

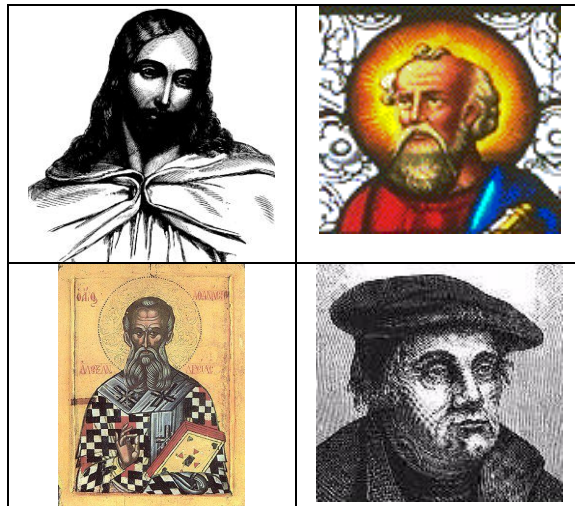
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# Basic Christian Theology



Written by Robert C. Jones  
Acworth, Georgia

# Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

Robert Jones

[www.sundayschoolcourses.com](http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com)

I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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## Introduction

This survey study of *Basic Christian Theology* is taken from a series of sermons and Sunday School courses that I've written over the last 10 years. The purpose of this course is to answer the questions "What do Christians believe?" and "What do Protestants believe" (and how are Protestant beliefs different from Roman Catholic beliefs). This course was written to be taught in three-to-four 60-90 minutes sections – it is not meant to be an in depth study.

Specifically, we'll cover these topics:

- The Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed (two Creeds accepted by almost all Christians, Catholic and Protestant)
- Basic Reformation (Protestant) theology
- Evidence for the historical Jesus

Some may question why the third topic above is in a course on basic theology, but I actually consider it to be key, because Christianity, more than any other religion, is based on the belief that a series of historical events actually occurred (the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). Paul goes so far as to say that if these events didn't actually occur, our faith has no basis:

"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And **if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith**. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." (NIV, I Corinthians 15:12-19, emphasis added)

## The Apostles Creed

"Christian truth could not possibly be put into a shorter and clearer statement." – Martin Luther

The Apostles Creed (along with the Nicene Creed) is a basic statement of Christian belief. It defines the set of beliefs that makes a Christian a Christian. The Creed was originally written partially as an *affirmation* of basic Christian beliefs, and partly as a *refutation* of Gnostic beliefs.

The Apostles Creed is recited in many churches every Sunday during worship. Why do Christians make such a weekly public proclamation? The need to express one's belief publicly is explained in Romans 10: 9-10:

"That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved." (NIV, Romans 10: 9-10)

## Historical background

"I call it the Apostles' Creed, though I am by no means solicitous as to its authorship." – John Calvin

Although the Apostles Creed has long borne the identifier “apostle”, it was probably NOT written by the Apostles – there is no reference to it in the New Testament, nor did any of the apostles ever claim to have written it (although there are non-canonical sources that claim that each Apostle (Matthias replacing Judas) added one of the original 12 statements (or "articles")).

Although the apostles did not write the Creed, it is still ancient in origin - it dates back to at least the mid-2nd century. It was probably originally used as a creed spoken during (adult) baptism ceremonies, as a basic statement of Christian faith. The Apostles Creed was a Western church creed, as the Nicene Creed was a product of the Eastern Church.

The version we use today was fairly intact by the 7/8th centuries. There are slight variations in the Catholic and Protestant versions (and between Protestant denominations) used today.

The Creed is divided into three main sections - belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (Spirit), thus underscoring the Trinitarian beliefs of Christians – belief in the three-in-one God. A phrase-by-phrase look at the Creed follows.

### ***The Apostles Creed line by line***

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.*

We put our faith in an omnipotent, omnipresent God that created everything in the universe, both material and spiritual. This God has ultimate and complete control over everything in the universe. This is in stark contrast to some Gnostic and Eastern religions that believe that there are two Gods in the universe of equal strength - one that created the heaven and the spiritual realm, one that created earth and the material realm. One of the reasons the Apostles Creed was originally written was to refute these “dualist” views

*And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord,*

Jesus is the Son of God - not just a prophet or teacher.

*who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary*

While Jesus was a human being, there was something special about his birth and parentage - He comes from God. (Protestants generally view that Mary was the mother of the human part of Jesus, and not "Mary, Mother of God"). A key point is that Jesus was NOT just a spirit, as some early Gnostics claimed (docetism), but was an incarnate human being.

*suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried*

Some people may wonder why a sacred creed of the Christian Church contains a reference to an obscure Roman governor of 2000 years ago. The reason for the reference is this - Christianity is a religion that is based on the belief in the occurrence of certain historical events, one of which is the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. The reference to Pilate (whom archeology has proved to have been a real person) places Jesus in an historical place in an historical time. Jesus interacted with historical figures, and died a horrible death

*He descended into hell (Hades)*

This part of the Creed is the most controversial, and difficult to understand statement in the Creed. It was not in the early baptismal versions, and isn't present in some Protestant versions of the Creed (Mennonite, Methodist). There are various interpretations:

- Some view that it means the same as "buried", or "tomb"
- It may mean that Jesus descended to the "abode of the dead" (the meaning of "hades" - "hell" is an Anglo-Saxon word), and was separated from God during that period (in Revelation, the "Second Death" is isolation from God). (See also the curious passages at 1 Peter 3:18-20)
- "But after explaining what Christ endured in the sight of man, the Creed appropriately adds the invisible and incomprehensible judgment which he endured before God, to teach us that not only was the body of Christ given up as the price of redemption, but that there was a greater and more excellent price — that he bore in his soul the tortures of condemned and ruined man...Thus by engaging with the power of the devil, the fear of death, and the pains of hell, he gained the victory, and achieved a triumph, so that we now fear not in death those things which our Prince has destroyed." (John Calvin, *Christian Institutes*)

*the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty;*

The key moment in Christianity is the resurrection of Christ. Paul in I Corinthians 15:12-19 believed that this event was so important, that Christianity had little meaning without it — "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."

This part of the Creed also demonstrates that Jesus has a special place in heaven - at the side of the Father (see also Revelation Chapters 4&5).

*from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

Jesus is the final arbiter of humanity - all will be judged whether living or dead. This final judgment is described in Revelation 20:12-15:

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (NIV, Rev 20:12-15)

*I believe in the Holy Ghost;*

The third part of the triune God - the Holy Ghost (Spirit), our counselor and comforter.

*the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints;*

"Catholic" in this context means, simply, "universal" - it is NOT referring to the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, it is still included in many Protestant versions of the Creed. However, some Protestant versions substitute other verbiage - the Anabaptist (Mennonite) version, for example, says "a holy general Christian church"; Luther said, simply "holy Christian Church"

In this case, "church" does not refer to a building, organization, or denomination - it is the sum of all believers, living, dead, or to be born. It transcends denominational boundaries. The universal church is

made up of the assembly or congregation of Christians (or "saints", as the Apostle Paul uses the term) - us!

*forgiveness of sins;*

One of the key reasons that Christ became incarnate - to redeem our sins. All humans are sinners (including all Christians) - but Christians are forgiven of their sins, by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

*the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting*

The death of the body is not the end of the line for Believers. We will have everlasting life with God. The phrase "resurrection of the body" evokes an image of Halloween creatures in a graveyard. However, we do not know exactly what form this resurrection will take. As Paul says in I Corinthians 15:51-52:

"Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed--in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

*Amen.*

So be it!

## The Nicene Creed

### ***Historical Background***

In 312 A.D., an amazing event occurred – perhaps the most amazing event in church history since the time of the apostles. A general in the Roman Empire named Constantine marched on Rome, in an attempt to take over control of the Western Empire. Arrayed against him were the forces of Maxentius, four times as strong. At a key point in the battle, Constantine had a vision, which is described by Ecclesiastical Historian Eusebius:



"He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, **CONQUER BY THIS**. At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle."

Constantine went on to win the battle against Maxentius, take over control of the Western Empire, and convert to Christianity – the first Roman Emperor to do so. By 324 A.D., Constantine had taken over the Eastern Empire as well, and had established Christianity as the preferred religion in his realm.

While Constantine was primarily focused on political and military issues, his bishops were in the midst of a great debate, started by the Presbyter of Alexandria Arius (c. 250 - 336 A.D.). Arius believed that Jesus, the Son was on a lower level than the Father. Specifically:

"The Father existed before the Son. There was a time when the Son did not exist. Therefore, the Son was created by the Father. Therefore, although the Son was the highest of all creatures, he was not of the essence of God."

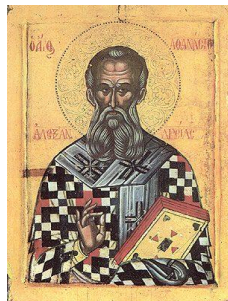


Arius viewed that Christ was an intermediary distinct from the Father (or that there was a difference of substance (*homoiousia*), or essential being between the Father and the Son.).

Arguing strenuously against the views of Arius was Athanasius, (c. 296-373 A.D.), later Bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius argued that the *Word* (John 1:1-18) became man - the Word did not come *into* a man. Thus, Christ is fully God and fully man.

High Noon occurred in 325 A.D. when Constantine, emperor of the Roman Empire ordered that the debate be settled once and for all. A great church council was ordered, and it took place at Nicea (in Bithynia). Over 300 bishops attended the council, most from the Eastern part of the Empire. Arius lost the debate, and the view of Athanasius became the view of the church. The doctrine of *homoousios* was affirmed – that Christ was of one (or the same) substance with the Father.

While the earlier Apostle’s Creed tended to focus on the nature of the incarnate Christ, the Nicene Creed tended to focus on the relationship of Christ to the Father (and, later, the Holy Ghost).



St. Athanasius, who argued successfully against the views of Arius

### ***The Nicene Creed line by line (English Version 1549)***

*We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.*

God created everything in the universe – including physical things (refuting the views of the Gnostics, which viewed that there were two gods in the universe, one that created the pure heavenly and spiritual realms, and one that created the impure physical realms.)

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made;*

The centerpiece of the Creed – the relation of Christ to the Father. As noted above, Christ was NOT a created being, but rather “God of God” and “True God of True God”. This matches well with scripture readings such as Colossians:

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (NIV, Col 1:15-17 )

The key phrase in the Nicene Creed is “being of one substance with the Father”. Arius viewed that Christ was of “like” or “similar” essence with the Father. This is NOT a sufficient explanation – a pulpit is made of wood, and so is the rocking chair in my living room, so they are of “like” substance – but not very connected. The Creed says of the ONE substance (or essence), thus putting Christ, “by whom all things were made”, on the same level as the Father.

*who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.*

Quite similar in verbiage to the Apostles Creed – and making the same point. Christ actually became a living, breathing human being – he was a historical figure, who lived, died on the cross, and rose again. He was not just a spirit, as some Gnostics believed.

*And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.*

There will be a Second Coming, and a final day of reckoning – Judgment Day, where the living and the dead will be judged by Christ himself (see Revelation 20:11-15)

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit [the original version of the creed ended here], the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.*

This passage confirms the Trinitarian nature of the godhead – Father, Son and Holy Ghost. This is also the section that helped cause the schism between the Roman Church, and the Eastern (Orthodox) Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (and also, the only significant difference in the Creed between the Eastern and Western churches). The Eastern Church says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father – the Western Church (including the Protestant churches) say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father **and the Son**.

*And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church.*

There is one universal church, founded and descendent from the apostles.

*We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

The death of the body is not the end of the line for Believers. We will have everlasting life with God. The Creed also supports the idea of one baptism being sufficient for the remission of sins.

## **Reformation (Protestant) theology**

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century Protestant reformers (such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and Menno Simon) disagreed on some key issues, which led to the proliferation of Protestant denominations that we know today. Among the areas of disagreement:

- Infant vs. adult baptism
- Relationship between church and state
- The meaning of the Eucharist (Communion)
- And in later times (1600s on) - predestination vs. free will

However, there was a key theology that ALL of the reformers agreed on, that forms the basis for almost all Protestant denominations today. Martin Luther coined the term "evangelical" to refer to someone that held these core beliefs - the most prominent evangelical preacher in the world today is probably Billy Graham.



Many of these evangelical beliefs ("original sin", for example) also have a place in Roman Catholic tradition, especially in the theology of St. Augustine. However, by the time of the Reformation, the writings of Augustine were not at the forefront of Roman Catholic theology.

### ***The Core Beliefs of the Protestant Reformers***

*All mankind are unregenerate sinners - there is nothing that man can do on his own to achieve salvation*

The early Reformers (as well as Augustine before them) believed in the doctrine of "original sin", meaning that all humans are tainted by the sin of Adam & Eve (including newborn children). Because of mankind's moral depravity, there is nothing that man can do on his/her own to achieve salvation – no amount of good deed "points" can overcome man's inherent sinful nature.

Paul in Romans 3 wrote:

"As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." (NIV, Romans 3:10-11)

*Sin is a massive gulf between God and humans - God sent his Son, Jesus, to redeem the sins of mankind. Through faith in Jesus, humans can become reconciled (justified) with God.*

God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. Because humans are utterly evil (when left to their own devices), there is no way that we can become reconciled (or justified) with God on our own. God sent his son to act as a bridge, or mediator, between unregenerate humans, and Himself:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (NIV, John 3:16/17 )

The key to reconciliation (justification) with God is faith in Jesus Christ.

It can be said that the whole Reformation started because Martin Luther had a revelation regarding one verse in the Bible, which concerned how human beings could become reconciled with God through faith:

"For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."" (NIV, Rom 1:17 )

About the above verse, Luther said:

"The righteousness of God is the cause of our salvation. This righteousness, however, is not that according to which God Himself is righteous as God, but that by which we are justified by Him through faith in the Gospel. It is called the righteousness of God in contradistinction to man's righteousness which

comes from works...righteousness (justification) precedes works and good works grow out of it."  
(Luther's *Commentary on Romans*, p. 41)

*Salvation for humans beings is through the Grace (unmerited favor) of God only - No one is worthy of salvation*

The reformers believed that man is reconciled with God solely through faith, and saved by the Grace (unmerited favor) of God, not through anything that mankind does on his/her own (because no human being would be worthy enough on their own).

This view was a direct challenge to the Roman Catholic hierarchy of the day, which preached that salvation was a combination of works (which could include giving alms, going to confession/mass, celebrating feast days, etc.), and faith.

As pointed out in the verses from Ephesians below, even faith itself is a gift of God - therefore, humans on their own can do nothing to achieve salvation.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast." (NIV, Eph 2:8-9)

*Mankind is not saved through works - works are a result of justification, not a cause*

The Apostle Paul makes it clear in a number of passages that we are not saved through "works" (good things that we do), or through observing the "Law" (attending church, maintaining rituals, etc.). Salvation will not be achieved by how many good "points" we accumulate. For example:

"So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." (NIV, Rom 11:5-6)

This does not mean that we shouldn't practice good works! Rather, it means that good works are a result of our being saved ("They'll know we are Christians by our love"), not the price of admission to being saved.

"And, therefore it is taught with perfect truth, that no man procures favor with God by means of works, but that, on the contrary, works are not pleasing to God unless the person has previously found favor in his sight." (John Calvin, *Christian Institutes*)

The table below shows some of the key New Testament verses that formed the bases for Reformation theology.

Reference	Notes
Genesis 15:6	Abraham's belief
Romans 1:17	Righteousness by faith
Romans 3:10-31	No one is worthy of salvation
Romans 4	Paul discussing Abraham
Romans 5:1-2	Gaining access to Grace by faith
Romans 5: 8-21	Reconciliation through Christ
Romans 11:1-6	Remnant chosen by Grace
2 Corinthians 5: 16-21	Ministry of reconciliation
Galatians 3:6-9	Children of Abraham
Ephesians 2: 1-10	Salvation through Grace alone

Titus 3: 4-7	Justification by Grace
1 Peter 1: 3-12	Goal of your faith

## ***Other Core Theological Beliefs Among the Early Reformers***

### *Priesthood of believers*

This was a term coined by Luther - it became a doctrine preached by all of the primary early reformers. Luther believed that each individual could interpret the Bible on their own, without external authority, such as popes or other prelates. He also believed that individuals did not need intermediaries between themselves and God (such as a priest in the confessional).

### *The Bible should be available in the vernacular, or the common language of the people.*

Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was generally translated solely into Latin, which was understood by a very small segment of the population (clergy, some merchants, etc.) Roman Catholic Masses were conducted in Latin until Vatican II in the 1960s.

Luther's 1534 German translation of the New Testament sold over 100,000 copies in his lifetime, and set the stage for an explosion of translations in the years to come. Never again would large population groups be prevented from reading (and interpreting) the Bible on their own.

These aforementioned two doctrines were a direct threat to the European hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church, which based much of its authority on its self-proclaimed right to interpret the Scriptures, and to act as an intermediary between God and man.

### *Bible as the sole authority of the Word of God*

The reformers believed the Bible was the sole authoritative word of God. The Roman Catholic view (then and now) is/was that church tradition/councils/teachings are on equal authoritative footing with the Holy Scriptures.

### *The Universal Church*

Prior to the Reformation, the "Church" was generally defined as the Roman Church, with its papal head. With the coming of the Reformation, the "Church" began to be defined as the total of the saved, living, dead, or to be born (regardless of denomination). A strong proponent of this view was John Calvin, founder of the Reformed Church, one of two great Protestant movements that came out of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Lutherans being the second).



## **Evidence for the Historical Jesus**

As mentioned in the introduction, Christianity, more than any other religion, is predicated on the fact that a set of historical actually occurred – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Jesus did not exist, then Christianity may contain some interesting guides on how to live a moral life, but it has no basis as a faith that brings redemption and salvation. Thus, the question of the evidence for the historical Jesus is very relevant.

## ***The Gospels as History***

"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." (Ireneus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1)

In the last 150 years, the Gospels of the New Testament have come under attack by those that question their historical accuracy. Yet, again and again, archaeological and historical evidence continues to verify the accuracy of the Gospels. This is especially interesting considering the Gospels were not written as histories, but rather, as testaments of faith.

However, the fact that the Gospels are not biographies of the life of Jesus, doesn't mean that the historical detail contained therein is not accurate. For example, famous archaeologist Sir William Ramsey said:

"Luke is a historian of the first rank...this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." (McDowell, p. 110)

### **What the Gospels tell us about the historical Jesus**

- His mother's name was Mary; she was betrothed to Joseph, a carpenter
- Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, not by Joseph
- Before Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem to participate in a census called by the Emperor Augustus
- Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great (Herod died in 4 B.C., so Jesus was born <= 4 B.C.)
- Jesus was descended from King David in the House of Judah (and may have been considered the legitimate King of the Jews by some.)
  - Herod, fearing that Jesus was the legitimate heir to the Davidic dynasty, ordered all boys 2 years and younger, in and around Bethlehem, to be slain
- Mary & Joseph took Jesus to safety in Egypt, until the death of Herod
- Several prophets identified the baby Jesus as the Jewish Messiah ("anointed one")
- Jesus grew up in Nazareth in Galilee (Northern Palestine)
- Jesus had brothers (James, Joseph, Judas and Simon), and sisters
- Jesus was a carpenter by trade (as was his father, Joseph)
- Jesus began his ministry at about 30 years of age, after he was baptized in the Jordan River by his relative (cousin?) John the Baptist

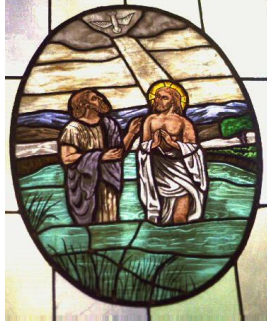


Photo by Robert Jones

- Jesus spent 40 days in the desert to prepare for his mission; he successfully resisted temptation by the devil
- Jesus made Capernaum in Galilee the headquarters of his ministry
- Jesus primarily ministered to the Jews, but also had Samaritan and Roman followers



Photo by Robert Jones

- Jesus had twelve close followers, referred to as Apostles. He had many other followers (attracting crowds at least as large as 5,000 in some cases). Some of his most loyal followers were women, including Mary Magdalene.
- At some point in his ministry, Jesus proclaimed himself the Son of God
- Jesus performed 36 recorded miracles, including raising from the dead, healings, turning water into wine, walking on water, and providing food to 5,000+ people from 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish
- Jesus preached a message of redemption from sin, salvation by faith in God and His Son, and proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was nigh.
- Jesus performed numerous exorcisms, driving out demons
- Jesus was betrayed by one of his 12 followers (Judas Iscariot) during a visit to Jerusalem for Passover
- Jesus was tried before members of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and accused of blasphemy, for proclaiming himself the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy, and the Son of God
- Because the Jews had no law to put a man to death, they brought Jesus before the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Pilate deferred the case to Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee. Herod Antipas returned Jesus to Pilate.
- Pilate offered to the crowd in Jerusalem to release Jesus, but they demanded his crucifixion
- Jesus was tortured by Roman soldiers



- Jesus was crucified on a Hill called Golgotha (Calvary). When he died, a great darkness appeared over Jerusalem, and several miraculous events occurred.
- Jesus rose from the dead, and appeared several times to the Apostles, and women followers
- 40 days after he rose from the dead, Jesus ascended to heaven



Photo by Robert Jones

### What the Gospels don't tell us

- What time of year Jesus was born
- When or how Joseph died
- What Jesus did between the ages of 12-30
- Anything about the Essenes (possibly the Dead Sea Scroll sect)

### Validating the Gospels - Historical Evidence

It is interesting to hear how secular contemporaries of Jesus described Him. In Acts 25:13-20, we get some clues from the New Testament itself. But is Jesus mentioned by contemporary secular sources outside the New Testament? While the number of references is probably fewer than you might imagine, they do exist! The primary source material is from Jewish turncoat-Roman historian Flavius Josephus.

*Flavius Josephus (37 A.D. (?) - 100 A.D.)*

Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat that led rebel troops against the Romans in Galilee during the First Jewish Revolt (66-73 A.D.) He later betrayed the Jews, and served the Romans. In his later life, he wrote two massive historical works:

- *The Jewish War*
- *Jewish Antiquities*

John the Baptist, James the Just (brother of Jesus), and Christ are all mentioned in "Jewish Antiquities". We'll look first at the John the Baptist





passages.

"2. Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him." ("Jewish Antiquities", 18.5.2)

Many similarities with the Gospel accounts can be discerned in the above excerpts:

- "...that was called the Baptist..."
- "...commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism..."
- Baptized with water for remission of sins
- Put to death by Herod (Antipas) who feared John would incite the people to rebellion



John the Baptist at Mission Santa Clara, CA, photo by Robert Jones

Jesus is mentioned twice by Josephus. One time is in reference to his brother James the Just (head of the Christian church in Jerusalem):

"But this younger Ananus, who, as we have told you already, took the high priesthood, was a bold man in his temper, and very insolent; he was also of the sect of the Sadducees, who are very rigid in judging offenders, above all the rest of the Jews, as we have already observed; when, therefore, Ananus was of this disposition, he thought he had now a proper opportunity [to exercise his authority]. Festus was now dead, and Albinus was but upon the road; so he assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned:" (Jewish Antiquities 20.9.1)

Again, interesting parallels to the Gospel against can be found:

- Ananus, a Sadducee, was high priest of the Sanhedrin. He was "...very rigid in judging offenders..."
- "...Jesus, who was called Christ..."
- "brother of Jesus...whose name was James" - Josephus identifies James by his more well-known brother
- James accused before the Sanhedrin, and "delivered to be stoned"

Finally, the primary secular reference to Jesus Christ in Josephus is in what is now known as the *Testimonium*, in the 18th book of *Jewish Antiquities*. (Note that many Bible scholars consider the bracketed passages to be later Christian interpolations.)

"3. Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, [if it be lawful to call him a man]; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. [He was [the] Christ.] And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; [for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him]. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." ("Jewish Antiquities", 18.3.3)

Even if we ignore the bracketed parts, we see a great deal of synchronicity with the Gospels:

- Jesus lived
- He was a teacher and miracle worker
- He had followers both among the Jews and the Gentiles
- He was condemned to the cross by Pontius Pilate
- His followers didn't stop following him even after the crucifixion
- The "tribe" of Christians, founded in Jesus' name, still existed at the time of the writing of "Jewish Antiquities" (93-94 A.D.)

#### *Thallus*

- A 1st century historian (perhaps as early as 52 A.D.) - his works are lost!
- Quoted by several of the Early Church Fathers
- Clearly accepted the historical existence of Jesus, although he tries to find a natural explanation for events described in the scriptures as divinely inspired.

"1. As to His works severally, and His cures effected upon body and soul, and the mysteries of His doctrine, and the resurrection from the dead, these have been most authoritatively set forth by His disciples and apostles before us. On the whole world there pressed a most fearful darkness; and the rocks were rent by an earthquake, and many places in Judea and other districts were thrown down. This darkness Thallus, in the third book of his History, calls, as appears to me without reason, an eclipse of the sun". (Julius Africanus, c. 221 A.D., "The Chronology of Julius Africanus", 18.1)

#### *Phlegon*

- Wrote "Chronicles" c. 140, now lost
- Quoted by Julius Africanus, Origen
- Like Thallus, he clearly accepted the historical existence of Jesus, although, like Thallus, he tries to find a natural explanation for events described in the scriptures as divinely inspired

"Phlegon records that, in the time of Tiberius Caesar, at full moon, there was a full eclipse of the sun from the sixth hour to the ninth — manifestly that one of which we speak." (Africanus, 18.1)

"Now Phlegon, in the thirteenth or fourteenth book, I think, of his Chronicles, not only ascribed to Jesus a knowledge of future events (although falling into confusion about some things which refer to Peter, as if they referred to Jesus), but also testified that the result corresponded to His predictions. So that he also, by these very admissions regarding foreknowledge, as if against his will, expressed his opinion that the doctrines taught by the fathers of our system were not devoid of divine power." (Origen, "Against Celsus", Book 2.14)

"And with regard to the eclipse in the time of Tiberius Caesar, in whose reign Jesus appears to have been crucified, and the great earthquakes which then took place, Phlegon too, I think, has written in the thirteenth or fourteenth book of his Chronicles." (Origen, 2.33)

*Pliny the Younger*

- Was Governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor
- Wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan in 112 A.D. regarding the Christians in his province
- Verifies that Christians in 112 A.D. both worshipped Christ "as to a god", and were willing to die for their belief in Christ

*Cornelius Tacitus*

- Born c. 52-55 A.D.
- Served as senator, under Vespasian, and later (112-113 A.D.) governor of Asia
- In "Annals" (c. 116 A.D.), he verifies the details of Christ's death at the hands of Pontius Pilate "Christus, the founder of the name [Christians], had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue." (quoted from McDowell, p. 49)

*Suetonius*

- A Roman historian, wrote in c. A.D. 120:

"As the Jews were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome." (quoted from McDowell, p. 52)

*Mara Bar-Serapion*

- Sometime after the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), Mara Bar-Serapion (a Syrian) wrote a letter from prison to his son

"What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that that their kingdom was abolished...Nor did the wise king die for good; he lived on in the teaching which he had given." (quoted from McDowell, p. 52)

**What the secular historical references tell us**

Historical Fact	Verified By	N.T. equivalent
John the Baptist lived	Josephus	Matt 3:1
John baptized with water for remission of sins	Josephus	Matt 3:6
John was put to death by Herod	Josephus	Luke 9:9

Historical Fact	Verified By	N.T. equivalent
(Antipas)		
Jesus was called Christ	Josephus	Acts 2:36
Jesus had a brother named James	Josephus	Mark 6:3
Jesus lived	Josephus, Thallus, Phlegon	The New Testament
Jesus was a teacher	Josephus	Matt 17:24
Jesus was a miracle worker	Josephus	John 7:21
Jesus had Gentile followers (as well as Jewish)	Josephus	Matt 8:5/13
Jesus was condemned to die by Pontius Pilate	Josephus, Tacitus	Mark 15:15
After the death of Jesus, his followers continued to teach in his name	Josephus, Mara Bar-Serapion	Acts
The followers of Jesus were named Christians (named after Jesus <b>Christ</b> )	Josephus, Tacitus	Acts 11:26
There was a darkness of the sun at the death of Jesus	Thallus, Phlegon	Luke 23:44/45
Jesus had knowledge of the future	Phlegon	Matt 24:1/2
There were earthquakes at the death of Jesus	Phlegon	Matt 27:51/54
Christians worshipped Christ as God	Pliny the Younger	Matt 14:33
Christians were willing to die for their belief in Jesus	Pliny the Younger	Acts 7:55 - 8:2
Christianity spread to Rome	Tacitus	Acts 23:11
Jewish followers of Christ were expelled from Rome by Claudius	Suetonius	Acts 18:2
Jesus as King of the Jews	Mara Bar-Serapion	Matt 12:2, John 19:19/22

## Validating the Gospels - Archaeological Evidence

### *Pontius Pilate*

Prior to 1961, some skeptics challenged whether Pontius Pilate ever existed. Although Pilate is mentioned in all four Gospels (plus in Acts and 1 Timothy), skeptics claimed that there was no independent, direct verification that Pilate lived.

All that changed in 1961 at Caesarea Maritima. An Italian expedition discovered a 2 foot by 3 foot stone with Pilate's name on it, in the Roman theater. The inscription read:

]S TIBERIEUM  
PON]TIUS PILATUS  
PRAEF]ECTUS IUDA[EA]E

...Tiberium  
Pontius Pilate,  
Prefect of Judea (McRay, p. 204)

### *The crucifixion - nailed or tied?*

The New Testament identifies that Christ was "nailed" to the cross (John 20:25, Acts 2:23, Col 2:14). (Traditional depictions show nails through both the palms of His outstretched hands, and through His ankles). Many historians doubted the accuracy of this statement, feeling, rather, that people that were crucified were probably tied to the cross (and left to die of thirst and exposure), rather than nailed.

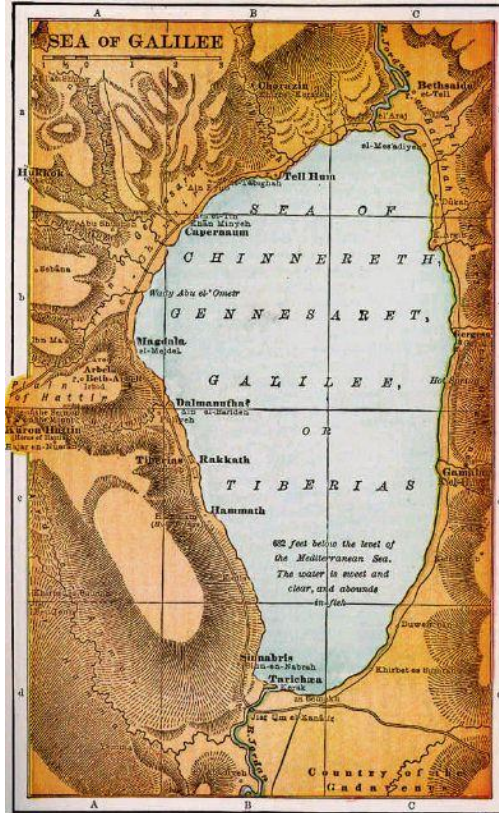
In 1968, a man that was crucified c. mid-first century A.D. was discovered by Vassilios Tzaferis, in a suburb of Jerusalem called Giv'at ha-Mivtar. Tzaferis (and Nico Haas, who published the data from the dig) concluded:

"The feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixed by the same nail at the heels...the upper limbs were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm." (McRay, p. 205)

### *Gergesa*

The Synoptic Gospels identify that Jesus visited by boat a town on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee, identified as "the region of the Gerasenes" (Mark 5:1, Luke 8:26). Traditionally, this has been identified with the towns of Gerasa, or Gerdara, which are (respectively) 37 and 5 miles from the Sea of Galilee. So how could Jesus have stepped ashore from a boat?

In 1970, Vassilios Tzaferis excavated the remains of a Byzantine church, located near an unexcavated city known as Tell el-Kusri, on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee. A nearby bay contains the remains of a harbor. Many scholars now believe this is the "Gergesa" (or the "region of the Gerasenes") mentioned in the Bible - exactly where the New Testament says it was.



Map source: "Classic Map" from Ages Master Christian Library

### *Lysanias of Abilene*

Luke (Luke 3:1) identifies that when Lysanias was "tetrarch of Abilene", John the Baptist began his ministry. Some historians challenged this statement, because the only known Lysanias was the ruler of Chalcis, 40-36 B.C. However:

"...an inscription has been found from the time of Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) that names Lysanias as tetrarch in Abila near Damascus." (McRay, p. 160)

### *Nazareth - fact or fiction?*

Many skeptics doubted that Nazareth existed in the time of Jesus. The doubts are based on the fact that Nazareth is not mentioned in any of the following sources:

- Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament (see, for example, Joshua 19:10-15)
- Josephus (see next section) gives the names of 45 towns and villages in Galilee. Nazareth is not among them!
- The Jewish Talmud mentions 63 towns and villages in the area. Nazareth is not among them.

Excavations by Bellarmino Bagatti in 1955 have shown that there was an agricultural settlement on the site identified in the New Testament as Nazareth. The site dates back as far as 900 years before Christ. Evidence of use during the Roman occupation has been found.

Also, excavations by Michael Avi-Yonah at Caesarea in 1962 unearthed a tablet with the name "Nazareth" contained on it. The tablet demonstrates that Nazareth existed at least as early as first century A.D.

### *The great census debate*

Luke (2:1-3) identifies the following as an historical event occurring at the time of the birth of Jesus:

"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register." (NIV)

Many skeptics have doubted the veracity of this statement, given that the only census known by a Quirinius until recently was one dated by Josephus as A.D. 6. (Jesus couldn't have been born later than 4 B.C., because that was the year that Herod the Great died). So, Luke must have been wrong, either about the census, or about Jesus being born when Herod the Great was still alive, right? Wrong!

"Jerry Vardaman has discovered the name of Quirinius on a coin in micrographic letters, placing him as proconsul of Syria and Cilicia from 11 B.C. until the death of Herod." (McRay, p. 154)

Further evidence indicates that it is very possible that a census could have been ongoing in Israel at the time of Jesus' birth - it was just a different census (and probably a different Quirinius) than mentioned by the Josephus.

Note also that Luke was aware of the later (6 A.D.) census, which he refers to in Acts 5:37 as "the" census, as opposed to "a" census in Luke 2:1-3).

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### About the Author

Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. From 1984-2009, Robert worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.



Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see back cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the Disciples Bible Study five times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Retracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

His interests include the Civil War, Medieval Monasteries, American railroads, ghost towns, hiking in Death Valley and the Mojave, and Biblical Archaeology.

Robert is available as a guest speaker on Christian history and theology topics in the Atlanta Metro area, and North Georgia. See <http://www.sundayschoolcourses.com/speaker.htm> for more information.

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