

SAN PEDRO PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Adult Discipleship Class | Summer 2025

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Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapters Twelve Through Fifteen

A Summary Worksheet

The Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Introduction

Chapters Twelve through Fifteen carry Guthrie's exposition of the Apostles' Creed from "and in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord" through "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Across the four chapters he traces one continuous movement of God toward us: God comes all the way into human life in Jesus (incarnation), God deals with human sin from the inside rather than from a safe distance (atonement), God's raising of Jesus establishes him as the world's rightful Lord even while evil still visibly contests that rule (resurrection), and God keeps that same saving presence reaching us now through the Spirit poured out on the church (Holy Spirit). What follows is a summary of each chapter with some of Guthrie's own words highlighted along the way, each cited to its page in the text. Guthrie is deliberately following the order of the Apostles' Creed itself, which means these four chapters are not four independent topics to master but four connected moments in a single confession: this is who God is, and this is what God has done, and is doing, for us.

Chapter Twelve — "Where Is God?"

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

Guthrie is clear that the doctrine of the incarnation is not really a claim about the biology of the virgin birth; it is the claim that in Jesus of Nazareth, God became genuinely, specifically, historically human — without ceasing to be God. He rules out two old shortcuts. Docetism makes Jesus only appear human, a divine visitor in a human costume. Apollinarianism gives him a human body but a divine mind, quietly excusing him from the vulnerability the rest of us carry. Guthrie will have neither. Jesus was a real Jewish man, tempted as we are tempted, dependent as we are dependent — his sinlessness was not exemption from temptation but a whole life of love, fully oriented toward God and neighbor. Because this fully human life is also, somehow, God's own life among us, to know Jesus is to know God. Guthrie also unpacks the title "Son of God" to make this point: it is a title of authority, but not the authority of kings and Caesars. Jesus is Son of God precisely in his lowliness, weakness, and vulnerability to suffering and death — which turns out to be the revelatory form of his divinity, not a contradiction of it.

Whatever else they may mean, the birth stories of Jesus emphasize that the Christian belief that 'God is with us' is not just a beautiful idea or an abstract theological truth. It happened! (Guthrie, 234)

the story of a God who becomes little, weak, and powerless so that human life may be affirmed, protected, and defended (Guthrie, 247)

Chapter Thirteen — “Is God Against Us?”

The Doctrine of the Atonement

Guthrie opens with the old revivalist image of an angry God, a hammer poised to smash a dirty glass — until the hammer strikes Jesus instead. It is vivid, he says, and also badly misleading, because it makes God the one who has to be talked out of destroying us. Scripture tells the story the other way around: God takes the initiative in reconciliation, in Paul's words, “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). God does not love us after the atonement; the atonement happens because God already loves us, while we were still enemies. Guthrie surveys four biblical pictures of what the cross accomplishes — the marketplace (slaves purchased and freed), the battlefield (God's decisive victory over hostile powers), the altar (a sacrifice that meets our need, not God's), and the courtroom (the judge who himself bears the sentence) — and insists none of them is a “theory” that explains how atonement must work. Each is a limited, faithful attempt to say what God, in love, has already done. Guthrie also insists that talk of the “wrath of God” is not the opposite of God's love but an expression of it — the honest hurt of a God who takes our self-destruction seriously, who bears the consequences of that wrath rather than simply excusing it or inflicting it on us from a distance.

The Christian way is not the way of escape so that we can keep on the way we are; it is the death of what we are. (Guthrie, 266)

Legitimate anger... will not express itself in a vindictive desire to get even, pay back, and destroy ‘the enemy.’ It will express itself in the search for ways to heal broken relationships, restore order, and liberate the oppressed for the good of everyone on all sides. (Guthrie, 267–268)

Chapter Fourteen — “Who's in Charge Here?”

The Doctrine of the Resurrection

For Guthrie the resurrection is the single most important claim in all of Christian doctrine — more central even than the cross, because it is the one event that gives meaning to everything else. He is honest that the four Gospel accounts do not agree on every detail, and that no one actually witnessed the resurrection itself, only its aftermath: an empty tomb and a risen Lord who kept appearing. What matters, Guthrie insists, is not harmonizing the details but hearing what they agree on — God, not Jesus himself, raised Jesus bodily from death, and that act declares Jesus the rightful Lord of the world. That lordship is real now, even though evil still visibly contests it. Guthrie compares it to D-Day: the decisive victory has already been won, even while the fighting continues. He is candid that the language of “Lord,” “king,” and “kingdom” can sound patriarchal and dated to modern ears, but he keeps it anyway, because no gentler modern equivalent captures the political weight of the claim: Jesus' authority is not subject to human veto, ancient or modern.

The resurrection of Christ is the one event in history that gives meaning to all of history, including our own. (Guthrie, 272)

the resurrection of Jesus meant that he who gave himself as the Suffering Servant of God is now revealed to be the triumphant Lord (Guthrie, 273)

Chapter Fifteen — “What's New?”

The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Chapter Fifteen is not, strictly, a chapter on the resurrection — it moves to the next line of the Creed, “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” But Guthrie treats it as the continuation of the same story: incarnation, atonement, and resurrection secure Christ's saving lordship, and the Spirit is how that same saving presence keeps reaching us now. The Spirit, he writes, is the Spirit of Jesus Christ — the one Jesus himself received and bore during his earthly life, and the one he promised and sent to his followers after his resurrection. The Spirit's distinctive work is newness: new life, a life of love; new truth, a Scripture that keeps correcting what we think we already know; and new community, a church gathered from genuinely different people around one common Lord. The resurrection, in other words, is not a closed event in the past — the Spirit is how it keeps happening. Guthrie also warns that not everything new is automatically “of the Spirit”; we are always tempted to mistake our own preferences, or the spirit of the age, for God's Spirit, so discernment — “testing the spirits” — has to keep asking whether what we are calling spiritual actually looks like the God we already know from Scripture.

The promise of the Spirit... is first of all a promise made not to isolated individuals but to the church — not just for its own sake but for the sake of its service of the kingdom of God in the world. (Guthrie, 295)

Perhaps the best way to ‘test the spirits’... is to ask whether our worship, our religious feelings and experiences, and our faith and hope in God are accompanied by openness and sensitivity to all the people we encounter every day. (Guthrie, 304)

Putting It Together

Read in sequence, Chapters Twelve through Fifteen tell a single story rather than four separate doctrines. The incarnation establishes that God has not stayed at a safe distance from human life but has entered it completely, in Jesus, as one of us. The atonement establishes that this same God deals with our sin and estrangement not by demanding a payment from the outside but by bearing the cost from the inside, out of love that precedes and does not depend on our response. The resurrection establishes that this crucified man is now the world's rightful, living Lord — a victory that is real now even where it is not yet visible everywhere. And the Holy Spirit establishes that none of this is locked in the past: the same God who came in Jesus, dealt with sin at the cross, and triumphed over death at Easter is still at work, in the church and in the world, giving new life, new truth, and new community. Guthrie's whole burden across these four chapters is pastoral as much as it is theological: none of this happened, or is happening, so that we could admire it from a distance. It happened, and keeps happening, so that we could be drawn into it. That is also why Guthrie keeps circling back, chapter after chapter, to the same insistence: God moves first. God comes to us in the incarnation before we ask for it, reconciles us in the atonement before we deserve it, raises Christ as Lord before we recognize it, and gives the Spirit before we earn it. Whatever else these four chapters teach, they teach that Christian faith begins with something done to us and for us, not something we accomplish ourselves.

Christian Doctrine — Chapters Twelve Through Fifteen

Discussion Questions

Read through these questions before Wednesday if you can. There are no right answers to perform here — just honest thinking about who God is and what God has done. Write your initial thoughts and bring them with you.

On the Incarnation (Chapter 12)

1. Guthrie says Jesus was not “half man, half God” but a real, fully human being in whom God was genuinely present. Why does it matter that Jesus was tempted the way we are tempted — not exempted from it?
2. Guthrie writes that God's power “is made perfect in weakness,” and that the incarnation is the story of a God who becomes little and powerless so that human life can be affirmed and defended. Where do you find that comforting? Where do you find it hard to believe?
3. Guthrie says Jesus' “Son of God” authority looks nothing like the authority of kings or Caesars — it shows up in lowliness, weakness, and vulnerability instead. Where does that upend your own instincts about what strength and authority are supposed to look like?

On the Atonement (Chapter 13)

4. Guthrie rejects the picture of an angry God who has to be “satisfied” before he can love us, insisting instead that reconciliation is God's initiative, not ours. How would this change the way you'd explain the cross to someone who has only heard the angrier version?
5. Of Guthrie's four biblical pictures of the atonement — marketplace, battlefield, altar, courtroom — which one has shaped your own understanding of the cross the most? What does it capture well, and what does it leave out?
6. Guthrie says the wrath of God is not the opposite of God's love but an expression of it. Does thinking of divine wrath that way change how you hear the word “wrath” in Scripture, or in your own life?

On the Resurrection (Chapter 14)

7. Guthrie calls the resurrection “the one event in history that gives meaning to all of history.” Do you experience it that way, or does it feel more like a past event you affirm than a present reality you live inside?
8. Guthrie compares the resurrection to D-Day — the decisive victory already won, even while the fighting goes on. Where in your own life or in the world right now do you find that “already, not yet” tension hardest to hold onto?
9. Guthrie is honest that the Gospel resurrection accounts do not agree on every detail, and that no one actually witnessed the resurrection itself. Does that honesty unsettle your faith, strengthen it, or both?

On the Holy Spirit (Chapter 15)

10. Guthrie says the Spirit's gifts are new life, new truth, and new community, and that none of them can be earned or produced by our own effort. Which of the three are you most hungry for right now?
11. Guthrie insists the Spirit's promise belongs first to the church, not just to individuals. How does that sit with a culture — and maybe a habit in your own faith — that tends to treat spirituality as a private matter?
12. Looking back across all four chapters, where do you most need to be reminded that God moves first — in coming to us, reconciling us, raising Christ, and giving the Spirit — before we do anything at all?

