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House to House Heart to Heart

VOLUME 31 NUMBER 7

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DO I HAVE TO JOIN A Denomination?

—Why the First Century Church Is Better

Allen Webster

Watch on youtube

The Roman Colosseum was built by Vespasian in A.D. 70–72 (Domitian added a fourth story in A.D. 82). Over the centuries, it was damaged by the elements, earthquakes, and pollution. It was neglected by officials and defaced by looters repurposing its materials. As it crumbled, it became an eyesore. Its value plummeted.

In 2013, a massive, multi-phase restoration began. Those in charge did not order new blueprints. They studied old drawings and writings, dug up foundations and studied topography, and sought to understand original colors and materials; they are rebuilding it the way it was. They have had to peel away layers, tear out additions, and build back what had been removed. It has become an icon of Italy's heritage, and its value has risen sharply. Annual visitors doubled from 6 million (2019) to 12.3 million (2023).

A rusted-out 1967 Chevrolet Camaro SS that has not run in years sits in a junkyard. It seems worthless, with a bent frame and torn seats. Imagine that a father and son buy it as a project and repair it over time. At some point they must decide whether to restore it or to "restomod" (restore + modernize) it. One is more valuable; the other is more comfortable. Modernized cars drive better and have conveniences, but they lose collector value. That model, fully restored, sells for $70,000–$120,000 at auction. A "restomod" version with digital dashboard, LS engine, new suspension, air conditioning, Bluetooth, and aftermarket wheels might bring $40,000–$60,000.

Should the church be modernized or restored?[1] A decision about a building or car is neither right nor wrong, but religion adds a moral dimension because God requires obedience (1 Corinthians 1:10; Colossians 3:17; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:6; 2 John 1:9–11; Revelation 22:18–19).

THE PATTERN/ORIGINAL—THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Jesus promised, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18). He designed it as He wanted it; He bought it with His blood (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25); He sent the Spirit to guide its construction (Acts 2). The apostles boldly preached what Christ

taught them (Acts 2:1, 42, 47; 4:13), revealing His pattern for the church (Ephesians 4:1–6), and recording its doctrine for the future (Ephesians 2:20; 3:10–11). That church is perfect. It is "the church of the living God" (1 Timothy 3:15).

When we follow the New Testament pattern, we restore the original church at the local level. What are some prominent characteristics of the New Testament church?

- No head but Christ (Colossians 1:13, 18).
- Sinners believed, repented, and were baptized to be saved (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38).
- Worship in spirit and truth (John 4:24). It met on Sundays to break bread, pray, teach, sing, and give as prospered (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1–2; Ephesians 5:19).
- No human headquarters—Christ reigns from heaven (Acts 2:33–36).
- No governing organization above the local church (Philippians 1:1)—just autonomous congregations.
- No creed but the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16–17)—no human doctrines, councils, or synods.
- No human names—just, for example, "Christians," "elders," and "churches of Christ" (Acts 11:26; Romans 16:16; 1 Peter 5:1).
- No one joined it—Jesus added members when they obeyed the gospel (Acts 2:47).
- One body—the church (Ephesians 4:4)—with many congregations (churches).

THE DEPARTURE/APOSTASY—THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

God warned that some would depart from the faith (1 Timothy 4:1–3). Paul spoke of a falling away involving a man who acted like God (2 Thessalonians 2:3–10). Those changes came, bit by bit, as men departed from God's pattern, assumed authority not theirs, and introduced innovations, hierarchies, and unscriptural doctrines—sprinkling for baptism, instruments in worship, extreme unction, and the seven sacraments. Creeds, councils, and congregations set aside Scripture and replaced plain teaching with convenient and popular precepts. Simple Christianity was widely forsaken for human tradition, resulting in the formation of the Roman Catholic Church as a mixture of Christianity, paganism, and innovation.

In the early church, every local church was independent, overseen by elders, and served by deacons (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Timothy 3:8-13). Small deviations crept in and ultimately led to complete digressions. These deviations began among church leaders (Acts 20:29–30), including the following:

Elevation of One Elder (Pastor) over Other Elders in a Congregation. Every mature early congregation had a plurality of elders who held equal authority (Acts 14:23; 1 Peter 5:1–3). The first deviation came in the early second century when a single elder began exalting himself to chief elder (or president) of the group. Ignatius of Antioch (c. A.D. 110), for instance, advocated a single-bishop model to fight apostasy. The chief elder came to be called the bishop, with increased authority, while the others were "only" presbyters or priests. This distinction does not exist in Scripture, where bishop, elder, and pastor refer to the same office (Titus 1:5–7; Acts 20:17, 28).

Creation of Districts Under Bishops. In the second and third centuries, geographic oversight replaced local autonomy as the bishop of a major city began overseeing more than one congregation. Regional bishops were called metropolitans or diocesan bishops. Scripture teaches that elders are to shepherd the flock among them—not flocks elsewhere (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28).

Establishment of Archbishops, Cardinals, Councils, and the Pope (A.D. 606). In the fourth through the sixth centuries, other doctrines developed, including the following:

- Archbishops were established over several bishops in large regions.
- Patriarchs were appointed over even larger areas (Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Rome).
- Councils (like Nicaea in A.D. 325) began issuing binding decisions for all churches.
- The bishop of Rome claimed preeminence among the patriarchs.

In A.D. 606, Boniface III was declared universal bishop by the Byzantine Emperor Phocas. This officially began the papacy. From there, the bishop of Rome became known as the Pope, or Father, and exercised universal authority over the church.

The Roman Catholic Church claims to be the original church, but the New Testament never mentions it. It claims unbroken succession of popes from Peter, but the Bible never calls Peter a pope nor even mentions the office. It claims that the bishop of Rome has authority over other bishops, for Peter was the bishop of Rome, but the Bible never says Peter was ever in Rome. (First Peter 5:13 likely refers to literal Babylon.) It claims authority through tradition and papal decree, but the Bible condemns following men's

"You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

EPHESIANS 2:19

traditions, and never mentions papal decree. Any unique Catholic doctrine is conspicuously absent from the Bible. It does not mention a pope, cardinals, rosaries, purgatory, praying to Mary, celebrating Christmas or Easter, celibate priesthood, or the Mass as a repeated sacrifice.

Martin Luther tried to reform the Catholic Church in the 1500s, but he did not go far enough. John Calvin (1509–1564) developed a system of doctrines that became widely accepted, but they were erroneous. Others protested. Division followed, creating more churches—Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran—all teaching different things. Creeds and councils gained sway over autonomous churches. The original pattern became buried under tradition.

THE RETURN/RESTORATION: THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Many things are improved by updates and modifications (such as phone apps and safety features in cars). Others are ruined by them (brushstrokes/color changes on a master artist's painting; "architectural vandalism" on old church buildings; updated Bibles omitting or changing teachings on sin, gender, or salvation).

A painted over (varnished) Rembrandt, *The Night Watchman*, is being restored at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The project utilizes advanced techniques like digital imaging and AI to understand Rembrandt's techniques and the painting's original look. It would have been easier to commission an artist to paint a similar picture—but it would not be a Rembrandt.

Religion is like this. Starting a new denomination is easy—but it is not the church of Christ. Reforming an existing church might bring improvements—but it would still not be the original. Thus, the need for the Restoration Plea: Let us speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. Let us call Bible things by Bible names and do Bible things in Bible ways. Let us be Christians only. Let us return to the Bible to replicate the first church.

Truth is never outdated. God did not give a temporary religion—He gave us a once-for-all-time faith (Jude 1:3). Following the Bible alone is not simply preference—it is imperative. We either follow Jesus and His apostles, or we follow man-made religion (Matthew 15:9; Acts 2:42). God's paths are old paths (Jeremiah 6:16; 10:23; Proverbs 14:12). Jesus prayed for unity (John 17:20–21). Paul preached "one body" (Ephesians 4:4). Unity cannot come from compromise (Philippians 1:17; Jude 1:3); it comes from returning to the original foundation (Ephesians 2:20–22), peeling away the doctrines men have added, putting back what was removed, and following the blueprint carefully.

Let us go back to Pentecost, not Nicaea; to truth, not tradition; to Bible verses, not papal decrees; to Jerusalem, not to Rome; to Jesus (John 14:6), not to Peter.

Endnotes

[1] By "modernize," I mean changing key components, not adapting to modern times: Driving a car to worship or taking a plane to a mission trip versus riding an animal, preaching with a PowerPoint and a microphone versus writing in the dirt (John 8:6) or raising the voice to be heard.

How Do I Know the Bible Is the Word of God?

Its wonderful unity convinced me. The Bible is not really one book; it is 66 books. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. If you were to print them on average 20-pound paper, with average margins, use an average size font, and put them in an average binding, they would fill an average shelf.

They were written over a period of about 1500 years by at least 40 different authors and in at least three different languages. They were written by people of all walks of life. Some were poets. Some were shepherds. Some were kings. Some were herdsmen. Some were farmers. Some were prophets. Some were preachers. And some were priests. In many instances, the one had not read what the other had written. Yet when you gather these materials together, they don't read like 66 books. They read like one book.

How is that possible? God planned His Book from the beginning. "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

—David Pharr, Rock Hill, South Carolina

God's Plan for Saving Man

Watch on youtube

Divine Love: John 3:16
God's Grace: Ephesians 2:8
Christ's Blood: Romans 5:9
Holy Spirit's Word: 1 Corinthians 2:12–13
Sinner's Faith: Acts 16:31
Sinner's Repentance: Luke 13:3
Sinner's Confession: Romans 10:10
Sinner's Baptism: Acts 22:16
Christian's Love: Matthew 22:37
Christian's Work: James 2:24
Christian's Hope: Romans 8:24
Christian's Endurance: Revelation 2:10

Five Parenting Mistakes to Avoid

1. Neglect of spiritual training due to busyness, laziness, or relying on others (Galatians 6:5; Judges 13:8; Ephesians 6:4).

2. Rearing our children as we were reared (by default), especially if we did not have Christian parents.

3. Handling all children in the same way or showing favoritism (Genesis 37:1–3; 1 Timothy 5:21).

4. Comparing our children to each other (2 Corinthians 10:12).

5. Trying to relive our lives through our children. Each individual has the right to his own choices (Joshua 24:15).

Childrearing Wisdom from God

Read these verses and meditate about how to implement them in your child/children's lives:

1 Timothy 3:4-5
Ephesians 6:1-4
Colossians 3:20-21
Hebrews 12:5-11

"Hear instruction and be wise."

PROVERBS 8:33

To watch videos, read articles, answer Bible questions, and more go to housetohouse.com

Is Bible Class Important?

Does attending Bible class regularly make any difference in the quality of one's life?

With all the pressures that children and young people face today, regular attendance to Bible class helps to mold their character and fortify them against evil.

Consider this: In a five-year period, Judge Fossett in Brooklyn sentenced 2,400 juveniles to the reformatory. His investigation showed that not one of them was a member of a Bible class anywhere.

In a two-year period, Lee Baxton presided over 2,400 juvenile cases. He had a standing offer to pay court costs for any person convicted of a criminal offense if that young person had been regular in attendance to a Bible class during that year. He never had to pay anyone's fine.

Attending Bible class is not a cure-all, but young people who are regularly found there are seldom found in court.

Our young people need all the help we can give them. Plan to be in Bible class this Sunday. You have an example to set.

—Author Unknown

"Train up a child in the way he should go."

PROVERBS 22:6

Just for Fun — Word Search, Acts 2:37–39

Find the words in blue. Words go in any direction.

"When they **heard** this, they were **cut** to the **heart**, and said to **Peter** and the rest of the **apostles**, 'Men and **brethren**, what **shall** we do?'

Then Peter said to them, '**Repent**, and let **every** one of you be **baptized** in the name of **Jesus Christ** for the **remission** of **sins**; and you shall **receive** the **gift** of the **Holy Spirit**. For the **promise** is to **you** and to your **children**, and to **all** who are afar off, as **many** as the **Lord** our **God** will **call**.'" — ACTS 2:37–39

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P	M	J	C	Y	O	I	Y	Y	R	R	U	A	I	X	T
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W	R	P	K	R	B	A	P	T	I	Z	E	D	A	G	H

The Simple Gospel

Curtis Cates, Sr., told of hearing Charlie Wheeler preach when brother Cates was but a boy. He said that Wheeler's sermon was so simple that, though but a lad, he thought to himself: "I believe I could preach like that; it is so simple!"

Wheeler's simplicity in preaching stirred the idea of preaching in a young man's heart. That simple style later characterized Cates' preaching also. True gospel preaching is simple because the gospel is simple.

To say that the gospel is "simple" does not mean that it is not rich and deep. It means the gospel is free from complexity; it is not complicated. It is not hard to understand; it is unaffected, natural, and plain.

The gospel comes to the point. It declares plainly that man is a sinner who cannot save himself. It speaks in clear and tragic tones of the consequences of a life of sin. The gospel makes no attempt to classify sinners into categories, such as rich and poor, black and white, young and old. It starkly declares: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The gospel does not complicate the means by which sinners are saved. It states plainly that there is but one way, through Christ (John 14:6). In coming to God, the sinner has simple facts to believe—the death of Jesus "for our sins," His burial, and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:1–4). He has simple commands to obey—believe, repent, confess, and be baptized (Mark 16:16; Romans 10:10; Acts 2:38). Belief of those facts and obedience to those commands secures the simple but sublime promises: forgiveness of sins, all spiritual blessings, and hope of life eternal! The gospel teaches that the way of life is plain and narrow, but lighted by the lamp of eternal day.

The gospel is declared to be "the power of God to salvation" (Romans 1:16). It draws its power from a rugged and blood-stained cross. The cross at its core gives the gospel the simple, rational appeal to reach the intellect; it paints the story of divine love in vivid colors to move the emotions; it storms the ramparts of the stubborn soul to change the will.

The gospel story tells of the Son of God as a man moving among the common people, who heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37). It speaks of love that came down (John 1:14). It pictures Christ concerned about the problems of life: the plight of the poor (Matthew 25:40); the fever of Peter's mother-in-law (8:14–15); the fear of the disciples (17:6); and the sorrow of Mary and Martha (John 11:35). It shows Him moved with compassion for the ignorant, the straying, and the lost (Matthew 9:36; 14:14; 20:34; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13).

God made the gospel simple so we could all learn and follow it. Have you?

—Kenneth L. Randolph

"I fear … your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."

2 CORINTHIANS 11:3

Cut out this section and mail it to the address on the front.

Bible Quiz

VOLUME 31:7

Send us your answers to receive a free Bible bookmark. We will grade and return your questions and enclose the bookmark "The Covenants of the Old Testament" as a way of saying thanks for spending time in the Word (quantities may be limited).

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

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Questions are taken from the New King James Version.

Answers to Previous Quizzes

V. 31:5 *New Testament Bible Characters:* 1. Gabriel (Luke 1:26–31); 2. John the Baptist (Matthew 3:13–17); 3. Peter (Luke 22:54–62); 4. Judas Iscariot (Matthew 26:14–16); 5. John (John 13:23; 21:20, 24); 6. Thomas (John 20:24–29); 7. Stephen (Acts 7:54–60); 8. Saul (Paul) (Acts 9:1–6); 9. Peter (Acts 2:14–41); 10. Elizabeth (Luke 1:5–13); 11. Matthias (Acts 1:23–26); 12. The Centurion (Matthew 8:5–13); 13. The Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25–34); 14. Barnabas (Acts 4:36–37); 15. Matthew (Levi) (Matthew 9:9); 16. The Samaritan woman (John 4:7–26); 17. Simon of Cyrene (Luke 23:26); 18. Mary (Luke 10:38–42); 19. Pontius Pilate (John 18:28–19:16); 20. Lazarus (John 11:38–44); 21. Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2); 22. Luke (Colossians 4:14).

V. 31:6 *Bible Book Word Find:* a mos (Amos); mark (Mark); lu, ke (Luke); john (John); jo. El (Joel); judges (Judges); job (Job); he brews (Hebrews); es. Ther (Esther); act. S (Acts); jam, es (James); ruth (Ruth); rom ans (Romans); t it us (Titus); m at the w (Matthew); genes is (Genesis); Phi lemon (Philemon); Chronicle, s (Chronicles); Daniel; na hum (Nahum); hose a (Hosea); lamentations (Lamentations); revelation (Revelation); Timothy; Samuel; numbers (Numbers); mal. A chi (Malachi); pete r (Peter); exodus (Exodus); king s (Kings).

Marriage and Family

Find answers in Genesis 1:28; 2:24; Exodus 20:12; Psalm 127:3; Proverbs 15:17; 18:22; 22:6; 31:10; Malachi 2:16; Matthew 19:6; 1 Corinthians 7:3; 13:4; Ephesians 4:32; 5:25; 6:1, 4; Philippians 4:19; Colossians 3:19; 1 Timothy 5:8; Hebrews 13:4; 1 Peter 3:7; 4:8. *Questions are taken from the New King James Version.*

1. "A man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become _____ _____."
2. Husbands must love their wives as _____ loved the church.
3. "He who finds a wife finds a _____ _____."
4. Children should _____ their parents in the Lord.
5. Husbands are told to dwell with their wives with _____.
6. Husbands are to love their wives and not be _____ toward them.
7. A virtuous woman is worth far more than _____.
8. "Honor your father and _____."
9. "Be kind to one another, _____."
10. "Love suffers long and is _____."
11. Marriage should be honored by all, and the marital bed kept _____.
12. God hates _____.
13. Parents are instructed to train up a child in the way he should _____.
14. A person who does not provide for their own family is worse than an ____.
15. Fathers are not to provoke their children to _____.
16. God will supply all your _____ according to His riches in glory.
17. A husband's body belongs to his ____; a wife's body belongs to her _____.
18. A dinner of herbs is better where love is than a fattened calf with _____.
19. "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and _____ it."
20. What God has joined together, let no man _____.
21. _____ are a heritage from the Lord.
22. Have fervent love for one another, for _____ covers a multitude of sins.
23. Fathers should bring children up in the training and _____ of the Lord.

A Simple Plan for a Spiritual Life

Humans were created for more than eating, drinking, procreating, working, and dying. Man is a spirit housed in a body (Genesis 2:7); therefore, he is capable of living a life beyond a physical level. He has introspective, prospective, and retrospective abilities. He is made for more. Notice some characteristics that build a spiritual life:

1. *Read and study the Bible daily.* We need spiritual food just like we need physical food. "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You!" (Psalm 119:11). Man was not made for bread alone (Matthew 4:4). The Bible is God's guidebook for a meaningful life.

2. *Pray without ceasing* (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is the privilege of God's child (Prayer calls upon our Father, Matthew 6:9). It is an often underutilized privilege. There are blessings for others and ourselves daily that can only be accessed by prayer. It takes a spiritually minded person to pray consistently to a God he only experiences by faith. Develop an active prayer life.

3. *Live a life of purity and holiness.* Part of living a spiritual life is denying the lusts of the flesh (1 John 2:16). We are to be an example of purity to others (1 Timothy 4:12). We are to keep ourselves pure and unspotted (Ephesians 5:27).

4. *Look for ways to serve others daily.* Jesus came to seek and serve (Matthew 20:28). Our service will be brought up on the judgment day (Matthew 25:34–46).

5. *Serve without being asked.* Jesus taught His followers to walk the second mile. That is service that surprises others. It is doing more than expected. It means starting early and stopping only when the job is finished. Do the dirty job or the hard job. Love the unlovable and serve the selfish. "To him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

The best life is a spiritual life. The secret is to live the opposite of the way the world believes is best. Serve instead of being served. Love all. Do not insist on your rights. Choose to give instead of getting.

"As seeing Him who is invisible."

HEBREWS 11:27

Cut out this section and mail it to the address on the front.

Recommended **Resource**

Since 1969, the *Spiritual Sword* has published quarterly journals with articles about various doctrinal topics. In this podcast, different guests discuss these topics from a biblical perspective. Grab your Sword (Ephesians 6:17) and study with us! **pod.link/1725903849**

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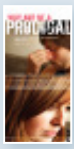
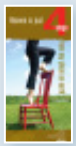


☐ Why Not Be a Prodigal: Part 2



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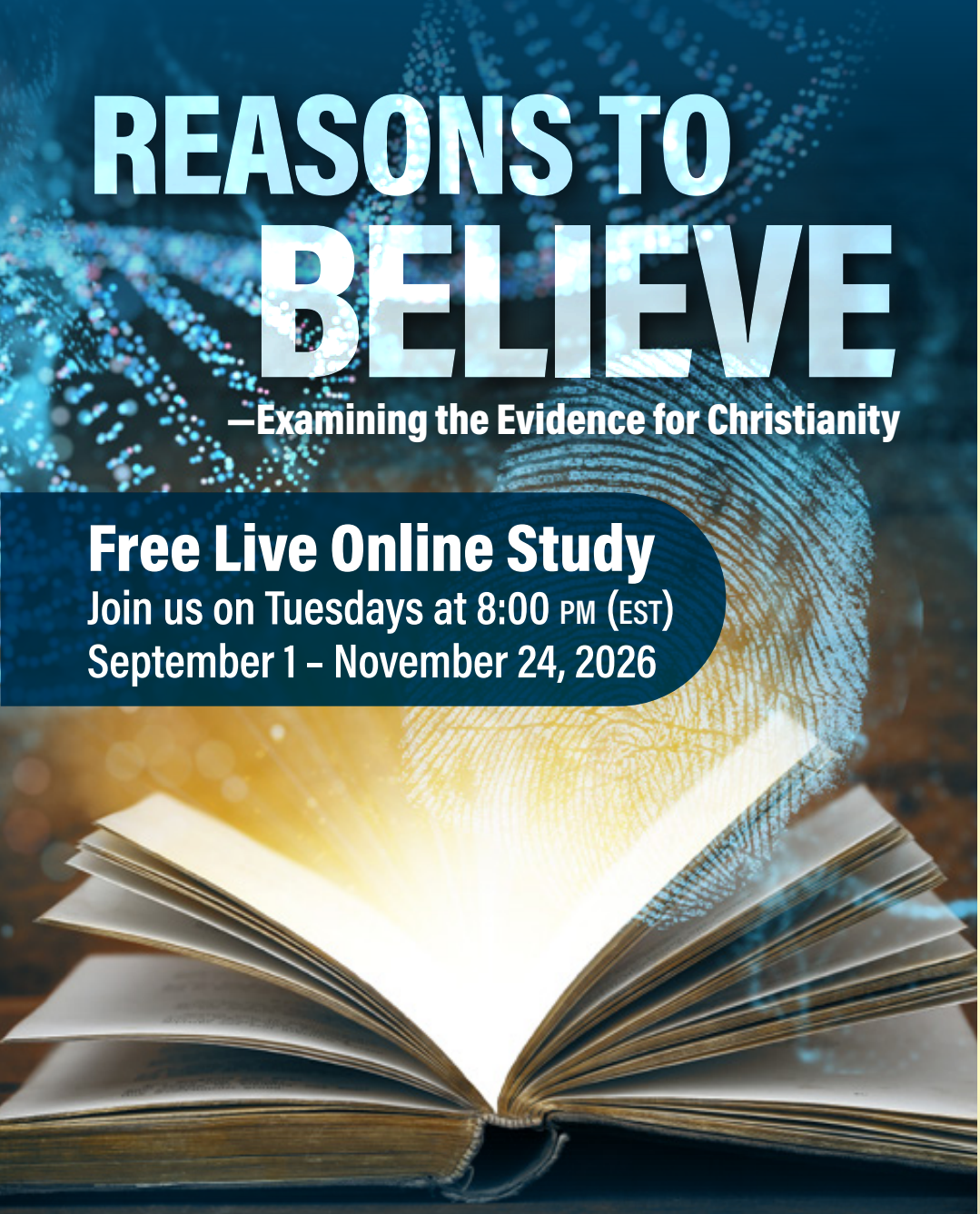

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housetohouse.com/study

The Miracles of Jesus

Jesus' miracles are more than just wonders; they are signs that reveal who He is and why He came. As John records, "This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him" (John 2:11). Miracles confirmed His message and showed His compassion (Matthew 9:6–7; 14:14; John 6:14).

He calmed storms with a word (Mark 4:39), fed thousands with a few loaves and fish (Matthew 14:19–20), and healed the sick. He even raised the dead—calling Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:43), and then raising Himself from the dead, just as He declared: "I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (John 10:18). The miracle of the resurrection of Jesus gives us the promise of our own resurrection one day (1 Corinthians 15:20–22).

His miracles addressed human needs, called attention to the words of His teaching, and demanded obedience. They encourage people to trust the One who holds power over nature and life. The miracles of the Bible prove that Jesus is God and give us reason to believe. "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31). —Matt Wallin

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7/26

church of Christ
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Vermillion, SD 57069

Don't Join a Denomination

If you read the New Testament from beginning to end, you will not find the word "denomination" anywhere. You will find the church—the one Jesus promised to build (Matthew 16:18) and purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28). Today He still adds the saved to His church (Acts 2:47). It is a divine body—not a human organization.

Over the years, people have divided that body into groups with different names, doctrines, and practices, but division was never God's plan. Paul corrected Christians in Corinth when they began to identify with men instead of Christ: "Each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:12–13). The church of the Bible is not denominational.

You do not "join" anything invented by man to belong to Christ. At the birth of the church in Acts 2, Peter said, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (v. 40). Luke records that "those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them" (v. 41). They were saved by receiving the Word of God, being baptized, and being added to the Lord's church. We do the same thing today.

When you obey the gospel, He adds you to His church (Acts 2:47). Do not settle for a name, creed, or tradition that divides. Come back to the simplicity and unity of the church that belongs to Christ alone.

If you would like to learn more about the church Jesus built—and how to be part of it without denominational barriers—we would love to open the Bible with you and help you see what God's Word truly teaches. —Matt Wallin

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