

**Five Sermons
for My Church Family
in a Time of Transition**

**Presented to Manoa Valley Church
by Dr. Kent M. Keith**

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Preface

The five sermons in this collection were presented at Manoa Valley Church in May, June, and July 2006. My hope was that these sermons would be helpful to my church family during a time of transition.

Manoa Valley Church in Honolulu, Hawaii has been my church family for more than 30 years. My wife and I were married at the church, and my children were baptized there. Over the years, many members of the church have helped me to grow in my faith and my understanding of the Lord. The steadfast warmth and love of my fellow church members has meant a lot to me.

During the past several years Manoa Valley Church has experienced significant changes. As part of that process of change, we are searching for a new Senior Pastor. It seems to me that this time of transition is a good time to affirm our core beliefs and our covenant to live them. It is a good time to affirm that our faith can be unshakeable, but our beliefs can change as we grow spiritually; the Bible is the Holy Word of God, but there is more than one reputable, accurate translation that can speak to us; and there are some issues, like the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture, that are important, but need not divide us, because they are outside our core beliefs, and are up to each of us to determine as best we can with the light that is given us. Finally, it is a good time to affirm that we come together as a church family not only to worship Christ, but also to live the teachings of Jesus. He calls us to serve others, especially those who are in the greatest need.

If there is an underlying message in these sermons, it is that we know who we are, and we know what we are called to do. We have every reason to move forward, quietly confident in the Lord, and deeply committed to doing the Lord's work as the body of Christ.

Dr. Kent M. Keith
Honolulu, Hawaii
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Our Core Beliefs

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

May 21, 2006

Good morning! It's a beautiful day, and a wonderful time to be together as a church family.

I will be preaching five times in the coming two months. Today, I will talk about our core beliefs. The next time, in two weeks, I will talk about the difference between faith and belief. Two weeks after that, I will talk about the Bible as the Word of God. My fourth topic will be the rapture, and my final topic will be about worshipping Christ and following Jesus. I hope that my words will be of some use to you as we journey together as members of the body of Christ.

Since many members of our church family are on our church retreat, I thought we might do a little retreat of our own this morning. I'd like to review our core beliefs as Christians, as members of the United Church of Christ, and as members of Manoa Valley Church. The question is this: As we gather together as a church family, what are the core beliefs that we share—what beliefs do we have in common?

Each of us will probably answer a little differently. Let me give you my understanding of those core beliefs. We believe in almighty God. We believe he created the world. We believe that he loves us. We believe that he loves us so much that he sent his Son, the Christ, to teach us and die for us, so that we can be reconciled to God. We believe in the Holy Spirit, which guides us and encourages us. We believe that God is manifest as the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity gives us a way of understanding three dimensions of God.

We believe that we can be saved. If we accept Christ into our lives, and believe in Him, we will be saved and enjoy everlasting life. We know that we cannot earn salvation. Salvation is a gift, the gift of grace, a gift that comes from God, because he loves us. We gratefully accept that gift, and in our joy, we seek to live the way God wants us to live.

Jesus taught us how to live. He taught us that the two greatest commandments are to love God, and to love each other—to love our neighbors as ourselves. He taught us through the Sermon on the Mount, and parables, and his own example. He gave us the Great Commission, to go out and share the good news with all nations. He taught us that the Son of Man will return, in all his glory.

I hope that I have just described a set of core Christian beliefs. These core beliefs took centuries to develop. Christians, in their communities and churches and organizations, have been on a long journey, seeking to understand God and Christ and the Holy Spirit.

For nearly 300 years after the resurrection of Jesus, Christians were often persecuted, and had to focus on surviving and preserving their knowledge of Christ. During this time there were Christian communities, and there were Christian teachings and traditions, but Christians were not organized the way we are today. They did not have church buildings and national offices and synods and seminaries and ministers and priests and bishops and popes the way we do now.

Since Christians were not organized the way we are today, there was no standard position, no orthodoxy, no statement of faith that was accepted by all Christians. Christians were trying to understand all that they could about Jesus, and they had many different beliefs. When we look back, we can identify the views that were not accepted later in history, and we may label them heretical. But the simple fact is that there were no heretics in those early days, because there was no method for judging any doctrine to be orthodox or heretical.

The early Christians did not agree about many things. They did not agree about the humanity and divinity of Jesus. They agreed that he was divine, but how divine? Was he completely divine, and merely appeared to be human? If he was human, how human was he? What did incarnation really mean? Was he fully human until he was baptized by John, and then became divine as well as human? Or, assuming instead that he was both human and divine at birth, how do we describe his two natures—his divinity and his humanity—and how did those two natures co-exist? These are not easy questions.

There was also a struggle to understand the relationship of Jesus to God. He is the Son of God, but does that mean he is in some way less than God? Or is he equal to God? If he is equal to God, does he have the same substance as God? Has he existed as long as God has existed, from the beginning of time, or did God create him after the beginning of time?

Then there were questions about the Holy Spirit. Where does the Holy Spirit come from? Is it from the Father, or is it a kind of spiritual energy generated by both the Father and the Son?

Debates over all these questions raged for centuries, and not just among church leaders. These different views were argued by the general public. Gregory Nyssa, in a sermon delivered in Constantinople sometime around 380 A.D., regretted the contentiousness of the Christians of his day. He is reported to have said this:

If in this city you ask a shopkeeper for change, he will argue with you about whether the Son is begotten or unbegotten. If you inquire about the quality of bread, the baker will answer, ‘The Father is greater, the Son is less.’ And if you ask a bath attendant to draw your bath, he will tell you that the Son was created *ex nihilo* [out of nothing].

Theological issues were important to everybody, and everybody seemed to have his or her own opinion.

There are two creeds that serve as milestones or benchmarks in the early centuries of the Christian journey. The first creed that has been preserved is the Apostles’ Creed, thought to have been written within 50 years after the last books of the New Testament were written. That means that it might have been written some time between 100 A.D. and 150 A.D. The Apostle’s Creed is on your ivory-colored handout. Here it is:

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord;

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell.

The third day He rose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven
and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic [universal] church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.

Amen.

The Apostles Creed is still cherished and followed by many Christians today.

The second creed I want to mention is the Nicene Creed, which was adopted by a church council in Nicea in 325 A.D. While it did not settle the most vigorous debates of its day, it was confirmed by later councils and was eventually accepted by most Christians around the world. You have one version of the Nicene Creed on your handout. It states:

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

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

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, 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. And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. 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.

So we have the Apostles Creed, probably written between 100 and 150 A.D., followed by the Nicene Creed, adopted two hundred years later in 325 A.D. Doctrinal differences continued into the Middle Ages, and played a role in the division of the church into two major segments—the eastern segment, which became the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the western segment, which became the Roman Catholic Church. Historians use the year 1054 A.D. as the year this separation became complete.

The Reformation took place 500 years later. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg, protesting the sale of indulgences by the church to raise money so the church could rebuild St. Peter's basilica in Rome. Martin Luther did not set out to start a new church, but rather, to reform the Roman Catholic Church. However, within a few years, he had become the leader of a movement that had political, social, and economic as well as religious impacts. The protesters became the Protestants. The key issues for Luther were salvation by grace, not by works alone, and the primacy of Scripture as the source of religious authority.

We are Protestants, and we belong to the United Church of Christ, the UCC. The UCC describes itself this way:

The UCC was founded in 1957 as the union of several different Christian traditions: from the beginning of our history, we were a church that affirmed the ideal that Christians did not always have to agree to live together in communion. Our motto—“that they may all be one”—is Jesus' prayer for the unity of the church. The UCC is one of the most diverse Christian churches in the United States.

Here is the UCC attitude toward statements of faith:

The United Church of Christ embraces a theological heritage that affirms the Bible as the authoritative witness to the Word of God, the

creeds of the ecumenical councils, and the confessions of the Reformation. The UCC has roots in the "covenantal" tradition—meaning there is no centralized authority or hierarchy that can impose any doctrine or form of worship on its members. Christ alone is Head of the church. We seek a balance between freedom of conscience and accountability to the apostolic faith. The UCC therefore receives the historic creeds and confessions of our ancestors as testimonies, but not tests of the faith.

The UCC adopted its statement of faith in 1959. That original statement was later adapted by Robert V. Moss. Manoa Valley Church has adopted the Moss adaptation, almost word for word, as our own Statement of Faith. We added a sentence about the Bible. Here is our Manoa Valley Church Statement of Faith, which is on your handout:

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus Christ. We believe in the divine inspiration and authority of the Holy Bible.

We testify that:

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in

Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God.

Amen.

So that's a quick review of our heritage and where we stand, now, here, at Manoa Valley Church, in terms of our core beliefs.

I think we have a wonderful, inspiring statement of faith. We have benefited from the long journey of Christian searching and debating and praying. But I don't think the journey is over. I don't think it should *ever* be over. I hope that the journey will continue, so that we may achieve even greater understanding in the years to come. It is possible that, centuries from now, Christians will say that during our time, we were still in the early stages of Christianity. We don't know how many years stretch ahead of us until the Second Coming. What we do know is that every day, we can continue to learn, and grow closer to God, and become better disciples of Christ.

In that light, let me conclude with a statement from the United Church of Christ:

The United Church of Christ is a blend of traditions that are as old as Judaism's proclamation of one God who is the creator and lover of earth and heaven. We are justifiably proud of this heritage, and want to hand it on to our children. But ours is a *living* tradition: God, in the words of the writer of the Book of Revelation, is a God who "is and who was and who is to come..." [A]ny book about the history of our church must necessarily remain unfinished until our Savior returns to establish for all time God's loving reign among the people God created.

Let us pray.

Lord, we are grateful to our Christian brothers and sisters who went before us, seeking to know you and to define their beliefs about you. We ask that you bless us as we continue in that journey, drawing strength from the creeds and statements of faith that we have inherited, and drawing inspiration from new understandings of your love and your Word. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Faith and Beliefs

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

June 4, 2006

Good morning!

This is the second in a series of five sermons that I will be giving every other week through July 16. My hope is that these sermons will help us to think about our faith, our beliefs, and our actions as we prepare to welcome a new senior pastor.

Last time, we did a quick review of our core beliefs, starting with the early days of Christianity, reviewing two historic creeds, and then our own Statement of Faith. I quoted a document from the United Church of Christ that says that our journey as a Christian community is not over, and we can still learn and grow and increase in understanding. That means that our beliefs can change. That should be a blessing, not a threat. The reason is that faith and beliefs are not the same thing.

That is what I would like to talk about this morning— the difference between faith and beliefs. We use the two words interchangeably in our daily conversation, but I think it is helpful to distinguish them. The reason is that our faith can be unshakeable, even as our beliefs change with new knowledge and spiritual growth. A change in our beliefs should not affect our faith.

The dictionary says that faith is confidence or trust in a person or thing. Our religious faith is about our confidence and trust in God. That faith can come from many sources— from the Bible, from the lives and teachings of people of faith, and from the wonders of the natural world around us. Faith can come from any experience that reveals to us that there is something more— something beyond the materialistic world, something spiritual and transcendent and inspiring. We may experience our own revelations in moments of joy, and peace, and love. We may experience revelations in moments of despair, when we call upon God to be with us in our pain. Whatever happens, we know that God exists, and we have faith— we have confidence and trust in him.

When we have faith, we know that God doesn't cease to exist just because times are tough, or we don't understand what he's doing, or somebody else says he doesn't exist. We know that our own actions can make God happy or sad, but nothing that we do, and nothing that anybody else does, can change the fact that he exists. He is there, loving us, and inviting us to have a relationship with him.

And that's what it means to live by faith: It means having a trusting relationship with God. When we have a trusting relationship with God, we can live with a sense of God's presence. We can sense his presence in our daily lives and work. Sensing his presence makes life sacred.

Without faith, we will have no relationship with God; we will be cut off from God's presence. So our faith needs to be unshakeable. We will have good days and bad days, and things will go well and not so well. But even when we experience sorrow and calamities, our faith can be strong. No matter what the world does to us, we can still have faith in God. We can still be confident of him; we can still trust him, we can still have a relationship with him; we can still sense his presence in our lives.

A couple of months ago, Pastor Don Asman pointed out to me the last three verses of the Old Testament book of Habakkuk. This is a wonderful affirmation of faith. Let me read to you Habakkuk 3: 17-19:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my savior.

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
He enables me to go on the heights.

The faith of Habakkuk is an unshakeable faith. Even as he faces disaster, he rejoices in the Lord. Habakkuk has given us a wonderful example of the kind of faith that we need to have to continue our relationship with God, no matter what happens to us or to the world around us.

Now, let's talk about beliefs. In the religious context, a belief is a religious creed or doctrine or statement of faith. Our beliefs are *about* God. Our beliefs attempt to describe the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So you might say that we have faith *in* God, and we have beliefs *about* God.

Two weeks ago, we briefly reviewed the long history of our core beliefs—the centuries of debating, praying, and defining what Christians believe. Historic creeds and doctrines were developed that still guide and inspire Christians today.

The danger, of course, is that we may put our faith in our creeds and doctrines, not in the God whom the creeds and doctrines attempt to describe. In other words, the danger is that our confidence and trust will be in our beliefs about God, not in our God.

When that happens—when our beliefs or descriptions of God become the object of our faith, we may find ourselves clinging to our beliefs. We may not be open to any new religious insights that might result in new beliefs. We may not be willing to grow spiritually.

Another thing that may happen when our beliefs become the object of our faith is that when we realize that we can no longer accept a certain belief, we may feel as though we are losing our faith. But that shouldn't be a problem. We just need to remember that our beliefs are not our faith. Old beliefs may fall away, and new beliefs may replace them, but God is still God. We can still have faith—we can still have confidence and trust in God—even when we change our descriptions of him.

Let me try a hypothetical example from daily life. Let's say that I have a friend named Joe. Joe is a good human being. Joe and I work together in the same organization. I have learned over the years that Joe is honest and hardworking and wise and friendly. It would be very natural for me to say that I have a lot of faith in Joe—I have confidence in him, and I trust him. I know that he consistently does the right thing.

I also have some beliefs about Joe. I picked up these beliefs as a result of conversations or comments made by others at the office. As a result, I believe that Joe was raised in New York, majored in English at college, served in the Marine Corps, and was once a Social Studies teacher at an intermediate school. I also believe he played basketball, and is six foot one.

Now suppose that one day a lifelong friend of Joe's comes to town, and I find out from him that Joe was raised in New Mexico, not New York, and he majored in history, not English. I learn that Joe served in the Peace Corps, not the Marine Corps. Also, Joe didn't teach Social Studies at an intermediate school, he worked with kids in the special education program at an elementary school. Finally, I learn that Joe did indeed play basketball in college, but he is not six foot one, he is 5 feet 11 inches tall. So I learn that a lot of my beliefs about Joe were not true.

That's a little unsettling. I probably misunderstood some of the comments that people made about Joe. Maybe I just made some assumptions on my own that weren't correct. So now I am going to have to adjust some of my beliefs about Joe, and that feels a little awkward.

But the real question is: So what? Joe hasn't changed, only some of my beliefs about Joe have changed. And the most important thing is that my faith in Joe has not changed at all. I still have a lot of confidence and trust in Joe. None of the new information about him changes the fact that he is a good human being, honest and hardworking and wise and friendly. I still know that he will do the right thing. My faith in Joe is not affected at all by a change in my beliefs about him.

This can happen regarding our religious beliefs. We know that our beliefs can change as we grow and mature spiritually. The simplest way to prove this is to study the same chapter of the Bible every five years. Each time you read it, you will see things that you did not see before. The Bible did not change—you changed. As a result, you may have new beliefs about that chapter of the Bible. That's why we continue to study the Bible, and listen to sermons, and go on retreats, and try to live our faith in daily life.

I don't think there is anything to fear in this process of spiritual growth and new beliefs. Changing a belief about God does not change God. It just means that we have a new way of describing or understanding him.

When we know that our faith is unshakeable, but our beliefs about God can change with new spiritual insights, we don't have to feel threatened by other people's beliefs. There are doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and approximately 200 different Protestant denominations. But these differences in beliefs should

not prevent us from joining together as members of the body of Christ. In fact, we can enrich each other with our different spiritual and religious insights.

I said that I do not feel threatened by other people's beliefs. I also do not feel threatened by such things as *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown. Since the book is one of the biggest all-time bestsellers, and the movie was released recently, it has been getting a lot of attention in the press and at many churches.

The first reason I don't feel threatened by the *The Da Vinci Code* is that it is a work of fiction. Dan Brown mixed fact and fiction to create an exciting tale that has been incredibly successful in the commercial marketplace. Personally, I enjoyed both the book and the movie. And I am sure that discussing *The Da Vinci Code* can be an interesting opportunity to identify what we believe and what we don't believe.

As you know, the story told in *The Da Vinci Code* is that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had a child; that the child survived; and that the blood line of Jesus has continued down to the present day. Supposedly, the Roman Catholic Church has desperately tried to kill off the descendants of Jesus, so in each generation, the descendants have had to be protected by an ancient secret society in order to survive.

I don't believe that the story is true. But even if it were true, it would not affect either my faith in God or my most important beliefs about Christ. It wouldn't change the fact that Jesus is the Son of God, that he taught us and died for us, and that he was resurrected and has reconciled us to God. It wouldn't change his message, or the miracles he performed.

For me, it is like somebody telling me that Jesus was of medium height instead of being tall, had black hair instead of brown hair, had a thick beard instead of a wispy one, spoke Greek instead of Aramaic, enjoyed swimming as well as walking on water, and built tables as well as overturning them. I find *all* things about Jesus to be interesting, but information about his personal attributes doesn't come within ten galaxies of affecting my faith in God or my most important beliefs about Christ.

What I find odd is that Dan Brown— or perhaps the person who wrote the screenplay for the movie— seems to assume that if the word got out that

Jesus was married and had a child, that would be the end of Christianity or at least the end of the Christian church. The reason, supposedly, is that his marriage would make it clear that Jesus was human, and that would somehow destroy the idea that Christ was divine.

But this is a very odd assumption, because Christians for the past 1,500 years have been affirming that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. And we have been affirming that fully human means *fully human*. We have been affirming that except for sinful behavior, Jesus did what humans do. His human activities might have included marriage and fatherhood. After all, marriage is considered sacred, not a sin, and children are a gift from God, not a sin. So it might have happened. But if it happened, it would only add to our understanding of the human experiences of Jesus. It would not affect any of our beliefs about the *divinity* of Jesus. We don't believe that a Jesus who is more human is therefore less divine. He is still the Christ. Perhaps Dan Brown and his screenwriter ignored this, because to recognize it would have ruined their story. There would have been no bad guys, and nothing would have been at stake.

I have talked about being open to changes in our beliefs. Where might we see some change in our beliefs in years to come? Here are my own preferences. I would like to see more attention given to God the Creator and to the Holy Spirit. We have spent 2000 years learning about Jesus, and we need to continue that learning. But I think we need to renew our understanding of God as Creator, to remind ourselves that the natural world is sacred, and is currently being degraded. All natural environmental systems are in decline, and it is hard to believe that that is what God wants.

I also think that there is much more we can learn about the Holy Spirit. Millions of people throughout the world are dispirited. They need the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we could be of more help to them if we more fully understood the Holy Spirit and could share our beliefs with others.

This is a good day to think about the Holy Spirit, because today is the day we celebrate Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit descended on the apostles. This is how it is described in Acts 2: 1-4:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from

heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

What an extraordinary experience! This was a new kind of incarnation, the incarnation of God in a new church, a church called to continue the work of Jesus with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The church became the body of Christ. That is what we should remember on Pentecost, that we are called to be the body of Christ. We are called to do his work. We are called to go forth, inspired by the Holy Spirit. Let us go forth, then, sharing and living our faith and our beliefs, as we love and care for others.

Let us pray.

Lord, we have complete confidence and trust in you. Our faith is unshakeable. We ask your blessing as we continue on our journey as members of the body of Christ, seeking to understand you as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Which Bible?

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

June 18, 2006

Good morning!

This is the third in a series of five sermons that I will be giving this summer. The first one was about our core beliefs—a review of the creeds and statements of faith that have been and are still an important part of our journey as the body of Christ. The second one was about the difference between faith and beliefs—how our faith is about our confidence and trust in God, while our beliefs are our descriptions of God. Our faith can be unshakeable, even as our beliefs change due to new spiritual insights. Today I will talk about the Bible. The next time, two weeks from now, I will discuss the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture. The final sermon in the series will be on worshipping Christ and following Jesus.

Last fall, I came across an article in a Christian magazine that noted that there are many versions of the Bible being published today. The article asked the question: Which Bible can we Christians trust as the Word of God?

I had no idea how to answer that question. Then, three months ago, I took a course on biblical theology that gave me some background that has given me a new way of looking at the question. This morning I will be sharing some of what I have learned.

First and foremost, there is good news about the Good News. The good news is that the Bibles that are in our pews today are more accurate, and closer to the original words of the biblical writers, than the Bibles that were in our pews 50 years ago. Our bibles are more authoritative than ever before.

Why is this the case? It is the result of the discovery of thousands of manuscripts and centuries of intense scholarship. Hundreds of biblical scholars and translators have been involved in a massive effort to identify and then translate the most authoritative texts. It has been an exciting and complex detective story.

Here's how the story begins. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God. The Bible came from God, and was written down by men inspired by God. Unfortunately, we do not have any original "autograph" manuscripts of the scriptures written by those inspired men. For example, we do not have any original gospels handwritten by Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, nor any original letters handwritten by Paul. What we have are copies of copies of copies of the original manuscripts.

Even many of the early copies no longer exist, because they were written on papyrus— thin strips of the pith of the papyrus plant that were soaked, pressed, and dried for use as writing material. The early church was poor, and papyrus was the cheapest and most common writing material of its day. It was fragile, and did not last very long. Beginning sometime around the 4th century A.D., when the church became legal in the eyes of the empire and acquired some resources, copies of the gospels were written on parchment. Parchment was made from animal skins, and it was more expensive. It was stronger, smoother, and survived for longer periods of time.

Most scholars believe that the earliest parts of the New Testament to be written down were the letters of Paul, written sometime between 50 A.D. and 60 A.D., a generation or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The four gospels of Mathew, Mark, Luke, and John are believed to have been written later, between 70 A.D. and 100 A.D., two or three generations after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The New Testament was written in Greek. The oldest Greek manuscripts date back to the second century— 100 A.D. to 199 A.D. They were written on scrolls. Scrolls are basically sheets that are attached to each other to form one long page that is rolled up. Some scholars think that Matthew and Luke didn't use all the material available to them in the earlier gospel of Mark, because it wouldn't all fit on even the largest scroll. Eventually, the writings were collected into a kind of book known as a codex. A codex consisted of sheets that were folded over each other, forming pages that had writing on both sides. Almost all known manuscripts of the New Testament are in this codex form.

While the original scriptures were inspired by God, the scribes who copied those scriptures over the centuries were human, and we human

beings are prone to error. This is the subject of a best-selling religious book by Bart Ehrman entitled *Misquoting Jesus*. The book is not actually about misquoting Jesus. It is about all the accidental and intentional changes in the bible made by scribes over the centuries.

In the early days of Christianity, literacy rates were low. Most of the early Christians were poor and could not read. We assume that the gospels and the letters of Paul were read out loud to church members. Many of the scriptures would have been memorized and passed from Christian to Christian. When the scriptures were written down, they were probably written down by church leaders who were not professional copyists.

A lot of bibles were copied during the middle ages. Just imagine monks standing in shadowy, candle-lit rooms in a medieval monastery, copying the Bible day after day. Scholars say that the words were written in all upper-case letters with no spaces between them, so it wasn't always clear where a word started or ended. Sometimes, when two lines of scripture began or ended with the same word, a scribe would accidentally skip the first line, and go directly to the second line, leaving out a whole line of words in between. At other times, a scribe would write a note on the side of the manuscript, and later, another scribe would assume that the note was to be inserted in the text, so he would add it in. Some words looked very much alike, and a scribe could accidentally choose the wrong one. In short, there were lots of errors.

In addition to accidental changes, scholars like Bart Ehrman argue that the scribes made intentional changes. The scribes may have wanted to smooth out the language, or reconcile one passage of the Bible with another, or add an explanatory phrase, or change a few words that caused doctrinal problems. Scribes may also have had their own editorial preferences and theological views which influenced their copying.

Remember that the printing press was not invented until 1456. For 1,400 years, each copy of the Bible had to be hand copied. That meant that each copy of the Bible could be different from every other copy, because each copy could have its own specific errors. I remember having this problem myself, decades ago, when I was writing articles and papers using a manual typewriter. If I made mistakes I could not erase or blot out, I had to type my article or paper again. The next time I typed it, I made sure to correct the earlier mistakes, but I might make some *new* mistakes that I

didn't make the first time. Even today, with word processors, I can make mistakes editing a document, so that I inadvertently leave out a word or include the same word twice. I am living proof that human error is always with us.

Now— in terms of the Bible, the big question for our scholarly detectives is: Which manuscripts are the most authentic? Which have the fewest errors from accidental copying mistakes, and which have the fewest changes due to the editorial or doctrinal preferences of the scribes? In other words— which manuscripts are the closest to the original words of the inspired writers of the Bible?

Scholars use external and internal evidence to establish the most authentic texts. They look at the age and genealogy of the text as well as quotations from the early church fathers who wrote about the scriptures. Scholars apply rules of internal criticism. For example, scholars believe that the shorter version of a text is probably more authentic, because the scribes were more likely to add words than to subtract them. They also believe that the more difficult reading— the one that is harder to understand— is probably more authentic, because the scribes were more likely to simplify the meaning than to make it more complicated.

One caution is that the earliest manuscripts are not always the most authentic. An earlier manuscript may have had many errors, while a later one may have been copied accurately from a chain of manuscripts that had few errors.

In 1707, biblical scholar John Mill published an edition of the Greek New Testament that documented as many as 30,000 variations in the texts of the one hundred Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that were available to him. Today, three hundred years later, there are even more manuscripts and variations known to us. In fact, today, we have approximately 5,700 Greek manuscripts, most of them fragments but some of them continuous-text manuscripts of the entire New Testament. The number of variations between all these texts may be in the hundreds of thousands.

However, careful examination by scholars has revealed that most of the differences between these thousands of manuscripts are minor differences. Scholars seem to agree that seven eighths of the text of the New

Testament is certain, and variations in the final eighth are not significant in terms of fundamental Christian doctrines or the overall sense of each biblical passage. Considering how old the Bible is, and how many copies exist, that is remarkable indeed.

Now, in addition to the challenges of copying and recopying, there are the challenges that come with translation. To be really accurate, when we refer to “the Bible,” we are really referring to the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Those were the original languages. Every Bible in any other language is a translation.

Some of the translations of the New Testament are better today than centuries ago because scholars have discovered more Greek texts from the first and second centuries A.D. that were *not* biblical manuscripts. These non-biblical texts have given scholars a better idea of how certain Greek words were used by everyday people during the time of the apostles. This has helped them understand what the biblical writers meant when they used certain words in the scriptures.

Scholars talk about two theories of translation. One is the theory of formal correspondence, which is an attempt to make the most direct, word-for-word translation that one can make. This gets the reader as close as possible to the original Hebrew or Greek text. The other theory is called dynamic equivalence, which is an attempt to convey the meaning to today’s reader without worrying about the word order and vocabulary of the original text. Each of these approaches has advantages. The best advice is therefore to look at more than one translation when you are studying a specific passage in the Bible.

As you know, you can purchase what is called a parallel Bible, a book that provides several Bible translations side by side. An example is *Today’s Parallel Bible*, which includes the King James Version, New International Version, the New American Standard Bible (Updated Edition), and the New Living Translation. The publisher’s preface refers to these four translations as “four of today’s most widely read and well respected translations.” The King James version is described as “beloved for four centuries.” The New International Version or NIV, which is what we have in our pews here at Manoa Valley Church, is described as the best-selling modern English Bible translation. The New Living Translation is cited as the best-selling simple

English translation, and the New American Standard Bible is described as “the most widely accepted contemporary word-for-word translation.”

Years ago, most Christians considered the King James version of the Bible to be the *only* Bible. While it is still beloved, the King James Version is no longer relied upon the way it used to be. The reason is that the King James version was not based on the best Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Here’s how it happened.

The first complete edition of the Greek New Testament to be published and sold was prepared by the famous humanist scholar, Erasmus of Holland. It was published in 1516, and it came to be known as the “Textus Receptus” or the received text, which was used for the next 300 years.

Erasmus prepared the text in a hurry. In fact, he said that his Greek New Testament was “rushed out rather than edited.” His publisher was trying to get his edition out into the marketplace before a competitor could distribute an edition that was already printed but not yet approved for sale by the Pope. So Erasmus prepared his edition in only five months, using whatever Greek texts were most conveniently available to him. Those texts were late medieval texts, written eleven hundred years after the originals, plus a manuscript borrowed from a friend, and part of the Latin Vulgate translated back into Greek. It was this very hurried edition that later became the basis for the English King James Version, which was published in 1611 and subsequently revised a number of times.

At about that time, in the early seventeenth century, the Codex Alexandrinus arrived in England. It was a fifth century manuscript, much earlier than the ones used by Erasmus, and it varied in many ways from the text that Erasmus produced. Scholars were struck by the differences, and they began to look at other Greek texts. In 1831, Karl Lachmann published the first Greek New Testament *not* based on the Textus Receptus of Erasmus. That was the beginning of a period of scholarship and controversy that has continued up until today.

Today, most English-speaking churches do not use the King James Version, but rather the Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, or the popular NIV, the New International Version that we have in our pews. This shift away

from the King James version is a dramatic change in only 50 years. However, it is good news about the Good News. The NIV that we use today is more accurate than the King James Version that many of us grew up with. By the way, the NIV involved more than 100 scholars working over 25 years at a cost of \$2 million. It was a major achievement.

I have seen a bumper sticker that says: “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” I agree that God said it and we believe it, but that doesn’t quite settle it. The Bible is the inspired Word of God, but we don’t have the original inspired words, and those original inspired words were not in English. Fortunately, we are now closer than we have ever been to those original inspired words, but we should approach the Bible with some humility. There is more than one reputable method of translating the Bible, and therefore more than one reputable translation. Above all, we need to remember that we don’t worship the Bible, we worship the God who is revealed through the Bible. The Bible is not God. The Bible is God’s Holy Word. It is the revelation he wants to share with us.

So which Bible should you use? Use the one that helps you feel the presence of God. Use the one that speaks to you more directly than any another. Use the one that conveys a sense of the sacred, while drawing you into its message. Use the one through which you believe that God is revealing himself to you.

I grew up with the lofty language of the King James Version. However, it seemed much too formal and stilted to me. On the other hand, some of the “street talk” versions of the Bible did not appeal to me— they didn’t seem to have the dignity of a sacred book. The New International Version was an exciting discovery for me, because it was easy to read, and yet it had the dignity and poetry of a sacred book. It drew me in. When I found it, I sat down and read the New Testament, from front to back, for the first time in my life. It is still the Bible I read the most often, and the Bible I quote in my own writing. I check other translations, to broaden my understanding, but the NIV is the one that I rely on the most.

But I know that the best translation for me may not be the best one for somebody else. God knows that each of us is a little different. It does not surprise me that there is more than one reputable translation, more than one way for us to understand the Word of God. That simply gives God more than one way to speak to us, and more than one way for us to listen to him.

So— which Bible should you use? Use the one through which you most clearly hear the voice of God, beckoning you to be closer to him. Use the one that draws you in, to know and love him better.

Let us pray.

Lord, we thank you for your Word, the Holy Bible. We thank you for revealing yourself to us through the Scriptures, so that we may know and love you better. We thank you for the scholars and translators who have worked for centuries to bring us the most authoritative bibles we have ever had. We ask that you be with us each and every time we read and pray on your Holy Word. In Jesus name, Amen.

The Second Coming, the End Times, and the Rapture

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

July 2, 2006

Good morning!

This is the fourth in a series of five sermons. The first was on our core beliefs, the second was on faith and beliefs, and the third was on the Bible. My next and final topic, two weeks from now, will be worshipping Christ and following Jesus.

This morning I want to talk about the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture. This is a very complicated topic. What I want to do this morning is to report to you what I have learned so far. I hope that my words will be useful to you in some way.

The Second Coming was included in the Apostles Creed, which dates back to 100-150 A.D, and the Nicene Creed, which was adopted in 325 A.D. However, neither of those historic creeds specifically mentioned the end times or the rapture.

I think it is important to know that the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture are not mentioned in the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ or in the Statement of Faith of Manoa Valley Church. This does not mean that these ideas are unimportant, it just means that they are not part of our core beliefs. Each of us may arrive at his or her own beliefs on these topics without contradicting the UCC or Manoa Valley Church Statements of Faith.

The Second Coming, end times, and rapture refer to events which may be connected in different ways, depending on your beliefs. I will talk about each one in turn.

The Second Coming or Second Advent is the belief that Jesus will return to earth to fulfill the prophecies, judging the world and establishing the Kingdom of God. This belief is held by the vast majority of Christians, even though Christians may not agree on the details.

The Second Coming is mentioned at a number of places in the New Testament. For example, at Matthew 16:27, Jesus says: “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” The Second Coming is mentioned in the Bible in connection with the end times, and in the Book of Revelation.

There have been a number of predictions regarding the date of the Second Coming. For example, Pastor William Miller and the Millerite movement thought that the Second Coming would occur on October 22, 1844. Some Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that it occurred in 1914, in an unseen presence, with the visible events yet to come. Fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell made a prediction in 1999 that the Second Coming would occur within 10 years, so that would be any time up to 2009.

The Second Coming is linked with the end times. The end times are a time of tribulation that occurs just before the Second Coming. The end times are described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Let me read the description of the end times that is found in the gospel of Matthew, at Matthew 24: 1-42, in the New International Version. This is a long passage— you may want to follow along in your pew Bibles:

Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. “Do you see all these things?” he asked. “I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another, every one will be thrown down.”

As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. “Tell us,” they said, “when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

Jesus answered: “Watch out that no one deceives you. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains.

“Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

“So when you see standing in the holy place ‘the abomination that causes desolation,’ spoken of through the prophet Daniel— let the reader understand— then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or on the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now— and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, ‘Look here is the Christ!’ or, ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect— if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.

“So if anyone tells you, ‘There he is, out in the desert,’ do not go out; or, ‘Here he is, in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.

“Immediately after the distress of those days
 ‘the sun will be darkened,
 and the moon will not give its light;
 the stars will fall from the sky,
 and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

“At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he

will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

“No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.

“Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

This long passage includes many predictions, and is rich in imagery. It opens up the opportunity for a wide range of interpretations.

There are many Christians who believe that the end times are near. This may account for the immensely successful series of books known as the *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. The first book in the series was published in 1995, and at least a dozen books have been published since then, selling a combined total of over 60 million copies.

Any predictions about the date of the Second Coming or the end times seem a little odd, in light of the fact that Jesus said that “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Most Christians seem willing to accept the idea that we simply cannot know when the Second Coming or the end times will occur.

One of the puzzling statements made by Jesus in Matthew 24 is that “this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” This certainly seems to contradict the idea that the end times are yet to come. And it may be why there are some Christians who believe that the end times described by Jesus occurred long ago.

This is an idea in Brian McLaren’s new book, *The Secret Message of Jesus*. McLaren points out that Jesus was speaking to the Jews of his day, and was talking about their temple and their life as a nation. In the passage we read from Matthew 24, Jesus said that the temple in Jerusalem will be destroyed. The disciples ask him to explain what he means. Jesus responds by describing the end times. What he said about the end times matches up with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Jews in 70 A.D. The connection seems even closer in the passage from the book of Luke that describes the end times. Here is Luke 21:20-24:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

We know that the Roman army—the Gentiles—crushed the Jewish rebellion and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews fled for their lives, and they fled to many nations. For the Jewish people, the destruction of the temple and their dispersion was the end of their kingdom, and could easily be seen as their “end times” and their “end of the age.” It was 1,800 years before they began to return to Israel, and nearly 1,900 years before they again came together as a nation. The point is that if the destruction of the temple and dispersion of the Jews in 70 A.D. was the end times that Jesus was predicting, then indeed, members of his generation would have still been alive when it happened.

So there is the intriguing possibility that the end times that Jesus described were for the Jewish nation of his day. But even if that were the case, the Second Coming and the rapture could still be in the future.

Let's turn to the rapture. The rapture was a topic of intense discussion here at Manoa Valley Church a couple of years ago. I have to confess that when the topic came up, I had never heard of it before. I had heard of the end times and the Second Coming, but not the rapture. So I had to go look for a definition. Here is a definition from an on-line religious encyclopedia:

The rapture is an event in certain systems of Christian eschatology (*the study of the end times*) whereby it is believed that all Christians will be taken from Earth by Jesus Christ into Heaven. Although almost all forms of Christianity believe that those who are "saved" will enter Heaven, the term "rapture" is usually applied specifically to the belief that Christians will be taken into heaven prior to the second coming of Christ, and there will be a period of time where non-Christians will still be left on earth before Christ arrives to set up his earthly kingdom.

The word "rapture" comes from a Latin word that means to carry off, abduct, seize, or take forcefully. The idea is that in the rapture, Christians are carried off into heaven. This is said to occur before seven years of tribulation, which will be followed by the Second Coming.

The key idea here is that Christians will be carried off to heaven long before the Second Coming. This means that there will be two Second Comings, in effect. The rapture will be an earlier, additional Second Coming for Christians only.

The idea of the rapture as currently defined is relatively new. It seems to have arisen after the Protestant Reformation, 1500 years after the death and resurrection of Christ. It gained some attention in the 19th century, after an evangelist named William Eugene Blackstone sold a million copies of his book, "Jesus Is Coming."

The idea of the rapture gained wider exposure in the 1970s as a result of books by Hal Lindsey such as *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Lindsey assumed that the rapture would occur very soon. There were a number of predictions that the rapture would occur in 1993, which was seven years

before 2000, the millennium. There is a website that has a “Rapture Index” that assigns numerical values to world events that are believed to predict the date of the rapture. The index was at 50 in 1993, and is now somewhere around 150.

The rapture is a major event in the first *Left Behind* book. In that book, Christians suddenly disappear, leaving cars and airplanes to crash because they no longer have drivers and pilots. People returning to their homes find their loved ones gone, their empty clothing crumpled on the floor. Some people believe that during the rapture, the bodies of believers will be converted into a different form, and will then rise vertically into the air, passing through ceilings and roofs, to meet Jesus in the sky.

One view of the rapture is that it will occur before seven years of tribulation, so that Christian believers will be carried off to heaven and will not have to suffer the persecutions that will occur during the time of the Antichrist. Another view is that Christians will remain on earth during the seven years of tribulation, but will be protected when a wrathful God carries off the wicked at the end of the age. A third view is that Christian believers will be raptured in the middle of the seven years of tribulation.

Personally, I have always assumed that Christians will remain during the time of tribulation. In Matthew 24, Jesus described the end times and said:

Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

He also said: “If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened.” I read both of these passages to mean that Christians will be present during the time of tribulation, which will be shortened for their sake.

Perhaps I read the text that way because the rapture as it is being described today doesn’t fit my understanding of the teachings of Jesus. I believe that Jesus calls us to love and help everyone, Christian and non-Christian, friend and foe alike. He didn’t teach us to abandon others to save ourselves. He taught us to be Good Samaritans, and go where we are needed.

If indeed there is going to be a time of tribulation, that is when we will be needed the most. If the time of tribulation is a dangerous time, and we die loving and helping others, then we will die doing what Christ has called us to do. Perhaps our love for others during the time of tribulation will tell people more about the love of Christ than anything they have ever seen before. Perhaps they will come to understand, and will be saved, too. And when we go to the hereafter, and see Jesus face to face, perhaps we will hear him utter those wonderful words: “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

That is my own particular interpretation. That is what I want to believe. Your interpretation and belief may be different. However, so far as I can tell, many Christians do not believe in the rapture as it is currently being described. Here is what it says in the religious encyclopedia that I consulted:

Most Roman Catholics and many Protestants do not accept the concept of a rapture in which some are ‘taken up into Heaven’ before the end of the world; this idea did not exist in the teachings of any Christians whatsoever until the 1800s, so it cannot be said to belong to Apostolic Tradition. Instead, most Catholics and many Protestants interpret 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 literally, and assert that the rapture will immediately follow the general resurrection on Judgment Day, when the living and the newly-resurrected-dead will rise up to meet Christ as he descends from heaven to judge the world. These people consider the rapture to be merely a minor detail in the Biblical description of the Second Coming of Christ.

It appears then that many Christians believe that the rapture is not an event that will occur a number of years *before* the Second Coming. Rather, they believe that the rapture is *part* of the Second Coming. For example, in the passage in Mark in which Jesus describes the end of the age, he says at Mark 13:26-27:

At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the end of the heavens.

This gathering of the elect which is part of the rapture can be interpreted to be part of the Second Coming. And here is the scriptural reference that was mentioned in the religious encyclopedia, 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-18.

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Again, this passage can be interpreted to mean that it is during the Second Coming that people will be caught up and meet the Lord in the air.

All of this can be very confusing. I have spent some time trying to understand it, and I admit I have not gotten very far. I am comforted by knowing that the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture are not included in our Statement of Faith and are not part of our core beliefs. We can study, and discuss, and pray about these ideas and arrive at our own beliefs.

In the meantime, we need to keep these issues in perspective. First of all, we believe that Christ will be with us every day, if we only let him into our hearts and into our lives. Events that may occur in the future should not overshadow the opportunities for us today, and every day, to know Christ and to live together as the body of Christ. We believe that Christ is risen; he is with us now; we are his people. So we should not be waiting. We should be doing what he has called us to do.

In the book of Matthew, the description of the end times is followed by four parables told by Jesus— the faithful and wise servant, the ten virgins and their oil lamps, the talents, and the sheep and the goats. These parables tell us what to do until the Second Coming occurs.

From the story of the faithful and wise servant, we know that we must do our duty, so that when the master returns, he will be pleased with our actions. From the parable of the ten virgins, we know that we must always be ready— we must have enough oil for our lamps, or we will miss the bridegroom when he comes. From the parable of the talents, we know we should be good and faithful servants who multiply our talents for the Lord. From the parable of the sheep and the goats, we know *who* will join the Lord in heaven.

The parable of the sheep and the goats is especially relevant, because it describes the judgment that will occur at the Second Coming. Jesus says

that when the Son of Man comes in all his glory, he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep and the goats. Those who will be rewarded with eternal life are those who gave food to the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, looked after the sick, and visited those in prison. This parable makes it clear that when the Day of Judgment comes, it will not be enough to have believed in Christ. We must have loved and helped others. We must have lived the way he calls us to live.

I can understand why Christians yearn to be raptured into heaven to see Christ face to face. What a glorious day that will be! But we do not know when the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture will occur. What we do know is that today and tomorrow, Christ can be present in our lives. What we do know is that today and tomorrow, we can live the way Jesus taught us to live. We believe that Christ will come again. Until then, we need to demonstrate to the world what it means to be his people, doing his work.

Let us pray.

Lord, we do not know when you will return in your glory, or what the Second Coming, end times, and rapture will be like. But we know you are with us now, and will continue to be with us, even to the end of time. We praise you, and we rededicate ourselves to being your body, doing your work. In your name we pray, Amen.

Worshipping Christ and Following Jesus

Presented to Manoa Valley Church

by Dr. Kent M. Keith

July 16, 2006

Good morning!

This is the last of five sermons in a series. During the past two months we have reviewed our core beliefs; discussed the difference between faith and beliefs; and looked at the history of the Bible and the new and more accurate translations from which we can choose. We also tried to get a better understanding of an issue that is not included in our core beliefs, but has confused a number of us, and that is the connection between the Second Coming, the end times, and the rapture.

This morning I would like to talk about worshipping Christ and following Jesus. This is where I see our biggest challenge as Christians.

When I was a teenager, I read a book that claimed that what Jesus taught and what is taught about him are two different things. What Jesus taught includes the Sermon on the Mount and the parables, as well as what he taught us by example— by the way he lived among us. This is Jesus as the rabbi, the teacher. By contrast, what is taught about Jesus are beliefs about who he was and is. This is Jesus as the Son of God, the Savior, the Christ.

It seems to me that some people really do separate Jesus and Christ. I am not in favor of that, for reasons I will explain. But I think it is true that some people follow Jesus and ignore Christ, while others worship Christ and ignore Jesus.

Those in the first group love Jesus as a teacher, a prophet, a spiritual leader, a man of great wisdom. They do not see him as the Christ. They just follow his moral and spiritual teachings. Those teachings are dynamic, radical, and challenging. They can reach people of any culture or background. I think of Gandhi, the great Indian leader, who was a Hindu, but was very influenced by the teachings of Jesus. His whole nonviolent resistance movement was based on ideas he learned from Jesus.

The teachings of Jesus can be a wonderful door into the Christian faith. They are a good place to start. But they are not a good place to stop. Those who stop there miss the greater meaning that is available when one connects the teachings of Jesus with the divinity of Christ. People who stop with the teachings, stop short of salvation.

But I think it is worse to do what many Christians do, which is to worship Christ and ignore Jesus. Unfortunately, worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus eliminates the moral content of our religion, and makes it easy for us to become captives of our secular, commercial culture. When that happens, we become blind to the kingdom of God, and we endanger our own salvation. That is why I think that the biggest challenge facing Christians today is the challenge to not only worship Christ but also follow Jesus.

I have visited some churches that have a wonderful spirit and energy. They sing and praise the Lord. These churches are growing in membership, and I don't wonder why. They are so positive. They are so filled with joy! But these churches make me uneasy. I know that they send their members home happy and renewed, but it is not obvious that they send their members home committed to living the way Jesus taught us to live. In interacting with some of their members, I have been struck by their lack of knowledge and their lack of interest in the teachings of Jesus. There is praise, but not practice. There is good worship, but not good works.

I may be completely wrong about this. But I think that what I am seeing has been a problem for Christians for nearly 2,000 years. Today, it is a special problem for us Protestants.

When we broke away from the Roman Catholic Church about 500 years ago, the breakup was accompanied by arguments about the relative importance of faith and works. The Catholic Church and Martin Luther understood the importance of *both* faith and works. But the Catholic Church emphasized works, and Luther emphasized faith.

We Protestants believe that we are saved by faith, not by works. We are saved by God's grace. That grace is a gift. We know that we don't earn our way to heaven by doing good deeds. So we can easily slip into the mistaken belief that once we are saved, we're done. All we have to do is go to church, pray regularly, maintain a personal relationship with Christ, and

that's it. The rest of the time, we can do what we want. It's all about faith, not about works.

But Jesus wanted us to love people and help people. We need faith to be saved, but we should be so happy when we are saved, that we commit ourselves to loving God and loving each other. We should be so happy when we are saved, that we commit ourselves to living the way Jesus taught us to live. Faith may come first, but it must flow into good works. As we read in the book of James, chapter 2 verse 17: "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

It is good to come to church, praise the Lord, thank God for his grace, and thank Christ for dying for our sins. It is good to come to church, greet each other, listen to a sermon, talk to our friends, sing hymns and praise songs, and go home happy and renewed. It feels good, and it *is* good. It is good to come together and worship as the body of Christ. It is good to rejoice together and support each other. It is good to be like David, as he is described in 2 Samuel, leaping and dancing before the Lord, amid shouts and the sound of trumpets. We had a wonderful re-enactment of that Scripture passage this morning with Grace Kwon in the Children's Moments. And we are reminded by this morning's Scripture reading from Ephesians that it is good to praise God for the spiritual blessings he has given us in Christ.

But if we only worship Christ and ignore Jesus, we eliminate the moral content of our religion. We devalue Christianity as a way of life. And there is ultimately nothing different about us— we live like everybody else. We label ourselves "Christian," but the label doesn't mean much. Jesus said, "By their fruits ye shall know them." If we ignore the teachings of Jesus, our fruits are pretty much the same as everybody else's.

Even worse, we do things that directly *contradict* the teachings of Jesus. Worshipping Christ while ignoring Jesus has allowed Christians to do all sorts of things that Jesus himself would find abhorrent. When Christ is detached from the teachings of Jesus, *anything* can be done in his name. And I am very saddened to say that, over the past centuries, anything and everything *has* been done in his name.

We have long thought of ourselves as a Christian nation. But as a nation, we do not follow Jesus. He said blessed are the peacemakers, but our

nation is often at war. Over the past century, we have intervened militarily in the affairs of other nations dozens of times, killing tens of thousands of innocent women and children in the process.

Jesus cared about the poor, but we live in a nation in which the number of poor is growing, especially the number of poor children. In the richest nation on earth, millions of people go to bed hungry every night. What is our national response? Our government is reducing programs for the poor so that tax cuts can be given to the rich.

Jesus commanded us to love each other, and he invited all people to a new life in him. But we live in a nation in which there is continued discrimination based on race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation. Many Christians in the past supported slavery and tried to prevent African Americans and women from achieving their civil rights. Many Christians today are fomenting hate against homosexuals.

It's not just that these things are wrong according to the teachings of Jesus. It's that many of these things are being done by people who say they worship Christ. In fact, many of these wrongs have been or are being done *in the name of Christ*. What is especially painful is to see churches turn away people who need Christ and want to worship him, but are not allowed into the church because of the prejudices of church members. People are being turned away in the name of the Christ who never turned *anybody* away.

I think this happens for a simple reason. Instead of following Jesus, we follow our secular, commercial culture. We want to get along, so we go along. It's easier. We yield to the dominant social and political pressures of our day. We accept the values, customs, and prejudices of our culture, even when those values, customs, and prejudices clearly contradict the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus wants us to know the kingdom of God. Much of his teaching was focused on announcing the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand. If we have faith, if we believe, then the kingdom of God will be ours. But we will not see it, or understand it, or become part of it, if we are captives of our culture. We will not see the kingdom of God, if we are blinded by the kingdoms of the earth. We need to break away and follow Jesus.

But how do we do that? How do we break away from our culture? We do it by being *in* the world, not *of* the world. At the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for his disciples. At John 17: 14-15, he said:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

“The world” in this passage means the society or culture in which we live— the world of business, government, the military, schools, the media, and social institutions. “The world” is the material world, the secular, commercial world.

Jesus was *in* the world. He walked among us. He ministered to us. He taught, and healed the sick, and fed the hungry. And he wanted his disciples to do the same. In his prayer, he said he did not want God to take his disciples out of the world— he just wanted God to protect them from the evil one.

As disciples of Jesus, we should be *in* the world, loving and helping others. As we minister to those in need, we will experience joy and sorrow, we will learn to love and be loved, we will learn to forgive and be forgiven, and we will grow toward God.

However, while Jesus was *in* the world, he was not *of* the world, and he did not want us to be, either. As disciples of Jesus, we shouldn’t be defined by the ways of the world. We don’t have to have the same goals and lifestyles as the secular, commercial culture that is all around us. We don’t have to seek symbols of secular success like power, wealth, and fame. We don’t have to be among the social elite. We don’t have to live the way others expect us to live.

Jesus wants us to grow spiritually and know the kingdom of God. To do that, we have to free ourselves of the expectations and pressures of the secular, commercial culture in which we live. We don’t have to be against our culture. We don’t have to isolate ourselves from our culture. But we must make sure that we are not *captives* of our culture. Only then will we be able to see the kingdom of God.

That is why Jesus calls us live in a way that is essentially *counter-cultural*. He calls us to a life of service, not power. He calls us to share our resources, not to accumulate wealth. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, he calls us to reach out and feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, give hospitality to strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. Even as we do it to these least of his brothers, we do it unto him.

In his life among us, Jesus showed us how to reach out to the outcast—to reach out to anyone who is rejected, or different, or socially unacceptable. He calls us to be especially concerned about the poor. In the Beatitudes he calls us to be peacemakers. In the Sermon on the Mount he calls us to love our enemies. Throughout the gospels, he calls us to pick up our own crosses and follow him. Only then can we be free. Only then can we escape our secular, commercial culture.

One person who escaped his culture and followed Jesus was Albert Schweitzer. I think I was in the 4th grade when I read a biography of Albert Schweitzer. He was born in 1875, and became one of the most brilliant and accomplished Europeans of his day. He distinguished himself early as an outstanding musician, philosopher, and theologian. Then, at age 30, he began to study medicine and surgery to prepare for what he called “the direct service of humanity.” In 1913, when he was 38, he and his wife left their comfortable lives in Europe and sailed to Western Africa, where they set up a crude hospital. In their first year, they served over 2,000 patients suffering from such diseases as malaria, yellow fever, and leprosy.

Over the years, Schweitzer traveled to Europe and America to lecture and raise money for the hospital. He continued to serve others and promote his concept of reverence for life until he died in 1965. Schweitzer’s example inspires me, because he was a man who had it all—everything the secular culture could give. But he loved Christ, and he followed Jesus. He gave up all that “success” for service.

In his book on *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Schweitzer explained what it meant to him to follow and know Jesus:

He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who did not know who he was. He says the same words, ‘Follow me!’, and sets us to those tasks which

he must fulfill in our time. He commands. And to those who hearken to Him, whether wise or unwise, he will reveal himself in the peace, the labors, the conflicts and the suffering that they may experience in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery they will learn who he is...

Schweitzer escaped his culture and followed Jesus. Millions of people who are much less famous have done the same.

I think that the best way to escape the culture and be in the world, not of the world, is to establish our own culture, a Christian culture of love and hope, that supports us as we strive to live the way Jesus taught us to live. We need to build a strong church that is truly the body of Christ, doing what he calls us to do. We need a vibrant church fellowship that can reach out to those who need us the most.

In short, we need a church community that is not beholden to the institutions and expectations of the secular, commercial culture. We need a church community that is beholden only to Christ, and seeks only to follow Jesus. Living in this kind of church community gives us the spiritual freedom to see and understand the kingdom of God. Living in this kind of church community gives us the freedom to take action in the culture that surrounds us.

I know that some people are uncomfortable talking about religion and politics. But politics is the process by which our democracy implements the values of its citizens. Our values should come from the teachings of Jesus. If we don't seek to act on these values, we will not be living the way Jesus taught us to live.

I have recently read two books by Rev. Jim Wallis, who has been head of the Sojourners organization for many years. Rev. Wallis has written two books that I recommend to you. One is called *God's Politics: Why The Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. The other is called *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith Is Always Personal but Never Private*.

Wallis points out while each of us can do a lot privately, even anonymously, to help others, the fact remains that many of the people who need help are stuck in systems that need to be changed. Changing those systems is political. If we are not willing to work in the political arena, we are placing a major limit on the way we live our faith. We do not have to

join a party or establish a Christian platform to have an impact. We just need to act on our values and beliefs.

An example that is before us today is the plight of the homeless here in Hawaii. We have thousands of homeless adults and children, including people with mental illnesses and people who have jobs but cannot make enough money to pay for housing. Many of our fellow citizens seem to want the homeless to be out of sight and out of mind. Responding to popular pressure, our city government cleared them out of Ala Moana Beach Park, knowing that they had no place else to go. Who stepped in? Church members from Central Union, Kawaihau, Kahaluu Methodist, and others who not only worship Christ but also follow Jesus.

The state has now set up a temporary shelter for the homeless, and that's good. But now our city government wants to remove the homeless from the beaches of Waianae, not waiting until the state and non-profit organizations can establish a place for them to go. Obviously, our city government has not yet heard from enough of us who follow Jesus.

Speaking up about the social and political problems of our day may feel risky if we are dependent on the social and political institutions of our secular, commercial culture. Wallis points out that if we build our own church culture, our own communities of faith, then we will no longer be dependent on secular institutions and the secular culture. We will have the independence and strength to do the things that Jesus calls us to do.

One thing that attracted me to this church more than 30 years ago was the quiet way in which this congregation tries to live the teachings of Jesus. Over the years, members of the congregation have helped to feed the hungry and provide meals to those who are home-bound. The congregation has donated money to missions and provided office space for Habitat for Humanity. Members of the church volunteer to stuff envelopes for mailings by non-profit organizations. In these and many other ways, members of this church have been trying to follow the teachings of Jesus. We're doing it again today with our Caring and Sharing fellowship after the service.

As you know, in addition to our Statement of Faith here at Manoa Valley Church, we have what we call "The Covenant of Manoa Valley Church." Here is our covenant:

We hereby covenant and commit ourselves to give meaning to the beliefs in the Statement of Faith in the following ways:

We place our lives in God's hands and will strive to give Christ's teachings a practical priority in our lives.

We will strive to become informed, mature, active Christians through regular worship, reading, and study of the Bible, prayer, and sharing our faith with others.

We will make the giving of our time, talent, and treasure a responsible, regular, and joyful part of our lives.

We will strive to embody the example of Christ in our attitudes and relations with our fellow human beings.

With trust in God's saving grace, we accept this as our covenant of discipleship. Amen.

This is a wonderful covenant because it is about *both* worshipping Christ and following Jesus. We commit to regular worship, bible study, and sharing our faith. We also commit to giving Christ's teachings a practical priority in our lives. We commit to giving our time, talent, and treasure. We commit to embodying the example of Christ in our attitudes and relations with others. Our covenant is about both faith and works.

Let us today affirm that we worship Christ *and* follow Jesus. Let us today affirm that we are *in* the world, not *of* the world. Let us today proclaim that we are a different kind of community, a different kind of culture— a truly Christian culture based not on secular, commercial values, but on the teachings of Jesus and the Lordship of Christ.

We are not perfect. God is not finished with us yet. We need to pray for each other, and forgive each other, and be patient with each other. But even as imperfect sinners, we can be witnesses to the power and glory of the Lord. Even as imperfect sinners, we can come together with unshakeable faith and live as the body of Christ. Even as imperfect sinners, we can quietly show the world what it means to worship Christ *and* follow Jesus.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, it is easier to worship you than to follow you. We ask that you free us from bondage to our culture, so that we can *both* worship you *and* follow you. We ask you to strengthen us, so that we can live as you taught us to live. We ask you to inspire us to create a truly Christian culture, a church community that is in the world, not of the world. We ask that you manifest your love among us, so that we can truly be your body, living your will, to your glory. We ask all this in your name. Amen.