



FIRST CHURCH

What do we believe?

**Living the Essentials
of the Faith:**

RAISE

Adopted by the Session of
First Presbyterian Church, Norfolk
February 16, 2009

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What We Believe

First Presbyterian Church Norfolk, Virginia

We affirm that:

1. Jesus Christ is Lord God of all and the only way of salvation.

- a. Jesus and God are One. (John 10:30, John 8:58, Phil. 2:5-7, Mark 2:7, Col. 2:9, John 20:28).
- b. Christ is supreme over all things (Col. 1:15-20, Matt. 28:18).
- c. Salvation can be attained only through Jesus' atoning sacrifice. (John 1:29, Rom. 3:23-25, Heb. 7:23-25, 9:15, 10:10-18, John 4:14-15).
- d. One cannot have a relationship with God outside of Jesus Christ. (John 14:6, Acts 4:12, John 6:40, 45-48, 1 Tim. 2:5-6, 1 John 4:14-15).

2. The Holy Scripture is God's revealed Word, the only infallible rule for faith and life.

- a. The entire Bible is God's revealed message to the entire human race. (2 Tim. 3:15-17, Psalm 119).
- b. The Bible is neither a science text nor a secular history text, but is infallible in all that it teaches. (John 20:31).
- c. Scripture is the two-edge sword separating truth from falsehood. (Heb. 4:12, Rev. 1:16, Eph. 6:17).
- d. The authority of Scripture is the bedrock of the reformed faith. We are reformed and we continue to reform but only consistent with the authority of Scripture. (John 5:37-40, Rev. 22:18-19.)
- e. Understanding comes from God, not by our own wisdom. (2 Peter 1:20-21).

3. God's people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship in which sexual activity is appropriate.

- a. We are called to lead pure and blameless lives (1 Peter 1:14-16, Phil. 2:14-15, Titus 2:11-14).
- b. Specifically we are called to lead sexually pure lives:
 - Jesus explicitly states that God's model is the marriage between a man and a woman. (Matt. 19:5, Mark 7:21, Eph. 5:31).
 - All forms of sexual activity outside of marriage of a man and a woman are condemned. (Lev. 18:22, Matt. 15:19, Rom. 1:27, 1 Cor. 5:9-11, Prov. 5:18-21, Deut. 23:17, 22:22, 27:20-23).
 - Leaders of the church are expected to be modelers of Christian living. (1 Cor. 4:15-17, 1 Tim. 3:1-12, Titus 1:5-9).

Adopted by the Session of First Presbyterian Church, Norfolk, Virginia in 2001.

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History and Overview

In the Fall of 2008, our leadership set out to define the "Essentials of the Christian Faith." This began as an effort to distinguish, for ourselves, between the important and the absolutely necessary. The material that follows is the results of that process of naming and defining; a list of five key concepts, each divided into two sections, which together summarize what we believe to be inseparable from the "essence" of being a follower of Jesus.

We use the acronym RAISE to help express these essentials. RAISE stands for Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification, and Eternity. The following pages explain these core beliefs in broad strokes.

This material originated as a ten-week series taught on Wednesday nights by our pastoral staff. Each week's class included a one-page summary, which you now have before you. Those summaries were then compiled and unanimously adopted by the Session of FPC in February of 2009.

Our format may be original, but our content is not. These are the same beliefs that Christians have shared from the earliest days of the church. They are not unique to Presbyterians or to Protestants, but are common for all who name Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They are the non-negotiables, accepted by believers everywhere and at all times.

We are continually reminded of Paul's command to Timothy to "hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard" and to "guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit" (2 Tim. 1:13-14). As together we raise our understanding of the essentials of our faith, may we also hold to that sound teaching passed down through Christ to the apostles and the early church. The mystery of faith is an extraordinary treasure that has been entrusted to us. It is our responsibility and privilege to be part of God's work in the world, as together we share that treasure, the good news of God's love for us in Jesus Christ, with a broken and hurting world.

Living the Essentials of the Faith: Everywhere, Everyone, At All Times RAISE – Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification, Eternity

————— *Revelation Part 1 – How do we know what we know about God?* —————

Key Concept: It is only through the person of Jesus Christ that humanity can attain sufficient knowledge of God.

Summary: Together with all Christians, we hold that God created the universe ex nihilo, meaning out of nothing. Prior to the universe, God was; even now, God is; at the end of this world, God will be. Because the Creator exists outside of the creation, and because we, and everything we experience, are part of creation, humans cannot examine, or probe, or analyze God as we can aspects of our universe – God cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched or smelled – not even with the greatest advances of modern technology.

Therefore, as creatures, we are reliant on God’s initiative for any knowledge of the divine. We call that initiative “revelation.” There are two kinds of revelation. The first, which we call general revelation, is the disclosure of God’s identity and character through our experience of His creation. This is analogous to learning about an artist by studying his or her artwork. Of course, art can only provide limited and tentative information about an artist, so naturally humans have, for millennia, received the same general revelation and come to dramatically different understandings of the divine.

Fortunately, God also provides us with special revelation. Special revelation is the direct self-disclosure of God to mortals. When God spoke to Abraham and called him to leave his homeland, when the plagues came upon Egypt, the Red Sea parted and the voice of God spoke from Mt. Sinai, when God spoke through Elijah and Isaiah and all the prophets, that was direct, Person-to-person communication. Christians believe that God’s special revelation culminated in the person of Jesus, in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19).

There is a hierarchy of revelation. Special revelation is, for obvious reasons, superior to general revelation. And within the rubric of special revelation, we see a similar hierarchy; God might, perhaps, speak to me directly, but that is clearly less complete, clear and authoritative than, for example, what God said to Moses and all the Israelites on Mount Sinai. At the absolute peak of our hierarchy of revelation is the person of Christ. Because “all the fullness of God” was found in Jesus of Nazareth, there can be no greater revelation of God than we experienced in Jesus. Everything that came before Jesus, and everything that came after Jesus, was a shadow or reflection of the all-sufficient revelation of Christ.

Scripture then, is the record of the special revelation of God to one chosen people, the Israelites, preparing them for and culminating in the full revelation of God to all humanity in Jesus Christ. Scripture is not an end unto itself, but the authoritative record that points us to Jesus. The word of God, the Bible, exists to tell us the true story of the Word of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

Living the Essentials of the Faith: Everywhere, Everyone, At All Times RAISE – Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification, Eternity

Revelation Part 2 – Why do we believe that the Bible is unique?

Key Concept: The Bible itself is part of God’s special revelation because it is “inspired” by God; its text and composition are simultaneously 100% human and 100% divine.

Summary: In the Christian tradition, not only do we believe that Scripture records the special revelation of God, we also believe that the record (i.e. the Bible) is itself special revelation. In other words, we believe the text of the Bible is more than a history of God’s revelations; it is “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). Therefore, we treat the words of the Bible in a very different fashion than we would treat, say, the words of C. S. Lewis, Martin Luther, or John Calvin.

Much of this difference resides in our understanding of how we received the Scriptures. We believe that God was intimately involved in the transmission of the Bible to His people. Second Timothy 3:16 tells us that all Scripture is “inspired by God” or “God-breathed.” We believe that our Bible is like Jesus Christ in that it is Incarnational. We believe that it is both 100% human, and 100% God. We acknowledge that human writers used their own creativity, discernment and intellect to write the Bible. On the other hand, we believe that Scripture is unique in that God mystically and mysteriously worked with each human author, guiding them in what they wrote. This is not to say that God dictated to or controlled them, but that God’s purposes and theirs, His will and theirs merged such that the finished product fully reflects both human and divine intention.

This concept of inspiration has an extremely important corollary with the Incarnation. Just as we would reject the idea that Jesus is sometimes human, and sometimes God, so too we reject the idea that the words of Scripture are sometimes from mortals, and sometimes divine. We affirm that they are always both; always of human origin, and always of divine inspiration. We can never discount a section of Scripture as merely reflective of the author or the context but irrelevant to us as modern readers, for we believe that God, who inspired those words, also intended for them to speak to us and to our children. Similarly, we can never select a passage of Scripture and pretend that its original context has no bearing on our understanding, because the human authors who wrote those words did so for a particular time and place. We must hold in tension both the human and divine authorship of Scripture each time we open its pages.

In other words, we believe that all Scripture must be primarily relevant to its original audience and that understanding the original audience and author will help us understand the message of God in the Bible. We also believe that Scripture is “living and active” and therefore remains relevant for us in our modern context, as it has been and will be for Christians of every time and place. Scripture is not limited to the perspectives or intentions of its human authors. That means that a book like Revelation was primarily relevant to its first audience; it also means that a book like Leviticus is still relevant for us today.

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— Anthropology Part 1 – What separates us from God? —

Key Concept: Humanity was created to be in relationship with God, yet all humanity has universally excluded itself from that intended relationship.

Summary: The first chapter of the Bible tells us that “God created humankind in his image.” This simple statement provides two crucial aspects to our Christian understanding of anthropology. First, we are created. As creatures, we are fundamentally different from our Creator, much like a work of art is ontologically different from an artist. At the level of our being, we share a common bond with all of creation (rocks, water, animals, stars, gases, plants, etc.) that we do NOT share with God. Intrinsic to the act of creation is the distinction between that which is made and the One who makes.

Second, this statement affirms that we are made “in his image.” When God created humanity, He formed us into something distinct from the rest of His creation. That image, that distinction, is simply this: God endowed humans with the unique ability to have and form relationships with one another and especially with God Himself. Thus God provided a means of bridging the inevitable chasm that looms between creature and Creator, and provided the purpose for all human life; to be in relationship with God.

Yet immediately after the magnificent story of God’s great triumph of creation, the Scriptures turn to the tragic story of humankind’s greatest failure. Here we discover, to our terrible sorrow, that our first ancestors violated the image of God within themselves. They rejected a relationship with their Creator in favor of a self-centered existence.

Their calamitous decision had repercussions far beyond their own lives. All humanity tasted the wretched fruit of the rejection of God, for we inherited a self-centered inclination instead of the God-centered orientation with which we were created. This innate self-focus (named “original sin” by the church) has led each successive member of humanity to repeat and reinforce the rupture in the relationship between creature and Creator. This rupture we name “sin”, a word referring both to individual actions of disobedience to God, and to the general condition of division from our Maker.

Sin and its consequences are the ultimate cause for all suffering and evil in the world. All broken relationships – between nations, individuals, strangers, family, neighbors, even between humans and nature – are broken because we have broken that most important relationship between God and those God made in his image.

The ultimate consequence of sin is death, meaning eternal separation from God. If our lives are characterized by our disobedience, disinterest and disregard for God, should we not expect our afterlives to be more of the same? Thus Scripture tells us that “the wages of sin is death.” Addressing our broken relationship with our Creator is the most urgent and vital need of all humankind, for sin is a defiance of our reason for existence.

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Anthropology Part 2 – Why does our brokenness require God’s grace?

Key Concept: Humanity broke the relationship between itself and God, but we cannot restore that relationship through any human effort; we rely entirely upon God’s grace.

Summary: Sin is not a uniquely Christian concept. Most other religious traditions address sin, or its equivalent, in some version of a karma-like concept with three basic suppositions. First, humans should strive to avoid sin and act righteously. Second, there will be some supernatural evaluation of each individual person. And third, in that evaluation, if one’s righteousness outweighs one’s sin on the scales of cosmic justice, rewards will follow; if not, punishment will ensue. Thus the solution for sin in many other religious traditions is to outweigh one’s sin with one’s good behavior.

However, this is not a satisfactory solution to the Christian problem of sin. The Christian tradition understands sin not as a set of actions to be outweighed, but as the condition of separation from God. Even if we overcame our own selfish inclination and were able to stop sinning, it would not undo our history of sin and separation. In the same way, someone who is in debt cannot change their situation by ceasing to draw on lines of credit – the debt itself must still be repaid.

Unfortunately, we have nothing to offer as payment for our debt, since our greatest devotion and worship is no more than what God already deserves – we have nothing to offer that is above and beyond His due. Our best hope is to stop increasing our debt; but we have no way of cancelling it. Like an adulterous spouse who cheats on a faithful wife or husband, all the responsibility for repairing this ruptured relationship lies with us. Yet being loving and faithful in the present and future is merely fulfilling the terms of the marriage relationship. It does not undo the adultery we have already committed.

We are therefore wholly reliant upon God for salvation and restoration. We need God to do more than simply ignore our sin. Such an action might be possible if sin was merely a matter of judging one’s effectiveness at adhering to a set of rules. But ignoring a broken relationship does not restore it, any more than a husband ignoring his wife’s adultery restores their marriage.

We rely not on God’s willingness to ignore our sin, but on His grace. Grace is the term that the church uses to describe God’s undeserved favor towards humanity. Grace affirms that only through God’s initiation can the problem of sin be solved. In our brokenness, our debt, our adultery, we hope not in ourselves but in our Creator, trusting that His power to save exceeds our power to damn. The story of humanity, and especially the story of the Bible, is the history of God’s grace extended again and again despite the promulgation of human sin. Grace culminates in God’s solution to sin itself – Jesus Christ – and is finally fully expressed and accomplished through the work of Christ on the cross.

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————— *Incarnation Part 1 – Who do we say that God is?* —————

Key Concept: The authoritative answers to the questions of God's (and Jesus') identity are found in the church's definitions of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

Summary: The foundation for the Old Testament understanding of God's identity is summarized in the *Shema*, the Hebrew prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4 – "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One." This prayer affirms two essential ideas: the oneness of God, and the name of God (the LORD, or YAHWEH in Hebrew).

In the New Testament, however, Jesus repeatedly claimed by word and action that He Himself was God. He also spoke extensively of His Father, and also of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. This suggested an apparent contradiction between Old and New Testament concepts of God, and presented early Christians with several essential questions: In what sense was Jesus, God? How can God be both One and also Father, Son and Spirit? Was Jesus God, human, or both? If both, what does that mean?

Ultimately, the church decided that these revelations were complementary, not contradictory. The church stated that God, the LORD, is Three Persons (in Greek, *hypostatizes*) in One Substance (*ousia*). Everything that is essential to being God, the substance of being God, is common to all three Persons. Moreover, these three, the Father, the Son and the Spirit, are so perfectly united in their love for each other, and in their will and actions, that they are literally both Three and One. This insight into God's identity we name the Trinity, and it is the most basic Christian definition of God. When a Christian says "God," he or she means "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The whole work of God's creation makes sense in light of the Trinitarian reality. God desires to be in a relationship with humanity precisely because God Himself is a relationship. The image of God in humankind is our ability to reflect the unity of the Trinity within our human relationships.

Yet while the Trinity establishes that Jesus, the Son of God, is *homoousia*, or "of one substance", with the Father, it does not address the connection between His humanity and divinity. The church's authoritative answer to this question is found in the concept of the Incarnation. The church stated that Jesus is one Person in two natures (divine and human) that combine without confusion, change, division or separation. In other words, a human body and soul was united with God the Son, the second Person of the Trinity, to form Jesus, who has one will and identity. Jesus is always and fully God and always and fully human. Those natures are united and yet still distinct.

The Incarnation reveals God's desire for humanity. In Jesus, we see that we can be drawn into the perfect relationship of the Trinity and experience a mystic union with our Creator, yet remain distinctly ourselves. Jesus literally embodies our hope for reconciliation with God.

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————— *Incarnation Part 2 – Is the cross the only way?* —————

Key Concept: Reconciliation between God and humanity is only possible through the death and resurrection of the Incarnate God-man, Jesus.

Summary: In the person of Jesus, God provided the only possible solution for the problem of human sin. Because Jesus was fully human, it was appropriate that the effort and work of reconciliation, the payment of our human debt of sin, should be made by Him. And because Jesus was fully God, He Himself was of infinite worth; He possessed the means to repay the debt that humans incurred. St. Anselm, in discussing the means of atonement, or reconciliation, between God and humankind, says the following:

“For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should be perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man.”

Throughout the witness of the Old Testament, God’s special revelation to Israel, two concepts regarding sin and atonement are reinforced. The first is that sin, which leads to separation from God and death, can be paid for by the death of a substitute; in the Old Testament, this substitutionary atonement occurred through the sacrifice of animals. The second is that these animal sacrifices were insufficient because they needed to be offered incessantly; their very repetition revealed that they could not fully resolve the problem of sin. A more perfect sacrifice, a more perfect substitute, was needed.

Jesus, being fully God and fully man, became, on the cross, the sufficient sacrifice for humanity’s sin. His infinite worth makes future atonement unnecessary. Christians affirm that on the cross, all the sin of all of humanity was imputed, or transferred, upon Jesus, who Himself was without sin. Likewise, when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior, His righteousness is imputed upon us. Thus by uniting ourselves to Christ through faith, our sins are paid and we are reconciled to God. This understanding of substitutionary atonement is essential to our Christian life.

We have a second understanding of atonement that is equally important, named the Christus Victor theory. In short, it affirms that Jesus’ death on the cross was part of a cosmic battle between the forces of God and Satan. The death and resurrection of Jesus – particularly the resurrection – was the final blow that forever broke the power of evil and death in the world. Thus through the death of Jesus we see a payment of our sin; through His resurrection we see His victory over the forces of sin and darkness.

The centrality of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the work of reconciliation between God and mortals is the core of the entire Christian faith. It is the gospel, the good news, for the entire world. There is no way back to a relationship with God outside of that path offered by the gospel. To suggest that salvation is possible apart from faith in Jesus is to reject the divinity and saving work of our Lord and Savior.

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Sanctification Part 1 – Where do we go from the cross?

Key Concept: Our response to the gospel of Christ meets God's ongoing work of redemption in the church's commitment to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Summary: The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not the end of the Christian life but the beginning. As believers we hope not merely to be saved from sin, but to be saved for a purpose; that we may be God's agents in the ongoing work of redemption of the world. We call the reclamation of the world sanctification.

Sanctification is the process of conforming to Christ that occurs AFTER the work of salvation has been accomplished. Whereas salvation, or atonement, is completely the work of God, in sanctification the redeemed people of God are allowed to participate with the Holy Spirit in transforming God's creation.

In the Old Testament, God saved and established a nation of people through the Exodus and the giving of the Law. So too, Jesus saved and established a nation of people through His life, death and resurrection. In the Old Testament, after God rescued His people and gave them an identity, He gave them the opportunity to participate in the spreading of this new Kingdom of Israel through the conquest of the promised land. In the same manner, after Jesus has rescued us from sin and death and given us an identity as His disciples, He also gives us the opportunity to spread this new Kingdom of Heaven through the conquest and conversion of the world.

The purpose of Jesus' time on earth was the establishment of this Kingdom of Heaven (also named the Kingdom of God). Reconciliation between God and humanity entails more than merely the forgiveness of our sins; it also requires a new way of life and living that centers on our restored relationship. The Kingdom exists wherever this life is lived out in community.

The Kingdom of Heaven is often in opposition to the kingdoms of earth. As members of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are called to live radically different from the rest of the world. The Kingdom can only transform the world inasmuch as it is distinct from the world. All the greatest tragedies of the church are easily traced to this one failing, that the church abandoned God's project of the Kingdom of Heaven, and chose instead to attempt to remake the nations of this world in God's image. But to pray "Thy kingdom come" is precisely to pray that the kingdoms of this world would pass away.

The Kingdom is God's eternal plan and reality for the world. What we erect now in the Kingdom – sharing the gospel, raising disciples, worshipping God, and spreading peace, justice and compassion – will last beyond even the return of Christ and the creation of a new heaven and earth. While the Kingdom is only completed with Christ's return, we are fully capable of living in it, and expanding it, today. We are both ambassadors and craftsmen of the eternal.

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Sanctification Part 2 – What does Jesus expect from His disciples?

Key Concept: All Christians, with the help of the Holy Spirit, are called to grow into a reflection of the invisible Christ.

Summary: The work of the Kingdom is not only to sanctify and reclaim the world for Christ, but also to sanctify the lives and characters of individuals. Sanctification here refers to the process of cooperation with the Holy Spirit that occurs in our response to Jesus and that leads us deeper into conformity with Christ.

St. Athanasius explained the process of sanctification, saying “God became man, so that man might become God.” Jesus came not merely to restore us to sinless humanity, but to advance us even beyond our pre-Fall state. Therefore we affirm that, in God’s plan, the end is better than the beginning. We can not only be freed from sin, but also united to God in an intimacy heralded by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the God-man.

We grow into this intimacy through our work of sanctification, but we are not able to advance this process alone. The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity, works with us to enable and empower our efforts to become Christ-like. Moreover, the Spirit abides within those who truly claim Christ as their Lord and Savior. The reception of the Holy Spirit is a miraculous indwelling of God in each of Christ’s followers that, in essence, produces a miniature version of the Incarnation – God and man united in one being.

This indwelling makes us a new creation; it is like a second birth. Yet while this transformation is ontologically dramatic, it is behaviorally gradual. Each follower of Christ has the privilege of participating in this process, and of growing up into this new life by daily choosing to subordinate will and life to that of the Savior.

Sanctification includes, but is not limited to, the removal of sinful behavior and thoughts; it also requires the inclusion of Christ-like behaviors and thoughts. We seek to rise above our natural desires to the super-natural standards that Jesus sets for us. Each Christian must strive to become so similar to Jesus Christ that they, like Paul, might say to others, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

All who aspire to leadership in the church must remember that Kingdom leadership stems not from theological wisdom or emotional affection for God or others, but from likeness to Jesus. One’s Christian leadership ability is proportional to one’s Christ-likeness, and none who are unlike Jesus can help others become like Him. Thus the ordained offices of pastor, elder and deacon are held in special honor and to the highest standards. We affirm that unrepentant sinful behavior, including all sexual activity outside of marriage between one man and one woman, is outside of God’s plan and grounds for exclusion from ordination and leadership.

¹But not grounds for exclusion from membership (or salvation). All who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, regardless of their path in the process of sanctification, are welcome in the church’s membership.

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Eternity Part 1 – What is the ultimate hope of all Christians?

Key Concept: Jesus will return to earth with “power and glory” to raise the dead and judge the living and the dead, securing the ultimate grace and justice that will fully realize the Kingdom of Heaven.

Summary: The Christian faith affirms that history has both a definitive beginning and a definitive conclusion. Time began when God created the world *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. It will conclude when Jesus returns to usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

Today’s popular eschatology (the church’s word for the study of the last things) obsesses about signs and tribulations and the escalating conflict between spiritual forces. A more Biblical eschatology, however, emphasizes not a set of highly detailed warnings, but the return of Jesus Christ that leads to the resurrection and the final judgment. For Christians, the end of time is neither to be feared or avoided; it is the very hope of our faith.

Jesus promises the disciples that He will ascend into heaven, and then return at a later date, “coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” Jesus’ return will complete the Kingdom of Heaven, finally triumphing over the powers of evil and establishing justice for all people of every time. Thus it is Jesus, who secured forgiveness for our sins through His death, and victory over death through His resurrection, who will also ultimately provide justice and peace as our Judge.

The return of Jesus, often called the *Parousia*, will be unmistakable to the world. He will appear in the heavens on a cloud, together with the entire angelic host. Immediately following His appearance in the heavens will be the resurrection of the dead. All those who have died will be restored to life and reunited with a spiritual version of their bodies. This resurrection is death’s final defeat. After the resurrection, there will be a judgment of both of nations and of individuals, mortals and angels. Jesus will separate those who followed Him from those who opposed Him, and each will depart for their own eternal reality. This judgment, which brings about the perfect justice of Christ, is the hope of all believers and God’s final and complete victory over evil.

Jesus warned His followers of certain signs for which to watch, but also instructed them to remain perpetually vigilant, for His return would be as unexpected as “a thief in the night.” Scripture tells us that the timing of Jesus’ return is known only to God, again reinforcing that we are to live in a manner of constant readiness.

Christians are privileged to know the end of their own story. We live in light of that ending, looking forward with hope even while working with urgency, knowing that our time is short. Together, Christians of every time and place unite together in the ancient prayer, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

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————— *Eternity Part 2 – What are you doing for eternity?* —————

Key Concept: Every person experiences an eternal destiny that parallels their earthly life and choices; for some, that destiny is an ever increasing union with God (Heaven), and for others, an ever increasing separation from God (Hell).

Summary: The Old Testament universally affirms that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous. However, in the Old Testament, God's justice predominately occurs in the context of our earthly lives, though glimpses of an eternal vision and future appear in the prophets. In New Testament times, that understanding shifts. Jesus and His disciples maintain their affirmation of divine justice, but they describe the ultimate justice of God as a post-resurrection event. Heaven and Hell, Jesus teaches, are eternal realities.

Jesus mentions the concept of Hell, a place of eternal punishment for the wicked, more often than any other Biblical figure. From Jesus' teaching and the other New Testament authors, we understand that those who choose not to conform to Christ are cast outside the kingdom of heaven, into the "outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Admonishment about the threat of Hell is a regular aspect of Jesus' ministry.

The church has often asserted that Scripture's language for Hell (outer darkness, unquenchable fire, etc) is a metaphorical attempt to describe an indescribable reality. Hell is an actual location for those in the condition of eternal separation from God. This separation is the inevitable result of an individual's choice to live without Christ, and God's choice to respect that decision. Hell is the fulfillment of our own God-less desires, and therefore, not only are those in Hell without hope, but they are also without objection; they have chosen and continually choose perfect isolation.

Conversely, Heaven is the subjection of our wills to that of God's. Heaven is not simply a place of happiness for good people, but a place of joy that comes through conformity with Jesus Christ. We enter Heaven through a relationship with Christ precisely because that is what Heaven is – a growing and ever more intimate relationship with Jesus.

Heaven is described as a place where we enjoy the constant presence of the Triune God, and where suffering, sin and death are no more. Jesus often speaks of the promise of eternal life, a promise secured by His death and resurrection. This everlasting life is lived in community with all the saints of every time and place.

The church teaches that Heaven is an ever increasing union with an infinite and perfect God. Together with all the saints, we eternally grow closer to the source of all joy. While Scripture's language for Heaven is also symbolic, we can expect more than harps and clouds; instead, Heaven promises wild and unbridled wonders, glorious challenges and victories, and the certain knowledge that each day will hold greater joy than the one it preceded as we grow in relationship with our Savior, Jesus.

First Presbyterian Church of Norfolk, Virginia

Living the Essentials of the Faith: Everywhere, Everyone, At All Times RAISE – Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification, Eternity

————— *A Short Q & A about RAISE* —————

Q: Are these beliefs unique to a particular church or denomination?

A: These concepts are applicable for Christians of every denomination. They are the essentials for all Christians, everywhere, at all times.

Q: Some very important topics (sacraments, priesthood, women’s ordination, spiritual gifts, predestination and free will, etc.) are not discussed here. Why are they missing?

A: Many important topics are not discussed in this work. There was an intentional effort to keep the list of essentials as small as possible, in order that they might faithfully reflect not merely the essentials of the faith for one congregation or denomination, but for all believers. Many devoted followers of Jesus differ on significant theological points, but these are not always grounds for dividing the broader church into camps of “real Christians” and “fake Christians.” In the history of the church since the Reformation, Protestants have often failed to distinguish between the important and the essential. There must be some overarching beliefs that tie Presbyterians and Methodists and Catholics and Pentecostals together as one family in Christ, despite many family disagreements. Similarly, there must be some criteria by which one can identify if a person or group has truly parted ways with the family of Christ. That is the purpose of “essentials.”

Q: Isn’t God too big for our systematic theology? Doesn’t He defy our attempts to limit, define and confine Him into simple 5-letter acronyms?

A: Both the nature of God and of His Scripture defy the theological systems that we so love to create. A “Biblical” theology acknowledges both the dynamic and mysterious identity of God, and the predominance of narrative (rather than rules or systems) in Scripture itself. We must acknowledge that we cannot know everything with certainty; but that is not to say that we cannot know anything with certainty. Intrinsic in identifying the “essentials” is an recognition that there are many other important aspects of the faith not included in this effort. We maintain that there are many areas where we have strong theological opinions, but where we must still make room for the mystery and ongoing revelation of our God. However, when God speaks clearly and definitively throughout the canon of Scripture, and when the church has reached an accord on those same essentials for centuries, it is equally dangerous to ignore or question those things that God Himself has made clear.

**Living the Essentials of the Faith: Everywhere, Everyone, At All Times
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————— *A Short Q & A about RAISE* —————

Q: Why not rely upon the already existing creeds and confessions of the church, rather than creating a new list of “essentials”?

A: These same essentials have been identified many times before throughout the history of the church (in documents like the Nicene Creed and the Westminster Confession). We heartily acknowledge the wisdom and authority of these older creeds and confessions. Our goal is neither to replace them nor to suggest that we possess wisdom greater than theirs, but simply to restate the same eternal truths in an accessible, contemporary format. While the truth of God is unchanging, it must be proclaimed and presented afresh in each generation.

Q: Why are the five topics of Revelation, Anthropology, Incarnation, Sanctification and Eternity listed in that order? Is there an implicit hierarchy within the essentials named in RAISE?

A: The components of RAISE are ordered as presented in order to provide the reader with a logical progression between concepts. Revelation comes first as it addresses the basic question of epistemology (how we know what we know). Our study of Anthropology and our broken relationship with God leads directly to our need for salvation in the Incarnation. Sanctification is the response to our experience of God in Jesus Christ, and Eternity is, naturally, at the end of all things. This is not intended to convey a hierarchy of significance; all these concepts are equally essential. However, if there is a lynchpin for the entire process, it is found in the center of our acronym and of our faith – the Incarnation. Our understanding of the Trinity, and of the Person of Jesus Christ, holds together all the rest of our faith.