

Discovering What It Means to Follow Jesus
Together with Fellow Believers



I
Am A
Christian

THOM S. RAINER

I Am a Christian

Discovering What It Means to Follow Jesus
Together with Fellow Believers



I Am A Christian

THOM S. RAINER



A Tyndale nonfiction imprint

Visit Tyndale online at tyndale.com.

Visit Tyndale Momentum online at tyndalemomentum.com.

Tyndale, Tyndale's quill logo, *Tyndale Momentum*, and the Tyndale Momentum logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Ministries. Tyndale Momentum is a nonfiction imprint of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois.

I Am a Christian: Discovering What It Means to Follow Jesus Together with Fellow Believers

Copyright © 2022 by Thom S. Rainer. All rights reserved.

Cover illustration by Eva M. Winters. Copyright © Tyndale House Ministries. All rights reserved.

The Author is represented by Alive Literary Agency, www.aliveliterary.com.

Designed by Eva M. Winters

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com, or call 1-855-277-9400.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-4892-7

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Amy Jordan and Jana Biesecker.

Two incredible leaders at Church Answers.

Two incredible friends to me.

And always to Nellie Jo.

Your gentle nudge led me to a church when I was a young man.

*Your persistent love sustains me and
strengthens me as an old man.*

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS *ix*

INTRODUCTION: WHO AM I? *1*

- 1: I AM A BELIEVER *13*
- 2: I AM A CHURCH MEMBER *27*
- 3: I AM A DISCIPLE *43*
- 4: I AM A SERVANT *57*
- 5: I AM A WITNESS *73*
- 6: I AM A PRAYER WARRIOR *89*
- 7: I AM A CHRISTIAN *103*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR *113*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I did not expect a business meeting in Franklin, Tennessee, to become one of the most momentous events of my life. When Ron Beers and Jon Farrar of Tyndale House Publishers came to talk to me about writing some books, I thought it would be just another meeting, but it was so much more. It was the beginning of both a professional relationship and an exceptional friendship.

I soon met Jan Long Harris as well, and these three Tyndale leaders have become friends I know I will cherish for life.

Without a doubt, the entire Tyndale team has been a blessing to me. Ron, Jon, and Jan started the relationship, but it has expanded to include many more.

Thank you, Bryan Norman of Alive Literary. Though I've written more than thirty books, you are my first agent. You have demonstrated your worth, class, and acumen again and again. I am incredibly blessed by you.

The team at Church Answers includes several family members, but even those who aren't Rainers are like family to me. I

love working with you. I love the joy, laughter, and passion you have for churches and church leaders. I can't imagine serving alongside anyone else.

I absolutely love my family. I love my wife, Nellie Jo. I love our sons, Sam, Art, and Jess. I love Erin, Sarah, and Rachel, our daughters-in-law. And I love our eleven (and counting) grandchildren. If you know anything about me, you know how much my family means to me. My world is first Christ and then my family. Did I mention that I love my family?

This book represents my greatest passion in ministry. Its thesis is simple. We who are Christians should know *why* we are Christians and why we should live out our faith in the context of a local church. Churches and church leaders often get a bad rap these days. It is now in vogue to criticize both and disparage their importance.

From the first local church in Jerusalem to the millions of churches around the world today, God is still at work in local congregations. In our walk as Christians, we need to remember the importance of the local church for our growth and effectiveness in the faith.

You may be reading this book in a new members or discipleship class, in a small group, or on your own. I have two messages for you. First, thank you for picking up a book with a common but curious title and deciding to take the time to read it. Second, I am praying that God will use this book to help you understand more fully what it means to follow Christ. I am praying that you will clearly see and embrace how God intends

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

for you to live out your faith—in the community and context of a local church.

The title of this book, *I Am a Christian*, is a great statement with deep meaning.

May it be a powerful statement for you as well.

Thom S. Rainer
Franklin, Tennessee

INTRODUCTION

WHO AM I?

A common icebreaker in new groups is to ask everyone to share something about themselves that nobody else would know. Maybe it's something their spouse would know, but sometimes even spouses are surprised by what is revealed.

On one such occasion, I responded, "I was a fifth-generation banker." It's possible that a few people in the room knew I started my work life as a banker, but hardly anyone knew I carried on a family legacy spanning five generations. It might be even more surprising to learn that all three of my sons were sixth-generation bankers before they answered the call to vocational ministry.

So, who am I today?

I am the husband of Nellie Jo; the father of Sam, Art,

and Jess; and the granddad of Canon, Will, Harper, Collins, Nathaniel, Joshua, James, Maggie, Bren, Joel, and Dominic. (That's the present tally, at least.) I am the son of Sam and Nan and the brother of Sam and Amy. (Yes, we like the name Sam in my family.)

Who am I? I am the friend of many people who have blessed my life immeasurably. My friends have been there for me in the good times and the tough times. I hope I have been that type of friend to them as well.

Who am I? I am the leader of Church Answers. I am the author of a lot of books. I have been the dean of a seminary and the pastor of four churches.

In short, I identify as a family man, a friend, a sports enthusiast, an author, and a person who has served in vocational ministry for a long time.

But who am I really?

If we were playing the icebreaker game right now and I asked you to identify yourself in one comprehensive sentence, what would you say?

I haven't always been as bold and forthcoming as I'd like to be, but if you asked me that question today, my response would be, "I am a Christian."

What exactly does that mean?

For certain, it means I have confessed that I am a sinner. I have repented of my sins and placed my faith in Jesus Christ. I believe that his death on the cross was on my behalf. He

took the punishment I deserve. He is my sacrifice, my Savior, my Lord, and my King.

To say that I am a Christian means I have chosen to center my life in the person of Jesus Christ. He is my hope and my salvation. He is my present. He is my eternity. Simply stated, he is my all. And though I am far from perfect in how I live my life and share my faith, my desire is always to openly proclaim Jesus and identify myself with him.

“I am a Christian” means I have a new identity—indeed a *powerful* new identity—in Christ. In the following pages, I will unpack the meaning of this simple, four-word sentence. Though the statement is brief, the implications are far-reaching, lifesaving, and life-changing.

THE URGENCY OF THE MOMENT

In today’s culture, many false belief systems are vying for our hearts and minds. The conflict can be both confusing and overwhelming. Right now, perhaps more than at any other time in history, we need to understand the urgency of the moment. So many forces in our culture seek to grab our time, attention, and commitment. Whether it’s politics, sports, leisure, social media, or the latest issue of the day, there is no shortage of opportunities to get involved. To be clear, these opportunities are not all bad. But they can cause us to forget our true purpose in life as followers of Christ: to

rescue lost souls and change the world for the better. At this pivotal moment, when our culture seems to teeter between one direction or another, we need to claim our most important identity—follower of Christ—and act on it.

DISTRACTIONS THAT DIVIDE AND CONQUER

Two hours before boarding a connecting flight home, I arrived at the busy airport too weary to read or work. So instead I simply sat in a chair near the gate and observed people.

I was amazed by how many people walked with their heads down, staring at their smartphones, and it struck me how quickly smartphones have changed our culture. We are on distraction overload with no end in sight.

I recently spoke to a man who is deeply concerned about how busy his family has become. For reasons he couldn't explain, he and his wife feel compelled to keep their three young children in sports year-round. Whenever they take a family vacation, it is filled with activities. They are involved in countless events at school. They are caught up in social media.

“We are too busy to enjoy life and each other,” the young father lamented. “Activities control us. My wife and I spend more time on social media than reading the Bible. It's pathetic.”

This is not something that can just be cleaned up around

the edges. Embracing our identity as Christians means we must shift our priorities—both for ourselves and for our families. The subtle siren call of busyness is hurting many families and damaging people’s lives. Our world needs a revolution of peace and restfulness that only Christ can provide. We have an opportunity to exemplify the abundant life that Jesus promised us, but not if we keep chasing after the world. Instead, we must grasp the significance of our identity in Christ. We must grab hold of what it really means to say, “I am a Christian.”

“Be still, and know that I am God! I will be honored by every nation. I will be honored throughout the world” (Psalm 46:10).

Hear those words. Heed those words. Slow down. Eliminate distractions. The time is now.

I AM A CHRISTIAN IN THE CHURCH

Then Came Bronson was a short-lived television series in 1969 and 1970 about a young businessman who quits his job and wanders from town to town on his Harley-Davidson motorcycle. The impetus for this dramatic change in his life was the suicide of his friend. The series was intended to stir our emotions about what really matters in life.

Instead, the show became a template for the illusory “good life.” What if we could just wander around the country, free

as a bird? The life of a loner was held up as an ideal for many to seek.

But that is not God's plan for us. From the very beginning, with Adam, God declared, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him" (Genesis 2:18). The entire Old Testament is about how God called a people to himself. We are meant to live in community.

That theme continues in the New Testament. In the four Gospels, we see Jesus surround himself with people. We see that his ministry and mission are focused on others—reconciling them to a relationship with God. "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost" (Luke 19:10).

The book of Acts tells the story of Christ's ascension and Peter's subsequent sermon on the Day of Pentecost. And what happens after that sermon? Through the work of the Holy Spirit, God's people immediately come together and a local church is formed in Jerusalem.

Once again, we see God's plan for Christians to gather, work, serve, and love others together. Just as it wasn't good for the first man, Adam, to be alone, it is not good for Christians to be alone.

From the second chapter of Acts to the early chapters of Revelation, we read the stories of local churches on a mission. Local churches striving for unity. Local churches teaching the gospel. Local churches serving others in their communities.

Lone Ranger Christianity is not biblical Christianity. God gave us local churches to carry out his mission. It is *his* plan. It is *his* purpose.

When Christians become committed church members, the church becomes healthy. When the church becomes healthy, communities become healthy. When communities become healthy, the world is transformed.

The urgent need of our day is for Christians to become committed church members. Sure, our churches are imperfect, and so are we as Christians. The Bible doesn't hide those realities. But it is amazing and miraculous what God will do through a few devoted Christians who become committed and selfless church members.

It is true that churches in North America are declining. But maybe we're missing a bigger story in this sad reality. Perhaps the issue is not declining churches, but the declining commitment of Christians. Perhaps the story is one of declining faith.

In other parts of the world, millions of Christians are gathering with a commitment to Christ that manifests as a commitment to the local church. They gather ready to serve, give, and evangelize. Some gather at great risk to their lives. But they know how important the gathered church is. They will continue to gather and demonstrate faith, even if it costs them dearly.

The local church is God's plan. We must become part of

his plan. We must serve through our local churches. “I am a Christian” and “I am a church member” go hand in hand.

THE SEVEN “I AM” STATEMENTS OF JESUS

The seven chapters of this book will cover seven “I am” statements that are part and parcel of what it means to declare, “I am a Christian.” Before we start that journey, let’s take a brief look at seven “I am” statements that Jesus used. Each one is a clear echo of the decisive statement God used to reveal himself to Moses centuries earlier: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14). Jesus used the same phrase to assert his identity and affirm that he is God.

“I Am the Bread of Life”

When the crowds around Jesus insisted that he perform a miracle like the manna that fell in the wilderness to feed the people of Israel, Jesus replied, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Of course, Jesus was speaking of something greater than physical and temporal sustenance. The “bread” he spoke of provided eternal spiritual nourishment. No one who accepts him as their bread of life will ever be spiritually lacking again.

“I Am the Light of the World”

In the passage following Jesus’ encounter with the woman caught in adultery, we find these powerful words: “Jesus spoke to the people once more and said, ‘I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life’” (John 8:12).

Light is a metaphor commonly used to describe the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus was emphatic that he and God the Father are one. As God the Father is light, so is Jesus. He provides a way in the darkness that no one else can provide.

“I Am the Gate for the Sheep”

The metaphor of a shepherd with his sheep is one that Jesus used often. He described himself as one who watched over and protected his sheep sacrificially. He always put his sheep before himself. He told the crowd in John 10:7, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.”

This verse has two powerful meanings. First, those who come to God through the gate (Jesus) will be his sheep. They will be saved. Second, as a shepherd, Jesus guards the gate of the fold where his sheep are resting. No one will get to them or take them away. They will be safe.

“I Am the Good Shepherd”

A good shepherd sacrificially protects his sheep. “A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don’t belong to him and he isn’t their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock” (John 10:12). But the good shepherd does more. “The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

Though few understood the true meaning of Jesus’ words before he went to the cross, those who witnessed Jesus’ crucifixion saw how the Good Shepherd sacrificed his life for his sheep. His immeasurable love for us is completely sacrificial.

“I Am the Resurrection and the Life”

Jesus conquered death. Think about that statement. Without the Resurrection, we would be without hope.

Speaking to his friend Martha, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying” (John 11:25).

Jesus then emphasized this truth to Martha: “Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die. Do you believe this, Martha?”

“Yes, Lord” (John 11:26-27).

How about *you*? Do you believe this?

“I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life”

There is only one way of salvation. Look at Jesus’ words in John 14:6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.”

We refer to this truth as the *doctrine of exclusivity*. It simply means that there is no other way to salvation except through faith in Jesus. Jesus was clear and unequivocal on this point.

“I Am the True Vine”

Those who follow Christ are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). And those who truly put their faith in Christ will bear fruit (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are not what save us; but if we have truly placed our faith in Christ, we will do the works God has called us to do.

Jesus used the metaphor of the vine and the gardener to explain this truth in John 15:1-2: “I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.”

Jesus’ seven “I am” statements are succinct but powerful. They make it clear who Jesus is and what his life, death, and resurrection mean. For the remainder of this book, we will turn our attention to seven “I am” statements essential

I AM A CHRISTIAN

to being a Christian. All followers of Jesus must fully grasp what it means to say, “I am a Christian.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Christians, sadly, can give more value to other identities in their lives than to the identity of being a Christian. What are some of the competing identities in the lives of Christians?
- 2.** Read John 14:6 again. What does the doctrine of exclusivity mean?
- 3.** Why is it so important for Christians to be fully and selflessly committed to their local church? What does the Bible say about “loner Christianity”?

I AM A BELIEVER

My mother had an incredible sense of humor, though she often didn't have a filter to determine when and where to express it. Actually, her humor shone through the brightest in some of those awkward moments.

After my dad died, I tried to get Mom to visit us as often as possible. Because it was a long drive from her home to ours, I would fly to her town, and we would fly back together. The first time we did this, Mom had not been on an airplane in many years. To give you an idea, the last time she had flown, she just walked onto the plane with her paper ticket in hand. Obviously, times have changed.

I forewarned my mom that she would have to provide identification to get through security. She thought that was

silly. At one point, I thought our trip would be scuttled by her refusal. But Mom knew her grandchildren awaited her, and she would sacrifice anything for those three boys.

Still, she felt burdened to point out to the frazzled ticket agent the absurdity of asking for identification. The conversation is etched in my memory.

“Why do I need identification?”

“Because we have to verify you are you, ma’am.”

“Well, that’s silly. Who do you *think* I am?”

“I don’t know who you are, ma’am, until I see your ID.”

“Well, I could have just introduced myself.”

The ticket agent sighed and returned my mom’s driver’s license to her.

Unfortunately, Mom couldn’t let it rest.

“You know, that’s not really me in the photo.”

At this point, I could tell the agent was losing his patience. I told my mom that it was indeed her photo. But she had to have the last word.

“Well, that’s a horrendous picture. It’s not me. I know who I am.”

I gently put my hand under her elbow and escorted her toward security. All the while, she continued to insist, “I know who I am.”

We have an identity as Christians. We sometimes call ourselves *believers*. Thus, what we have in common with other

Christians are what we call *beliefs*. To say, “I am a Christian,” means we hold to some common truths.

Let’s take a moment to examine several of those foundational beliefs.

PRIMARY PRINCIPLES

Because our leadership conference was supposed to include hands-on instruction, we limited the attendance to fifty people. So I didn’t expect the denominational diversity we ended up with. There were Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Assemblies of God. Within some of those groups, more than one affiliated denomination was represented. On top of that, twenty-one attendees identified themselves as nondenominational.

With that much diversity across the theological spectrum, I wondered whether I could get us all on the same page doctrinally before we proceeded to look at practical ministry matters. Though we definitely had our differences on secondary and tertiary issues, I was amazed—and gratified—to find enthusiastic agreement about the primary issues of Christian faith.

The Bible Is the Word of God

Without believing in the truthfulness of the Bible, it would be difficult to affirm the rest of our beliefs. After all, we learn

from the Bible about Creation, the Fall, the nature of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the person of Christ, the reality of Christ's death on the cross, the Resurrection, and the coming return of Christ.

God revealed himself through Jesus Christ, "the Word . . . made flesh" (John 1:14, κϋν). And God revealed himself through the Word of God, which we call the Bible.

Scripture affirms itself as God's revealed Word. As the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right" (2 Timothy 3:16).

In the original language of the New Testament, the word *inspired* here means "breathed." In fact, in many English translations of the Bible, the word is translated as "God-breathed." The Bible is the very breath of God. It is completely true.

If we begin to doubt the truth of any portion of Scripture, we undermine our confidence that any other part is true as well. If we decide for ourselves what is true in the Bible and what is not, we're essentially shaping our doctrine and beliefs to match our own whims and desires.

Because the Bible is both God-given and God-inspired, it is able to accomplish God's purpose of drawing us to salvation and teaching us how to live as Christians. The writer of Hebrews forcefully articulates the potency of Scripture:

“For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires” (Hebrews 4:12).

When we affirm that all of the Bible is true, we allow God to shape our beliefs. It is foundational for us to accept the truthfulness of all of Scripture.

There Is One God, in Three Persons

There is only one God. He is the creator of all. He is sovereign over all. He is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipresent (not limited by space and time). This one God reveals himself to us as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Frankly, the issue of the Trinity is one of the more challenging doctrines to understand. But if I believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, which I emphatically do, I can believe in the Trinitarian God even if I don't fully understand the details.

God the Father reigns supreme over the universe. He is all-loving, all-wise, and completely just. He becomes a Father to those who, by faith, accept his Son, Jesus Christ. This truth is one of the greatest points of security I have. God loves me as his child.

Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin named Mary, he came in the flesh to live among us.

Jesus lived a sinless life on earth. He willingly sacrificed his life on the cross for our sins. As our substitute, he took the punishment due to us. He was buried for three days in a borrowed tomb and then rose from the dead. Through his death and resurrection, all who believe in him will have eternal life in his presence.

In his last act on the earth, Jesus told his followers to be his witnesses. He then ascended to heaven and now reigns at the right hand of God the Father. One day, he will return to judge the world and establish his Kingdom.

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity. He inspired the writers many years ago to pen the words that make up the Bible. The Holy Spirit enables believers to understand truth. He exalts Christ. He convicts people of sin. He calls people to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Humanity, the Fall, and Restoration

Men and women are created in the image of God. Adam and Eve's sin marred that image, creating an eternal separation between God and humanity. Every person is born in sin and needs forgiveness. God offers redemption and restoration to all who confess and repent of their sin and seek God's mercy and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, who took the punishment for our sin on the cross.

The Resurrection of Christ

“He is alive!” Those three words are a powerful affirmation of the foundations of our beliefs. We serve a God who is alive. In fact, the apostle Paul declared that the Christian faith would be futile without the Resurrection: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:16-17).

Yes, the Resurrection is essential to the Christian faith. Paul minces no words. Without it, our faith is *useless*.

But there’s more. The Resurrection assures us that Christ is alive and that we who are Christians will live forever with him in eternity. “But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back” (1 Corinthians 15:23).

Because he lives, we live as well. Such is the promise of the Resurrection.

Salvation

I recently read a news article in which a celebrity declared that, if there really is a heaven, he will definitely gain entrance. After all, he has done so many good things in his life that God will *have* to let him in. But the Bible does not teach salvation

based on good works. To the contrary, if we're depending on our works to save us, we are in a lot of trouble!

John 3:16 is likely the most quoted verse in the Bible: "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

God created us in his image and loves us as his creation. But we messed up that perfect image through sin. God is holy and perfect, and he made a way for us to be perfect. It is through *his* work that we are saved, certainly not our own. Instead of us taking the punishment for our sins, God sent his one and only Son, Jesus, to die in our place. God does not desire for us to perish. He made a way for us to have eternal life.

Why did God provide this way? What was his motivation? After all, we humans rebelled against him. We don't deserve his salvation. Look again at the first phrase in John 3:16: "For this is how God loved the world." God's motivation was simple and pure—complete, unconditional love.

God, in his grace, offers us eternal life as a free gift. It must be received by faith. "God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

When you declare, "I am a believer," you are certainly

I AM A BELIEVER

affirming the truths we have covered in this chapter. But you're not merely believing in *something*; you're believing in *someone*. You have confessed and repented of your sinfulness. You have accepted the reality that Christ took your punishment on the cross. And by faith you have received the free gift of salvation.

I AM A BELIEVER WITH WORKS

When Paul concluded his first letter to the church at Corinth, he gave them five imperatives: “Be on guard. Stand firm in the faith. Be courageous. Be strong. And do everything with love” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14). The first two imperatives are closely tied to the affirmation, “I am a believer.”

When Paul exhorts us to be on guard, he is warning us about error and heresy coming into the church. He wants us to be guardians of the truth God has given us.

But “stand firm in the faith” is an admonition for us not to drift from the faith. Yes, we are believers. But we must stand firm in what we believe. How do we do that? How do we go beyond mere mental assent to working out our belief? The answer is not formulaic, but it is clear in Scripture. Among the many ways we can stand firm in our faith are four imperatives we must not neglect: connect with others, read the Bible, prioritize prayer, and share what we believe. These works are not what save us, but

our salvation must lead to works. As it says in James 2:14, “What good is it . . . if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?” Further, unless our faith “produces good deeds, it is dead and useless” (James 2:17).

Connect with Others

The entire New Testament is written in the context of a community of believers. Ever since the first church was birthed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost (see Acts 2), God’s plan for his people has been for us to live out our faith in the community of others. The faith of Christian believers was never meant to be lived in solitude. Most books of the New Testament were written either to a church or to a church leader. Community brings encouragement. Community brings accountability. Community brings strength. Community brings hope.

If we want to stand firm in the faith, if we want to grow in the faith, we must do so in the context of other believers, specifically the local church. We will look at this issue more fully in the next chapter.

Read the Bible

Maybe you’ve seen the cartoon. In the first panel, a man is pleading for God to speak to him. The next panel shows a

huge arm and hand reaching down from heaven to give the man a Bible.

It's funny because it's true.

We believe the Bible is the Word of God and that we hear from God when we read it. Earlier, we looked at 2 Timothy 3:16, which declares that the Bible is inspired by God. Let's look at that verse again, in the context of one additional verse: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. *God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work*" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, italics added).

Paul's words to his protégé Timothy make it clear: When we read the Bible, it teaches us to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. But even more than that, reading the Bible *prepares* and *equips* us to do the works God has planned for us. (See also Ephesians 2:10.)

Read the Bible every day. It will help you stand firm in the faith (Ephesians 6:10–17).

Prioritize Prayer

Prayer might be the most talked about but least acted upon spiritual discipline of the Christian faith. We will look at the discipline of prayer in greater depth in chapter 6, but

first we must understand that prayer is a critically important discipline for remaining strong in our faith.

When we read the Bible, we hear God's word directly. When we pray, we are in a conversation with God. Prayer is not merely a discipline; it is an honor of the highest magnitude. We are welcomed into the presence of the Creator and the King of kings.

There are hundreds of verses about prayer in the Bible. Paul, for example, says succinctly, "Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart" (Colossians 4:2). The word *devote* carries the sense of being consumed with something. Prayer should be a burning desire for all believers. Prayer is powerful. Prayer is effective. Prayer leads us to grow more deeply in the things we believe.

Share What You Believe

My wife, Nellie Jo, is a consummate encourager. I have watched her lift the spirits of people who were totally discouraged. She simply has a positive word for anyone—friend or stranger—who crosses her path.

Several years ago, she discovered she could use her gift of exhortation and encouragement to be a gospel bearer. Simply stated, she realized that the greatest encouragement she could offer someone was Jesus.

She is totally unassuming in her gospel witness. She has prayed in public for people who are hurting. She has sat

down for long conversations with acquaintances who are curious about the Christian faith.

Nellie Jo doesn't merely believe; she *shares* what she believes; she ties her beliefs to gospel action. This imperative will be unpacked more fully in chapter 5. It isn't enough merely to believe. We must be so convinced of our beliefs that we feel compelled to share them with others.

When Peter and John were jailed and faced long imprisonment or even death, they had an opportunity to walk away with no further punishment. There was just one stipulation: They could no longer speak in the name of Jesus.

Their response was swift, decisive, and powerful: "Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

If you are a believer, you will grow stronger as you share your belief with others.

I am a believer.

I hope the beginning of this book has made it clear that, as Christians, we are compelled and commanded to live our lives in the company of other believers.

Yes, we are believers, but we are believers in the company of other Christians—which is called *the church*.

That is the subject of our next chapter.

I AM A CHRISTIAN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Imagine you are explaining to someone why beliefs are important to your faith. What would you say?
- 2.** James says, “Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works” (James 2:26). What does he mean by this? How does it relate to what you believe?
- 3.** If someone asked you why reading the Bible is important, how would you respond?