–16).

Finally, the Church is described as the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who brought the Church into existence at Pentecost, who still indwells the Church, who imparts power to the Church, who enables sensitivity to Christ’s leadership, and who imparts the Gifts of the Spirit. As Paul writes to the church at Corinth: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17).

The Church has three primary earthly functions: evangelism, edification, and worship. The Church is called to evangelize the world and bring lost souls into relationship with Christ. Indeed, this function of the Church is commanded by the Great Commission: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Growth of the body is a fundamental goal of the Church, as the Church serves as a window to Christ for the world. The Church also exists for the edification of the believer. This edification takes the form of spiritual growth, intellectual growth, fellowship, and community. Corporate worship is also an integral part of the Church. Whereas edification focuses on the believer, worship concentrates on God: it is the praise and exaltation of God (who is certainly deserving of our worship).

Additionally, the Church has three sacramental responsibilities: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and marriage. By sacramental, Protestants mean that these responsibilities are holy and sacred, not that they impart any saving grace (for this reason, many protestant churches call them Ordinances). The first sacramental responsibility of the Church is physical baptism. Baptism is an initiatory rite of the Church, commanded by Christ: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Baptism is symbolic of New Birth and the believer’s Conversion. It does not, by itself, impart any saving grace. Instead, baptism is an act of faith and a public testimony that one has been united with Christ in His death and resurrection. Christian baptism is, in essence, the representation of a person’s renewal and union with Christ.

ICTG believes that baptism is the act of a willing, mature, and fully aware person, and that full immersion in water is the preferred method. Second, the Church bears the sacramental responsibility of the Lord’s Supper (also called “Communion”). Like Baptism, Communion does not itself impart any saving grace. Rather, like Baptism, it is also symbolic in nature. It is, therefore, a representational setting forth of the nature of Christ’s death, a proclamation of the basis of the Christian faith, a means of spiritual edification (both individual and corporate), and an institution also commanded by Christ: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19).

Finally, the Church is responsible for the sacrament of marriage. Marriage is a union of two believers, male and female, who desire to dedicate that union to the glory of God, and who desire to have God’s blessings bestowed upon their marriage. While we may have access to certain legal benefits when marriage is recognized by secular governments, it is not an institution of the government, but of the Church. We do not recognize the authority of the state to bless or condone marriage, as governments have corrupted the very concept of marriage. For this reason, we wish to state openly and firmly that marriage is a sacramental union of one male and one female, as Scripture declares: “He answered, ‘have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate’” (Matthew 19:4–6).

IX. A Historic Summation of the Christian Faith: The Nicene Creed

What is the Nicene Creed?

The Nicene Creed, in its original form, was written in 325 AD as a result of the Synod of Nice, one the great seven Ecumenical Councils. It was subsequently amended at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, there reaching its final form. It has been, and remains, the most fundamental and historically important creedal statement (summation) of the Christian faith. It is both ancient and apostolic.

Nicene Creed Text

“We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten not made, one in being with the Father. Through Him all things were made. For our salvation He came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the virgin Mary and became human. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose again, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy, universal, and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

The Apostles Creed Text (a shorter version from about 500 AD)

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Universal church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.