

Thinking  
about  
GOD

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about  
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An Introduction  
to Christian  
Theology

Third Edition

Fisher Humphreys

Insight Press

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To Caroline

*Sine qua non*

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## PREFACE

*Thinking about God* was first published in 1974, and a revised and enlarged edition was published in 1994. In both of those editions I wrote with my students in mind. In 1974 I was teaching at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and in 1994 at the Beeson Divinity School of Samford University. It is gratifying to me that across these four decades some professors have used *Thinking about God* in their college and seminary classes, some churches and other groups have studied it together, and many individuals have read it.

This third edition is much larger than the earlier ones. This is attributable largely to the fact that, although I am a Baptist, it was my privilege to serve as theologian-in-residence at St. Mary's-on-the-Highlands Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, following my retirement from teaching in 2008. Much of what is new in the third edition is a result of my learning to see things not only through my Baptist eyes but also through the eyes of Episcopalians and to write of things not only for persons who are training to be clergy but for laypersons.

In this third edition of the book I have used two devices that I did not use in the earlier editions, one new and one old-fashioned. The new one is bullet points. For many years I refused to use them, but I have finally concluded that I should take advantage of the clarity they can provide. The old-fashioned device is appendixes. Two things persuaded me to use them. One is that they bear a striking resemblance to another device to which readers of electronic publications today are accustomed, namely, links. The other is that they have made it possible for me to give extra space to selected subjects without interrupting the flow of ideas in the body of the book.

In this edition I have used five translations of the Bible. Except where otherwise noted, quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version. I also have used the New English Bible (NEB), the Revised English Bible (REB), the Today's English Version (TEV), and the King James Version (KJV).

As I was writing each of the three editions, numerous friends read drafts of the book and offered valuable comments. My friends Malcolm Tolbert and Philip Wise were especially helpful with the first edition, and another friend, Gary Fagan, suggested the title. For the second edition I was helped by members of the Trinity Group: Paul Basden, LaMon Brown, Gary Furr,

Ted Mashburn, Dwight Moody, Paul Robertson, Philip Wise, and Gerald Wright. Paul Robertson and Bill Griffin gave special assistance. For this third edition I have been helped by two thoughtful friends who are neither clergy nor academic theologians, Charles Arnett and Jason Baldwin, by my pastor Sarah Jackson Shelton, and once again by LaMon Brown. Both the second and third editions have been enriched by the questions and comments made by hundreds of my students across my thirty-eight years of classroom teaching. I am indebted to them all. Of course, it is I rather than they who bear responsibility for how the book has turned out.

I have dedicated *Thinking about God* to the dearest person in the world to me, my wife Caroline.

## CHAPTER 1

# THEOLOGY

### Introduction

The word “theology” is used in several different ways today, and it is a waste of time to argue about how it ought to be used. What I can do is to tell you how I intend to use it. I use it to mean thinking about God. When we are thinking about God, we are doing theology.

All Christians think about God. This means that all Christians have a theology; they all have some ideas about God. This is a good thing because, just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so theology is too important to be left to the academic theologians. We all are entitled to think about God, even if we are amateurs. Of course, just as civilian leaders are wise to consult the generals about war, so all of us are wise to consult the academic theologians about theology.

### FOUR RELATED THEMES

I find it helpful to distinguish theology from four other themes. They are the gospel, faith, orthodoxy, and doctrine.

#### GOSPEL

The word “gospel” appears frequently in the New Testament. It means “good news.” For example, Mark summarized Jesus’ message as follows:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mark 1:14-15)

Later on, after Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead, the church began to proclaim that his death and resurrection were for the salvation of the entire world. They called their message “the gospel.” This is how Paul described that message:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1-4)

My interest now is in the gospel in Paul's sense. The gospel is the good news story that, during the three days from the first Good Friday to the first Easter Sunday, Jesus Christ died, he was buried, and he rose again from the dead in order to save the world from its sins.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the gospel is a report about events in human history. It is not a prescription for how human beings should respond to God. It is not a new law to replace the Ten Commandments. It is not a philosophy of life. It is not a statement of timeless truth but of historical truth. It is the story of God acting in human history to rescue human beings from their sin.

Two things follow from the fact that the gospel is about events in history. First, people can know about it only if someone tells them. If the gospel were an abstract principle, people might discover it on their own. But since it is a story about particular events in history, people cannot discover it on their own. Someone who knows the story must tell them about it. As Paul wrote elsewhere, "How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Rom. 10:14).

Second, we human beings experience guilt, loneliness, ignorance, mental and physical suffering, and death. The gospel is the affirmation that God has acted decisively and successfully in human history, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to rescue human beings from the hard core of their predicament—sin—and from the problems that arise from sin. Therefore history—the history of Jesus—is indispensable to the Christian faith.

Apparently history does not play such an important a role in other religions. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead put it this way: "The Buddha gave his doctrine to enlighten the world; Christ gave his life. It is

for Christians to discern the doctrine."<sup>1</sup> That is a bit exaggerated—Christ did give his teachings, after all—but it correctly points out the importance to Christians of the historical story about Jesus.

The gospel and theology are closely related. When Christians think about God they do so with the conviction that the gospel story provides the deepest, truest understanding of God they know. So they come back again and again to the story about Jesus who died for our sins and rose again. The gospel is a fixed point for Christians as they think about God.

And there is something else. Christians have news that is really good, namely, that God has already acted in Christ to save the world. They try to communicate that good news in many different ways. One of those ways is by writing books of theology. It is my hope that as you read this book you may again and again hear the good news that God has acted in Christ to save you from your sins. Life can be hard and our world can be disheartening, and we all need from time to time to be reminded of the good, good news of Jesus Christ. Theology is not the gospel, but it is a vehicle by which the gospel can be conveyed to us.

## FAITH

The second theme that is related to theology but not identical with it is faith. When the gospel is preached to people, they must make a response. Two writers of the New Testament, Paul and John, emphasized that the basic response to the gospel is faith.

Faith is personal trust. Christians trust in God because they have seen God's love in action in the life and teachings and compassion of Jesus and in his suffering and death and resurrection. In fact, they trust in Jesus himself as their Savior and Lord.

God created human beings with the capacity to trust. What makes it possible for them to put their trust in God is that God acted in Jesus Christ to elicit the response of faith.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to recognize that theology and faith are not identical. When we fail to keep them distinct, we are tempted to think that if a person's theology is incorrect at some point, he or she is not a person of faith. A moment's reflection will make it clear that this is not true. It is possible to have correct theology without really having faith in Christ. Conversely it is possible to have genuine faith in Christ but not have all of one's theology

1 C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1962; first published 1936), Lecture I, "The Primitive Preaching." In this brief, important book Dodd displayed effectively this understanding of the early church's gospel message. His book generated an extended conversation about the subject.

1 A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1926), 26.

2 I will discuss faith at much greater length in Chapter 8.

correct. You do not have to make a perfect score on a theology exam in order to have faith in Christ.

A traditional Christian definition of the word “theology” is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. This idea is ancient, but apparently the phrase itself first appeared in a book by the medieval theologian Anselm. A few paragraphs after using this phrase Anselm added, “I believe in order to understand.”<sup>1</sup> This suggests that the fact that we have put our trust in God makes it possible for us to understand God in a way we could not if we did not trust in God. This should not surprise us. After all, when we trust a friend it becomes possible for us to understand our friend better than if we did not trust our friend.

A nice by-product of defining “theology” as “faith seeking understanding” is that it makes it clear that theology and faith are closely related but not identical.

## ORTHODOXY

The third theme to be distinguished from theology is orthodoxy. It is customary to use the word “orthodoxy” to refer to the beliefs that were accepted by the early church. Before the church split into Eastern Orthodox and Western Roman Catholic, and later into Catholic and Protestant churches, Christians had intentionally affirmed many important truths through their creeds and councils. These truths are called “orthodoxy,” and people who believe them are orthodox Christians.

What are the truths of orthodox Christianity? One way to answer the question is to refer to the great creeds of the church such as the Nicene Creed.<sup>2</sup> Another way is to list some of the discrete truths. Here are eleven truths that seem to me to belong on such a list:

- Monotheism: There is one and only one true and living God.
- Creation: God created the world out of nothing.
- The Fall: The world has fallen into sin.
- Trinity: In some wonderful and mysterious way the one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Incarnation: The Father loves the world and sent the Son into the world to rescue the world from sin.
- Gospel: The Son, Jesus, was truly divine and truly human, was born

1 Anselm, *Proslogion* translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995), Preface and I:11.

2 See Appendix 4, The Nicene Creed.

of a virgin named Mary, lived a perfect life, gave us matchless teachings, then laid down his life for our sins and rose again the third day.

- Pentecost: The Father and the Son poured out their Spirit on the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost.
- Mission: The Spirit guides and empowers the church on a mission to the world.
- Word and Sacrament: The church carries out its mission by preaching the gospel and observing the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.
- Hope: God will complete this wonderful work in the future.
- Scripture: The Bible tells us this wonderful story.

These orthodox beliefs have been held by Christians since the first century. In the fifth century a French monk named Vincent described the orthodox Christian truths as *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*—the things that have been believed everywhere, at all times, by everyone in the church.<sup>1</sup> Already in the second century the theologians Irenæus and Tertullian routinely spoke of truths such as these as the Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*). The Rule was different from the creeds. The words in a creed are fixed. The Rule was “a condensed summary, fluid in its wording but fixed in content, setting out the key-points of the Christian revelation.”<sup>2</sup> The Rule was especially important during the period before all the books in the New Testament had been adopted in all the churches scattered around the Mediterranean world and beyond.

Of course, within the church there are disagreements concerning the details of some of these beliefs. For example, there are disagreements concerning how the Christian belief in creation is to be related to the contemporary scientific understanding of the origins of the universe and of human beings. But differences concerning the details of the beliefs, while important, should not distract us from the fact that Christians have always held the beliefs themselves in common.

In my judgment, the beliefs that we Christians have in common are the most important ones we hold. They are not a lowest common denominator; they might be called a highest common denominator. The beliefs concerning which we are divided simply are not as important as those that make up orthodoxy. In this book, I intend to be especially attentive to orthodox

1 Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* II:3, in Henry Bettenson, editor, *Documents of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 84.

2 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1958), 37.

Christian beliefs.

Orthodoxy and theology are distinguishable. I suppose they could be identical if an individual was determined to think about God everything that orthodoxy affirms and nothing else, but I'm not sure that is even possible. In any case, there are Christians who do not affirm everything in orthodoxy, and those who do affirm all the orthodox beliefs may hold other beliefs about God in addition to those that are part of orthodoxy, so orthodoxy and theology are not identical.

## DOCTRINE

The fourth theme is doctrine. By "doctrine" I here am referring to the particular beliefs of the various Christian denominations. It is conventional to speak of Roman Catholic doctrine, Anglican doctrine, Lutheran doctrine, Presbyterian doctrine, Methodist doctrine, Baptist doctrine, Pentecostal doctrine, and so on.

Church doctrine and our theology are related because all of us do our thinking about God in the context of some particular church. I myself am a Baptist. This means that I am especially attentive to the distinctively Baptist heritage. For example, I have a special appreciation for believers baptism by immersion, a believers church, and the ideal of a free church in a free state. In this book I will give my primary attention to the orthodox Christian beliefs because they are our most important beliefs, but I also will be attentive to the distinctively Baptist doctrines, and sometimes I will refer to the doctrines of other denominations as well.

We can summarize the relationship of theology to the gospel, faith, orthodoxy, and doctrine as follows. The gospel is the good news the church preaches. We respond to the gospel by trusting in God and in Christ. The undivided church reflected upon the gospel and arrived at orthodox Christian beliefs. The denominations have particular interpretations called doctrines. And when individual Christians are thinking about God for themselves, all of these things are influencing their thinking.

## A RESPONSE TO GOD

We cannot think about God in a trustworthy manner unless God helps us. We are dependent on God's self-revelation that comes to us in various ways. God has acted in history, especially in the history of Jesus Christ. We experience God's presence in our lives. We read the Bible. In these and

other ways, God is revealed to us. Our theology is a response to revelatory initiatives God has taken.

Theology is one of several responses we make to God. The responses range from the indispensable to the optional. Faith is an indispensable response we must make to God; so are worship and prayer and love of God and neighbor. Optional responses we make to God include things such as constructing church buildings that have stained glass and pews.

Theology, thinking about God, falls somewhere in the middle of the range. It is not as important as faith or prayer or worship, but it is more important than buildings with stained glass and pews.

Theology is important in its own right. Even if our thinking about God did not benefit us, it would be appropriate for us to think about God. As a psalmist wrote: "How wonderful are the things that the Lord does! All who are delighted with them want to understand them" (Ps. 111:2, TEV).

There are various reasons for trying to understand any subject. For example, we may do so out of mere curiosity, as when we view a television program about some exotic animal. Or we may do so in order to gain power, as when we learn how to drive a car so that we can do that. Another reason for trying to understand a subject is that we love the subject. That is why we try to understand God, because we love God.

When a Jewish teacher asked Jesus which of the commands in the Torah (the Law) was most important, "[Jesus] said unto him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind'" (Mt. 22:36). Theology is a way of loving God with our minds. This is a natural thing to do. We think about our friends and family because we love them and want to understand them better. We think about God because we love God.

In addition to its intrinsic value, theology has instrumental value. It enhances the other responses we make to God. For example, thinking about God strengthens our faith, and our understanding of God encourages us to pray and enriches our worship. Theology may not be the most important response we make to God, but it can help us do a better job of the more important responses than we could if we did not think about God.

## FOLK THEOLOGY AND ACADEMIC THEOLOGY

Up until now, we have spoken of theology as something all Christians do. This may have surprised readers who are aware that the word "theology"

is sometimes used of an academic discipline. They have understood theology to be an academic study of the writings of persons from the distant past such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, or John Wesley, or persons from the recent past such as Karl Rahner and Karl Barth.

Therefore it is useful to distinguish between folk theology and academic theology. Folk theology is thinking about God done by non-specialists. Academic theology is thinking about God done by people who have been trained in the academic discipline of theology.

The distinction between academic and folk theology is not hard to understand. We make the same kind of distinction in other areas of human knowledge. For example, there is a clear distinction between folk history and academic history. We can learn folk history by listening to our grandparents talk about what life was like when they were young. We learn academic history by going to college or university, listening to lectures, and reading books.

The major difference between these two types of theology is this: folk theology is highly internalized but not necessarily well articulated. Academic theology is highly articulated but not necessarily internalized.

I want to explain what I mean by this. Folk theology is thinking about God done by Christian people who are concerned about the practical meaning of their understanding of God for their lives. Sometimes they have difficulty in expressing their understanding of God in words. They believe things that are not easy to articulate. For example, I have sometimes spoken about prayer and had people say to me afterwards, "That is what I always believed about prayer, but I couldn't put it into words." These people believed that God wants them to pray, and that God hears and answers their prayers, but they had not expressed those beliefs in words. They expressed them in action, by praying. They had internalized an understanding of prayer without attempting to articulate it carefully. When I articulated it in my sermon or talk, they recognized it as their own.

Of course, folk theology can be articulated. Many Christians find it helpful to put their understanding of God into words because it helps them to understand it better.

Academic theology, on the other hand, is always highly articulated. In order to study academic theology, we must read theology books and journals, and we must express our understanding of God in words that are clear and precise.

But we do not necessarily have to internalize the theology we study. For

example, students who agree with Augustine and John Calvin that God has predestined some persons for salvation and has passed over others, may nevertheless become experts concerning the theology of John Wesley who did not believe these things. Even though they do not agree with Wesley about predestination, they read what Wesley wrote about the subject and are aware of the technicalities of Wesley's rejection of the Calvinistic view of predestination.

Occasionally church members are scandalized when they discover that some academic theologians do not believe all the things about which they write and talk. This is understandable because in folk theology almost everything is internalized. Nevertheless it is important for academic theologians to study beliefs with which they do not agree. Otherwise no one would have an informed, dependable understanding of any beliefs other than those they themselves hold, and this would make it impossible to have meaningful conversations beliefs we do not all agree about.

Further, my experience in academic theology, which began more than fifty years ago, leads me to think that most academic theologians are deeply committed to the ideas they study. There is not much incentive for people to commit their lives to the study of theological ideas with which they feel no sympathy.

So, in fact, there is a range of theologies. At one end is folk theology, internalized but not necessarily articulated. At the other end is academic theology, articulated but not necessarily internalized. Almost all theology falls between these extremes. A lot of folk theology gets articulated, and a lot of academic theology gets internalized. Even so, the distinction between the two is a helpful one.

## SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF MY THEOLOGY

In this book I am presenting some of my thinking about God, and I hope that this will be a help to you as you do your own thinking about God. I want now to list seven characteristics of my theology.

### CHRISTIAN

First, and most important, my theology is Christian theology. Jews have a Jewish theology, and Muslims have a Muslim theology. My thinking about God is Christian because I am a Christian and because I believe in the revelation that God gave in Jesus Christ.

In this book I will be confessional about the fact that I am a Christian. In principle I could have written the book without allowing my own Christian commitments to be evident, but I did not want to do that.

In addition to the fact that my theology is Christian, there is a sense in which I will work to make my theology as fully Christian as possible. What I mean is that I will continue to bring my understanding of God back to the central events of the Christian religion, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The crucified and risen Jesus is a fixed point in my theology.

## ORTHODOX

Second, my theology is orthodox Christian theology. That is, I believe in the eleven things I that named above and that the church has believed at all times and in all places. Many theologians call this “catholic theology” because the word “catholic” means “universal.”

## BIBLICAL

Third, my theology is biblical. Some people assume it is easy to make one’s theology biblical. They think this can be done in several simple ways:

- By quoting the Bible.
- By offering interpretations of particular Bible passages.
- By gathering what the Bible says on a theological topic—the Holy Spirit, for example—and then organizing the biblical texts into a systematic form.

I think that these three activities are good, and I think that our theology—our thinking about God—is enriched if we do all three. I will be doing all three in this book.

However, I do not think that doing these three things insures that our theology is true to the message of the Bible. To put it the other way around, we can do all three of these things and still have theological ideas that are inconsistent with the biblical message.

For example, even the devil can quote the Bible, and he did that when he tempted Jesus in the desert (see Mt. 4:1-11). Also, Jesus engaged in controversies with people who interpreted the Bible in ways that were mistaken (see Mt. 22:23-33). And when we gather what the Bible says on theological topics, we may put it into patterns that are not found anywhere in the Bible. For example, some Christians have put together scenarios about what will happen at the end of the world. The individual themes in their scenarios—Christ taking people up into heaven, a period of great tribulation, Christian

coming to earth, a great battle of Armageddon, a millennium of peace, the last judgment, and so on—are all mentioned in the Bible. However, the pattern into which they are placed is not in the Bible.

Moreover, there is more to theology than thinking about the Bible. When we do theology we pay attention to the Bible’s teachings, but we then use those teachings to gain an understanding of the things the Bible talks about, namely, God and God’s relationships with the world. Theology really is thinking about God. Learning about the Bible is one step towards doing that.

Therefore making our theology biblical is more of a goal than an achievement. We must continue to work as responsibly as we can to make our thinking about God as true as possible to the revelation God has given in the Bible. This means engaging in a continual process of bringing our thinking about God back to the Bible. We try to stand on the shoulders of the prophets and to follow the footprints of the apostles.

## SYSTEMATIC

Fourth, my theology is systematic. Theology does not have to be systematic in order to be good. As those who work with young people in churches know, conversations with students may include serious thinking about God without being in the least systematic. In fact, I have found that important insights often come haphazardly. Even so, there is a place for systematic, orderly thinking.

An important factor in systematic theology is the sequence in which we take up various themes (some academic theologians call these themes *loci*). Sequence is more important than one might think. A good example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. In many books of systematic theology this topic appears at or near the beginning of the book; then, later in the book, the doctrines of the person of Christ and of the Holy Spirit appear. I have come to feel that this is not an ideal sequence because, until we have affirmed that Christ is divine and that the Spirit is a divine person distinct from the Father and the Son, we do not need a doctrine of the Trinity. When we place the doctrine of the Trinity ahead of these other doctrines, the doctrine of the Trinity feels superfluous. I suspect that one reason some Christians today feel that the Trinity is an optional add-on to more basic and more important Christian teachings is that they have read books in which it was presented before it was needed. In order to avoid this, I will begin with the revelation of God given in the Old Testament (Chapter 3),

then write about Jesus Christ (Chapters 5 and 6), then write about the Spirit (Chapter 7). Only afterwards will I write about the Trinity (Chapter 12). For me Trinitarianism is the most profound Christian understanding of God.

### CORRIGIBLE

Fifth, my theology is corrigible. It is open to correction. I have tried to think as carefully and clearly as I can about God, but I am aware that I may make mistakes. Because I am a finite human being, my knowledge is limited. Because I am a sinner, my knowledge is subject to distortion. Even though I will try to understand God as truly as I can, I recognize that my theology may still be in error. For that reason I must be open to correction.

From the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century there comes a phrase about the church: *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the church must always be undergoing reform.<sup>1</sup> I think the same can be said of our theology: *Theologia semper reformanda*.

This does not mean that we do not have deep convictions. We believe things deeply, we are prepared to defend them vigorously, and we try to live by them conscientiously. All that corrigibility means is that we do not confuse the status of our knowledge with the status of God's knowledge. God is infinite and perfect and knows all things, perfectly. We are finite and sinful and know some things, imperfectly. We must be both humble and confident about our theology. An English theologian, Leonard Hodgson, expressed this combination of conviction and humility in a memorable way. Of our theology we say, "This is the way I see it; cannot you see it this way too?"<sup>2</sup>

### ECCLESIAL

Sixth, my theology is church theology. By this I mean two things. I do my thinking about God as one who shares in the life of the church, and I do it for the benefit of church.

It is possible to do theology in settings other than the church and for persons other than the church. I appreciate the work of people who do their thinking about God primarily as scientists, or as therapists, or in the setting of a secular university. And I appreciate the work of those who write about God for the benefit of persons in other religions, or for those who doubt the existence of God. But my theology is written from within the fellowship

of the church, and for the use of persons who are, like myself, committed in faith to Jesus Christ.

### BETWEEN SECULARISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

Seventh and finally, I do my thinking about God in a middle space between secularism on my left and Fundamentalism on my right. By "secularism" I mean an affirmation that the natural world is all that exists, and there is no supernatural reality such as God. By "Fundamentalism" I mean the rejection of modern intellectual developments such evolutionary science and the historical criticism of the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

I have learned from both of these extremes, but in the final analysis they have been a disappointment. Ironically, they disappoint for the same reason. Neither of them has very much good news to offer to us and our broken world. The best place to hear the good news of Jesus is in the middle space between these two extremes.

The middle space is occupied by many churches and denominations. There are churches more ancient than my own, such as the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic. And there are churches and denominations that are younger than my own, such as the Pentecostals and charismatics. In many of the churches and denominations there are individuals who lean a little to the left, toward secularism, without becoming secular, and other individuals who lean a little to the right, toward Fundamentalism, without become Fundamentalists.

The space between the two extremes is very broad. Because it is the best place to hear the good news of Jesus, it is also, I believe, the best place to do Christian theology, that is, to think as Christians about God.

### SUMMARY

Theology is thinking about God. All Christians have a theology. Theology may be distinguished from the gospel, from faith, from orthodoxy, and from church doctrine, though theology is closely related to all these. Theology is one of several responses we make to God, not as important as worship or prayer but more important than church buildings and stained glass. Folk theology is the theology of the people of God, highly internalized but not necessarily fully expressed in words. Academic theology is the theology of

1 Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, revised edition (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 316.

2 Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956-57), II:113-14.

1 See Appendix 1, Fundamentalism.

academics, highly articulated but not necessarily fully internalized. I intend for my theology to be Christian, orthodox, biblical, systematic, corrigible, church theology, and neither secular nor Fundamentalist.

In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to God's self-disclosure which makes Christian theology possible.

## CHAPTER 2

# REVELATION

## INTRODUCTION

Christians believe that God has communicated with human beings.

It is possible to be religious, to believe that there is a God, and to have faith that, for example, God is the Creator, without believing that God has communicated with human beings. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a movement in England and elsewhere promoted this kind of religion. Known as "deism," it was embraced by many intellectuals including some of the founders of the United States. Its influence began to fade with the arrival of the warm-hearted religion of John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield.<sup>1</sup>

The question of God's self-communication is an important turning point in religion. If one has serious reservations about whether God communicates with human beings, one's understanding of God will be restricted to a few bare ideas.

In the religion of the Bible, there is a firm conviction that God has communicated with human beings. This conviction is shared by Jews and Christians. As we shall see, Christians have disagreements about the details of God's self-communication, but they share a deep conviction that God has given a self-communication.

Christians usually refer to God's self-communication as "revelation." The Greek word used in the New Testament for revelation is *apokalypsis*; it means "uncovering." Revelation is God's self-disclosure to human beings.

Behind the Christian understanding of revelation lie three assumptions:

- God is in some sense hidden or mysterious.
- God intends to be known by human beings.
- God acts in order to provide a self-disclosure to people.

<sup>1</sup> David A. Pailin, "Deism" in Alan Richardson and John Bowden, editors, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 148-150. Among the American founders who were deists were Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. I will explain below why I think that even though deists did not believe that God had given a self-communication, the understanding of God they received from their natural and moral experience was made possible by God's self-communication.

For about a century the concept of revelation has played an especially large role in academic theology, and academic theologians have debated the meaning of revelation vigorously. Some theologians insist that the proper use of the word “revelation” is to refer only to God’s acts in history; others say, only to the interpretation of God’s acts in history, or only to Jesus himself, or only to the Bible, or only to the encounter of human beings with God.

In my judgment these debates are not as important as they may at first seem. I think the word “revelation” may be used in any of these ways and in all of them. In order to get at what is important about revelation, consider these five questions:

- Does God act in history in ways that help people to know about God and to know God?
- Does God provide authorized interpretations of these acts?
- Did Jesus Christ provide a new and profound understanding of God?
- Do we learn about God as we read and study the Bible?
- Can we encounter God in a relationship of trust and love?

I believe that the answer to each of these questions is “yes.” Therefore I see no need to engage in debates about which of them we will denote with the word “revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

### NATURAL THEOLOGY AND REVEALED THEOLOGY

In the past some theologians have distinguished between the knowledge of God that human beings can have by reason alone, without the benefit of divine revelation, and the knowledge of God that they can have only through divine revelation. For example, it may be said that by reason alone we can know that God exists, but we need revelation in order to know that God is a Holy Trinity. These two kinds of truth were called “natural” and “revealed,” and they gave rise to two kinds of theology, natural theology and revealed theology.

In my judgment this is a misleading distinction. It suggests human beings may have knowledge of God that has not been revealed to them by God. I don’t think this is the case. I believe that all knowledge of God is made possible by God’s revelation, no matter how limited or even distorted it may be.

A more judicious distinction is between the knowledge of God that is given through the created world, on the one hand, and the knowledge of

God that is given through history, specifically through the history of the Hebrew people and of Jesus Christ in particular, on the other. These are known as general revelation and special revelation, and we will turn our attention to them now.

### GENERAL REVELATION

There are four questions to be asked and answered concerning God’s general revelation.

#### HAS GOD GIVEN A GENERAL REVELATION?

The first is: Has God given a general revelation? The Bible teaches that God is revealed through the created world. For example:

How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory! How plainly it shows what he has done! Each day announces it to the following day; each night repeats it to the next. No speech or words are used, no sound is heard; yet their message goes out to all the world and is heard to the ends of the earth. (Ps. 19:1-4, TEV)

The psalmist believed that God’s glory is revealed through the created world. This is not surprising. After all, the character of a novelist may be revealed in her novel and the character of a composer revealed in his music. The psalmist was also clear that this revelation of God’s glory was given “to the ends of the earth.” It is appropriate to speak of this as a general revelation, since it is given to all people in general.

When the earliest Christians went out to preach the gospel to the world, they encountered Gentiles who were not part of the covenant people and had never known the special revelation God had given to Israel. Yet the early Christians believed that in some sense God was already known to these Gentiles. For example, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in the city of Lystra, Paul said to his Gentile audience:

We are here to announce the Good News, to turn you away from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven, earth, seas, and all that is in them. In the past he allowed all people to go their own way. But he has always given evidence of his existence by the good things he does: he gives you rain from heaven and crops

<sup>1</sup> These and many related issues are discussed helpfully in John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956).

at the right times; he gives you food and fills your hearts with happiness. (Acts 14:15-17, TEV)

Paul clearly felt that through the created world the Gentiles in Lystra had been given a witness concerning the existence of God. Paul said something similar in his letter to the church at Rome; this was a church that Paul had not founded, and most or perhaps all of its members were Gentiles.

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness. (Rom. 2:14-15)

Although the Bible does not refer to general revelation very often, from these passages and others like them we learn that God has provided some revelation in the created world.

But can people receive this knowledge? Some theologians have thought that, even though God has given a general revelation, sin has so distorted the minds of human beings that they are unable to receive that revelation. God has spoken, but no one is able to hear.

It is true that sin has restricted and distorted people's reception of God's revelation. But in the three passages quoted above it seems clear that at least some of the general revelation about God gets through. Furthermore, our experience confirms what these passages assert. Many of us know people who are not Christians but who seem to have a clear knowledge of the reality of God and of the moral law.

So the answer to our first question is "Yes, God has given a general revelation, and people are receiving it." Christians should be grateful for this and appreciative of God's kindness and impartiality in reaching out to all people. We can work and pray so that people may understand the revelation that God has given in creation. For example, *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church contains a wonderful prayer that is predicated on this principle. It says: "Open, O Lord, the eyes of all people to behold thy gracious hand in all thy works."<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT MEDIA DOES GOD USE TO GIVE A GENERAL REVELATION?

This brings us to the second question about general revelation: how is it mediated to human beings? We begin by recognizing that there can be no constraints upon what medium of communication God may use. As the transcendent Creator of all things, God is free to use any medium God chooses. It is quite possible that God uses media of which we are not aware.

What we can do is to identify media that are mentioned in the Bible. In Psalms 19 and Acts 14 the medium that God uses is the external natural world: the heavens and the earth, the seasons and the crops. In Romans 2 God uses the internal medium of human conscience. The natural world and human conscience may be the most important media that God uses.

But we are not in a position to say that these are the only media. There is no reason why there could not be many traces of God scattered throughout the created world. In a long, complex sentence, an influential Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, has identified several of these:

But wherever someone still unconditionally hopes beyond all empirical hopelessness; wherever a particular joy is experienced as the promise of a joy that is limitless; wherever a person loves with unconditional faithfulness and resolve, although the frailty of such love on both sides cannot possibly legitimise this unconditional determination; wherever radical responsibility towards a moral obligation is maintained, even when it seemingly leads only to disaster; wherever the relentlessness of truth is experienced and unconditionally accepted and grasped; wherever the unsurmountable discrepancy between what is individual and what is social in the plurality of man's different destinies is endured in a seemingly unjustified resolve of hope for the meaning and blessedness which reconciles everything—a resolve which cannot even be given objective form—in all these situations God, as the condition which makes all this possible, is already experienced and accepted, even if this is not expressly and objectively formulated.<sup>1</sup>

This elegant affirmation is reminiscent of what was written long ago by the apostle James: "Every perfect gift, is from above coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Neither James nor Karl Rahner was claiming

<sup>1</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith* translated by Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 58.

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 329.

that the general revelation of God makes people Christians, but they were claiming that God is involved in the lives of all human beings in many different ways.

### **WHAT MAY BE KNOWN ABOUT GOD BY GENERAL REVELATION?**

The third question about general revelation is this: what may be known about God through general revelation alone?

The things that are mentioned in the biblical passages quoted above are God's glory (Psalms 19), God's existence (Acts 14), and God's moral law (Romans 2). Perhaps other things might be known also, for example, that God is one, or that God is Creator.

On the other hand, there are things that cannot be known by general revelation alone, for example, that God is not only one God but also Three Persons. In other words, when we move to the distinctively Christian understanding of God, by definition we have moved from general to special revelation, from the revelation given to all people through the created world to the revelation given in the history recorded in the Bible.

### **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF GENERAL REVELATION TO SPECIAL REVELATION?**

The fourth and final question about general revelation is this: What is the relationship of general revelation to the special revelation given in the history of Israel and especially in the history of Jesus Christ?

One obvious relation is that general revelation prepares the minds of people to receive the special revelation. This is true and important. But it is sometimes overlooked that there is a second kind of relationship.

In our time there is a secular challenge to religious belief. Millions of modern people, especially some knowledge elites, doubt that there is any supernatural reality at all. Much of the secular challenge to religious belief has been more effective against the knowledge of God found in general revelation than against that found in special revelation. That is, some secular people are quite comfortable in denying the reality of a bare notion of God, but they find themselves strangely drawn toward Jesus Christ as the Son of God. This may not be logical, but it happens. For these people belief in Jesus is a prerequisite for, rather than a consequence of, belief in God. It is not that they believe in Jesus because their minds were prepared by the general revelation of God in the natural world. It is rather that they believe in God because they have heard the story of Jesus and have become convinced that

Jesus was right in what he said about God, and so they believe in God.

This has implications for those who attempt to present the Christian message to secular people. Sometimes, instead of presenting a minimal understanding of God that would seem to be believable, it is better to present a maximal understanding of God that is worth believing.

These four questions and answers show that general revelation is a complex and controversial subject. The complexity and controversy are especially evident when we observe particular social groups in which attention is given to the general revelation. Three of these groups are philosophers, scientists, and adherents of other religions, and to them we now turn our attention.

### **GENERAL REVELATION AND PHILOSOPHY**

In the West the origins of philosophy go back several centuries before Christ. In the past philosophers dealt with subjects that today are dealt with in independent disciplines such as the various sciences. The subject of God interested many ancient philosophers, and it continues to be of interest to many modern philosophers as well.

When modern philosophers debate whether God exists, what God is like, and whether God has communicated with human beings, they arrive at radically different conclusions. Concerning God's existence, for example, there are philosophers who hold the following views:

- Atheism. They think there is no god.
- Strong agnosticism: They think no one can really know whether there is a god.
- Soft agnosticism: They don't know whether or not there is a god.
- Mere theism: They believe there is a god but they do not believe that God has communicated with human beings.
- Christians: They believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ.
- Adherents of other religions. They are Muslims or Jews or Buddhists or Hindus or members of other religions.

Our present concern is for the mere theists, those who conclude that there is a god but who do not accept the claims of Christianity or other religions that God has communicated with human beings. The question is: is it by means of God's general revelation that theists have arrived at their belief in a god? I believe the answer is "yes." That is, I think that it is because the created world contains traces of its Creator that theists become aware of God.

This becomes clear when we notice the kinds of arguments philosophers

have made for the existence of God.<sup>1</sup> One ancient argument begins with the insight that the existence of the world is not self-explanatory. Philosophers ask, “Why is there something and not nothing?” For some of them the existence of the world suggests a Creator. This is the cosmological argument.

A second argument begins with the presence of apparent design in the world. For example, eyes seem to have been designed to provide sight. This is the teleological argument. The argument is that if there is design, there must be a Designer.

A third argument, perhaps the most popular, is the moral argument. It begins with our awareness of moral values. Our moral sensibility tells us that some things—murdering one’s parents for no reason, for example—are fundamentally wrong. If there really is a moral standard that transcends the moral standards that human beings themselves create, then there must be a transcendent moral lawgiver (and perhaps a judge), and that is God.

A fourth argument is very technical and not very popular, but some philosophers are fascinated by it. It is called the ontological argument, and it was first proposed by Anselm, an Archbishop of Canterbury who died early in the twelfth century. It does not begin with anything we observe in the world or in ourselves, but rather with a concept of God as the most perfect being conceivable. Anselm believed that existence was itself a perfection, so he reasoned that God, as the most perfect being conceivable, must exist, since it would be a contradiction to say that the most perfect being conceivable lacks the perfection of existence.

Each of these arguments for God’s existence begins with something that God has given in the world: the world’s existence, design in the world, our sense of morality, and the human rational capacity to entertain the concept of the most perfect being conceivable. Two of these, the existence of design in the world and the moral sense, are mentioned in the biblical passages about general revelation (Acts 14 and Romans 2, respectively). That is why I think that the philosophical arguments that lead to mere theism have drawn upon God’s general revelation.

## GENERAL REVELATION AND SCIENCE

In science as in philosophy, there are atheists, strong and soft agnostics, mere theists, Christians, and adherents of other religions. This fact is some-

times obscured because of a modern misunderstanding about science and religion. Some people think that science and religion are always locked in combat.

But this is a mistake. While it is true that science and religion sometimes come into conflict, it also is true that the two often engage in conversation. In fact, from the beginnings of modern science until today, many scientists have been devout Christians. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Harvey, and Newton were all Christians. So are many fine twenty-first century scientists such as Charles Townes, John Houghton, John Polkinghorne, Francis Collins, and Owen Gingerich.

Some scientists have noticed that science raises questions that apparently cannot be answered by science. For example, according to Stephen Hawking, who is not a person of faith, in his wildly popular book, *A Brief History of Time*, if the rate of expansion of the universe at the Big Bang was 1/1,000,000 faster (or gravity that much weaker), it would have been too rapid for stars to form; that means there would have been no planets and therefore no life as we know it. On the other hand, if the rate of expansion had been 1/100,000,000,000,000,000 slower (or gravity that much stronger), the universe would have collapsed long ago, and that means there would have been no life as we know it. The rate of expansion of a universe that could give rise to human life had to fall within a range that is razor thin.<sup>1</sup>

How can one account for this? John Polkinghorne, a distinguished physicist and a theologian, says that two explanations are available. One is that our universe is one of many universes, and ours is one in which human beings could come into existence. The other explanation is that there is a personal, intentional, Creator God who created the kind of universe in which human beings could come into existence. Both accounts are reasonable and possible, so this is not an argument for God’s existence. But a purposive God is a perfectly plausible account of the existence of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

Our question is: do scientists who are mere theists owe their understanding of God to God’s general revelation? I think the answer, in science as in philosophy, is yes, and for the reason given earlier, namely, that it is things that they study in the natural world that provide them with hints (some of them would say evidence) of God’s existence.<sup>3</sup>

1 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 121.

2 John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (London and Minneapolis: SPCK and Fortress Press, 1998), 36-39.

3 For a more detailed understanding of science and theology, see Appendix 2, Science and Christian Theology.

William J. Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), Chapter 3. John H. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, fourth edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc., 1990), Chapter 2.

## GENERAL REVELATION AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS

As challenging as it is to identify the role of general revelation in persuading some philosophers and scientists of God's existence, the presence of a general revelation of God given by God to people in non-Christian religions is even more challenging. A large minority of Christians, and possibly a majority of them, if asked whether God has spoken to people in other religions, would answer no. Of course, many would make an exception for Judaism because the Bible makes it clear that God spoke to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

But why should Christians resist the idea that God has spoken to people in other religions? If God has given a general revelation, it seems reasonable to assume that some of the people who have received that revelation would respond religiously to God. Some of those people might create religions. They would not be Christians, of course, because Christians are not mere theists but people who have received God's special revelation given in Jesus. But they would be people who know God through a revelation that God has given to all people in general.

The Bible contains stories about several people who were not members of God's covenant with Jews and with Christians but who nevertheless had a knowledge of God. Among these are all those who lived before God made the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, Melchizedek, Jethro the father-in-law of Moses, the queen of Sheba, perhaps Job (there is nothing in the book of Job to suggest that Job was a Jew), and the Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem. It is true that many of these encountered the covenant people of God; otherwise they would not be mentioned in the Bible. But the point is that they had a true knowledge of God before they encountered the covenant people.

The case of the Magi is of special interest because God spoke to these men through their pagan religion (Mt. 2:1-12). They were astrologers who studied the heavens for messages of religious importance. Jeremiah instructed the Jewish people not to practice astrology (Jer. 10:2), but God nevertheless used the astrology of the Magi to guide them to Christ.

At this point it is helpful to ask the question, what are the available ways for Christians to understand the non-Christian religions? Currently the most widely-discussed answer to this question comes from a British theologian, Alan Race.<sup>1</sup> In a book first published in 1983 he suggested that Chris-

tians may take any one of three attitudes towards non-Christian religions:

- Exclusivism: Christianity is the only true religion. All others are false.
- Inclusivism: Christianity has the deepest and truest understanding of God, but people in other religions can know God also.
- Pluralism: Christianity is one way of knowing God, but the other religions are equally true and profound ways.

When the positions are described in this way, it seems to me that the biblical passages with which we began our discussion of general revelation—Psalms 19, Acts 14, and Romans 2—suggest a stance of inclusivism.

We now turn our attention to God's special revelation.

## SPECIAL REVELATION

I find it helpful to think of God's special revelation in terms of a pattern with five parts, namely, history, interpretation, community, Scripture, and proclamation.

### HISTORY

God provides special revelation by acting in history. What sets special revelation apart from the general revelation discussed above is that special revelation is given through particular historical events rather than through the general processes of the natural world.

The Bible contains, among other things, a record of a number of mighty acts performed by God in the history of the Jewish people. These acts are recited and celebrated in many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures; for example, here are some of the things that are said in Psalms 105:

- Praise God and sing to God.
- Tell of God's wonderful works.
- Remember the works God has done.
- God always remembers the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.
- When God's people wandered from nation to nation, God protected them.
- God sent a famine to Egypt so that Joseph could rescue our ancestors.
- God sent Moses to lead our ancestors out of Egypt.
- God sent miracle after miracle so that the Pharaoh would let our ancestors go free.
- God guided our ancestors through the desert and gave them food

<sup>1</sup> Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1983, 1993).

and drink.

- Our ancestors came into the land God had for them with joy and singing.
- Praise the Lord.

This psalm is representative of hundreds of passages in which Israel's knowledge of God is expressed by reciting the mighty acts that God has done in Israel's history.<sup>1</sup> Among the most important of those acts are the call of Abraham (Genesis 11), the deliverance of Israel from Egypt at the Exodus (the book of Exodus), the formation of the people into a nation with a land of their own (the book of Joshua), the leadership of King David (the books of 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles), and the deliverance from captivity in Babylon (the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and the later prophets).

For Christians the defining acts of God are the life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (the four Gospels tell this story). God's mighty work in Jesus was immediately followed by the pouring out of the Spirit on the followers of Christ and the creation of the new covenant community, the church (the book of Acts tells these stories). By these mighty acts God's nature, attributes, and purposes have been revealed.

The author of Hebrews provided a classic statement of the fact that for Christians the defining revelation of God is that which was given in Jesus:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . . . He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being. (Heb. 1:1-2)

The fact that Jesus is the defining revelation of God is expressed in many ways in the New Testament. An especially profound expression was given by John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

John's message is that God's self-disclosure (Word) was enfleshed as a hu-

man being, Jesus. Those who have seen Jesus have seen God's glory. They know that God is a God of grace and truth, that is, of love and reality, because they have seen Jesus.

This helps us to understand a puzzling fact that has been called "the scandal of particularity." Why did God choose an otherwise obscure people, the Jews, to be God's covenant people? Why did God do these special acts of revelation in the history of those particular people rather than some other people? To take it a little further, why should the fullest knowledge of the eternal God that human beings can have be available only to those who happen to know about this tiny slice of human history?

There may not be a full answer to these questions, but a partial answer is this: If God intended to act to save human beings, and if God's act was going to take place in human history, then it would have to take place in a particular place, at a particular time, in the history of a particular people. Particularity is inevitable if God is to save the world by acting in the world. Therefore the appropriate response of Christians to the scandal of particularity is to embrace it rather than be embarrassed by it.<sup>1</sup>

## INTERPRETATION

Second, God's acts are interpreted. Historical events are not reported as raw information. The barest report of historical events includes some interpretation—even if it is no more than that the events are worthy of being reported.

The revelatory acts of God were never reported neutrally. They were reported and transmitted along with interpretations. Moses did not say merely, "We are free from slavery." He said, "God has freed us from slavery." Paul did not say merely, "Jesus was crucified." He said, "Christ died for our sins."

In other words, God did not play charades, acting silently and inviting people to try to guess the meaning of the acts. God inspired prophets and apostles to interpret the divine acts so that they could be properly understood. The prophetic and apostolic interpretations of God's acts, and of God as known through those acts, were inspired by God. The interpretations are the work of God just as the acts themselves are. The Bible contains the divinely authorized witness to God's mighty acts and also the divinely

<sup>1</sup> The scandal of particularity has been presented in doggerel attributed to an English journalist named William Norman Ewer: "How odd / of God / to choose / the Jews." One rejoinder is attributed to the prolific American humorist Leo Rosten: "But not so odd / as those who choose / a Jewish God / yet spurn the Jews."

<sup>1</sup> The idea of theology as recital of God's acts was proposed by G. Ernest Wright in his influential book *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952).

authorized interpretation of their meaning. That is why the Bible is the holy book of the Christian church.

Of course, the Bible contains some writings that do not fit the pattern of events-and-their-interpretations. The classic example is wisdom literature such as the book of Proverbs. But, given the importance of God's mighty acts to the life of Israel and of the church, it is not too farfetched to see even these other types of literature as authorized responses to God's acts and so as part of the interpretation of the acts.

Special revelation begins, then, with God's acts in history, and continues with those acts being given divinely inspired, authorized interpretations by prophets and apostles.

## COMMUNITY

Third, a faith community was formed that knew about God's acts and believed the divinely authorized interpretations of them. The community coalesced around the reports and interpretations of God's acts. This faith community came into existence as people heard about the acts of God and believed in the God whose acts they had heard recited. In the Old Testament era this community was the nation of Israel. It comprised all of the biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah who heard of God's work among their patriarchs and especially of the great deliverance of the Exodus. These people continued to remember that work by celebrating the Passover, and they thereby came to put their faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God who saved Israel at the Exodus.

At the center of Israel's life was the call to remember God's acts:

Israel, remember this! The Lord—and the Lord alone—is our God. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Never forget these commands that I am giving you today. (Deut. 6:4-6, TEV)

The Lord did not love you and choose you because you outnumbered other peoples; you were the smallest nation on earth. But the Lord loved you and wanted to keep the promise that he made to your ancestors. That is why he saved you by his great might and set you free from slavery to the king of Egypt. Remember that the Lord your God is the only God and that he is faithful. (Deut. 7:7-9, TEV)

Israel as a religious community was formed around its memory of the mighty acts of God such as the Exodus. From one generation to the next, Israel kept alive the memory of God and of what God had done for them.

The Christian church was also formed around its memory of mighty acts of God, the acts of God in Christ. But whereas the people of Israel had biological ties as well as faith ties, the church had only its ties of faith. The faith of the church, like that of Israel, was faith in a God who had acted in history. In particular, Christian faith is faith that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world" (2 Cor. 5:19, KJV). The Christian church comprises people who have heard the gospel that Christ died and rose again to take away sin, who have believed that it is true, and who have therefore put their faith in the Lord, and who have come together to remember and celebrate what the Lord has done.

Just as the Jews remember and celebrate God's mighty act at the Exodus by means of their Passover, so Christians remember and celebrate God's mighty act in Christ at Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Paul wrote about Jesus' institution of that wonderful meal:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

Jesus' words "in remembrance of me" emphasize that, in its central act of worship, the church is a community that remembers faithfully the story of the crucified and risen One, for all generations.

In this restricted but important sense, then, both Israel and the church play a role in God's special revelation because they are communities of people who know, believe, remember, and proclaim the acts of God and the authorized interpretation of those acts.

The Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church have no trouble recognizing that the church plays an indispensable role in special revelation. Some Protestants, however, find it difficult to appreciate the important role of the faith community in the pattern of divine revelation. Reacting against what they felt were exaggerated claims by the Roman Catholic

Church, Protestants in the past have confined their description of God's revelation to God's acts and their interpretations and then moved directly to the Bible. While this is understandable, it does not do justice to the important role that the faith communities have always played and continue to play in the communication of God's revelation.

## SCRIPTURE

Fourth, from the beginning the faith communities used language to speak about God's acts and the meaning of those acts. Most of the communities' proclamation of God's acts was done in language, but at times some of the prophets used non-verbal communication. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, wore an iron yoke in order to communicate his message of judgment and later bought a piece of property in order to communicate his message of hope (Jer. 27-28, Jer. 32). But the principal way of communicating was through the use of language.

At first, Israel's proclamation of the Exodus and the church's proclamation of the gospel events were given orally, but in both cases there came a time when it seemed wise and appropriate to write down their messages. The result of this writing is, of course, the Bible as we know it today.

For us today the Bible is the most tangible factor in the pattern of special revelation. This gives it a special place in the life of the church. Here are some of the things that all Christians believe about the Bible.

- The Bible is their holy book.<sup>1</sup>
- The Bible is part of God's special revelation to Israel and to the church.
- God is revealed through the Bible.
- The great message of the Bible is true.
- The Bible is "the Word of God."
- The Bible is normative for Christian theology and life.
- God inspired those who wrote the Bible.
- The Bible is to be preserved, translated, read, studied, preached, and obeyed as the Word of God.

To these eight agreements we may add that many Christians, though not all, believe that the Bible has priority over all other writings. This was emphasized by the Protestant reformers in the sixteenth century, and today it is widely though not universally accepted in non-Protestant churches as well.

Despite this immense amount of agreement, Christians also have disagreements about the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

## PROCLAMATION

Fifth and finally, others enter the community by hearing and believing what the community is saying about God's acts and their meaning. Because Israel is bound by biological ties, infants are born into that community, but there comes a time when the children must embrace the faith of Israel for themselves. That embrace of the faith is celebrated at bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah ceremonies. In the case of the church, which lacks biological ties, the existence of the faith community is even more dependent on the faith being intentionally embraced.

The Christian community continues its witness by means of sermons, songs, and books, and in personal conversations and lifestyle. God uses these forms of witness to bring others into the church. That is, people who see and hear these forms of witness concerning the crucified and risen Christ put their faith in Christ and in so doing receive the special revelation of God and the gospel.

## GOD'S PURPOSE FOR SPECIAL REVELATION

This brings us to an important issue: What is God's purpose in providing special revelation? Is it just to provide people with information about God? Or is there more to it than that?

Christians believe that God gives us information. However, information alone does not fulfill God's purpose. God's purpose is not only that people know about God but that people know God in a personal way. God's purpose in giving revelation is that we be informed, but, in addition, that we be transformed.

Sometimes these two, knowledge of God and relationship with God, have been set in tension with one another. That is unfortunate and unnecessary. Both are important, and both are made possible by revelation. Knowing about God without having a personal relationship with God is insufficient; having a personal relationship with God without any knowledge about God is impossible.

<sup>1</sup> Roman Catholic Bibles contain fifteen books known as "The Apocrypha" that are not in Protestant Bibles.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 3, Disagreements about the Bible.

## SUMMARY

We may summarize what has been said about general revelation as follows:

- The Bible teaches that God has given a general revelation that in principle is available to all people
- God has created people so that they can receive that revelation.
- God employs many media to communicate the general revelation, several of which are mentioned in the Bible.
- The general revelation prepares people's minds to receive the special revelation, but the reverse is also true: the special revelation appeals to some people's minds in a way that makes the general revelation seem plausible.
- The general revelation has been received by mere theists who are philosophers, scientists, and adherents of other religions.
- The general revelation is a partial revelation but a true one.

The fullest revelation of God is the special revelation that has been given through the history of the Jews in general and the story of Jesus in particular. In summary, the pattern of God's special revelation is:

- God acts in history.
- God's acts are interpreted authoritatively by prophets and apostles.
- A community of faith is formed, comprising persons who have responded to the message of the prophets and apostles by putting their faith in God.
- Individuals in this community use language to communicate the message, first orally and then in writing, in the Bible.
- As the years go along, the message is transmitted in sermons, hymns, books, and conversations. All of this is done so that people may know about God and so that they may know God in a personal way.

## CHAPTER 3

### GOD

#### INTRODUCTION

This book is about God and about relationships between God and the world God has created. In that sense, every chapter is about God. What I intend to do in the present chapter is to provide an account of the understanding of God that was available to the Hebrew people before the revelation that God gave in Jesus Christ.

It is conventional for academic theologians, when they write about God, to write first about God's nature and then about God's attributes. I will follow that pattern in this chapter. However, instead of the word "attributes" I will use the word "character." And in between the themes of God's nature and character I will write about two additional themes, God's purpose and God's activities.

Before I begin to try to put into words our Christian understanding of God, I want to describe the difference between the way we use words to speak about God and the way we use them to speak about everything else.

#### LANGUAGE ABOUT GOD

When we speak about God, we are taking words whose meaning we know from our experiences in the world and applying them to the One who transcends everything in the world. This means that all our language about God is analogical.

So, for example, when we say that God is wise, we are saying that there is an analogy between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of people in the world. We are in effect saying: "You know the difference between a wise person and a foolish person; God is more like a wise than a foolish person." We speak this way even though we know that our analogies are not really adequate to speak of God. God is wise, but not exactly like people are wise, because God is much wiser than any human being.

Here is a series of statements about God that reflects a pattern that theologians have recognized for many centuries:

- We use an analogy: God is wise.
- Then, we negate it: God is not wise in exactly the same way a human being is wise.
- Finally, we go beyond it: God is far wiser than any human being.

Traditionally these three ways of speaking about God have been known as the way of analogy (*via analogia*), the way of negation (*via negativa*), and the way of eminence (*via eminentia*)

It is important for us to recognize that our language about God is analogical. If we fail to grasp this, we may slip into one of two serious problems. The first is the problem of forfeiting God's uniqueness. If, for example, when we say that God is wise, we mean *exactly* the same thing we mean when we say that human beings are wise, then we have effectively brought God down to the level of human beings.

The second is the problem of thinking that our language about God is really not about God but only about our experiences. On this understanding, to say that God is wise is not really to claim that there actually is a wise God out there (so to speak), but simply to assert that I experience life as if there were a wise God—for example, I feel as if the world makes sense and is not meaningless. This problem is at the opposite extreme from the first problem, and it happens more frequently in academic theology than in folk theology.

The first problem is a denial of God's uniqueness; the second is skepticism. Both problems are serious. Surprisingly, Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians judged that the denial of God's uniqueness is more serious than skepticism.<sup>1</sup> Recognition of the analogical character of our speech about God effectively resolves these two problems.

But recognizing the analogical character of language about God creates a problem for some Christians. They worry that it means that we are not making truth claims about God at all.

That is a misunderstanding. There are true and false analogies, just as there are true and false literal statements. In analogical language as in literal language, it is relevant to ask whether what is being said is true. Acknowledging that our language about God is analogical is simply a way of acknowledging that we recognize God's uniqueness, holiness, transcendence, and sovereignty over all the created world. Christians have always acknowledged these things.

Further, some thoughtful Christians are uncomfortable saying that we

are making truth claims about God. Aware of the mystery of God, they point out that it is impossible to “put God in a box.” This is certainly true. And it is true also that there will always be an unfathomable mystery about God. But it nevertheless is the case that we all make truth claims about God.

And it is right for us to do this. The justification can be seen if we exchange the metaphor of a box for the metaphor of bows-and-arrows. We can't put God in a box, but our words are like arrows that we can shoot in a certain direction. They can't reach God, of course, because God is a mystery beyond our reach. But they can be sent in the right direction rather than in wrong directions. So it is true—the right direction—to say “God is wise” and untrue—the wrong direction—to say God is foolish or ignorant.

Bearing in mind the analogical character of our language, we will now attempt to describe the nature of God.

## THE NATURE OF GOD

### GOD IS TRANSCENDENT

Perhaps the best way to begin to understand God is to recognize that God is unique. There is one and only one true and living God. God should never be confused with any other reality. God is not a big human being, or a natural force such as gravity, or a cause such as democracy.

The Hebrew word for God's uniqueness is *qadosh*. It is usually translated “holy,” but its root meaning is “separate.” God is the Holy One—the One who is completely separate from everything else that exists.

Today the word “holy” suggests a moral quality. I will be speaking about God's moral character later in this chapter. Our interest in “the holy” right now is not in God's moral character but in God's uniqueness.

In order to prevent confusion, some academic theologians have used words other than “holy” to speak of God's uniqueness. One of these is the word “sovereignty.” I have decided to use the word “transcendent” to speak of God's uniqueness. “Transcendence” is a spatial term, suggesting that God is high, above all things, separate, and exalted. According to the prophet Isaiah, God has said: “I am the high and holy God, who lives forever. I live in a high and holy place” (Isa. 57:15, TEV).

Awareness of God's transcendence is basic to authentic religious experience. The human experience of God's uniqueness was explored by Rudolf Otto in an influential book published about a century ago entitled *The Idea*

<sup>1</sup> “Analogy” in F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 46-7.

of the Holy.<sup>1</sup> Otto described the sense that religious persons have of God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a mystery that is tremendous and overwhelming but also fascinating and attractive.

## GOD IS PERSONAL

To our confession of God's uniqueness we add that God is personal. Otto alluded to this when he wrote of the fascination God exerts over human beings. We are drawn to God because God is personal, not only a tremendous mystery but also a fascinating one.

In the Bible God is everywhere seen to be personal. The Bible presents God as a living God and therefore as entirely unlike lifeless idols. For example, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:2). In a long oracle ridiculing idols Jeremiah said, "But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King" (Jer. 10:10). At Caesarea Philippi Peter confessed to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16). When Paul and Barnabas preached in the polytheistic city of Lystra, the people of Lystra were so impressed that they thought the preachers were the gods Zeus and Hermes and tried to worship them. The apostles were so horrified by this that they tore their clothes and said to the people, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless [idols] to the living God" (Acts 14:14-15). Paul told the young pastor Timothy, "We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10).

The personal understanding of God is found outside the Bible as well as in it. For example, this understanding of God is operative when we ask the ultimate question, "Are we alone in the universe or is Someone there?" The word "Someone" suggests a personal God. And the word "there" suggests God's transcendence.

The Bible emphasizes both the personhood and the transcendence of God. When I introduced the word "transcendent" above, I quoted a passage from Isaiah, but I did not finish the quotation. The verse speaks of God not only as transcendent but also as personal:

I am the high and holy God, who lives forever. I live in a high and holy place, but I also live with people who are humble and repentant,

so that I can restore their confidence and hope. (Isa. 57:15, TEV)

God is high and holy; God also is personal and enters into personal relationships with people who are humble and repentant.

## THE TRANSCENDENT, PERSONAL GOD IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

An especially effective way of affirming that God is both personal and transcendent is to speak of God as Creator. Creators are "other" than what they create, and yet they are in a sense "present" in what they make. I will discuss this below in connection with God's activities.

Israel's neighbors in the ancient eastern Mediterranean world did not share Israel's belief in a personal, transcendent God. They believed in many gods rather than in one God. We refer to that belief as "polytheism," and to the practice as "idolatry," worshiping the gods as if they were somehow present in statues or other representations. The second of the Ten Commandments, the command to make no images of God, is directed against idolatry (Deut. 6:8-9). Israel's rejection of idolatry is a witness to the fact that God is transcendent and personal.

There is another witness in Psalms 115. The situation that the Jewish author of this psalm faced was that his neighbors could point to the statues in their places of worship and say that they could see their gods. They then ridiculed the Israelites for claiming to have a God but having nothing they could see. The psalmist turned the tables on these people and ridiculed them:

Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. Those who made them are like them; so are all who trust in them. (Ps. 115:2-8)

The psalmist defends the transcendence of God: God lives in heaven rather than on earth, and that is why God cannot be seen. The psalmist reminds idolaters that their gods can't speak, see, hear, smell, feel, or walk. They are lifeless. Finally, the psalmist ridicules those who ridiculed Israel: those who worship these lifeless idols will become, like them, lifeless.

For Christians, the most familiar presentation of the truth that God

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* translated by John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1931; first German edition, 1917).

is both personal and transcendent is the one Jesus gave us in the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught us when we pray to say: "Our Father in heaven" (Mt. 6:9). The words "Our Father" communicate that God is personal, and the words "in heaven" mean that God is transcendent. We can understand why Jesus would teach us to pray this way because, when we pray, we need to remember both that God is very close to us, our friend, and also that God is the absolute, sovereign, transcendent Lord of the universe. As Rudolf Otto said, "It always remains an overwhelming and daring paradox . . . that He who is 'in heaven' is yet 'our Father.'"<sup>1</sup>

### THE TRANSCENDENT, PERSONAL GOD TODAY

The claim that God is both personal and transcendent has puzzled some philosophers. The problem is how to hold together the two concepts of personhood and transcendence. If God is absolutely unlike anything in the world, can God be personal like human beings? And if God is personal, can God be absolutely transcendent? Here is how one philosopher expressed it:

A modern controversy about 'the personality of God' will be found to turn upon the difficulty involved in reconciling the finitude which seems to be essential to human personality with the absoluteness and infinity, or at least omnipresence and omnipotence, which we are accustomed to ascribe to God.<sup>2</sup>

Some philosophers have found it so difficult to reconcile the personhood and transcendence of God that they have set aside one or the other of these two. For example, one group of thinkers, called Personalists, has said that God is personal but not transcendent. On the other hand Paul Tillich, who was both a philosopher and a theologian, apparently thought that God is transcendent but not personal:

The God who is *a* being is transcended by the God who is Being itself, the ground and abyss of every being. And the God who is *a* person is transcended by the God who is the Personal-Itself, the ground and abyss of every person.<sup>3</sup>

Many thoughtful Christians are comfortable with understandings of

God similar to Tillich's. It seems to me that a number of different things contribute to this. Here are seven of them:

- They may feel that the best way to avoid idolatry is to move away from personal ways of thinking about God.
- They embrace the transcendence and the mystery of God, and they feel that thinking of God as personal is a failure to respect the mystery.
- They may identify the emphasis on God as personal as childish and believe that it is more mature to think of God in non-personal terms.
- They may assume that non-personal categories are more adequate for thinking about spiritual realities than personal categories.
- They may think that it is more reasonable to think of God as a personification of abstract qualities rather than as personal.
- They may feel a personal God is not compatible with the massive, innocent, involuntary, pointless suffering in our world.
- When they encounter world religions that emphasize interiority such as Buddhism, they may come to think of personhood, whether in God or in ourselves, as an illusion.

Under the influence of factors such as these, thoughtful Christians speak about God in language reminiscent of Tillich's. For example, they speak of the Sacred, or the Holy, or the Mystery, or Reality, or the One, or Spirit. They may continue to use the word "God," but they think of that as a personification of a Reality that is actually non-personal. They think God is more like an energy field than a human being.

I appreciate some of the considerations that lead to this view, and I respect Christians who are this thoughtful about God.<sup>1</sup> But in the end I think the view is mistaken. To surrender the idea that God is personal is to surrender what was most important to Jesus, that God was his *Abba*, his Father. I think this is unwise.

Nor is it necessary. The American theologian Robison B. James has proposed that Tillich's failure to affirm God as personal is an omission that can be filled without violence to the rest of Tillich's theology. James suggested that it be filled by introducing into Tillich's understanding of God the understanding of persons associated with the Jewish philosopher Martin

1 In my judgment the fourth idea, that non-personal categories are more adequate ways of thinking about spiritual realities than personal, is simply mistaken. The seventh idea, however, rightly identifies a failing in some modern theology. The failing is that, although the Christian tradition teaches that God is both immanent (present throughout all the world) and transcendent, in many Christian circles God's immanence is neglected or even resisted. What is needed in those circles is a heartier affirmation of the Christian tradition.

1 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 87.

2 C. C. J. Webb, *Problems in the Relations of God and Man* (London: Nisbet & Co. Ltd., 1924), 216.

3 Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 82-83.

Buber and his immensely influential book *I And Thou*.<sup>1</sup> That seems true and immensely important to me.

A Scottish theologian, H. R. Mackintosh, made an argument in support of a personal understanding of God by asking a shrewd question: “Which limits God more—to say that He does have the capacity for fellowship, which is what personality is, or to say that He does not have it?”<sup>2</sup>

That’s it, exactly: God must be maximally personal in order to be maximally transcendent. What limits God is to say that God is *not* personal, not to say that God is personal.

We can summarize our understanding of the nature of God this way: In the Bible God is seen to be personal and transcendent. This understanding was immensely important to Jesus, it is confirmed in our religious experience, and it is compatible with philosophical reflection.

And to that we might add that it enriches our religious life. Because God is personal, we are able to love and trust God. Because God is transcendent, we are able to revere and honor God. Taken together, God’s personhood and transcendence lead us to worship God.

## THE PURPOSE OF GOD

It is characteristic of persons that they are not only living, conscious, and intelligent. They also are purposeful. The same is true of God. God had a purpose for creating the world in the beginning, and God’s actions in the world are always purposive. In folk theology today, four things are said today about God’s purpose in creating the world.

First, it is said that God’s purpose is a mystery. This is certainly true. However, we need to distinguish between two kinds of mysteries. There are mysteries about which we know nothing whatever, and there are mysteries about which we have some knowledge. God’s purpose in creating the world is, I believe, a mystery about which we have some knowledge.

Second, it is said that God’s purpose is to save sinners. This also is true. But that raises a further question: For what purpose is God saving sinners?

Third, it is said that the divine purpose for creating the world is to bring glory to God. This too is true. But it also is incomplete. And when, as often

happens, it is left standing alone, it seems to suggest that God’s only interest is God and that God has no real interest in the world or in the human beings in it. This is foreign to the Bible. The Bible presents God as intensely interested in the world. In fact, Christ died to save the world; that hardly suggests that God does not care about human beings.<sup>1</sup>

All three of these things are true, but they are all incomplete. They need a fourth to complete them. The fourth thing is that God created human beings in order to have fellowship with them.

Here is how I would express the purpose of God in creation: God created the world in order to gather together a family of people to be God’s own, people who freely receive God’s love and salvation into their lives and who then begin to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Notice what happens to the first three ideas when we adopt this fourth idea.

First, God’s purpose remains a mystery. In fact, the mystery is deepened. Why would the transcendent God choose to create a family of people to belong to God? We do not know; it is a mystery.

Second, God created the world in order to save sinners. And now we know the purpose for which God saves sinners—to be God’s own family, and to share a common life of love and trust in this world and the world to come.

Third, God created the world in order to receive glory. And now we know why God receives glory. When we become God’s people, we learn how wonderful God has been to create us and then to redeem us, and we naturally honor and worship and give glory to our wonderful God.

The Bible bears witness to the fact that God’s purpose is to create a family of people to be God’s own. I will mention three of the ways it does this.

One of the most prominent themes in the Bible is the theme of covenant. A covenant is a formal relationship; the most familiar kind of covenant is a marriage covenant. Throughout the Old Testament, God is said to have made covenants with Israel. In fact, the prophet Hosea actually used the marriage covenant as an image of the covenant between the Lord and Israel. God is Israel’s husband, and Israel is God’s wife (see Hos. 1-3). The

1 In a book entitled *The End for Which God Created the World* the American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards addressed this issue by saying that God’s purpose of being glorified is not selfish. He argued that, since God “comprehends universal existence,” God’s love for God includes love for all that God has created. See *The Works of President Edwards in Eight Volumes* edited by Edward Williams and Edward Parsons (Leeds: Edward Baines, 1806), I.IV.1 (I:479).

2 I have written this definition from the point of view of the Bible, that is, from the point of view life on Earth. I do not intend the definition to foreclose on whether God is carrying out purposes beyond our planet.

1 Robison B. James, *Tillich and World Religions* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), ch. 9 “Is Ultimate Reality Personal? Adding Buber to Tillich,” 141-158.

2 H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1929), 136.

essence of the covenant between God and Israel is expressed in these words: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.”<sup>1</sup> The theme of covenant suggests that God intends to create a community of people and to be their God.

The central image in the preaching of Jesus was the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15). The kingdom was the gracious rule that God was extending over the lives of human beings through the life and work of Jesus.

Jesus also taught that the greatest of God’s commandments, that which God most wanted from the covenant people, was that they would love God with all their hearts and love their neighbors as themselves (Mt. 22:34-40).

The biblical teachings about covenant, about the kingdom of God, and about the greatest commandments, all suggest that God’s purpose in creation is to gather together a family of people to be the people of God. These people freely receive God’s love into their lives, and they then learn to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves.

## THE ACTIVITIES OF GOD

In the previous chapter we spoke of God’s mighty acts in history as the initial phase of God’s special revelation. We want to consider those acts again here, this time as the means that God uses to create a new community and to be their God.

It is conventional, when speaking of the acts of God, to distinguish acts of creation from acts of redemption. This is a helpful distinction provided one bears in mind that in both creation and redemption God is carrying out the same purpose.

### CREATION

We begin with creation. The Bible opens with these majestic words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, REB). The theme of creation appears repeatedly in the Bible.

A special name has been given to the church’s teaching about creation: *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing. The phrase appears first in an ancient Jewish book that is part of the Apocrypha and is included in Roman Catholic Bibles but not in Protestant ones: “I beg you, child, look at the sky and the earth; see all that is in them and realize that God made them out of

nothing” (2 Maccabees 7:28, NEB).<sup>1</sup>

Even though the phrase “out of nothing” is not found in Protestant Bibles, the idea is. It is explicit in Romans, where we read that God “calls into being things that are not” (*ta me onta hos onta*, the not-being as being, Rom. 4:17, REB). In another wonderful phrase, Paul speaks of God as “Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is” (Rom. 11:36, NEB).

In the Hebrew Scriptures there are numerous passages that speak of God’s creation of the world. In addition to Genesis 1-2, representative passages about creation include Job 38, Psalms 104, and Isaiah 45. In these passages several images are used for God’s work of creation. This is particularly clear in Isaiah:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, “What are you making?” or “Your work has no handles”? Woe to anyone who says to a father, “What are you begetting?” or to a woman, “With what are you in labor?” Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands? I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. (Isa. 45:9-12)

The prophet has employed four images for creation. The first is of a potter making a piece of pottery. The second is of a father begetting a child. The third is of a woman giving birth to a child. The fourth is of a nomad stretching out the curtains of his tent.

In Job 38 and Psalms 104, the imagery is quite different. It is the image of construction work: “You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken” (Ps. 104:5).

Still another image is used in Genesis 1: “Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). This is the image of a monarch giving a command. When a monarch commands, it is carried out.

Here, then, are six distinct images of creation: a monarch giving commands, a builder constructing a building, a nomad stretching out the curtains of a tent, a mother giving birth to a child, a father begetting a child, and a potter making pottery. Today we might express the same idea by saying that God is like an engineer who designs a new computer chip, or like a

<sup>1</sup> Passages with this phrase or similar phrases include Lev. 26:12 = 2 Cor. 6:16; Jer. 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:1, 31:33, 32:38; Ezek. 11:20, 14:11, 34:30, 36:28, 37:23; Hos. 2:23 = Rom. 9:25, 26; Zech. 13:9.

<sup>1</sup> In the ancient Latin translation of the Bible called the Vulgate the wording is *ex nihilo fecit illa Deus*.

novelist who writes a novel, or like a composer who creates a symphony.

The belief that God is the Creator of the world is one of the great success stories of the Hebrew and Christian religion. If you ask people in the western world today, “What do you think of when I say the word ‘God?’” many will probably reply, “The One who created the universe.”

People think this way because God first communicated it to Israel, and it has been passed along in societies that have been influenced by the Jewish and Christian religions. It is not self-evident that the relationship between God and the world is like the relationship between a creator and something that she creates. Some very intelligent people have thought of God in other ways. Apparently the philosopher Plato thought that God and matter are both eternal and that God shaped matter but did not create it. Stoic philosophers believed that the world is the body of God and that God is the soul of the world. Some Gnostic philosophers thought that the world was a emanation from God as a ray of light is an emanation from the sun.

The Christian understanding of creation is different from each of these, and we think as we do about creation because we are heirs of the biblical revelation. The writer of Hebrews emphasized this: “By faith we understand that the universe was formed by God’s command, so that the visible came forth from the invisible” (Heb. 11:3, REB).

Some Christians assume that the story of creation in Genesis 1-2 inevitably conflicts with the modern scientific account of the world. This does happen if we treat the Genesis story as a scientific account, but I see no reason to do this. Isaiah wrote that God’s creation of the world is like a woman’s giving birth to a baby, but no one thinks that this is a scientific account. Why then should we think that the Genesis story of a monarch giving commands is a scientific account? I don’t know of any good reason to do that.

The fact that God is the Creator of the world tells us something about God, about ourselves, and about the world. It confirms what we said earlier about the nature of God, that God is personal and transcendent. Only persons can truly create, and creators transcend their creations. Human beings paint pictures, but we would never confuse an artist with her canvases.

The fact that God is our Creator tells us something about ourselves. It tells us that our life is a gift rather than an entitlement. It tells us that the meaning of our lives is greater than the purposes that we choose to adopt for ourselves. There is a higher meaning, the meaning that God gives to our lives by creating us for a purpose.

The fact that God is the Creator of the world also tells us something

about the world. It tells us that the world is good. Since God is good, everything God makes is good: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

In Genesis we learn also that the Creator has entrusted this good world into the care of human beings who are to “have dominion” over it (Gen. 1:28). The word “dominion” has sometimes been understood to mean that human beings are free to exploit the earth in any way they like, but that certainly is not what the word means. The dominion of human beings over the earth is to be modeled after God’s dominion over the earth, that is, the dominion of One who lovingly created the earth and treasures it.

The biblical teaching is that we human beings do not own our planet. The psalmist said, “The earth is the Lord’s” (Ps. 24:1). God owns the earth and has entrusted it to our care. Our dominion of the earth is a work of stewards, managers, of a world that belongs to God. We are no more free to defile our planet than to deify it.

The meaning of our dominion of the earth is clarified by two verbs used in the story of the garden: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). The word “till” means that human beings are to cultivate the earth and make it productive, and the word “keep” means that human beings are to protect the earth.

## REDEMPTION

In creating the world, God was acting to carry out the purpose of creating a community of people to be God’s own. The same is true of God’s subsequent, redemptive acts.

In Chapter 2 above I mentioned some of God’s acts that are recorded in the Old Testament. They include the call of Abraham, the deliverance at the Exodus, the formation of the nation by the giving of the land of Israel, the kingship of David, and the deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. And, of course, Christians believe that God’s greatest act was the life and death and resurrection of Christ. When we look a little more closely into the nature of these mighty saving acts we notice two things, the uniqueness of Israel’s belief and the miraculous character of some of God’s acts.

Israel’s neighbors derived their beliefs about their gods from the world of nature more than from the world of history and of human events. It was in the cycles of planting and harvesting, birth and life and death, the changing of the seasons, the phases of the moon, and the rising and setting of the sun, that many ancient peoples saw the activities of their gods.

Israel, on the other hand, while not indifferent to God's rule over nature, was more focused on God's acts in human history. Israel saw God revealed most fully in historical events such as the Exodus.

The implications of this are enormous. This view invests history with a transcendent meaning. It is religiously important to remember the past. Time and history are not illusions, nor are they problems from which we need to escape, as some religions teach. Rather, they are the stage on which God acts, and they are thereby filled with meaning.

We also notice that some of God's mighty acts were miracles. I want now to make five comments about miracles.

First, the word "miracle" is used today in two senses. In a broader sense, any wonderful event may be called a miracle: "The birth of our baby was a miracle." In a narrower sense, a miracle is an event that does not fit into the natural pattern of cause and effect that is present throughout our world. The resurrection of Christ was a miracle in this latter sense. We are concerned now with miracle in this narrow sense.

Second, not all of God's acts are miracles. We believe that it was an act of God that Christ died for our sins; yet it is according to the natural pattern of cause and effect that a man who is crucified should die.

Third, the Bible records a great many miracles. Interestingly, most of them are clustered in three groups: those surrounding the Exodus, those done by the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and those done by Jesus and his disciples. A few others are scattered throughout the Bible, but most are in these clusters. What this means is that there are vast tracts of biblical history, entire centuries, in which, so far as we know, God did no miracles. Yet we are confident that God was working during those periods. This takes us back to the second point: not all of God's acts are miracles.

Fourth, there is a tendency today to think that when people have great faith, God will do great miracles. There is some justification for this belief.<sup>1</sup> However, that is only part of the story. The other part is that sometimes the desire for miracles is wrong-headed. Jesus said quite clearly, "It is a wicked, godless generation that asks for a sign" (Mt. 12:39, REB). It was the devil who urged Jesus to do the miracle of throwing himself down from the temple without being hurt in order to impress the people (Mt. 4:1-11). And it was the wicked king Herod who "was greatly pleased; he had heard about [Jesus] and had long been wanting to see him in the hope of witnessing some miracle performed by him" (Luke 23:8-9, REB). Paul expressed the same attitude

toward miracles as Jesus. He wrote: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:22-23). From these passages we learn that it is not always a good and faithful thing to want a miracle.

Fifth, we may now answer the question: "Does God do miracles?" Our answer is simply, "Yes, God does do miracles." What argument supports this conclusion? In addition to the biblical record, I believe that an openness to miracles is required by the fact that God is the Creator. If we take seriously the fact that God created the world and everything in the world including the natural pattern of cause and effect by which the world ordinarily operates, then we are in no position to deny that God can override that natural pattern.

This, then, is what we want to say about God's activities: In order to carry out the purpose of bringing together a family of people to be God's own, God acts, first, by creating a world and populating it with people, and, second, by mighty acts in human history to rescue human beings so that they may be a part of the family of God.

God's acts of creation and redemption reveal God's character, and to that subject we now turn our attention.

## THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Some academic theologians have drawn up long lists of the attributes or perfections of God, and sometimes they have organized these into categories such as, for example, moral attributes and metaphysical attributes.<sup>1</sup> Lists and categories of divine attributes can be insightful, but they can also have a somewhat unreal feel to them. We almost never describe people in this way. Have you ever heard anyone say: "My friend has moral attributes such as fortitude and patience and physical attributes such as youthfulness and energy"?

For this reason I will identify just a few of the divine attributes rather than a long list, and I will not categorize them. Since no list of God's attributes can in any case be comprehensive, it is not irreverent to be selective. Of course, I do bear the responsibility for the selection I make.

<sup>1</sup> John L. Dagg provided a list of eleven attributes of God, A. H. Strong wrote of eight absolute and eleven relative attributes of God, divided into six sub-categories, and Karl Barth wrote of six perfections of the divine loving and six perfections of the divine freedom. John L. Dagg, *A Manual of Theology* (Harrisonburg, VA: Gano books, 1982; first published 1857), Part Second. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Fleming H. Revell, 1954; first published 1907), vol. I, part IV. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II:1, *The Doctrine of God* English translation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), chapter VI.

<sup>1</sup> See Mt. 9:22, Acts 14:9.

I will discuss four things about God's character: God is good, loving, wise, and powerful. I have chosen these four qualities because they are emphasized in the Bible and because they contribute so much to Christians' relationships with God. Others may feel that other qualities are more important. I understand that and respect it. But these seem most important to me.

## GOD IS GOOD

The Bible contains many references to God's goodness. For example, "The Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 100:5).<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew prophets put special emphasis on God's moral goodness. In the eighth and seventh centuries before Christ some people in Israel thought that God's primary concern was for religious practices such as sacrifices and festivals. Prophets such as Amos opposed this view. This is what the Lord said to Israelites who performed religious ceremonies but did not live moral lives:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21-24)

This prophetic revelation of God is immensely important. Perhaps it is not too much to say that the prophetic concern for justice serves as the foundation of religion and society as we know them in western civilization.

Our interest is in what this revelation tells us about God. If it is so important to God that people live morally, it must be because God is a God of moral goodness. God is perfectly good. God does not act arbitrarily. God does not act vindictively. God does not break promises. God does not connive at evil. We may trust God never to do anything wrong.

It is not enough formally to affirm that God is good. We must believe it deeply. If we do not believe deeply in the goodness of God, then we really should not put our faith in God. A bad god does not deserve to be

<sup>1</sup> What was said earlier in this chapter about the analogical character of our language about God is especially important here. When we say that God is good, we are aware that we are using an analogy and that God's goodness transcends human goodness. We are saying that God is more like a conscientious parent, for example, than like a parent who abuses or neglects his children.

worshiped. Confidence in the perfect goodness of God is a fundamental element in authentic religion.

Despite the work of the prophets and those who came after them, a few academic theologians have concluded that God, though good, is not perfectly good. Their reasoning is that a perfectly good God would not permit the vast amount of suffering in the world. One of these has written the following:

There may be a demonic side in God. . . . We are dealing with a God capable of harshness more extreme than some people would use. . . . We must face it: any God powerful enough to alter the course of nature in order to save people is also one strong enough to force a game of Russian roulette on us all, when he could have withheld such terror from the program for human life.<sup>1</sup>

These are chilling words, and they find no resonance in the minds of traditional Christians. In agreement with the apostle John we confess that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

## GOD IS LOVE

The second perfection of God is love. In the Hebrew Scriptures the most dramatic witness to God's love may be the story of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer. Apparently Gomer was a prostitute, perhaps engaged in religious prostitution in connection with the worship of the idol Baal. But in spite of her infidelities Hosea loved her, and his love for her became a revelation of the love that the Lord had for the people of Israel.

The Lord said to me again, "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. And I said to her, "You must remain as mine for many days." (Hos. 3:1-3)

Clearly Gomer was important to Hosea. He cared for her welfare. He worked hard to overcome everything that separated them and to reunite them in their marriage. The message of Hosea is that God also loves Israel in this way. Israel is important to God. God cares for her welfare.

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Sontag in Stephen T. Davis, editor, *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 140, 142, 144.

God's goodness and love are revealed in the message of the prophets. We Christians believe that the most complete revelation of God's love and goodness was given in deeds, in Jesus Christ and in his sacrifice of himself on behalf of the world. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

### **GOD IS WISE AND POWERFUL**

The third and fourth perfections of God are wisdom and power. Both of these are displayed in the creation of the universe. The power to bring this vast universe into existence is a power beyond our imagining. The same is true of the wisdom of God that has organized the universe from the vastness of space down to the intricacies of sub-atomic particles. The writers of the Bible knew much less than we today do about the size and age of the universe, but they saw God's wisdom and power displayed in its existence and organization: "O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all" (Ps. 104:24). "We rejoiced in him, who rules by his might forever" (Ps. 66:6-7). God's power is evident in God's saving acts: "He brought you out of Egypt with his own presence, by his great power" (Deut. 4:37).

The greatest revelation of God's wisdom and power was given, not in the work of creation, but in the work of redemption. Here we encounter a profound mystery. According to Paul, God's power and wisdom are most fully displayed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ:

We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor. 1:23-25)

It is God's redemptive work in history that most fully reveals all the aspects of God's character.

The God who has saved us is a God we can trust. We can put our faith in the God whose wisdom, power, goodness, and love come together to carry out a great act of salvation for human beings. And we can all echo the words of the apostle:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us

from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)

### **SUMMARY**

Christians believe that prior to the coming of Christ God gave the Jews a true and important understanding of God. Here is a very brief summary of that understanding:

- God is the transcendent, personal One.
- God's purpose is to create a family of people to be the people of God.
- In order to carry out that purpose, God creates the universe and acts in human history.
- God's activities show that God is good, loving, wise, and powerful.

This revelation of God, which was given initially to Israel, reached its fulfillment in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and especially in his death upon the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

## CHAPTER 4

# HUMAN BEINGS

## INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century an enormous amount of attention is being devoted to human beings. History, biography, anthropology, sociology, and psychology are all studies of human beings. Add to these academic disciplines our preoccupation with politics, our attention to finance and economics, our concern about health and education, the time we spend reading fiction and viewing drama, and it becomes clear that we human beings give most of our attention to ourselves.

Why then should Christians who are trying to speak about God add anything to the torrent of words that others are already writing and speaking about human beings? The answer is that we believe we have something to say that is not being said by everyone else. We attempt to speak of human beings in their relationship to God.

In this chapter we will give our attention to two of our relationships with God: human beings are creations of God, and human beings are sinners before God. Both of these appear early in the Bible. The first two chapters of Genesis are about God's creating human beings, and the third chapter of Genesis is about human beings sinning against God. In a sense these two ideas, creation and sin, could be called the good news and the bad news about human beings.

The human beings about whom I am writing in this chapter do not exist only in my mind. They are not an intellectual construct. What I will be writing in this chapter is about real persons who live in the real world. People who drive cars, spend money, fall in love, read books, have children, play games, and try to make sense out of their lives—all of these people are creations of God and sinners before God.

## HUMAN BEINGS ARE CREATIONS OF GOD

### HUMAN BEINGS ARE SPECIAL

When we hear a reference to the fact that human beings are created by

God, we tend to think first of the creation of Adam and Eve whose story is told in Genesis. This is natural, but it is important to emphasize that God is the Creator of all human beings, not just of our first parents.

Human beings have a special place among God's many creations. In Genesis 1-2 the uniqueness of human beings is expressed in at least four ways:

- Human beings were created last, at the close of the sixth day, as the crown of creation, so to speak.
- Human beings alone were created in God's image (Gen. 1:26).
- Human beings alone are given dominion over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:28).
- It was into human beings alone that God breathed the breath of life (Gen. 2:7).

The special status of human beings is emphasized in a different way in Psalms 8:

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet. (Ps. 8:3-6)

The psalmist's reference to dominion may draw upon the reference in Genesis 1:28, and the reference to God's making human beings a little lower than *Elohim* (which may be translated either "angels" or "God") may draw upon the reference to "the image of God" in Genesis 1:27. The psalmist is saying these wonderful things not only about Adam and Eve who lived before sin entered the world, but about all human beings even after sin had come into the world.

## THE IMAGE OF GOD

We want now to look more closely at the biblical teaching that human beings are made in God's image. The idea that human beings are created in "the image of God" occurs about a dozen times in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> However, the Bible never says what the image of God is. As a result there have been many proposals and debates about what the image is. One proposal is that the

<sup>1</sup> References to the image or likeness of God occur in Gen. 1:26-27, 5:1-2, 9:6; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 3:18, 4:4; Eph. 4:23-24; Col. 1:15, 3:9-10; and James 3:9.

meaning is physical; human beings literally look like God. Other proposals are that the image of God is the ability of human beings to reason or that it is their capacity for moral judgments. Since the image of God is mentioned in Genesis just prior to the reference to our having dominion over the earth, it has been suggested that the image is that dominion; God has dominion, and human beings, made in God's image, have dominion.

The influential Swiss theologian Karl Barth argued that in the creation story the image of God is the capacity of human beings to enter into close, loving relationships with others. He pointed to Genesis 1:27:

So God created humankind in his image,  
In the image of God he created them;  
Male and female he created them.

Barth's argument was that this is an example of Hebrew parallelism, a poetic device that is characteristic of Hebrew poetry. This means that the three clauses in this verse are references to the same thing. "The image of God" is therefore the same thing as "male and female." "Male and female" represents the fact that God created human beings with the capacity to enter into interpersonal relationships, including the most intimate of human relationships, that of marriage.<sup>1</sup>

The novelist and theologian Dorothy Sayers suggested that the image of God is creativity. Her argument is simply that the God in whose image Genesis says that human beings were created, was a God who was busy with the work of creation.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Bible does not tell us what the image of God is, it is wise to make our proposals concerning its meaning with some humility. However, there are three things about the image of God that seem fairly clear:

- The phrase "the image of God" suggests that there is a relationship of some kind between God and human beings.
- The image of God is not something that human beings must acquire or achieve; it is something that God has given them in creation.
- The image of God is given only to human beings, not to any of God's other creations, and it therefore makes human beings unique among God creatures.

All three of these concepts seem to be included in the familiar English word "personal." God is personal, and human beings are like God in that

they are personal. Personhood is not something human beings acquire or achieve but rather is given to them in creation. And personhood sets human beings apart from God's other creatures. It is helpful to notice the similarities between the phrase "image of God" and the English word "personal." However, this does not give us a complete understanding of the image because the word "personal" is almost as elusive as the phrase "image of God."

## HUMAN BEINGS ARE PERSONS

There is a sense in which we do not need to define the word "personal." Definitions consist of words which, the definer hopes, point to a more immediate experience than the word they define. But no experience is more immediate to human beings than the experience of being persons. In that sense, because we are persons we do not need a definition for the word "personal." We know from the inside, so to speak, what it is to be personal.

Nevertheless, we do learn about ourselves as persons by reflecting upon our lives. I will briefly mention thirteen characteristics of human persons. All of them have a place in our religious faith and life. Some of them are part of the image of God in us, but others are not.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN BEINGS

First, human beings are bodily, physical creatures. In Genesis we read that Adam's body was created by God from the dust of the earth. Because everything that God creates is good, human bodies are good. They are not evil as some religions have said. It is characteristic of human beings that all of their experiences are mediated to them through their bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Second, each human being is a self or soul or spirit or person. God creates each human being with an identity that belongs irreducibly to that person. It seems to me that biblical references to a soul or spirit are often references to what we today call a person or a self.

We must not be misled by the word "self." It is a good thing to be a self. Selfishness and self-centeredness are sinful, but being a self is a gift from God.

It is conventional to bring together these two aspects of human beings, the body and the self, by saying that human beings are embodied selves or embodied souls. While not wrong, this could be understood to mean that

1 Some contemporary academic theologians are giving special attention to two factors associated with human bodies, namely, gender and race. A fine example of the former is Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), and an excellent example of the latter is Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III:1, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 191ff.

2 Dorothy Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1956).

we are selves first and only then given bodies. But the creation story in Genesis 2 puts things the other way round. God first created the man's body, and then God breathed into the man the breath of life. The philosopher of science Nancey Murphy has suggested that instead of saying that human beings are embodied selves, we should say that human beings are animated bodies (the word "animated" is from the Latin word *animus* which means "soul"). She points out that this is consistent with our scientific and medical understanding of the dependence of the self upon the body.<sup>1</sup>

Third, each human being has consciousness and, more importantly, consciousness of oneself, that is, self-awareness. Many other creatures on this planet have consciousness, but apparently only human beings have self-awareness. We are aware that we are aware. Many of us grow in self-awareness across the years of our lives.

Self-awareness is mysterious. For that matter, so is consciousness. The relationship between our conscious and our unconscious lives is obscure, and so are our various states of consciousness (sleeping and waking, for example).

Fourth, human beings are intelligent. By empirical experience, by reason, and by intuition, human beings are able to know about themselves, their world, and their Creator.

Fifth, human beings make value judgments. These include moral, epistemological, and aesthetic values. We can recognize the good, the true, and the beautiful, and their opposites.

Sixth, human beings live in the world of nature that God created.

Seventh, human beings live in a world of culture that human beings have created. We make music and cities and stories and technology. We inhabit the world of culture just as we inhabit the world of nature. The centerpiece of culture is language. The world of culture includes politics and economics as well as art, literature, and architecture.

Eighth, human beings are free. The doctrine of fatalism is false. Many things in our lives are determined, but many others are not. There is a margin of genuine freedom in human existence, sometimes a large margin. To the extent that our actions have been freely chosen, to that extent we are responsible for them.

Ninth, human beings are intentional. They have purposes for their lives.

They act to accomplish ends that they themselves have adopted.

Tenth, human beings are sociable by nature. After Adam was created, God said that it was not good for the man to be alone (Gen. 2:18).

Eleventh, human beings are pushed by the past and pulled toward the future. Apparently human beings are the only creations of God who are aware of history and who live with hope, and these are important factors in the identity of human beings.

Twelfth, human beings are self-transcending.<sup>1</sup> We attempt to live into our true humanity by reaching beyond ourselves. We reach out for freedom. We reach out for knowledge; we are born with curiosity. We reach out for happiness. We reach out for love, and also for something worthy of our love. We would find it incomprehensible for someone to say: "I don't care whether I'm free, or whether I understand, or whether I'm happy, or whether I'm loved or have something worthy to love."

Our constant striving to transcend where we presently are is a quest for our true identity. Cats are not concerned with whether they are truly feline or dogs with whether they are truly canine, but we human beings are concerned about whether we are truly human. That is why we instinctively reach out for things such as freedom, knowledge, happiness, and love.

There is a parallel here with migratory birds who instinctively return to nesting places thousands of miles away. Something inside them pulls them toward the distant nesting places. Something inside human beings pulls us toward freedom, knowledge, happiness, and love. It is something that God has put in human beings. And it is something that draws human beings to God. The freedom we seek is the freedom Christ gives. The knowledge we seek is the truth that Christ is. The happiness we seek is the joy of the Lord. The love we seek is God's love, and the object worthy of our love is God. Augustine was surely right when he prayed, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."<sup>2</sup>

Thirteenth and finally, human beings are a mystery. Much about what it means to be human is hidden from us. We have real knowledge about ourselves, but it is incomplete knowledge.

We can bring all these factors together in the following manner: Human beings are physical creations of God, and their experiences are mediated

1 Nancey Murphy, "Human Nature: Historical, Scientific, and Religious Issues" in *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 20; see also her essay "Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues" in the same volume.

1 See, for example, "Man as Transcendent Being" in Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* translated by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 31-35. See also the discussion of general revelation in Chapter 2 above.

2 Augustine, *Confessions* translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), I.1.

through their bodies. They are conscious and self-aware selves. They are intelligent. They make value judgments about the good, the true, and the beautiful. They live in the world of nature that God created and also in the world of culture that they have created. They are free, responsible, and intentional. They are sociable and live in community. They are pushed by the past and pulled toward the future. Like migratory birds that return to distant nesting places, human beings reach beyond themselves for freedom, knowledge, happiness, and love. Whether they realize it or not, what they are reaching for is God.<sup>1</sup>

It is God who has us created human beings to be these complex and mysterious creatures that we are, and God continues to relate to us in all our complexity. But creation is only half of our human story, the good half. The dark half is what has happened to the gift of life God has given us, and to that tragic part of our story we now turn.

## HUMAN BEINGS ARE SINNERS BEFORE GOD

We have seen that from the beginning it was God's purpose to bring together a family of people to be the people of God. The destiny that God planned for all human beings was that they would freely receive God's love into their lives and then learn to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves. Obviously that is not the human condition today. Instead, human beings have severe problems.

Christians are not the only people who recognize that the human race has severe problems. This is widely recognized in the world today. Several diagnoses of the problems have had wide appeal among thoughtful people. For example, it is said that technology dehumanizes us, or that unequal distribution of wealth leads to class strife, or that poor education results in ignorance, or that our emotions either cause us anxiety if we repress them or produce destructive behavior if we express them freely. These analyses see our predicament in terms of relationships to technology, to wealth, to education, and to our emotions.

Christians recognize that there is truth in these and other accounts of the human predicament. However, they think that there is something else as well, something more fundamental than these accounts suggest. It is a problem in the relationship of human beings to God. Human beings are

1 Modern science offers challenges to some of what is said here about human origins and human freedom. For a response to some of the challenges, see Appendix 2, Science and Christian Theology.

alienated from God. They are sinners. Christians believe that alienation from God is the hard core of the human predicament. The other problems arise, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, from that alienation.

The Bible teaches that there are two dimensions to our alienation from God. The first dimension is that we use our freedom to make choices that are contrary to God's will. We will call this aspect of our predicament "sins."

The second dimension of the human predicament does not arise from choices we make.<sup>1</sup> It consists of the problems that are built into nature or into the structures of our corporate life or into our individual dispositions. No one seems to be responsible, yet things are still in terrible shape. We will call this part of the predicament "evil."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes writers of police fiction refer to "perpetrators" and "victims" ("perps" and "vics"). That is similar to the two aspects of our human predicament. Human beings commit sins, and human beings also are victims of evil forces beyond their control. It is important that we acknowledge both of the aspects of our predicament so that we can understand the predicament. If we acknowledge only one part, we will have only a partial view of our predicament.

We will now consider the two aspects of our predicament.<sup>3</sup>

## SINS

We begin with sins because most of us are more familiar with them and therefore they are easier to identify. The classic biblical story about sins is the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God commanded them not to eat a certain fruit; they chose to eat it; eating it was a sin against God; they were responsible for what they did; God punished them for their disobedience.

We are all familiar with the experience of freely choosing to do what we know is wrong. For example, children bully each other. Young people abuse drugs. Adults cheat on their income tax returns. Husbands are unfaithful to their wives. Employees steal from their employers. Politicians deceive their

1 Here I do not intend to foreclose on the question of whether the evil powers have their ultimate origin in free choices that human beings have made or whether they existed even before human beings made free choices. I intend only to follow the practice of New Testament writers who assume that the evil powers exist.

2 So far as I am aware, there is no agreed-on terminology either in the Bible or in the history of Christian thought for these two aspects of the human predicament. I think that denoting them "sins" and "evil" communicates what I intend, but I acknowledge that there is some arbitrariness in using these particular words in this particular way.

3 An especially helpful theological assessment of the human predicament is Stephen J. Duffy, "Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited" in *Theological Studies* (1988) 49: 697-633.

constituencies. People of one race look with contempt upon people of another race. Strong nations are ruthless toward weak nations.

Much of the human predicament is due to the fact that we choose to do wrong things such as these. We decide to act in ways that violate standards we know to be good, and so we make a mess of our lives and of the world.

Not all of our choices are bad, of course. We do many good things. Parents love and care for their children. Children obey their parents. Politicians behave with honor. Employees work hard and are honest. People work for racial justice. Strong nations provide assistance to weak nations.

But many of our choices are wrong and sinful and contrary to God's will, and that is a large and important aspect of the human predicament.

## EVIL

The other aspect of our predicament is quite different. It consists of evil powers that have enslaved us. We did not create these powers. We have not chosen to be enslaved by them. We cannot escape from them. They are tyrannical, toxic, and destructive of our lives. Sometimes, even we decide to do good and we try to do good, we still fail; some force or addiction compels us to do evil. Sometimes, even when our intentions are good, our actions lead to disaster. Sometimes our cures are worse than our diseases.

The Bible speaks clearly of both aspects of our predicament. Here, for example, from Romans, is a list of some of the sins we freely choose to commit:

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. (Rom. 1:29-31)

A little later in the same book Paul writes as follows about the second aspect of the human predicament:

I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . .  
I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. (Rom. 7:14-18).

Paul's point here is not just that he does wrong things; it is that he cannot help doing them. In Ephesians Paul says that the problem of being enslaved to sin extends to the entire world:

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. (Eph. 2:1-2)

In this passage our predicament includes our doing wrong ("trespasses and sins"), but it also includes an inner helplessness ("you were dead"), an environment that we cannot escape ("this world"), and evil powers that dominate and tyrannize us ("the ruler of the power of the air").

This is a classic analysis of the evil forces: the world, the flesh, and the devil. "The world" is not a reference to nature and the natural world, but rather to human society and its values and structures. These do not conform to God's will for the world. All human beings are trapped in the structures of a world that takes them away from God.

"The flesh" is not a reference to physical bodies but rather to human nature itself. The human predicament is not only outside ourselves. It is within us. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther used a famous phrase for this. He said that our human nature is "curved in upon itself."<sup>1</sup> We are intractably self-centered.

"The devil" is the evil spirit "at work among those who are disobedient." As such, the devil is both a source of temptations for human beings and an enslaver of human beings.

These evil powers do not become our problem when we first choose to do something wrong; they are our problem from our birth. We are born into a fallen world with tendencies that take us away from God. These powers are inescapable, and they are intractable.

To these three forms of evil two others may be added, suffering and death. I will discuss death in Chapter 11. Here I want to say something here about suffering. Suffering is not only a human problem. It is a religious problem and is treated as a religious problem in the Bible. For example, it is the principal theme of the book of Job, and Christ's disciples asked him about it (see John 9:1-12). The religious problem caused by suffering can be expressed as an argument in the form of a syllogism:

1 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* translated and edited by Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 159. Commenting on Romans 5:34, Luther used the Latin phrase *incurvatus a se* that has become a famous description of the human predicament.

God is all-powerful and therefore able to prevent suffering.  
God is good and loving and therefore wants to prevent suffering.  
But suffering exists.

Therefore either God is not all-powerful or God is not perfectly good and loving.

An attempt to respond to this argument is called a theodicy. The principal strategy in theodicy has been to point out that suffering is a consequence of the choice of human beings to sin. This strategy is known as the free will defense.<sup>1</sup> The argument is simply that it is human beings who are responsible for suffering, not God.

It is true that much human suffering, perhaps most of it, is a consequence of human sins. Nevertheless, difficulties remain. One is that some suffering does not seem to be a consequence of sin. For example, are all of the diseases and accidents that cause so much suffering a consequence of sins? Are natural disasters such as storms, earthquakes, and tidal waves? How can that be?

Further, even if it is the case that much suffering is a consequence of human sins, why does not God prevent the suffering? We human beings feel a moral obligation to make an effort to prevent suffering; why does not God do the same? A human being who could prevent a murder and failed to do so would be regarded as morally deficient, yet God, who presumably is able to prevent all murders, does not do so. Why is that?

Christians have wrestled with these difficulties for centuries, and no completely satisfying answer has been given. Nevertheless, even though the Christian faith cannot eliminate the difficulty, it does provide important help. In an important sense, what suffering people need even more than an explanation for why they are suffering is deliverance from their suffering. And until they are delivered, they need someone who cares about them to be with them while they suffer.

Both of these things are provided by the Christian faith. The Bible teaches that God is compassionate towards those who suffer and that Christ has experienced suffering and sympathizes with those who suffer. It also teaches that even though God is not responsible for all suffering, God has voluntarily shouldered the responsibility of dealing with all suffering. In Christ God has acted to deliver people from their suffering once and for all. And God has

prepared a final destiny in which people will no longer experience suffering:

Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world—a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine. Here he will suddenly remove the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. The Sovereign Lord will destroy death forever! He will wipe away the tears from everyone's eyes. (Isa. 25:6-8, TEV)

Suffering certainly looks very different when a friend who understands is there to bear it with you and when you are confident that it will not last forever but that in the future you will be delivered from it. It is still evil, not good, but it is more bearable.<sup>1</sup>

Some people are offended by the traditional Christian teaching that human beings are born into a predicament that includes the world, the flesh, the devil, suffering, and death. They point out that infants cannot be responsible for their actions. This is true, of course, but it misses the point. The point of the traditional Christian teaching is precisely that we are not responsible for all of our predicament. We have been born into a deeply troubled, fallen world, not into the Garden of Eden. We begin with problems whose potential will develop as time goes on. Certainly infants are not guilty for intentionally choosing to do wrong, but they are born into a fallen world, with a disposition toward selfishness, they suffer, and death hangs over them from the beginning. Infants have problems not of their own making, but problems that are nevertheless real and serious. So do adults.

Christians are realists about the human predicament. They are not cynical. They know that evil is parasitic on the good creatures God created. But they also know that the human predicament is intractable. Though they sometimes are criticized for talking too much about sin, Christian realism about sin is, in fact, one of the most hopeful things about the Christian religion. When Christians announce good news to the world, they are not ignoring the human problems. They are facing the problems realistically and continuing to live with hope and confidence and even happiness, not because they think that things as they exist are really all right but because they believe that God has dealt successfully with the problem.

<sup>1</sup> The wisest and also the loveliest brief statement of Christian theodicy I have ever read is Carol Zaleski, "Love in the Time of Evil" in *The Christian Century* 133:12 (June 8, 2016), 35. The first four unnamed persons in her essay are, I believe, Augustine, Aquinas, C. S. Lewis, and John Hick.

<sup>1</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 29ff.

## SINS AND EVIL POWERS

It is important to acknowledge that there are these two aspects to the human predicament. On the one hand we must acknowledge that people know right from wrong, that they have freedom to choose whether to do right or wrong, that they freely choose to do wrong, and that they are responsible and therefore guilty for the wrong they do. It is dehumanizing to treat people as if they bear no responsibility for their choices and actions.

On the other hand we also must acknowledge that at times we cannot avoid evil. We are trapped in it and tyrannized by it. We cannot get free from it. The problem is too big for us. Perhaps we could eliminate poverty—if we were willing to deny people freedom. Perhaps we could eliminate crime—if we were willing to execute all criminals. Perhaps we could educate all people—if we were willing to brainwash them. Perhaps we could have completely successful democratic governments—if we were willing to tolerate the abuse of minorities by the majority. The structures of our personal lives and of our corporate life are set against the simultaneous achievement of all the values we know to be worthwhile.

At times, it is difficult to be sure if one's action is a sin for which one is responsible or a consequence of evil over which one has no control. Parents and judges have to make judgments about this continually. It is not easy work. Did my little daughter hit her friend because she chose to do so or because she was acting out of a violent impulse for which she was not responsible? Did this young man rob his employer because he chose to do so or because he was acting under the influence of peer pressure that was greater than he was able to resist?

The fact that it is difficult to draw the line between actions for which we are responsible and those over which we have no control does not mean that there is no line. There is a line. We just don't always know where it is.

To complicate things further, there is a lot of interaction between the two aspects of the problem. The traffic moves both ways. On the one hand, our freely chosen sins can contribute to our becoming enslaved to powers we cannot control: we drink excessively and become addicted to alcohol; we gossip cruelly and become addicted to gossip. On the other hand, the powers can lure us into sins; the devil who sometimes controls us may also tempt us; the suffering we cannot avoid may also lead us into a bitterness toward God or others that we might otherwise not have embraced.

It is not necessary for us always to be able to say whether our actions are sins or the consequences of evil powers. It is necessary and important for

us to recognize that sins and evil powers are all real. And it is important to recognize that Christ has provided us with salvation from both our sins and the evil powers. Christ has provided the forgiveness we need for our sins and the redemption—liberation—we need from the evil forces that control and destroy us. Paul wrote of Christ: "We have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (Eph. 1:7). In the Lord's Prayer we ask for both: "Forgive us our debts. . . . Deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:12-13).

## CONCLUSION

The Christian estimate of human beings is the highest possible one: They have all been created by God a little lower than God (Ps. 8:5). This is a true humanism, a true appreciation of the dignity of every human being. It is regrettable that much of the humanism in the world today has ceased to be Christian and has become secular.

The biblical teaching about human beings is that they are God's special creations, and that they commit sins and are victims of parasitic evil powers. Human beings are therefore far more wonderful and also far more fallen than many people recognize. One Christian writer who recognized both the goodness and the fallenness of human beings was Blaise Pascal:

What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earthworm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe! . . . If man had never been corrupted, he would, in his innocence, confidently enjoy both truth and felicity, and, if man had never been anything but corrupt, he would have no idea of either truth or bliss. . . . We once enjoyed a degree of perfection from which we have unhappily fallen.<sup>1</sup>

It is remarkable that almost all Christians, even children who grow up in church, manage to grasp both the goodness and the fallenness of human beings. On the other hand, very sophisticated thinkers who do not have the benefit of the biblical tradition may find it difficult to do so. Some recognize that human beings are good but do not recognize the intractability of the human predicament; their views are naïve, unrealistic, and utopian.

1 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* translated by A. J. Krailsheimer (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 131 (434).

Others think that human beings are fundamentally bad and fail to see that human beings are God's good creations; their views are cynical and misanthropic.

God has graciously given us a worldview that includes both the good news that we are God's good creations and the bad news that we are hopelessly fallen into sins and evil. God has been even more gracious in sending Jesus Christ to save us from our sins and evil, and to that story we now turn.

## CHAPTER 5

### Jesus Christ

#### INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ is probably the most famous person who has ever lived. His name is known to most of the people in the world today, and this has been the case for centuries. He is almost universally respected. This is true not only in those parts of the world in which Christianity is the predominant religion but also in parts of the world where other religions predominate. Many Jews and Muslims regard Jesus as a prophet of God, many Hindus think of him as a holy man, and many Buddhists regard him as a *Bodhisattva*, an enlightened one.

It is remarkable that Jesus should have received such fame and respect, since in many ways his life was quite ordinary. He was born into a modest Jewish home. He did not enter public life until he was about thirty years old, and his public ministry lasted only a year or so. He did not accomplish any of the things that one usually associates with greatness. He wrote no books, made no inventions or scientific discoveries, conducted no military campaigns, led no institutions, accumulated no fortune or property, and held no political office. Perhaps the most attention-getting aspect of his brief ministry was his healing of the sick. He preached a message about God's kingdom and taught a way of life consistent with that message. He came into conflict with some of religious and political leaders in Israel, and they persuaded the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to have him executed as a political revolutionary.

Told in this way, the story of Jesus does not seem to justify the nearly universal fame and respect he receives today. Clearly something important is missing from this brief summary of his story.

What is missing, of course, is that Christians believe that through Jesus and his work God has saved the world. For those of us who believe this, two questions arise about Jesus.

The first concerns his identity. What is the true answer to the question that Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt. 16:15). I will attempt to answer this question in the present chapter.

Since this question is so important, it is not surprising that across the centuries the church has put much time and effort into trying to answer it. More books have been written, more councils have been held, more creeds have been formulated, and more heresies have been rejected in the church's efforts to understand Jesus than in the church's efforts to understand any other aspect of its faith. The church's efforts to understand Jesus have shaped the thinking of all Christian people, including millions of Christians who are not aware of those efforts. I think it is important to our theology for us to be aware of those efforts, so in this chapter I will refer at length to the history of Christology, the doctrine about Christ.

The second question concerns Jesus' saving work. How is it that through his suffering, dying, and rising again, he has provided salvation for the world? I will attempt to answer that question in Chapter 6.

We begin with the question of Jesus' relationship to God.

## THE DEITY OF JESUS CHRIST

### THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

The first Christians were Jewish women and men. They worshiped the God of Abraham and Sarah who had delivered Israel from Egypt at the Exodus. When they got to know Jesus of Nazareth, they came to believe that he was the deliverer whom God had anointed and for whom they had been waiting and hoping. When Peter said at Caesarea Philippi, "You are the Messiah" (Mark 8:29), he was confessing his faith that Jesus was the person whom God had chosen to provide salvation for Israel.

But Peter did not understand the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. Perhaps he thought that God would bring the world to an end and give Jesus control of everything. Perhaps he expected Jesus to recruit an army and drive the Romans out of Israel. In any case, Peter did not grasp the idea that Jesus' work involved his dying (Mark 8:31-33). But Jesus did die, and three days later he was raised from the dead. The resurrection changed everything—not only for Peter, but for the entire world.

### THE MEANING OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

The church did not come gradually to the conviction that God had resurrected Jesus from the dead. The very first Christian sermon, preached by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, emphasized the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:22-31), so there was never a time when the Christian church did not be-

lieve in Jesus' resurrection. All of the writers of the New Testament believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead. They sometimes assumed it, sometimes asserted it, and sometimes defended it, and they tried to understand the mystery of it, but they never expressed doubts about it.

When Christians today talk about the resurrection of Christ, they usually say one of two things. Either they defend the historicity of Jesus' resurrection as a bodily event, or they say that the resurrection is a symbol of a perennial spiritual truth that death is followed by new life.

I have sympathy for both of these themes. In my judgment, the historical evidence for the bodily resurrection of Christ is strong.<sup>1</sup> Peter thought so, and in his sermon at Pentecost he made an argument for the resurrection. First, he said that the resurrection of Jesus was prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2:24-31). Second, he said that he and his friends had themselves actually seen the risen Christ (Acts 2:32). Third, he argued that the living Jesus was still acting by pouring out the Spirit (Acts 2:33-36).

As for the idea that resurrection is a symbol of the renewal of life, I suspect the early Christians might have found it a bit puzzling, but I see no reason to object to it.

However, there is a third theme that is just as important as these two themes but is often neglected. It is the religious and theological meaning of the resurrection of Christ. I will try to express that meaning with six assertions.

First, the resurrection means that Jesus is alive. This is obvious, but it nevertheless should be stated. The church came into existence not so much to keep alive the memory of a dead teacher as to serve a living Lord.

Second, the resurrection means that Jesus has been vindicated. By the resurrection God has put a stamp of approval on Jesus and his ministry and his self-understanding. So, for example, Jesus was right when he said that the kingdom of God was at hand, that he had the authority to forgive sins, that he would be giving his life as a ransom for many, and that at the end of the world he will be the judge of all people.<sup>2</sup> God "has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" that things such as these are true (Acts 17:31).

Third, by his resurrection Jesus has inaugurated a new era in the relations between God and human beings. The Jews of the first century believed, just as many Christians today believe, that the resurrection of the

1 This is summarized helpfully by Hans von Campenhausen in "The Events of Easter and the Empty Tomb" in *Tradition and Life in the Early Church* translated by A. V. Littledale (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 42-89. The most formidable argument against a bodily resurrection of which I'm aware is Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966).

2 Mark 1:14-15, 2:1-12, 10:45, Mt. 25:31-46.

dead would take place at the end of the world. When the church began to proclaim that God had raised Jesus from the dead, they were saying that “the last days” (Acts 2:17) had arrived and the new age of salvation had begun. The resurrection of Jesus brought the salvation for which Israel had been longing: “What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus” (Acts 13:32-33). And salvation was not just for the Jews. The resurrection of Jesus opened the way for Gentiles to put their faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah, to “believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Rom. 4:24), “to trust in God, who raised him from the dead” (1 Peter 1:21).

Fourth, the resurrection means that Christians may have hope that at the end God will raise us up with Jesus. Jesus is the first fruits of resurrection; the rest of the harvest, so to speak, will come with the resurrection of Jesus’ followers at the end of the world (1 Cor. 15:20-23). “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:14). God “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).<sup>1</sup>

Fifth, Jesus’ resurrection was unique. He alone has been resurrected from the dead. It is true that the Bible records stories of other individuals being raised from the dead, but their bodies were resuscitated temporarily rather than resurrected permanently, and eventually they faced death again. Paul said that this is not true of Jesus: “Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again” (Rom. 6:9). It was because Jesus’ resurrection was unique that the church began “telling the good news about Jesus and his resurrection” (Acts 17:18). The church did not begin preaching that, for example, the raising of the son of the widow of Nain was good news for the world (see Luke 7:11-17).

Sixth and finally, the resurrection means that Christ is divine. It is true that at the end of the world others will be resurrected the way Jesus was, but until that time Jesus’ resurrection is unique, and that uniqueness points to a unique relationship between Jesus and God. Paul wrote that Jesus “was proclaimed Son of God by an act of power that raised him from the dead” (Rom. 1:4, REB). The resurrection shows that Jesus is Lord: “Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Rom. 14:9). A German theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, has expressed the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection this way: “If these apocalyptic ideas [about the resurrection of Christ] are translated into Hellenistic terminology and con-

ceptuality, their meaning is: in Jesus, God himself has appeared on earth.”<sup>1</sup>

The resurrection of Jesus convinced the earliest Christians that Jesus is divine. We will look now at seven ways that conviction is expressed in the New Testament. The first is devotion to Jesus.

### THE EARLY CHURCH’S DEVOTION TO JESUS

Even a casual reader of the New Testament may notice that the early Christians expressed religious devotion to Jesus. For example, they prayed to him. One prayer was “*marana tha*” which means, “Our Lord, come” (1 Cor. 16:22). This prayer is in Aramaic rather than Greek, so it was prayed by Jewish Christians. It was not just later Gentile Christians, but also earlier Jewish Christians, who offered prayers to Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

The same thing is true of early Christian worship of Jesus. Thinking of Jesus as the Lamb, John wrote:

I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, “To the one seated on the throne *and to the Lamb* be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (Rev. 5:13, italics added)

This approval of offering worship to Jesus would be striking under any circumstances, but it is made especially striking by the fact that John also insisted that worship must never be offered to anyone other than God. On two occasions John was about to fall down to offer worship to an angel, but the angel stopped him and said, “You must not do that! . . . Worship God!” (Rev. 19:10, 22:8-9).

John insisted that worship should be offered only to God, and he ap-

1 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* translated by Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 69.

2 The same prayer appears in Greek in Rev. 22:20.

1 I will say more about Christian hope in Chapter 11.

proved of offering worship to Jesus. John believed Jesus was divine.<sup>1</sup>

## TITLES

It was conventional in the early church to confess faith in Jesus by giving him exalted titles. We will review briefly three of the most important titles.<sup>2</sup>

The most familiar probably is “Son of God.” This title may immediately suggest to a modern person that Jesus was divine. However, in the Bible Jesus was not the only one who was said to be a son of God. In the Old Testament the nation of Israel is described as God’s son. For example, the Lord said: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son” (Hos. 11:1). Also in the Old Testament, the king of Israel was sometimes said to be son of God. For example, in Psalms 2, a psalm apparently used at a royal coronation in Israel, the Lord says, “I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill,” and the king replies, “I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you’” (Ps. 2:6-7). In the New Testament also, the idea of being sons of God is used repeatedly of God’s people. For example, John wrote: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12).

However, John then immediately used the concept of child of God in a very different way: Jesus has “the glory as of a father’s only son,” and he is “the only Son” of the Father.<sup>3</sup> He thought of Jesus as God’s Son in a unique sense. Presumably he learned this from Jesus himself. Jesus frequently re-

ferred to God as “my Father”—for example, seventeen times in Matthew alone. In prayer Jesus addressed God as *Abba* (Father), and in parables he spoke of himself as the Son sent by God and as the Son whom God honored with a banquet (Mark 12:1-12, Mt. 22:1-14). Speaking of himself and God he said, “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt. 11:27). Jesus thought of himself as the Son of God in a way that no one else is, and Jesus’ disciples were aware of that.

After Jesus’ resurrection his followers understood “Son of God” in a fuller way. Just a few days after his conversion, Paul “began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, ‘He is the Son of God’” (Acts 9:20). Paul may have been quoting a very early Christian saying or document when he wrote that Jesus was “declared to be Son of God . . . by resurrection from the dead.”<sup>1</sup> These seem to be affirmations not only that Jesus was acting on behalf of God, as Israel’s king was supposed to have done, but that he was himself divine.

A second important title used of Jesus was “Messiah.” The literal meaning of the Hebrew *messiah* is “anointed.” The Greek word for “anointed” is *christos*, Christ, so the words “Messiah” and “Christ” mean the same thing. In Israel in the Old Testament era, prophets, priests, and especially kings were anointed.<sup>2</sup> During Jesus’ lifetime many Jews entertained the hope that God would send a Messiah to save Israel. Jesus refused to say plainly that he was the Messiah (see John 10:24ff), and when Peter, speaking for the disciples, confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus “sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:30). Presumably Jesus did this in order to prevent people from confusing Jesus and his work with current messianic expectations.

Following the resurrection, however, the church began to speak frequently of Jesus as Messiah. At Pentecost Peter concluded his sermon by saying, “God has made him both Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:36). John said of his Gospel: “These things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). Clearly John meant more than that Jesus was a man whom God had chosen for important work.

As long as all Christians were Jewish people, the word “Christ” was a meaningful title for Jesus. But when Gentiles began to enter the church,

1 Currently several biblical scholars are giving special attention to early Christian devotion to Jesus. This is not the first time this has been done. For example, in 1924 A. C. McGiffert pointed out that Jesus “was an object of worship from the very beginning” and called attention to “the attitude of Paul and John, both of whom thought of Christ as divine.” Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *The God of the Early Christians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1924), 58, 52. McGiffert thought that devotion to Jesus originated with the early church’s welcoming of Gentiles who, not being strict monotheists, found it natural to think of Jesus as divine in a way that Jewish Christians did not; in fact, he said that some Gentile Christians worshiped Jesus instead of the God of Israel. But as the two examples above show, early Jewish Christians prayed to Jesus and worshiped him, and they did so, not *instead of* but alongside “the one seated on the throne” (Rev. 5:13). Today numerous scholars recognize that devotion to Jesus arose soon after the crucifixion of Jesus and therefore was not a gradual development brought about by the coming of Gentiles into the church. One of the leading scholars today, Larry Hurtado, has written three books about this subject. He has summarized the state of the scholarly study of early devotion to Jesus in a brief, helpful article. See L. W. Hurtado, “Early Devotion to Jesus: A Report, Reflections and Implications,” *The Expository Times* (January 2011) 122:167-176.

2 The literature on the New Testament titles for Jesus is vast and technical and full of controversies. Among other remarkable things, scholars have found ingenious ways to distinguish the different ways the titles were used by Jewish Christians in and outside of Palestine and by non-Jewish Christians influenced and not influenced by Paul, and they have explored not only the Old Testament background for the titles but the complex ways the titles were used in the wider Mediterranean world.

3 John 1:14, 18. John used this word “only” (Greek *monogenes*) of Jesus as God’s Son also in John 3:16, 18, and 1 John 4:9, and the author of Hebrews used it in 11:17.

1 Rom. 3:4. Verses 3 and 4 of Romans 1 may be an early Christian creed or confession. See A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible: Companion to the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 505.

2 For priests, see Ex. 28:41. For kings and prophets, see 1 Kings 19:16.

the word “Christ” was less meaningful because Gentiles, unlike Jews, did not have a hope for a promised Messiah. So in the Gentile church “Christ” ceased to function as a title and came to be used as a name; Jesus became known as Jesus Christ (or Christ Jesus).<sup>1</sup>

A third important title for Jesus is “Lord.” The Greek word is *kurios*. The uses of this word range from a respectful designation similar to “sir” (see, for example, Mt. 13:27) to a name for God. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, two names of God, *Adonai* and *El Shaddai*, were translated as *Kurios*. Also, when Jews read the Hebrew Old Testament aloud they refused out of reverence to pronounce *JHWH*, a name for God, and instead spoke the word *Kurios*.

“Lord” is the most frequently used title for Jesus in the New Testament. Peter said that by the resurrection God had made him Lord (Acts 2:36). Following the resurrection Christians understood Jesus to be the “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). One early Christian confession was, “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3), and a nearly identical confession—“Jesus Christ is Lord”—is found at the conclusion of the following passage:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.<sup>2</sup>

This is one of the most important passages in the New Testament insofar as Christology is concerned, so it is interesting that Christology was not Paul’s immediate subject. He was writing to the church at Philippi about the need for humility, and he wrote this passage in order to show that Jesus was a perfect example of humility. Even though Jesus was in the form of God and had equality with God, he was humble enough to be born in human likeness

<sup>1</sup> In Acts 4:10 and 8:12, Luke makes reference to “the name of Jesus Christ.”

<sup>2</sup> Phil. 2:5-11. It is possible that in this passage Paul has adapted a hymn about Christ. See A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible: Companion to the New Testament*, 633.

and to become a slave and to give his life for others, even to die for others on a cross. After he had made this ultimate sacrifice, God raised him up, and, as a result, in the end everyone will confess that he is Lord.

All three of these titles are present in a confession made to Jesus by his friend Martha: “Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God.”<sup>1</sup> These titles are a confession of Jesus’ deity.

## THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF JESUS

In the passages from Philippians 2 quoted above and elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul and other writers mention without much explanation that Jesus somehow existed even before his birth. Pre-existence is a way of speaking about Christ that is taken from the realm of time. The assertion of Christ’s pre-existence is not an alternative to the teaching that Jesus was really born at a point in time; Paul could also write that Jesus was “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4). Rather it was intended to affirm that, even though he was born in time, Jesus nevertheless was to be identified with God who is eternal.

## JESUS AND THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

Another intentional association of Jesus with God is found in the opening words of the book of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Heb. 1:1-2)

In this passage we notice four things. The first is the assertion that Jesus was superior to the prophets who came before him. Jewish readers would have found this an extraordinary claim. Second, Jesus is described as God’s Son. Third, the writer assumes that Jesus somehow existed before he came into the world “in these last days.” Fourth, Jesus is identified with God’s work of creation. The fact that God created the universe through Jesus means that Jesus is being closely identified with God. This is not intended to suggest that as the infant Jesus lay in the manger he was secretly exercising cosmic functions. Rather, it is an affirmation that the infant who lay in a manger had participated with God in the divine work of creating the universe.

<sup>1</sup> John 11:27. The three are present also in Rom. 1:3, 1 Cor. 1:9, and 2 John 1:3.

## THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF CHRIST

The story of Jesus' birth to a woman who was a virgin is narrated by two gospel writers, Matthew and Luke (Mt. 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-38). Each of them expressed the meaning of the virgin birth in his own way. Matthew wrote: "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1:21). Luke put it this way: "The child to be born will be holy; he will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

Jesus is the Savior, and Jesus is the Son of God: these are two meanings of Jesus' birth of the Virgin Mary. The affirmation that Jesus is God's Son is yet another way of identifying Jesus with God.

## JESUS AS THE INCARNATION OF THE *LOGOS* OF GOD

John associated Jesus with God in the following passage:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

This passage introduces yet another way of expressing the association of Jesus with God. It says that Jesus is the divine Word (the Greek noun is *Logos*) who has become a human being. This does not mean that the Word ceased to be divine; it means that the divine Word has become human while remaining also divine. Jesus is God who has come in the flesh to live with us. It is an assertion, not an explanation, of the mysterious but real presence of God with us in Jesus.

We have reviewed six different ways of identifying Jesus with God. All of the principal writers of the New Testament used at least one of these ways. But all of these ways are indirect rather than direct identifications of Jesus with God. None of them is as direct as writing, for example, "Jesus is God." This leads to the question of whether Christians in the New Testament era ever used the word "God" of Jesus.

## THE USE OF THE WORD "GOD" OF JESUS

If we are looking for direct identifications of Jesus with God, the most promising place would seem to be passages in which the Greek word *theos* (God) is used of Jesus. *Theos* is used of Jesus several times in the New Testament, but, surprisingly, it is used in ways that are indirect. Here are eight of

the principal passages.<sup>1</sup>

- John wrote that "the Word was God." He then made clear that "the Word" was Jesus by writing "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). This is an affirmation of Jesus' deity, but it is indirect.
- There are Greek manuscripts that say that what John wrote in John 1:18 was "the only-begotten God has made [the Father] known." But there are other Greek manuscripts that say he wrote "the only-begotten Son."
- Thomas's words to Jesus "My lord and my God" are certainly a confession of Jesus as God, but they are not a direct affirmation of that fact (John 20:28).
- John may have used *theos* of Jesus in his first epistle. He wrote: "We are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). It is unclear whether "He is the true God" is a reference to "him who true" or to "his Son Jesus Christ."
- The author of Hebrews wrote: "But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'" (Heb. 1:8). Though the word *theos* is here used of Jesus ("the Son" is clearly Jesus), it is used to address Jesus rather than as a direct affirmation that Jesus is God.
- In Romans 9:5 Paul writes that from the Jews "comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever." Was Paul saying that the Messiah was blessed by God forever? Or was he saying that the Messiah is God who is blessed forever?
- In Titus 2:13 Paul used a Greek phrase that may be translated either "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" or, more ambiguously, "the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ."
- There is a similar ambiguity in a phrase in 2 Peter 1:1. It may be translated either "our God and Savior Jesus Christ" or "our God and the Savior Jesus Christ."

The writers of the New Testament used the word *theos* in three distinct ways. First, it was occasionally used (in the plural) to refer to pagan gods (for example, Paul writes that "there are many gods" in 1 Cor. 8:5). Second, the principal use, of course, was to refer to the God of Abraham and Sarah who is the Creator of the world and whom Jesus called *Abba*. Third, as we have

<sup>1</sup> Dermot A. Lane, *The Reality of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 87-90.

seen here, *theos* was sometimes used by various writers to refer to Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### THE INDIRECTNESS OF THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Here is a summary of some of the things the New Testament says about the deity of Christ:

- The resurrection showed the followers of Jesus that he was divine.
- The early church was religiously devoted to Jesus as divine.
- The early church confessed the deity of Christ when it used of him titles such as “Son of God,” “Messiah,” and “Lord.”
- Paul and others confessed the deity of Christ by writing of his pre-existence.
- The writer of Hebrews and others confessed the deity of Christ by writing of him as God’s agent in creation.
- Matthew and Luke confessed the deity of Christ by telling the story of his virgin birth.
- John confessed the deity of Christ by writing of him as the incarnate Word of God.
- Various writers of the New Testament used the word *theos* of Jesus.

So if the early Christians believed that Jesus was divine—and clearly they did—why did they not say so more directly? Why did they not simply write, “Jesus is God” or “Jesus is divine”? I think two things can be said about this. One is that the question was never put to them directly. No one asked, “Is Jesus God, or isn’t he?” The second thing is that a direct affirmation of Jesus’ deity would immediately create a tension with the church’s vital belief, inherited from Judaism, that there is one and only one true and living God. By making their confession of Jesus’ deity indirectly, they avoided or at least reduced that tension.

The New Testament answer to the question, “Who is Jesus?” is, “He is God.” As it happens, we have confirmations from outside as well as inside the New Testament that this was in fact the belief of the earliest church. The eminent church historian Jaroslav Pelikan has described some of these confirmations in a beautiful passage:

1 On these three usages see Karl Rahner, “Theos in the New Testament” in *Theological Investigations* translated by Cornelius Ernst (New York: Seabury Press, 1961) I:125-130. In the church today there is a fourth, quite different use of the word “God.” It is used to refer to the Holy Trinity. So far as I am aware, there is no passage in the New Testament in which there is any indication that the author was using *theos* with the Trinity in mind. As we shall see in Chapter 12, the faith of the earliest Christians was profoundly Trinitarian, but they seem not to have expressed their Trinitarian faith by using the word *theos* to refer to the Trinity. Our practice of doing that today has been made possible by the work of the church in the patristic era in creating a formal doctrine of the Trinity.

The oldest surviving sermon of the Christian church after the New Testament opened with the words: “Brethren, we ought so to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as of the judge of living and dead. And we ought not to belittle our salvation; for when we belittle him, we expect also to receive little.” The oldest surviving account of the death of a Christian martyr contained the declaration: “It will be impossible for us to forsake Christ . . . or to worship any other. For him, being the Son of God, we adore, but the martyrs . . . we cherish.” The oldest surviving pagan report about the church described Christians as gathering before a sunrise and “singing a hymn to Christ as though to [a] god.” The oldest surviving liturgical prayer of the church was a prayer addressed to Christ: “Our Lord, come!” Clearly it was the message of what the church believed and taught that “God” was an appropriate name for Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Christians in the New Testament era believed that Jesus was God, and they expressed that belief in a variety of indirect ways. Later on, when the church was confronted directly with the question of Jesus’ deity, it answered directly. At that point the church began to address the tension between belief in Jesus’ deity and belief that God is one. The church did this by developing the doctrine that God is both one and three, that is, the doctrine of the Trinity. We will return to that doctrine in the final chapter of this book. Right now we need to examine what happened to make the church move beyond indirect confessions of Jesus’ deity to very direct ones.

### ARIUS AND THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

In the fourth century the issue of Jesus’ deity was discussed in a direct way. The catalyst for this was Arius, a presbyter in the church in Alexandria in Egypt. Arius thought that Christians had been using ambiguous language about Jesus, and he set out to clear up the ambiguities. He insisted that Jesus was not divine in the full sense of that word. In effect Arius said that if we draw a line between God, who is fully divine, and everything else, Jesus belonged with everything else rather than with God. Jesus was a great, good, eminently important creature, but in the end he was a creature, not God.

1 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 173. The four references in the quotation are to 2 Clem. 1:1-2, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17:2-3, Pliny the Younger, Epistle 10.96.7, and 1 Cor. 16:22, respectively.

Arius was opposed by his bishop in Alexandria and also by the bishop's young assistant whose name was Athanasius. The controversy with Arius had begun in about A.D. 319, but even before that Athanasius had written a book describing the Incarnation of the Word of God and insisting that, since Jesus has saved us, he must be divine. He wrote:

There were thus two things which the Saviour did for us by becoming man. He banished death from us and made us anew; and, invisible and imperceptible as in Himself He is, He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler and King of the whole creation.<sup>1</sup>

The debate about Arius's teaching created intense conflict throughout the Roman Empire. The Emperor Constantine, who was the first pro-Christian emperor, had hoped that the church would help to foster peace in his empire, and the opposite was happening. In order to resolve the conflict, he called together a large council of church leaders. In A.D. 325 the council met in a town named Nicæa and condemned the teaching of Arius.<sup>2</sup> They adopted a creed in which they took the controversial step of using philosophical language as well as the customary biblical language to describe Jesus as divine. They said that Jesus was *homoousios to Patri*, "of one substance with the Father."

The statement made by the Council of Nicæa was the first ecumenical (worldwide) church pronouncement about Jesus. In the sixteen centuries that have passed since it was adopted, the church has over and over again reaffirmed this conviction: Jesus is God. For example, the Constitution of the World Council of Churches begins with this confession:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Today many Christians—I am one—belong to churches that do not take

steps to encourage their members to accept the teachings of church councils, or even to be familiar with them. Nevertheless, many of us agree with what was said at Nicæa. I am glad that from Nicæa onwards it became natural for Christians to respond to the question, "Who is Jesus?" by saying, "Jesus is God."

## THE HUMANITY OF JESUS CHRIST

We turn now to the relationship of Jesus to human beings. He was one of us.

### THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

Throughout the New Testament Jesus is routinely described as a human being. We read there that he was born of a woman named Mary. In the little town of Nazareth he grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and other people. When he was twelve years old he and his family went on a pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. At the beginning of his public ministry he was baptized by John. Afterwards he went immediately into the desert where he was tempted, but he resisted the temptations.

Jesus was a person of prayer, and we have several of his prayers. He addressed God as *Abba* (Father). He was a prophet in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets. He preached and taught a message that continues today to be regarded by many people as the most important and wisest message ever preached. It is a radical message because of its insistence that God's grace reaches everyone, even the outcasts of society. He accumulated a group of followers, and he was popular with many of the people who heard him preach, especially in Galilee.

He also made some enemies. He was aware that his enemies intended to have him killed, but that did not deflect him from the work that God had called him to do. During a Passover festival he entered Jerusalem for the last time, in triumph, and he instituted for his inner circle a new ritual meal that, when we observe it today, we call the Lord's Supper, or Communion, or Eucharist. He was arrested, tried several times by Roman and Jewish authorities, and crucified.

This is the story of a real human being—an exceptional human being, but a real one.

Nevertheless, in the New Testament era there were people in the church who had doubts about Jesus' humanity. Their understanding of Jesus is known as Docetism, from the Greek word *dokein* which means "to appear."

1 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* translated by a religious of C.S.M.V. (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1944), §16.

2 Today Nicæa is part of the city of Iznik in Turkey.

3 Available at [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules).

Docetism is the claim that Jesus did not have a physical body but only appeared to do so. This misunderstanding about Jesus arose because the docetists believed that physical things are bad and that only spiritual things are good. They then reasoned that, since God is pure spirit, God cannot come into contact with a physical body. Since they believed that Jesus was God, they denied that he had a body; he only appeared to do so. In the New Testament both Paul and John wrote in opposition to Docetism; here is a passage from John: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God” (1 John 4:2, italics added).

In summary, the New Testament teaches that Jesus was a real human being, and it does so in several ways:

- It narrates the story of a real human life, including activities such as prayer.
- It tells about Jesus’ family and friends and enemies.
- It employs human terms such as “prophet” to describe Jesus.
- It contains arguments against the claim that Jesus had not come “in the flesh.” Usually the writers of the New Testament assumed that Jesus was a human being, but when that idea was challenged by docetists, Paul and John asserted and defended Jesus’ humanity.

There is one point at which Jesus was not like other human beings. He successfully resisted the temptations that he experienced. This is narrated in the story of his time in the desert (Mt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13), and it is described in passages such as the following: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionally Christians have referred to this teaching as the sinlessness of Christ. This is true, but it is also well to state it in more positive terms: Jesus was perfectly obedient to his *Abba*.

In the last chapter I identified five evil powers: the world, the flesh, the devil, suffering, and death. According to the Gospels Jesus experienced at least four of these. He lived in the fallen world, he was tempted by the devil, he suffered, and he died. Christians have debated whether he also experienced the inner disposition toward sin that Paul called “the flesh” and that theologians call “original sin” and “our fallen human nature.” The traditional view has been that Jesus did not have original sin. In fact, some theologians have speculated that original sin is transmitted through one’s father and, since Mary was a virgin, Jesus did not experience original sin. However, other theologians have pointed out that one biblical text seems

1 Heb. 4:15; see also 2 Cor. 5:21, 1 Peter 2:22, 1 John 3:5.

to suggest the opposite: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). They think that the phrase “in the likeness of sinful flesh” means that Jesus did experience the human fallenness that Paul calls “the flesh.” In any case, it is clear that Jesus was a real human being who really experienced the human predicament, and throughout this experience he remained faithfully obedient to his Father.

### APOLLINARIUS AND THE SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

One of the most serious challenges to the full humanity of Jesus came in the fourth century. For half a century after the Council of Nicæa in A.D. 325 the church was busy explaining and defending Jesus’ deity. One way that some people did this was to make the case for Jesus’ deity at the expense of his humanity, that is, to argue: “He was not a man—he was God!” One of the sincere and well-intentioned Christians who did this was an educator named Apollinarius. Apparently he thought that human beings are tripartite beings consisting of body, soul (or life force), and mind.<sup>1</sup> Apollinarius seems to have said that Jesus had a body and a life force like other human beings, but he didn’t have a human mind. He argued that the divine Logos took the place of a human mind in Jesus (“Logos” can mean “reason” as well as “Word”).

Other theologians challenged Apollinarius, and at a council at Constantinople in A.D. 381 his ideas were condemned. The council endorsed a creed that today is usually known as the Nicene Creed (because it was faithful to the teachings of the earlier council of Nicæa). This creed affirms both the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

The leader of the Second Ecumenical Council was the archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory of Nazianzus; in Eastern Orthodox churches he is known as “The Theologian.” In his opposition to Apollinarius he pointed out that if Jesus did not have a human mind he was not a complete human, however human his body and soul may have been. He made this interesting argument:

Anyone who has placed his hope in a human being who lacked a human mind is himself truly mindless, and does not deserve a complete salvation. For what was not assumed, was not healed. What is

1 The Greek words are, respectively, *soma*, *psyche*, and *nous*.

2 See Appendix 4, The Nicene Creed.

saved is that which has been united with God.<sup>1</sup>

I think this argument is correct. Jesus provided a full salvation by taking our full humanity unto himself. His mind was fully human just as his body and soul were. The New Testament bears witness to Jesus' human mind when it says that he "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:42, KJV).

In my judgment some Christians today tend to slip into Apollinarius's error. In order to defend the deity of Christ against skeptical or secular writers, they affirm Jesus' deity at the expense of his humanity. They are right to believe in Jesus' deity but wrong to defend it in Apollinarius's way. Both the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ are necessary for the Incarnation to be real. The Incarnation did not happen if Jesus was only a human being, but neither did it happen if Jesus was not a fully human being.

One expression of the Apollinarian error is a form of reasoning that appeals to some Christians today. It is an argument about what Jesus "must have been" like. It works in this way. We affirm that God is omniscient; we add that Jesus was God; then we conclude that Jesus "must have been" omniscient.

This is logical, but it is not dependable. You cannot learn about human beings in this way; you learn about human beings by observing them, not by reasoning about what they must be like. In the case of Jesus, you learn about him by reading what the New Testament says about him.

We can see the error in the "must have been" logic by taking other examples. For example, God has no mother; Jesus was God; so Jesus had no mother. Again, God cannot be tempted; Jesus was God; so Jesus was not tempted. Again, God cannot die; Jesus was God; so Jesus did not die. In each of these cases the logic is correct, but the conclusion is false. The New Testament tells us that Jesus had a mother, that he was tempted, and that he died. The reason the logic led to false conclusions about Jesus is that it did not take into account that Jesus, who was God, was also a human being living under the conditions of human life.

## THE UNITY OF JESUS CHRIST

### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN IN CHRIST

We have now affirmed that Jesus was true God and true man.<sup>1</sup> This brings us to our next question. How did one who was eternally divine become also human? The answer is that we do not know. In fact, we think it is impossible to know.

We can, however, understand some things about it. For example, we can say that it occurred through birth to a virgin. This is an important teaching, but it does not resolve the mystery of the Incarnation. We might simply restate the question. How did one who was eternally divine become also a human being who was born of Mary the virgin?

Over the centuries the church has employed different verbs to describe the act of God that resulted in the Incarnation of the Son of God. Some of these are used in the Bible, and others are not. Here are six of them:

- God *came* into the world.
- God *took* human nature.
- God *humbled* himself.
- God *united* human nature to the divine nature.
- God *used* a human body.
- God *became* a human being.

When we read these expressions we may get the impression that we actually understand how the great mystery occurred, but this is not true. All of these words preserve the mystery. We can see this by pushing them a bit. For example, when God *came* into our world, was it space travel? Again, when God *became* a human being, did God cease to be God? These questions—whose answer is no, of course—will not trouble us provided we bear in mind that these verbs do not eliminate the mystery of the Incarnation but point to it.

If we remember that the verbs point to a mystery, then we are free to take them with the seriousness they deserve. They tell us important things. For example, the verb "came" implies distance, and this reminds us that there is a "distance" between the transcendent God and human beings. The verb "humbled" reminds us of the moral quality of the Incarnation. The verb "became" alerts us that in the Incarnation the Word of God entered into a mode of life in which God would not only be acting but would also be acted upon by human beings. These verbs give us real help in understanding Jesus, but they don't eliminate the mystery from the Incarnation.

In the end, then, our answer to the question "How did God become a

<sup>1</sup> This language is found in Leo the Great, *Tome*, IV in T. Herbert Bindley, editor, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1950), 227. The Latin is *Qui enim verus est Deus, idem verus est homo*.

<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, Ep. 101 in Henry Bettenson, editor, *The Later Christian Fathers*, 108.

human being?” is “we do not know because it is a mystery.”

Once we recognize this, we can rephrase our question. We can ask: “What is the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ?”

So far as I can tell, no writer in the New Testament addressed this question.<sup>1</sup> However, when in the fifth century the leaders of the church did begin to address the question intentionally, they were guided by the things that the New Testament says about Jesus.

### NESTORIUS AND THE THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

The question of the relationship of the human and the divine in Jesus arose early in the fifth century in Constantinople, the capital of the eastern part of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> In A.D. 428 the emperor Theodosius II appointed a new archbishop named Nestorius to that city. Nestorius vigorously rejected the teaching of Apollinarius that Jesus did not have a human mind. He asserted firmly that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He used a word, *sunapheia*, usually translated “union,” for the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ. His critics felt that the word “union” was not strong enough for the relationship of the divine and the human in Christ.

The immediate cause of Nestorius’s troubles was that he rejected a church tradition concerning Mary the mother of Jesus. It was traditional for the church to say that Mary was *Theotokos*, which means “bearer of God.” Nestorius supported a proposal to replace that word with the word *Christotokos*, “bearer of Christ.” Nestorius’s opponents understood this to mean that Nestorius thought that the infant to whom Mary had given birth was Christ but was not God, and they objected to this. They believed that the child who was born to Mary was not only human but also divine. They felt that Nestorius had divided what cannot be divided, the divine and the human in Christ. The church usually spoke of the divine and the human as “two natures.” They felt that Nestorius had effectively made Christ into two persons rather than one person with two natures. Nestorius was condemned by a council in Ephesus in A.D. 431, deposed from his bishopric, and sent into exile.<sup>3</sup>

The early church was right to assert firmly that Christ is one person, not

two. The New Testament certainly supports that teaching; nothing in the Gospels suggests that Jesus was two persons.

The church today needs the teaching that Jesus is one person. There is a tendency among some Christians to divide Jesus in ways that are similar to the Nestorian error. For example, people say things like this: “As a human being Jesus died, and as God he rose from the dead.” If this means that Jesus’ death calls our attention to his humanity and that his resurrection calls our attention to his deity, there is no problem. But if it means that the one who died is human and the one who rose is divine, then we have divided Jesus in an inappropriate and unbiblical way.

One way to avoid this problem is to reverse the roles, and some academic theologians do this. Thus it is said that God died at the crucifixion, and that a man rose from the dead. This is paradoxical language, and paradoxical language has its uses. Paul, for example, used paradox when he spoke about the foolishness and weakness of God (1 Cor. 1:25). The use of paradoxical language can be an effective way to emphasize the mystery of the Incarnation.

In my judgment, however, the best way to speak about Christ theologically is to speak of him as one person who was at all times fully divine and fully human. I believe it is wise to say this: “One who was both divine and human died. One who was both divine and human rose from the dead.”

### EUTYCHES AND THE FOURTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

About twenty years after the church condemned Nestorianism, an opposite problem arose concerning the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ. In Constantinople a monk named Eutyches was a passionate opponent of Nestorianism. In order to emphasize that Christ is one person rather than two, he spoke of Christ as having only one nature, a divine-human nature.

The problem was that by this time the church had worked out an official vocabulary for speaking about Christ. He was one person in two natures. When Eutyches chose to speak of one person with one nature he contradicted the accepted language. His proposal seemed to many people to suggest that Jesus was neither fully divine nor fully human, but rather a single nature that was a mixture of the divine and the human. That, of course, was not what the church believed.

So in A.D. 451 in Chalcedon, which is near Constantinople, the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the church condemned the views of Eutyches. The council took this opportunity to draw together everything that had been

1 Rom. 1:3-4 seems to refer to the human (“descended from David according to the flesh”) and the divine (“the Son of God”) in Jesus. However, it does not say anything about how the two are related.

2 Constantinople is modern Istanbul in Turkey.

3 Today we know that Nestorius was misunderstood in the fourth century and that he did not hold the beliefs for which he was condemned. There are still Nestorian churches today, and efforts are being made to welcome them back into the fold of orthodox Christianity.

said at the three earlier ecumenical councils and to issue a statement that summarizes the church's understanding of Jesus. Here is a part of that famous statement, which is known as the Chalcedonian Definition:

We all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood . . . without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.<sup>1</sup>

Against Arius's denial of Christ's deity, the council affirmed that Christ was complete in Godhead. Against Apollinarius's denial that Christ was fully human, the council affirmed that Christ was complete in manhood. Against Nestorius's apparent division of Christ into two persons, the council affirmed that Christ was without division and without separation. And against Eutyches's assertion that the divine and the human were changed into a single nature in Christ, the council affirmed that in Christ the divine and human natures were without confusion and without change.

Though the statement of Chalcedon employs technical language, and though it deals with some matters that were not intentionally dealt with by the writers of the New Testament, I believe it is true to the New Testament teachings about Christ. It has become a benchmark in Christology. Some today accept it and others reject it, but everyone agrees that it was a defining moment for this doctrine.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN MODERN THEOLOGY

We have seen that Christology deals with three large issues, namely, the divinity of Christ, his humanity, and the relationship between his divinity and his humanity. I want now to review one modern proposal about each of these three issues.

### THE DEITY OF CHRIST AND FUNCTIONAL CHRISTOLOGY

In his influential book entitled *The Christology of the New Testament* the European scholar Oscar Cullmann made a distinction that is now widely accepted between functional Christology and ontological Christology. Functional Christology asserts that what is divine about Christ is that God acted

<sup>1</sup> Henry Bettenson, editor, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 51. Because the Definition is not used as a creed in worship services, it is not as well-known as the Nicene Creed.

through Christ to save the world; Christ functioned as God. Ontological Christology affirms that Christ is divine in his being as well as in his actions. The Christology of the four ecumenical councils of the church is ontological because it employs concepts such as being. Cullmann argued that in the New Testament, "Functional christology is the only kind which exists."<sup>1</sup>

I want to make four comments about functional Christology. First, Cullmann is of course correct that the writers of the New Testament used functional language about Jesus. For example, it is functional Christology to say that Jesus is the Messiah—the one whom God has chosen and through whom God will bring salvation. The use of functional language about Christ is biblical.

Second, I am not convinced that Cullmann is right that in the New Testament there is no ontological Christology. Paul's language about Christ's equality with God in Philippians 2 and John's language about the Word becoming flesh in John 1 seem like ontological language to me.

Third, even if Cullmann is right that the New Testament does not contain ontological language about Jesus' identification with God, it still would not follow that Christians should not use ontological language. Cullmann contrasted functional and ontological language and then suggested that the former is biblical in a way the latter is not. The New Testament doesn't do that.

Fourth, it seems to me that it is unnecessary to use ontological language in order to affirm the Christology of the councils and creeds. What the councils asserted that functional-only Christology doesn't assert, is that in Christ God was not only acting but also being acted upon. Everything that Christ experienced, was experienced by one who is God. For centuries theologians have spoken of the active and passive obedience of Christ. His active obedience was that he did the will of his Father. His passive obedience was that he experienced the sufferings that were inflicted by his enemies.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that it is possible to use the words "active" and "passive" to affirm what was said at Chalcedon: God was actively and passively present in Christ. God was acting in all Christ did, and God was experiencing all that Christ experienced.

This is theologically orthodox. It also is religiously important. Many of our contemporaries are concerned to know not only whether God has acted

<sup>1</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (English translation, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959), 326.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.16.5.

in our history to save us but also whether God knows what it is like to suffer as we do. The answer is that God has suffered as we do, in the person of the eternal Son who became flesh and lived among us.

## THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST AND THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

The second big issue in Christology is Jesus' humanity. In modern theology historians have carefully explored the humanity of Jesus; their work is known collectively as the quest for the historical Jesus. As the name suggests, this is a movement whose objective is to construct a historically accurate account of the life and work of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past two and a half centuries hundreds of scholars have worked vigorously, sifting through the sources of our knowledge of Jesus, in an effort to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus. I will review some of the conclusions of one of the most respected and influential of these scholars, E. P. Sanders. Sanders is confident that we know "the general course of Jesus' life: when and where he lived, approximately when and where he died, and the sort of thing that he did during his public activity."<sup>2</sup>

Sanders describes what he thinks lies behind the deeds and teachings of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels. For example, it is almost certain that Jesus was baptized by John. On the other hand, Sanders thinks that the birth narratives are probably inventions of the church.

Jesus' work was centered in Capernaum, a fishing village on the coast of the Sea of Galilee. It was there that he called his first disciples. Jesus chose twelve disciples, a symbolic number; he had a somewhat larger group of followers, some of whom were women; and he had many other supporters. His ministry was itinerant. He preached in villages and towns in Galilee, but not in Galilee's largest city, Sepphoris. Some of his preaching was in synagogues, some elsewhere.

Jesus had a reputation for performing healing miracles, exorcisms, and nature miracles. But even the nature miracles—feeding 5000 people, stilling a storm on the Sea of Galilee—did not make much impact. Perhaps the reason was simply that people in the ancient world found it natural to believe in miracles, or perhaps—this is speculative—it was because the early church invented or at least exaggerated the miracle stories.

According to Sanders, Jesus is better understood as a prophet than as a

miracle-worker. His prophetic message was eschatological; his preaching led his followers to expect a new kingdom to be established soon. The arrival of the kingdom would bring about not the end of the world but the transformation of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said that God is like a good shepherd and a loving father who cares deeply for every individual. Jesus called his disciples to live by high standards and in fact to give up everything else in order to follow him. But when he spoke to the poor and lowly, his message was different. He promised them the kingdom of God unconditionally. He did not want to add to their problems. "My burden is light," he told them.

Jesus' preaching was not as controversial as that of John the Baptist, but he did engage in disputes about the law. This is not surprising; disputes about the law were routine among Jewish religious leaders. Jesus supported rather than opposed the law, but he did debate its meaning. He dined with tax collectors, which to some of his contemporaries suggested moral compromise.

Jesus believed that God had given him the authority to speak and act on behalf of God. This conviction came from his having an immediate relationship with God.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time he knew he was a marked man. During that final week he performed three symbolic acts, all of them pointing to the coming kingdom of God and to Jesus' role in it. First, he entered Jerusalem on a donkey, thereby declaring himself to be a king. Second, in the temple he upended the money changers' tables which suggested that God was going to destroy the temple; it was this act that alarmed the religious leaders and that sealed Jesus' fate. Third, Jesus instituted a meal that he said would be his last until the kingdom arrived.<sup>2</sup>

The high priest Caiaphas became apprehensive that Jesus would cause public unrest during the Passover. He knew that the Roman governor Pilate would hold him responsible if that happened, so he decided that he wanted Jesus executed. Pilate executed Jesus because Caiaphas gave him a plausible reason to do so, namely, that in claiming to be the king of the Jews, Jesus was inciting a revolt against Rome.

The earliest Christians believed deeply in the resurrection of Jesus. They did not think he was a ghost or a resuscitated corpse. What he was did not fit into any known category. Paul and others had resurrection experiences.

Sanders concludes: "We know a lot about Jesus," but on the other hand,

1 For an overview of this movement see Appendix 5, The Quest for the Historical Jesus.

2 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 10.

1 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 183.

2 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 254-64.

“Much about the historical Jesus will remain a mystery.”<sup>1</sup>

Some Christians think that the quest for the historical Jesus is not a worthwhile project. This is understandable. After all, as is evident in this summary of Sanders’s book, many of the scholars’ conclusions contradict things that are said in the Gospels.

I understand that this is troubling, and I do not think that any Christian should feel compelled to become familiar with the modern historical study of Jesus, let alone accept all its conclusions. Today as in the past, Christians can read, study, and meditate on the four Gospels as trustworthy accounts of Jesus’ life and work, and then try to live according to what is taught in them.<sup>2</sup>

However, I myself am grateful that modern critical historians continue to study the life and work of Jesus carefully because in doing so they provide massive contemporary support for the fact that Jesus was a real human being. This, of course, has been part of the belief and teaching of the church from the beginning.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN IN CHRIST, AND KENOTIC CHRISTOLOGY

The third big issue is addressed only by those who directly affirm that Christ was fully divine (ontological as well as functional Christology) and that Christ was fully human (like the historians who seek to reconstruct Jesus’ life and teachings). It is the issue of the relationship of the divine and the human in Jesus.

One movement in theology that has attempted to address this issue is kenotic Christology. The word “kenotic” is derived from the Greek word *ekenosen*. This word is used theologically only once in the Bible, in Philipians 2:7. There, as we saw earlier, Paul writes that Christ “emptied himself.” Since the mid-nineteenth century many theologians have understood *ekenosen* to mean that Christ limited himself, that is, that the eternal Son of God accepted certain limitations as a part of becoming a real human being. Convinced that Christ was truly divine, truly human, and truly one person, they argued that what makes possible the unity of the divine and the human in Christ is that the divine Son of God freely accepted the kinds of limitations that are intrinsic to human existence in order to become also

truly human.

Kenotic Christology has been controversial. Some have assumed that it means that the Son emptied himself of his deity, but almost no kenotic theologians said that. Others have assumed that kenotic Christology is an attempt to explain how God became human. A few proponents of kenotic Christology made this claim, but most did not.<sup>1</sup>

A learned and representative spokesman for kenotic Christology was the Anglican bishop Charles Gore:

The divine Son in becoming man must, we conclude, have accepted, voluntarily and deliberately, the limitations involved in really living as man—even as sinless and perfect man—in feeling as a man, thinking as a man, striving as a man, being anxious and tried as a man. Jesus does not indeed appear in the Gospels as unconscious of His divine nature. He knows He is Son of the Father. He “remembers” how He came from God and would go back to God. But He appears none the less as accepting the limitations of manhood. And St. Paul, I say, [in speaking of *ekenosen*] gives us the hint which directs our vision. This was no failure of power. God is love, and love is sympathy and self-sacrifice. The Incarnation is the supreme act of self-sacrificing sympathy, by which one whose nature is divine was enabled to enter into human experience. He emptied Himself of divine prerogatives so far as was involved in really becoming man, and growing, feeling, thinking and suffering as man.<sup>2</sup>

Kenotic Christology is not an assertion that God’s Son emptied himself of deity. It is not an explanation of how the Son became also human. It is not simply an interpretation of the word *ekenosen*, though the word was important.

Kenotic Christology is an effort to hold together two ideas. One is the traditional, biblical teaching that Jesus Christ was divine. The other is the idea that, because Jesus Christ was a human being, he shared in human limitations. The limitations that were most important to kenotic theologians

1 E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 280.

2 A contemporary scholar who has adopted this view is Luke Timothy Johnson. See his “Learning the Human Jesus: Historical Criticism and Literary Criticism” in James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, editors, *The Historical Jesus: Five Views* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009).

1 Two who made this claim are the influential German Gottfried Thomasius and the Englishman A. M. Fairbairn.

2 Charles Gore, *The Reconstruction of Belief* (London: John Murray, 1926), 521-22.

were limitations of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

There are biblical passages that assert that Jesus had such limitations, such as Luke's comment that Jesus grew in wisdom and Jesus' comment that he did not know the time of the return of the Son (Luke 2:52, Mark 13:32). Before the development of modern kenotic Christology theologians tended to be uncomfortable with biblical passages such as these. Acting under the influence of the historical study of the life of Jesus, Charles Gore and others attempted to formulate a theology that accommodated the teaching found in these and similar passages. They insisted that Christ's becoming a human being included voluntarily accepting human limitations, and they further insisted that having human limitations was compatible with his being fully divine.

The proponents of kenotic Christology developed a special appreciation for the grace that God had exercised in the Incarnation. In Gore's words, "the Incarnation is the supreme act of self-sacrificing sympathy." Even those who do not formally accept kenotic Christology have benefitted from its emphasis on the fact that the Son of God loved the world so much that he accepted limitations in order to save the world.

In an essay entitled "The Incarnation" the Anglican theologian Leonard Hodgson carried forward the kenotic theologians' conviction that Jesus was God living within the limitations of knowledge that are natural to human beings. He suggested that the church fathers' understanding of human nature be replaced with a modern understanding of what it is to be human. Here is his definition of what it means to be human:

By the human self or soul, then, we mean the conscious subject of experiences. . . . Each one of us comes into existence as the self of a particular body, and in his own most spiritual essence is differentiated from his fellow-creatures by being the subject of the experiences which come to him through that body.<sup>2</sup>

Hodgson did not mean that human beings just happen to be subjects whose experiences are mediated through their bodies. He meant this as a full defi-

1 It is interesting to reflect on why in the modern period so many theologians have been preoccupied with Jesus' knowledge. Leonard Hodgson pointed out that in the patristic era theologians were less concerned with Jesus' knowledge than with his suffering ("The Incarnation" in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, edited by A. E. J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1928), 364-65, and *For Faith and Freedom*, II:76-77). Is it possible that the modern preoccupation with how much Jesus knew suggests that in the modern era the quantity of knowledge which one possesses is mistakenly thought to be a measure of one's moral goodness?

2 Leonard Hodgson, "The Incarnation," 369-70.

nition of what it is to be a human being; any being who is a self-conscious subject whose experiences are mediated through a body in space and time, is a human being.<sup>1</sup> Hodgson believed that what happened when the Word became flesh was that the eternal Son of God became a self-conscious subject whose experiences were mediated through his body in space and time. That is what it means to say Jesus was a human being.

Near the end of his career Hodgson expressed the same idea in a parable:

I can perhaps best present the Christian doctrine by inventing a dialogue between Satan and God after the manner of the author of the book of Job. In this Satan says to God, 'You may call yourself almighty, but there is at least one thing you cannot do, and that is to know from the inside what it means to live as a man, to think, feel and will as one of those creatures of yours, the content of whose minds is given to them by the experiences that come to each of them through being born of a woman at a particular time and place in the history of that world of yours.' There is no need to invent a speech for God's reply. It was given in deeds rather than in words. In the person of Jesus Christ he was born of Mary, lay as a babe unconscious in his mother's arms, and grew in the knowledge of himself as child, as boy, as man and as Messiah.

This is, in essence, the Christian belief about Christ. If it be true, there is inevitable mystery which gives rise to what is commonly called the christological problem. No more than Satan in my fable can we understand how God could exercise his omniscient almightiness by entering into the experiences of life as man. All we can say is that the more we ponder over the evidence concerning that earthly life the more we are driven to the conclusion that we can give no satisfactory account of it short of recognizing the life as the life of God incarnate.<sup>2</sup>

Hodgson's presentation is a good example of orthodox Christology expressed in modern terms: Jesus is seen to be divine, human, and one person.

1 Hodgson did not address the question of whether there could be other self-aware subjects with bodies who are not human beings, for example, self-aware subjects living in other parts of the universe than Earth. It is unlikely that he intended to foreclose on that matter.

2 Leonard Hodgson, *The Bible and the Training of the Clergy* (London: Dartman, & Todd, 1963), 55. I have referred here to Hodgson because his Christology is consonant with kenotic Christology and because he carried forward the concerns of earlier kenotic theologians. However, Hodgson never referred to his Christology as kenotic.

## CONCLUSION

I close this chapter with an observation. The more deeply we think about Jesus, the more we come to realize that the real challenge of Jesus is not to our minds as much as to our faith. The question is not how much we understand, for a mystery will always remain. The question is whether we trust that God loved us all enough to enter into our world as one of us in order to rescue us from our predicament.

## CHAPTER 6

# THE WORK OF CHRIST

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this chapter requires some explanation. Our subject is not Jesus' general public ministry of teaching and healing. It is rather the particular work of salvation that Jesus accomplished by his death and resurrection. This subject is sometimes called "the theory of atonement" or "soteriology," but the phrase "the work of Christ" seems to be more widely used today.

Unlike the doctrine of the person of Christ with which we were concerned in the previous chapter, the doctrine of the work of Christ has never received an authoritative definition by ecumenical councils or in the creeds of the church. As a consequence, the history of this doctrine is the story of a series of attempts by individual theologians to interpret the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. In this chapter we will refer to the work of some of those theologians.

We will begin with a clarification of the question to be answered in this chapter.

## THE QUESTION

In my judgment, the best way to understand the work of Christ is to give attention to four factors: history, the gospel, experience, and interpretation.

The first factor is the historical story that on a Friday morning in or about the year A.D. 30 Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. He died about mid-afternoon, and the following Sunday morning he rose from the dead. The death and resurrection of Christ were historical events.

The second factor is the church's gospel. From its inception the church has believed and preached that the historical events of the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday were acts by means of which God had saved the world.

The third factor is experience. Across the centuries billions of people have heard the church's gospel and have responded by trusting in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. They have experienced God's gift of salvation.

The fourth factor is a question: "What is the meaning of these historical

events, such that they made provision for the salvation that human beings have experienced?"

The New Testament contains numerous answers to this question. The answers are given in images. There are about two dozen of these in the New Testament; this suggests that no one of them is able to convey the full meaning of the wonderful mystery of Christ's saving work. Each of the images offers an interpretation of the events of the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Because God inspired the apostles to employ the images we find in the New Testament, the church has always been guided by these authorized interpretations of Jesus' sacrifice.

Following the close of the New Testament era, theologians continued to offer interpretations of Jesus' sacrifice. They have explored the biblical images carefully and combined selected images into coherent theories of atonement. In addition, some but not all theologians also have identified images from their own contexts for understanding the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We will now examine some of the biblical interpretations of the meaning of the work of Christ.

## NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

The writers of the New Testament used about two dozen images to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. We will briefly survey ten of the most accessible of them. We begin with one that is eschatological in character, that is, which concerns the last days.

### THE NEW ERA

In the first century the Jewish people lived with a hope that God would act in their history to bring the present evil age to a close and to launch a new era of salvation. They believed that two events would signal the arrival of the new era. They were the resurrection of the dead and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all of God's people.

On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached for the very first time the message about the death and resurrection of Christ. His sermon was about the two signs that pointed to the arrival of the new era. Peter said that the Spirit had been poured out that day, and he said that the resurrection of the dead had occurred fifty days earlier when one person, Jesus, had been raised from the dead. Peter referred to the current time as "the last days" (Acts 2:17),

and he assured people that in the new era that was beginning people may be forgiven of their sins and receive the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38).

In books about the history of the doctrine of the work of Christ it is not customary to include the eschatological image of hope for a new era of forgiveness. I think it should be. It is an interpretation of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection that shows how those events provide salvation. Peter's hearers certainly thought that it was good news that they were living in a new era in which God forgives sins and gives the Spirit to people; three thousand of them were converted when they heard that good news.

In different New Testament texts about the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice, emphasis is put on different things. These include Jesus' suffering, his blood, his obedience to God, his death, his cross, and his resurrection. In his sermon at Pentecost Peter did not say anything that associated Jesus' suffering or death with forgiveness. What he said was that Jesus' resurrection, along with the pouring out of the Spirit, inaugurated a new era of forgiveness.

### THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Our second image also is usually omitted from books about the doctrine of the atonement, a fact I find puzzling. It is found in the great sermon of Jesus that begins with the words, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11):

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. . . . I lay down my life for the sheep. . . . I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. (John 10:11-18)

The image of Jesus' death here is crystal clear: Jesus will voluntarily sacrifice his own life in order to protect his people just as a good shepherd would give his life to protect his sheep from predatory animals. Because Jesus does this, his sheep will find pasture and experience abundant life (John 10:9-10). Leaving the image of shepherd behind, Jesus speaks of "eternal life," and then, returning to the image, he says, "No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

In this image the emphasis falls on Jesus' obedience to "this command from my Father" (John 10:18) and also on his death. Salvation is understood as the good life that the sheep are able to have because the shepherd has

protected them from evil predators. We turn next to an image in which the defeat of evil forces is the whole point.

### CHRIST THE VICTOR

The context for the image of victory over evil forces is war. By his death and resurrection Jesus defeated the evil powers that oppress and enslave human beings. In Chapter 4 we briefly reviewed five of the evil powers, namely, the world, the flesh, the devil, suffering, and death.

The idea that Jesus engaged in combat with the evil forces pervades the four Gospels. In the desert he resisted the temptations of the devil (Mt. 4:1-11). He exorcised demons (Mt. 8:28-34). He healed people who were suffering. He restored to life persons who had died (Luke 7:11-17). He said that Satan fell like lightning from heaven (Luke 10:18).

Paul said that it was by the cross that Jesus won his victory over the evil forces: “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in [the cross]” (Col. 2:15). Paul was alluding to the way a Roman general might transport a conquered king back to Rome in chains and parade the defeated king through the streets to show what happens to those who oppose the power of Rome.<sup>1</sup> Christ did the same thing to the evil spiritual powers. He conquered them by his cross and made a public spectacle of them.

The writer of Hebrew said something similar about death:

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15)

The author is affirming that by his death Christ destroyed the devil and thereby freed mortal human beings from their fear of death. This is a dramatic interpretation of the meaning of Christ’s work. It is also a paradoxical interpretation. Christ’s death, which would have seemed to be a defeat, was in fact a victory over his spiritual enemies, and it provided liberation for sinners who had been enslaved by those enemies.

This dramatic image was destined to have a long and influential life. In a book entitled *Christus Victor* the Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulén argued

1 A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible: Companion to the New Testament*, 645.

that it dominated the thinking of the church for a thousand years.<sup>1</sup> Thanks in part to Aulén’s book, it is a widely-held image today as well.

### CHRIST THE EXAMPLE

The three interpretations of Christ’s death that we have reviewed so far emphasize the objectivity of Christ’s achievement and minimize the subjective responses people make to his work. Christ inaugurated a new age of forgiveness, he laid down his life to protect his sheep, and he defeated the evil powers that enslave human beings. Whether anyone believes it or not, Christ has achieved these things. His achievements do not depend upon responses that human beings may or may not make to them.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the other biblical images for Christ’s work are different in that they do emphasize the response that people make to Jesus’ work. One of these is that Christ has provided an example for us to follow. This is called a subjective view because the subjective response of human beings—following Christ—is intrinsic to the work of Christ.

Several New Testament writers speak of Jesus’ cross as an example for human beings to follow. In fact, Jesus himself spoke of it: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Mt. 16:24-25). Paul encouraged the church at Philippi to adopt the kind of humility Christ had, the humility that took him to the cross: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . . he humbled himself and became obedient unto the point of death—even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5, 8). Peter said the same thing: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21). Millions of people, empowered by Jesus’ example, have followed in his steps and found their lives transformed.

We turn now to an image that emphasizes that Christ died not only on behalf of sinners but also in their place.

### THE SUFFERING SERVANT

Although the Bible offers numerous interpretations of Christ’s saving work, one of them is much more widely talked about in the church today

1 Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London: SPCK, 1965), 4-7.

2 In fact, at Pentecost Peter did not initially invite his listeners to make any response. It was only when they asked him what they should do that he told them to repent and be baptized (see Acts 2:36-39). The later sermons in Acts did include an invitation to make a response.

than the others. It is the interpretation that emphasizes that Christ experienced the punishment that is due to sinners so that they would not have to experience that punishment. When this is developed into a theory, it is known as “penal substitution.”

The concept of penal substitution is found in at least two biblical images. One is the image of Christ as the suffering servant. In the book of Isaiah there are four passages about an unnamed person called “the servant of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup> The last and longest of the passages is Isaiah 52:13-53:12. In this passage the servant’s work includes suffering and dying in the place of and on behalf of others and experiencing punishment that was due to them. Here are some representative phrases from the passage:

Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. . . . The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. . . . He was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. . . . It was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin . . . the will of the Lord shall prosper. . . . He poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:4-12)

The early Christians saw in this passage a prophecy of the sufferings and death of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> For example, in Acts we read about a Christian leader named Philip who encountered a public official from Ethiopia on the road. The Ethiopian was reading from a scroll of Isaiah, the part we call chapter 53.<sup>3</sup> Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, and the Ethiopian replied that he was not sure of whom Isaiah was writing. Luke wrote this about Philip’s conversation with the Ethiopian: “Starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

A second example of the early Christians’ use of Isaiah 53 is seen in the

1 The prophet may have had in mind a group of people rather than an individual.

2 Some interpreters think that Jesus himself understood his mission in terms of Isaiah 53. They may be right. However, Jesus quotes Isaiah 53 only once, and that not in connection with his own death (see Luke 22:37). In any case, it is clear that at least some of the early Christians thought of Jesus as the suffering servant.

3 The Bible was not divided into chapters and verses until the sixteenth century.

epistle of 1 Peter. In the following passage Peter quotes one sentence from Isaiah 53 and paraphrases some other sentences from the same chapter:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls. (1 Peter 2:21-25)

Clearly Isaiah 53 was an important resource for the early church’s interpretation of Jesus. Jesus was the servant of the Lord who suffered and died in the place of others, and accepted punishment they deserved, in order to save them.

### THE BEARER OF THE CURSE

Another New Testament image that conveys the concept of penal substitution is the image of Christ as bearing a curse for others. Paul used this image once, in his letter to the Galatian churches: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.’”<sup>1</sup>

Here Paul alludes to a curse mentioned in the Old Testament and then quotes a second curse from the Old Testament. He alludes to Deuteronomy 27:26 which says that anyone who fails to keep the law of God perfectly is under a curse. Since no one keeps God’s law perfectly, that means that everyone is under a curse. Paul then quotes Deuteronomy 21:23 which says that everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed. Since Jesus was crucified, he is under that curse.

Paul’s argument is that, by accepting the curse of being hanged on a tree, Jesus freed everyone else from the curse that is upon them because they have not kept the law perfectly. If Paul understood the curse of being hanged on a tree the way it was understood in Deuteronomy, and I assume he did, then he understood Jesus to be experiencing divine punishment, and he was

1 Gal. 3:13. The reference in Deuteronomy is to hanging a corpse on a tree. Paul, of course, was thinking of the crucifixion of Jesus.

claiming that Christ's bearing of that curse sets human beings free from the curse they are under because they are lawbreakers. That is penal substitution.

#### **PARENTHESIS: THE IMAGES OF SACRIFICE**

In a moment I will survey three sacrifices that the early church used to speak Jesus' death. Before I do that, I want to give some background information about sacrifice in the Bible.

First, we today use the word "sacrifice" in the general sense of giving up or foregoing something. So we say, for example, "They sacrificed to send their children to college." Our familiarity with this usage can conceal from us the fact that in the Bible the word "sacrifice" is used in an entirely different sense. In the Bible a sacrifice is something that is offered to God as an act of worship. In fact, in Israel the offering of sacrifices was the central act of worship, much as Holy Communion or a sermon may be the central act of worship in Christian churches today.

Second, in Israel the principal things sacrificed to God were animals. There were some vegetable sacrifices—Leviticus 2 is about grain offerings, for example—but most sacrifices were animals. The animals were killed as part of the worship of God.

Third, in Israel there were multiple kinds of sacrifices, and they had quite different meanings. Sometimes people today assume that all sacrifices were offered in order to take away sins, but that is not true. Some sacrifices were offered to take away sins, but others were offered for other purposes, as we shall see.

Fourth, several of Israel's great prophets insisted that religious rituals, including the offering of sacrifices, can never be a substitute for obedience to God's moral law. So, for example, through the prophet Amos the Lord said to the people of Israel:

I hate, I despise your festivals. . . Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. . . Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream. (Amos 5:21, 24)

One of the psalmists took this a step further and spiritualized sacrifice. He said that the sacrifice that really pleases God is moral behavior such as contrition for sin:

You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a bro-

ken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps. 51:16-17)

Fifth, ancient Israel had neighbors who offered human beings as sacrifices to their gods. Some of the Canaanites, for example, offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. The covenant people of God were taught early in their history that the true and living God does not want this. In Genesis 22 we read that God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar. As Abraham was about to do this, God stopped him and provided a ram to be sacrificed instead. From this experience Abraham and his descendants came to see that God does not desire human sacrifices. Thereafter they regarded human sacrifices as an abomination, and on occasions when they were tempted to fall back into the practice, their prophets excoriated them (Eze. 23:36-39).

Sixth, Israel could, however, see a similarity between a human being who suffers and even dies in order to help others and the offering of sacrificial animals. We saw this in Isaiah 53 where some of the language used of the suffering servant includes sacrificial language, as when the prophet writes: "You make his life an offering for sin" (Isa. 53:10).

Seventh, Jesus and his early followers were intimately familiar with the practice of sacrifice. It was part of their religious heritage, and it was part of the world in which they lived. They went to the temple in Jerusalem where sacrifices were offered. It was therefore natural for them to think of Jesus' sufferings and death in terms of sacrifice.

No one living today has had the experience of participating in the Jewish practice of sacrifice. The Jews stopped offering animal sacrifices in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple, the only place in which Jews offered sacrifices. As for Christians, they have never offered animal sacrifices to God. The reason for this is that Christians believe that Jesus' death was an ultimate and final sacrifice that renders all other sacrifices superfluous.

Eighth and finally, because we modern Christians have not experienced animal sacrifices it can be difficult for us to appreciate the New Testament images of Jesus as a sacrifice. In order to do so, we must use both our historical knowledge and our imaginations. We must imagine our way back into the situation in which sacrifice was a routine part of life, at least for devout Jews who lived in Jerusalem. Once we have done that, we can grasp why they thought of Jesus' death as a sacrifice. It can be challenging to feel our way back into that ancient and foreign context, but it is possible, and when we

do it, we gain appreciation for the New Testament message.

We turn now to three sacrifices in ancient Israel that the early church used to speak of Jesus' death.<sup>1</sup>

### THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Israel's holiest festival is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. God provided the Day of Atonement to ancient Israel as a time when the blood of sacrificial animals would be used to cleanse the leaders and the people of Israel from their sin (Lev. 16). It is celebrated annually, in the fall of the year.

The book of Hebrews contains a lengthy passage in which the blood of Jesus is said to be like the blood of the animals sacrificed of the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:1-10:18). The writer insisted that Jesus' sacrifice is superior to the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement. For example, the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement had to be repeated annually, but the sacrifice that Jesus offered never has to be repeated. Moreover, the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement could not cleanse the most serious sins, but Jesus' sacrifice could (Heb. 9:12-14).

It is understandable that modern people who have never participated in the offering of sacrificial animals would ask how the blood of sacrifices could cleanse sins. That question may never have occurred to the people of Israel. They knew that God had commanded them to offer sacrifices for sin, they offered the sacrifices in obedience to God's command, and they believed God's promise that in the sacrifices provision was being made for the forgiveness of their sins. The author of Hebrews offered no explanation for how blood cleanses from sin; he simply assumed that it does and that his readers shared his assumption. He expressed his assumption this way: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). The New Testament scholar D. E. Nineham has written:

All New Testament talk about sacrifice would have to be interpreted in the light of the doctrine felt by the author of Hebrews as a fact too obvious to need justification: that remission of sin is simply impossible without the shedding of some blood.<sup>2</sup>

1 In addition to these three, the writers of the New Testament used several other kinds of sacrifices to interpret Christ's death. See, for example, Eph. 5:2. Apparently all of the writers' references to blood in connection with Jesus' death are allusions to animal sacrifices of one kind or another.

2 D. E. Nineham, *New Testament Interpretation in an Historical Age* (London: Athlone Press, 1976), 19.

Rather than trying to explain how sacrifice works, the author of Hebrews used sacrifice to explain the meaning of Jesus' death. The blood that he shed on the cross provides forgiveness just as the blood of the sacrificial animals on the Day of Atonement did—only better.

### THE PASSOVER LAMB

The most important act of God in the history of ancient Israel was God's liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. For more than three thousand years Jews have celebrated that event by observing an annual Passover meal in the spring of the year. In preparation for the Passover meal, lambs are slaughtered as a reminder of the lambs whose blood the Jews smeared on the doorposts and lintels of their homes in Egypt (Ex. 12:22-23).

The first Christians associated Jesus' death with the death of the Passover lambs. This association was suggested by the fact that Jesus died during the Passover festival, and the last meal he ate before his crucifixion was a Passover meal. Paul was even more explicit: "Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). To say that Jesus died as our paschal lamb is to affirm that the death of Jesus, like the death of the Passover lambs, was part of a complex set of events by means of which God delivered human beings from the destructive slavery that characterizes their lives.

The sacrifices of the Day of Atonement were to cleanse people from their sins, but the Passover sacrifices were not. The Passover story is not about God forgiving Israel's sins but about God redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt. The sacrifice of Jesus provides both forgiveness for sins like the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement and deliverance from evil powers like the sacrifices of Passover.<sup>1</sup>

### MAKING A COVENANT

In Chapter 3 we saw that Israel thought of herself as living in a covenant relationship with God, and the idea of covenant continued to be important to Jesus and the early church.

In the ancient world the blood of sacrificial animals was used to make and to re-affirm covenants. For example, God made a covenant with Abraham through blood (Gen. 15), and Moses and the people of Israel ratified

1 Forgiveness and redemption are mentioned together and perhaps conflated in Eph. 1:7 which speaks of Christ "in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses" (see also. Col. 1:14). They are also spoken of together in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts. . . . Deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:12-13).

their covenant with God through a ceremony involving the blood of animals (Ex. 24). When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the people of Israel feared that God was cancelling the covenant; Jeremiah assured them that in the future God would make a new covenant with Israel and that it would be even better than the original covenant (Jer. 31).

On the night before Jesus died he told his disciples to eat bread and drink wine in memory of him. He said of the wine, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor. 11:25). He was saying that he was fulfilling the promise God had made through Jeremiah. By means of his blood Jesus was creating a new covenant between God and human beings. The author of Hebrews discussed Jesus’ new covenant at length (Heb. 8, 9:15-22, 10:16-18).

Christians are privileged to live in a covenant relationship with God. That is their salvation, and it was made possible by the blood of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

### THE GOD-FORSAKEN ONE

As Jesus was dying he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:45). He was quoting Psalms 22:1. The writers of the Gospels frequently quoted this psalm in connection with Jesus’ crucifixion and death.

The most trustworthy way to understand what Jesus meant when he spoke these words is to ask what the psalmist meant when he first wrote them. The psalmist made it quite clear that he was referring to the fact that God had not delivered him from his enemies: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (Ps. 22:1-2, Mt. 27:46). This is an example of parallelism: What the psalmist meant by being forsaken by God was that God was not helping him in his distress.

The psalmist did not say precisely what was causing his distress. Instead, he used vivid images of how awful the distress was: he was a despised worm, bulls encircled him, lions roared at him, he was poured out like water, his heart was like wax, oxen gored him, and dogs surrounded him. In the past God had delivered him from his troubles, he said, and in the past God had delivered the people of Israel also. But on this occasion God has left the

psalmist to his troubles. God has forsaken him.

The psalm changes abruptly in the middle of verse 21: “From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.” After God rescued him, the psalmist gave a *todah*, a thanksgiving offering. At the *todah* a sacrificial animal was offered to God, but it was not burned up. Instead it was cooked and eaten by the psalmist and his family and friends. At the *todah* the psalmist made a speech in which he praised God for delivering him at last.

If Jesus meant by his cry what the psalmist meant, and I assume he did, then he was asking why God had not delivered him from his suffering on the cross. Years later, when Matthew recorded this cry of Jesus, he knew that the rest of the psalm was also true of Jesus. That is, he knew that God had delivered Jesus by the resurrection, just as God had delivered the psalmist. By the time Matthew was writing, the church, like the psalmist’s family and friends, gathered regularly for a Christian *todah* or thanksgiving offering, called the Lord’s Supper, to praise God for his deliverance of Jesus from the cross and from death by raising him from the dead.<sup>1</sup> It is appropriate that many churches refer to the Lord’s Supper as a Eucharist, that is, a thanksgiving to God.<sup>2</sup>

Christ offered a sacrifice that is remembered at the Lord’s Supper, but the cry of dereliction is not about that. The cry is about the fact that Jesus’ *Abba* had not yet delivered Jesus from the torment he was experiencing on the cross. There is a great mystery here. One influential theologian has written of Jesus’ cry: “All Christian theology and all Christian life is basically an answer to the question that Jesus asked as he died.”<sup>3</sup> This is hyperbole, but it alerts us to the fact that implicit in the cry of Jesus are the great mysteries of Christian faith—the mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity. The cry of Jesus may well be the most profound of all the biblical interpretations of the cross.

Here is a summary of the ten biblical images for Christ’s atoning work described above:

- By his resurrection Christ inaugurated a new era in which forgiveness of sins is available.
- Like a good shepherd Christ has laid down his life in order to protect his sheep and to give them life.
- By his death and resurrection Christ has defeated the destructive evil powers and liberated human beings from them.

1 This interpretation of the cry of dereliction is taken from James Luther Mays, “Prayer and Christology: Psalm 22 as Perspective on the Passion” in *Theology Today* (October 1985), 322-31.

2 The Greek word *eucharistein* means “to give thanks.”

3 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974), 4.

1 One theologian has proposed that all of the biblical interpretations of Jesus’ death can be brought together under the umbrella of the new covenant. See Dallas Roark, *The Christian Faith* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), Chapter VIII. I am not sure that the new covenant encompasses everything, but Roark’s proposals calls attention to the very broad range of meanings which the image of new covenant conveys.

- Christ's humility and unselfishness are an example that, when followed, leads to salvation.
- Like the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, Christ experienced the punishment of sins that human beings deserve and thereby delivered them from punishment.
- Christ accepted the curse of being hanged on a cross in order to free human beings from the curse of having failed to keep God's law.
- Christ was the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement that provides forgiveness of sins.
- Christ was the sacrifice of the Passover that provides deliverance from slavery to evil powers.
- With his sacrificial blood Christ has made a new covenant between God and human beings.
- Christ was the one whom God initially did not rescue but who, after God did deliver him from suffering and death, gathers his people for a sacrificial meal of thanksgiving.

Now we will turn our attention to what some of the church's theologians have said about the meaning of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

### THEOLOGIANS AND THEIR THEORIES

We begin with a summary of some of the things that the church's theologians whom we will consider have and have not been doing when they have proposed their theories.

First and most important, the theologians have affirmed with the early church the fact of the atonement, that "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). If they did not believe this gospel, there would be no reason for them to develop theories to understand it better.

Second, the theologians also have affirmed the images used in the New Testament to interpret the meaning of Jesus' saving work.<sup>1</sup> They have unpacked the meaning of the biblical images in order to appreciate them more fully. They have studied the images individually, and they also have explored the relationships among the various images, sometimes placing separate biblical images side by side in order to create a theory.

Third, they have identified concepts that were present in the images,

concepts such as participation and substitution. They have defended the concepts as true, often by arguing that they are reasonable.

Fourth, some theologians have selected images taken from their own context rather than from the first-century Jewish context. In doing this they did not intend to replace the New Testament images with their own images. Their images and theories were interpretations of the truths of the biblical images, not substitutes for them. They employed contemporary images in order to communicate the meaning of Christ's sacrifice effectively. As we noticed above, some of the biblical images are taken from contexts that are unfamiliar to later readers. This is true of the images of sacrifice, for example.

But the theologians' achievement goes deeper than communication. By using familiar images they were also gaining a better understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. They were not just answering the question, how can we speak of the gospel so people today can grasp it? They were also answering the question, how can we ourselves understand the gospel events better?

This leads to a question. How can a contemporary image give modern people a fuller understanding of the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice than we can get simply by studying the biblical images? The answer is related to what it means to understand something. In an essay with the exotic title "Bluspels and Flalansferes" the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis made two points about metaphors that seem relevant here.<sup>1</sup>

First, Lewis said that teachers use metaphors to instruct their young students about things the students could not otherwise understand. For example, a science teacher may use a metaphor to explain a concept in physics to students who do not know the mathematics that the professor uses to understand the same concept. The student is entirely dependent on the metaphor and has no understanding of the concept apart from the metaphor. I suspect that something like this is the case with the biblical images for Christ's work. Because the biblical images were inspired by God and are the divinely authorized images for understanding the meaning of Christ's saving work, theologians, and all other Christians, are dependent on those images. God may understand the cross without reference to the images, but we cannot.

Second, Lewis also said that students can gain new understanding by creating metaphors for themselves. These may not be as apt as the teachers' metaphors, but they help the students to understand better precisely

<sup>1</sup> Most have done this. A few have also rejected one or another of the New Testament images. This is true, for example, of the liberal Protestant theologian Hastings Rashdall in his book *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1920).

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1969), 251-265.

because they are the students' own metaphors. Similarly, theologians can gain understanding of the saving work of Christ by choosing contemporary images and using them to develop theories of atonement. The new images and theories do not carry the authority of the biblical images, but they can provide a helpful supplement to the divinely authorized biblical images.

We shall consider just three of the many theories of atonement that theologians across the centuries have proposed. The first two are traditional and are familiar to many people. The third is newer and less well known.

### JESUS SATISFIED GOD'S HONOR

Near the end of the eleventh century the Archbishop of Canterbury was a theologian and philosopher named Anselm. He wrote what probably is the first book about the atoning death of Christ. It is entitled *Cur Deus Homo*, Why Did God Become a Man?

For almost a thousand years the church had routinely taught that Jesus' death was a ransom that God paid to the devil in order to free human beings from bondage to the devil. Anselm said that was not true and that it would have been morally wrong for God to engage in a transaction with evil.

Anselm chose two images from his own medieval world for understanding the meaning of Jesus' death. Medieval Europe lived under a feudal system. Society was structured by the relationship of feudal lords and their serfs. The lord provided protection for the serfs, and the serfs honored the lord by giving him his due in terms of services or produce. When a serf failed to give what was due to the lord, that was an affront to the honor of the lord, and it threatened the social order. In order to remedy the failure, satisfaction had to be rendered to the honor of the lord.

The medieval church provided a penitential system in which, when Christians confessed their sins, their confessors would assign them penances. Penance was an action that, because God had not initially required them, could be offered to God for forgiveness when one had sinned. Penance ranged from saying extra prayers to making extra donations to the church.

As the title of his book suggests, Anselm's objective was to explain why God had become a human being. His explanation begins with the fact that human beings have sinned. Anselm defined sin in feudal terms as failing to render to God what is due to God's honor. This threatens the moral order of the universe in the same way a serf's failure to render to his lord what was due to the lord's honor threatened the social order.

In order to remedy this situation, satisfaction had to be made to the

honor of God. But who could do this, and how? On the one hand, Anselm said, only a human being should render satisfaction to God's honor because it is human beings who have sinned. On the other hand, only God is able to render satisfaction to God's honor. Therefore, only one who is both a human being and God can render satisfaction to the honor of God. Only Jesus was both God and a human being. That is the answer to the question in the title of Anselm's book.

But how could Jesus make satisfaction to the honor of God? Like all human beings Jesus owed God his obedience, and of course he obeyed God perfectly. He could not offer his obedience to God as a satisfaction for human sins, since as a human being he owed God his obedience. However, since Jesus did not sin, he did not owe God his death. Therefore he could offer to God his death to make satisfaction to the honor of God on behalf of sinful human beings. That is what he did on the cross. By dying, he rendered satisfaction to the honor of God on behalf of human beings who had offended God's honor by their sin.

Here are six observations about Anselm's theory.

First, Anselm has clearly drawn on medieval images that were not known in the era of the New Testament.

Second, Anselm did not confine himself to medieval images. Rather, he drew on numerous truths from the Bible and used them in his theory. These include that God is the lord of the earth, that human beings have sinned, that Jesus is the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, that God forgives, and that God's forgiveness does not upset but supports the moral order of the universe. Anselm's theory is suffused with biblical ideas.

Third, the central image of Anselm's theory—rendering satisfaction to the honor of God—is taken from the medieval world of feudal relationships and from the penitential system. This insured that the theory would seem natural and understandable to medieval Christians. Presumably it made it convincing as well. So it was good communication.

Fourth, Anselm did not use the medieval images only because they communicated well. He used them also to understand the meaning of the cross well.

Fifth, Anselm's theory remains convincing to many people today even though we don't live in a world of feudal relationships and many of us do not engage in penitential practices. His theory "travels" successfully into post-feudal societies.

Finally, Anselm did not intend to replace the biblical images of Christ's atoning work with his own medieval images. He was attempting to under-

stand the meaning of the biblical teaching, not to displace it. His work is a supplement to the biblical teaching.

## JESUS EXPERIENCED THE PUNISHMENT THAT HUMAN BEINGS DESERVE

Our second theory is probably the most influential in Christian history, and it probably is the most influential in the church today as well. Its influence is so great that some Christians think of it as the only proper, biblical theory.<sup>1</sup> It is the theory of penal substitution. As we saw earlier, the theory is built on at least two New Testament images, the suffering servant and the curse.<sup>2</sup> The most important proponent of the theory was the Protestant Reformer John Calvin. Calvin is the author of what is probably the greatest book of systematic theology ever written by a Protestant. It is entitled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin's theory of atonement appears in the last five chapters of Book Two of this great work. I will summarize these chapters.

Calvin affirms the orthodox view that the eternal Son of God united human nature with his divine nature and was incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus offered his obedience to God. His obedience was both active and passive. He actively obeyed God's laws, and he actively carried out the work to which God called him. He passively submitted to the pain and humiliation of crucifixion, as God had commanded him to do. By his active and passive obedience he saved disobedient human beings from the punishment their sins deserved.

1 Where the subject of Christ's work is concerned, penal substitution today completely dominates the thinking of many Christians, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. Positively, this gives them an immense appreciation for the fact that Christ has graciously and sacrificially provided salvation for the world. Unfortunately, however, it means that some of them find it impossible to appreciate any of the two dozen or so other images for Jesus' sacrifice in the New Testament. It is not unusual to hear biblical ideas such as the exemplarist understanding of Jesus' sacrifice described as "liberal" or "heretical." The church would benefit from a retrieval of some of the other biblical understandings of Jesus' sacrifice.

2 Christians who understand almost every New Testament reference to Jesus' death as a reference to penal substitution may assume that all references to sacrifice are references to a substitute bearing the penalty for the sins of others; as we have seen, this is not the case. They may understand Jesus' cry of dereliction (Mt. 27:45) as an expression of divine punishment—God turning away from Jesus because Jesus is bearing the world's sins; I have tried above to show that this is not its meaning. They may appeal to the scapegoat of the Day of Atonement in support of penal substitution. They are right that the scapegoat was an example of penal substitution, but they overlook the fact that no New Testament writer used the scapegoat to speak of Jesus' sacrifice.

Calvin emphasizes that Christ was prophet, priest, and king.<sup>1</sup> As prophet he taught God's truth, and as king he reigns over his subjects. His work is best seen as that of a priest who offers a sacrifice for the sins of human beings. God is righteously angry at human beings because they have sinned, and God will not allow sinners into the divine presence. Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice to appease God's anger, to make satisfaction for sins, to wash away sin and guilt, and to restore God's favorable disposition toward human beings.<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter Sixteen of Book Two Calvin set all this in the context of criminal law. Calvin says that conscientious people know that God the righteous judge will not allow the moral law to be broken without inflicting punishment. On the cross Jesus accepted the punishment that the sins of human beings warranted. As a consequence, it was no longer necessary for God to punish human beings, and so they were delivered from the wrath of God.

Calvin spelled this out in an attractive way. He worked through what the Apostles' Creed said about Jesus and showed how each phrase in the Creed provided distinctive insights into Christ's saving work. I will review what he said about six of the phrases.

Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate," that is, in a court of law. This shows that Jesus stood in the place of sinful human beings in a legal sense. By taking the punishment due to human beings he made it possible for them to be acquitted or justified despite their sins: "This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God [Isa. 53:12]. We must, above all, remember this substitution."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus "was crucified." This shows that Jesus took the curse associated with being hanged on a tree and thereby delivered human beings from the curse they brought on themselves by sin.

Jesus "died." This shows that Jesus rescues human beings from death. It also empowers them to mortify or kill their sinful passions:

The second effect of Christ's death upon us is this: by our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old man in us that he may not flourish and bear fruit. . . . Paul not only exhorts

1 In Israel prophets, priests, and kings were anointed for the work God gave them. Because Jesus was "the Christ" (the anointed), he was called by God to carry out these three roles in a spiritual sense. This "threefold office of Christ" appears in many later books of theology.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.15.6.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.16.6.

us to exhibit an example of Christ's death but declares that there inheres in it an efficacy which ought to be manifest in all Christians.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus "descended into hell." Surprisingly, Calvin said that Jesus' descent into hell did not occur after Jesus' death. It was while Christ was dying on the cross that he experienced the torments of hell that are God's punishment for sin: "Christ was put in the place of evildoers . . . to bear and suffer all the punishments that they ought to have sustained."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus "rose again from the dead." The saving work of Christ would be incomplete without his resurrection. "Through his death, sin was wiped out and death extinguished; through his resurrection, righteousness was restored and life raised up."<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes the theory of penal substitution has been developed in directions that Calvin did not teach. For example, it has been suggested that by his death Christ made it possible for God to love human beings. Calvin rejected that idea: "It was not after we were reconciled to him through the blood of his Son that [God] began to love us. Rather, he has loved us before the world was created." Calvin did add that "in a marvelous and divine way [God] loved us even when he hated us." But Calvin denied that God's love for human beings was made possible by Christ's sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

## ANSELM AND JOHN CALVIN

We can gain insight into how theories of atonement are constructed by comparing and contrasting the work of Anselm and Calvin. Both men, of course, affirmed the gospel. Neither of them ignored the biblical images for Christ's work, but Calvin gave more detailed attention to the images than Anselm did. Calvin juxtaposed several biblical images that are not brought together in the Bible, including sacrifices for sin, the suffering servant, the curse, and legal acquittal (justification).

Where Anselm was thinking of sin and Christ's work in terms of dishonor and satisfaction, Calvin was thinking in terms of crime and punishment. Anselm was thinking about the relationship between civil law (serfs and lords) and church law (penances) on the one hand and the moral order of the universe on the other. Calvin was thinking about the relationship

between criminal law on the one hand and the righteousness of God on the other. The criminal law context pervades *Institutes* II.16 in particular. This is unsurprising, since Calvin was educated in the law.

We turn now to a more recent theory of atonement.

## JESUS EXPERIENCED THE COSTLINESS OF FORGIVENESS

We have seen that several of the New Testament images for Christ's death were taken from Israel's sacrificial system. Anselm's theory utilized the medieval feudal and penitential systems. Calvin's theory utilized a court of criminal law. We turn now to a theory whose context is interpersonal relationships. It is the theory of costly forgiveness.

The background for this theory is an understanding of forgiveness that is widely accepted today. It goes like this. Forgiveness is a response people can make when someone wrongfully hurts them. They may have been hurt by a friend or family member. They may have been hurt by an employer or employee. They may have been hurt by a group.

When people are hurt, two things happen naturally. First, they feel anger. This is not a learned reaction but an instinctive one. Second, because they are angry, they naturally want to hit back. This also is an instinctive response. We want to retaliate against anyone who wrongfully hurts us. After all, retaliation seems only fair. If you hit me and I hit you back, that balances the scales. That's justice.

But it isn't forgiveness.

Forgiveness is better than justice. According to one analysis, there are three ways we can treat people:

- We can treat them worse than their behavior deserves. For example, the government can execute an innocent person. That is an injustice.
- We can treat people according to what their behavior deserves. For example, when a child hits his little sister, his parent may make the child sit in a corner and think about what he has done. That is justice.
- We can treat people better than their behavior deserves. For example, imagine that a husband has an extramarital affair. His wife learns about it, and she tells him how deeply he has hurt her. But she does not retaliate. She does not have an affair. She does not divorce him. She works to rebuild their marriage. That is forgiveness. Forgiveness is better than justice. It is more magnanimous, more grace-filled.

Forgiveness is not easy. In order to forgive you must accept two kinds of pain. First there is the pain of having been hurt unfairly. This is unavoidable.

1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.16.7. Unlike some modern theologians, Calvin was not averse to including the exemplarist understanding of Jesus' death in his theology of the cross.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.16.10.

3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.16.13.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.16.4.

able. But there is a second kind of pain. It is the pain of not doing what you naturally want to do, which is to retaliate. Forgiveness is the costly alternative to taking revenge. It is suffering brought about because you have been hurt and yet are determined not to hurt in return.

This really isn't fair. The person who hurt you should have to suffer, not you. But in the real world of moral, interpersonal relationships it is the injured party alone who can forgive, and that means it is the injured party who must suffer.

Here, then, is our definition: Forgiveness is voluntarily accepting the pain caused by people who wrongly hurt you, accepting the anger you naturally feel because you have been hurt, and accepting the pain of not seeking revenge, in such a way as to end the destructive power of your pain, anger, and frustration both in your life and in the lives of others.

Beginning in the nineteenth century some Christian theologians began to think of the suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross as being like the suffering human beings experience when they set out to forgive those who wrongly hurt them.<sup>1</sup> I will call their interpretation "costly forgiveness."

Is this interpretation taught in the Bible? Not directly, but there may be hints of it. For example, In Ephesians 4:32 we read: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." This seems to suggest when we observe someone suffering in order to forgive someone else, we are seeing an image of what was happening on the cross.

It is natural to ask the question, "When did God forgive human beings, and how?" Teachings such as the Day of Atonement suggest that God's forgiveness of Israel occurred annually. Some theologians go to the opposite extreme and say that the New Testament suggests that God's forgiveness is an eternal and timeless attitude that God takes toward human beings. In fact, however, the gospel suggests that God's forgiveness is neither a repeat-

able action nor a timeless attitude but rather a discrete historical action. It is an act carried out by God in Christ on Good Friday. The suffering of Jesus is the event in which the eternal Son of God, having set aside the transcendence that insulates God from the painful effects of human behavior and become incarnate, voluntarily embraced the most outrageous consequences of human sinning as God's way of forgiving sins.

On this understanding the cross is more than a revelation of something that has been going on eternally in God's life. It is the historical event in which, once and for all, God embraced terrible suffering and lived through it in such a way as to forgive the world. It was costly for God to forgive just as it is costly for us to forgive.

Here are eight facts about this theory of atonement. First, the emphasis falls on Jesus' sufferings. This is in contrast to the emphasis placed on his blood (as in the case of sacrifices), on his cross (as in the curse passage), on his death (as in Anselm's theory), and on his resurrection (as in the case of Peter's sermon at Pentecost). It is similar to the emphasis on Jesus' suffering in the image of the Suffering Servant.

Second, the central image of this theory, like that of Anselm, is not taken directly from the Bible. It is taken from a world with which many people today are familiar, the world of interpersonal relationships where people unfairly hurt one another and where forgiveness is desperately needed. For people who live in this world and share its assumptions about forgiveness, the theory of costly forgiveness provides a profound and understandable account of the meaning of Jesus' saving work.

Third, behind the theory of costly forgiveness there stand biblical teachings such as sin, suffering, forgiveness, and the understanding of Jesus as God Incarnate.

Fourth, this is an objective interpretation of the meaning of Jesus' saving work. Our subjective response—which is to accept and then live into the fact that in Christ God has forgiven us—contributes nothing to its meaning. Whether we know it or not, God has forgiven the world at great cost. It is finished.

Fifth, the salvation that Jesus achieved is understood fundamentally as forgiveness of sins.

Sixth, costly forgiveness opens up wonderful interpersonal and moral possibilities. When we experience God's costly forgiveness, we can be reconciled to God. And when we experience God's costly forgiveness, we can be morally transformed; if Jesus' suffering to forgive you can't change you, nothing can.

1 The earliest statements of this understanding known to me are in two books by the American theologian Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice: Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1866) and *Forgiveness and Law: Grounded in Principles Interpreted by Human Analogies* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1874). Other early presentations are found in Douglas White, *Forgiveness and Suffering: A Study of Christian Belief* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1913); H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1927); D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948); and Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1951). Some of these theologians (White was a physician) presented their understanding of costly forgiveness as a variation on older theories of atonement such as penal substitution or exemplarist views. Historians of the doctrine of Christ's atoning work also have associated costly forgiveness with older understandings of atonement. In my judgment this is misleading, and therefore I am here treating costly forgiveness as a distinctive theory of atonement. I believe that analyses of the doctrine would be more accurate and insightful if historians and theologians adopted this practice.

Seventh, several contemporary academic theologians have expressed concerns that in some of the traditional understandings of the cross violence is part of God's plan for saving the world. One concern is that, in affirming that violence—the cross—is a part of God's plan for saving human beings, Christians offer support to those who believe in and practice violence in the world today. Another concern is that a God who employs violence is incompatible with Jesus' understanding of God as *Abba* and is unattractive to people today who are committed to peace. In my judgment, thinking about the cross as God's experience of the suffering that is intrinsic to forgiveness successfully addresses these concerns. God's plan is not to arrange for violence. God's plan is to arrange for forgiveness, and for God as for us, forgiveness is costly rather than easy. In the cross God is the victim of violence, not its perpetrator.<sup>1</sup>

Eighth and finally, God's costly forgiveness has benefited not only Christians but wider society. For example, the message of costly forgiveness has called human beings to forgo revenge and to consider forgiveness as a way to respond when they are hurt. The idea of costly forgiveness has been helpful, for example, in counseling married couples when one partner has been unfaithful. It has been helpful in nations such as, for example, South Africa which, when apartheid was ended, formed a Truth and Reconciliation Committee that led the nation to avoid what might have been massive revenge-taking.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The good news that "Christ died for our sins" is simple in the sense that children are able to understand it and to experience God's gift of salvation. It also is profound in the sense that for two millennia it has challenged the thinking of some very wise people and inspired the work of countless artists and composers. The fact that there are so many biblical ways of thinking about it suggests that it is a mystery too great to be understood by any one of them alone.

1 A fine book on this subject is Sharon L. Baker, *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). This leads to the question of whether non-violent interpretations of the cross should displace those in which violence plays an indispensable role.

2 Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

## CHAPTER 7

# THE HOLY SPIRIT

## INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter I pointed out that the saving work that Christ carried out on the first Good Friday and the first Easter Sunday is a finished work. This is in contrast to the work of the Spirit, which is unfinished and ongoing.

The church has always been interested in God's Spirit, but that interest has been intensified by a movement that originated early in the twentieth century. It is the Pentecostal movement, and it gave rise to a second movement, the charismatic movement. Central to these movements is a personal experience of the Spirit of the Lord. These movements have created a space in which the church has been able to think carefully about the Spirit of God.<sup>1</sup>

We will begin with a brief overview of the language that is used in the Bible to speak of the Spirit of the Lord.

## BIBLICAL LANGUAGE FOR THE SPIRIT

In the Bible several words and phrases are used to refer to the Spirit of the Lord. The phrase "Holy Spirit" occurs three times in the Old Testament (Ps. 51:11, Isa. 63:10-11) and more than 90 times in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> The phrase "Spirit of God" occurs thirteen times in the Old Testament and thirteen times in the New Testament. The phrase "Spirit of the Lord" is used twenty-six times in the Old Testament and five times in the New Testament. In one New Testament passage (Luke 4:18) the phrase means "Spirit of the God of Israel," as it always does in the Old Testament; in the other four passages the phrase probably means "Spirit of the Lord Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

Two New Testament phrases show the close association of the Spirit with Jesus. The phrase "Spirit of Christ" appears twice (Rom. 8:9, 1 Peter 1:11) and the phrase "Spirit of Jesus Christ" once (Phil. 1:19).

1 See Appendix 6, The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements.

2 In the King James Version of the Bible, the Greek words for "Holy Spirit" were sometimes translated "Holy Ghost." The English word "Spirit" is from the Latin word *Spiritus*, and the English word "Ghost" is from the German *Geist*.

3 The other four passages are Acts 5:9, 8:39, 2 Cor. 3:17, 18.

In a long discourse Jesus spoke repeatedly of the Spirit as *paraklete* which means *one who is alongside (to help)*. In John 16 the Spirit is like an attorney who helps the disciples when they are being put on trial for their faith. In the book of Revelation the phrase “seven spirits” may refer to the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

A single Hebrew word, *ruach*, is used for both God’s Spirit and the spirit of a human being. This word also is used to refer to a wind or to breath. Translators depend on the context to determine which word is the best translation. The context is not always clear. That is why Genesis 1:2 could be translated in the King James Version as “the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters,” in the New Revised Standard Version as “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” and by the literary scholar Robert Alter as “God’s breath hovering over the waters.”

In the New Testament the Greek word *pneuma* carries the same ambiguities as the Hebrew word *ruach*. It can refer to a wind, a breath, the spirit of a human being, an evil spirit, or the Spirit of God.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS TO THE SPIRIT OF GOD

It is natural for us Christians, when we read about God’s Spirit in the Old Testament, to import into those passages our Christian understanding of the Spirit as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. To do so is to commit an anachronism. No one in the Old Testament thought in Trinitarian terms. In Chapter 12 below we will explain why that is the case. We will be careful not to read our Christian ideas about the Spirit back into the Jewish Old Testament but rather to understand what the Old Testament says on its own terms.

The Old Testament teachings about God’s Spirit would seem to be grouped into three categories, though I believe there are just two. The first possible category concerns the Spirit and creation.

### THE SPIRIT AND CREATION

Theologians frequently emphasize the role of God’s Spirit in creation. In a sense this is surprising because, as Clark Pinnock conceded in his fine book *Flame of Love*, “The Bible says less about creative functions of the Spirit than it does about redemptive functions surrounding the new creation.” But then he added, “The relative scarcity of such texts does not make the

truth unimportant.”<sup>1</sup> This is true, of course, but it is wise to be cautious when our theology is going beyond what the Bible says.

In three Old Testament passages *ruach* is associated with the creation of the world. One is Genesis 1:2, but as noted above that may not be a reference to the Spirit but to God’s breath or to a wind from God. The same is true when Job says of God: “By his wind (*ruach*) the heavens were made fair” (Job 26:13). It is true also in a third passage in the book of Psalms: “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath (*ruach*) of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6).

The same ambiguity occurs in the two passages, both in Job, in which God’s *ruach* seems to be associated with the creation of human beings. Job declares that he will not utter a falsehood “as long as my breath is in me and the spirit (*ruach*) of God is in my nostrils,” and Job’s visitor Elihu says: “The spirit (*ruach*) of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”<sup>2</sup>

In summary, in the Hebrew Scriptures the Spirit of God is not clearly associated with either the creation of the world or the creation of human beings. I therefore think it is unlikely that the ancient Jews, when they were thinking about the creation of the world or of human beings, thought in terms of the Spirit of God.

In view of this, I suggest that what the Old Testament says about God’s Spirit falls into just two categories. The first comprises passages that speak of the Spirit being given to individuals.

### THE SPIRIT WAS GIVEN TO SELECTED INDIVIDUALS

To those of us who speak English the word *spirit* suggests something amorphous and pervasive flowing tirelessly through the world of nature. For the Hebrew people *ruach* seems to have suggested the opposite. For them God’s Spirit was present at particular places at particular times with particular persons. Specifically, they thought of God’s *ruach* in connection with God’s dealings with the covenant people.

Today many Christians are interested in what God might be doing in religions other than Judaism and Christianity. Some of the writers of the

1 Clark Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 50-51, 52. I do not share all of Pinnock’s views about the Spirit, but I think that this is the most beautiful book of contemporary theology I have read. The prose is graceful, but the book is beautiful for another reason also. As in the *Confessions* of Augustine, in *Flame of Love* the author’s passionate love for God is evident throughout.

2 Job 27:3, 33:4. The word translated “breath” in these verses is not *ruach*. It seems likely that in these verses *ruach* is a reference to breath.

1 Rev. 1:4, 3:1, 4:5, 5:6.

Bible had a similar interest. This is evident in the stories of people who lived before Abraham such as Abel whose offering was accepted by God and Enoch who walked with God. It is present also in the stories of non-Israelites such as Lot, Melchizedek, Moses' father-in-law Jethro, Job,<sup>1</sup> the Queen of Sheba, and the Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem. The prophet Malachi (1:11-12) speaks of God being worshiped truly by non-Israelites.<sup>2</sup> It is natural for us today, when we think of how God might have worked with people outside the covenant, to think about the Spirit of God. But the biblical writers did not associate this wider work of God with the Spirit.

For the Hebrew people God's *ruach* is invasive rather than pervasive. The invasive work of the Spirit is evident in the stories of individuals who are given the Spirit of God. In the Old Testament era the Spirit was not given to all the covenant people, only to selected individuals. We will briefly survey the stories of ten of those individuals.

The first was Joseph. The Pharaoh thought that the reason that Joseph was able to interpret dreams correctly because he was "one in whom was the spirit of God" (Gen. 41:38).

The second was a man named Bezalel of whom the Lord said: "I have filled him with divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood" (Ex. 31:3-5). God gave Bezalel artistic gifts so that he could create a beautiful tabernacle in which the Israelites could worship the Lord. In this story the Spirit of God that filled Bezalel seems more like a set of skills and abilities than a personal presence.

Moses, the man who led Israel out of Egypt, and Joshua, the man who helped Israel settle in Canaan, both received the Spirit of God and were given wisdom for their work as leaders (Num. 27:18-20, Deut. 34:9).

God gave the Spirit to at least four of the judges. Judges were military leaders who protected the covenant people as they settled into the promised land following the Exodus from Egypt. For example, God gave the Spirit to Gideon, and the Spirit gave Gideon wisdom to conduct an unusual military campaign against the Midianites (Judg. 6:34). God gave the Spirit to Samson, and the Spirit gave Samson superhuman strength to defend Israel against the Philistines (Judg. 14:6, 19). Here the Spirit of God was more like

an endowment of superhuman physical power than a personal presence.

God also gave the Spirit to prophets. For example, the prophet Micah wrote: "As for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Micah 3:8; see also Num. 11:25). The Lord gave the Spirit to the prophet Balaam (see Num. 24:2). His story is unique in the Old Testament in that he was not an Israelite. However, the story makes it clear that the Spirit was given to him so he could protect the Israelites.

God also gave the Spirit to some of Israel's kings. The Spirit empowered King Saul and later King David to rule the covenant people. When the Spirit was first given to Saul, Saul "fell into a prophetic frenzy" along with a group of prophets (1 Sam. 10:10). Here we notice an early association of the Spirit with ecstatic experiences. Centuries later, when the Christians had the ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues (see 1 Cor. 12), they may have been helped by stories such as this one to associate their ecstasies with the Spirit of God.

Each individual to whom the Spirit was given received a gift or empowerment of some kind. In the New Testament era the church emphasized the association of the Spirit with gifts.

In the Old Testament the forms of empowerment were diverse. Many scholars associate the Spirit most closely with the gift of prophecy. However, it appears to me that in most of the stories the Spirit was given in order to protect God's people. That is true in eight of the ten stories above.

The gift of the Spirit to these individuals was not always permanent. This is evident in the stories about Saul and David. When Saul became disobedient to God, the Spirit was taken away from him and given to David: "Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah. Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul" (1 Sam. 16:13-14).

Later on David committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of her husband Uriah, a Hittite mercenary serving in David's army. When the prophet Nathan confronted David about his crimes, David repented. Psalms 51 is by David and is an expression of his repentance: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me" (Ps. 51:10-11). David was asking God not to do to him what God had done to his predecessor Saul, namely, take away the Spirit with the

1 Since an entire book of the Bible is devoted to the story of Job, it is natural to assume that he was an Israelite, but nothing in the book of Job suggests that Job was an Israelite.

2 This passage is doubly striking. Not only does Malachi say that non-Jews are worshiping the Lord truly, he says that Israel is not worshiping the Lord faithfully.

result that Saul became insane.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage the Spirit is personal rather than an impersonal power as in some of the earlier passages. However, the Spirit is not a person distinct from God but is rather the presence of God. “Do not cast me away from your presence” and “do not take your holy spirit from me” are parallel phrases. “Your holy spirit” is the same thing as “your presence.”

### THE SPIRIT WAS PROMISED TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Several of the Old Testament prophetic books contain promises that in the future the Spirit will be no longer be given just to selected individuals but to all of God’s people. For example, in Isaiah the Lord made this promise: “I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit on your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring” (Isa. 44:3).

In Ezekiel the Lord said: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances” (Eze. 36:26-27). This passage is the first we have seen that says that the Spirit will help God’s people to obey the Torah. Centuries later the early Christians emphasized that the Spirit helps God’s people to live virtuous lives.

The most famous of the Old Testament promises concerning the Spirit appears in a long passage in the book of the prophet Joel. It is famous in part because Peter quoted it in his sermon at Pentecost. It begins with the Lord saying: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions” (Joel 2:28).

The Hebrew people knew that the individuals to whom the Lord had given the Spirit became great and gifted leaders, so they must have been encouraged by the promise that in the future the Spirit would be given to all of God’s covenant people. This would fulfill a hope that Moses once expressed: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Num. 11:29).

This promise of the Spirit was not fulfilled in the Old Testament era. It was fulfilled centuries later, and in some unexpected ways.

1 An even more temporary gift of the Spirit is recorded in Num. 11:25. God took some of the Spirit that had been on Moses and put it on 70 elders of Israel. They all then prophesied—once—and never prophesied again. This passage is unique in that it is the only one in the Old Testament that clearly speaks of the Spirit as given to multiple people at one time.

## JESUS AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD

We have seen that the Old Testament references to God’s Spirit fall into two principal categories: God gave the Spirit to selected individuals, and God promised to give the Spirit to all the covenant people at some unspecified future time. The same two categories appear in what the Gospels say about the Spirit and Jesus: The Spirit was given to Jesus, and Jesus promised to give the Spirit to his followers in the future.

The Spirit was involved with Jesus from the moment of his conception (Mt. 1:20), something that is not said of anyone else in the Bible.

The Spirit descended on Jesus in a special way at his baptism (Mt. 3:16). Jesus’ baptism marked a transition for him from private life to a public ministry. It was like a commissioning or an ordination. The coming of the Spirit to Jesus meant that the Spirit would be guiding and empowering him in his public ministry.

This began immediately. The Spirit guided Jesus into the desert (Mt. 4:1).<sup>1</sup> There Jesus was tempted to conduct his ministry in false ways. The first two temptations were about bread and circuses.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was tempted to attract followers by feeding them (turning stones into bread) and by sensationalism (throwing himself down from the temple and being rescued by angels). The third temptation was to compromise with evil by worshiping the devil. Jesus rejected these false ways of being the Messiah.

Luke wrote that the Spirit empowered Jesus’ entire public ministry: “Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone” (Luke 4:14). Then Luke offered this account of Jesus’ first sermon in his hometown:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim

1 Mark says the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness (Mark 1:12), a reminder of how closely the Spirit was associated with power.

2 The phrase is from a later Roman writer, Juvenal, who used it to describe dissolute Roman citizens whose only desires were to be fed and to be entertained.

release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

There are parallels between Jesus and the individuals who in the Old Testament era were given the Spirit, but there are dramatic differences also, as this passage shows. Jesus was the unique bearer of God's Spirit.

Just as several prophets in the Old Testament era had predicted a coming time when God would pour out the Spirit on all the covenant people, so Jesus promised his followers that they would all be given the gift of the Spirit. For example, in order to encourage his disciples to pray he said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13).

He also described what would happen when his disciples were put on trial for being his followers: "When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Mt. 10:19-20).

Following his resurrection Jesus repeated his promise to his followers that the Spirit would be given to them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

These promises, like those of the Old Testament era, were not fulfilled during Jesus' historical ministry on earth. We turn now to the event in which they all were fulfilled.

## THE SPIRIT ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST

Pentecost is a Jewish festival that occurs fifty days after the festival of Passover.<sup>1</sup> After Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension his followers were in Jerusalem. The city was filled with pilgrims from around the Roman

1 The Greek word "Pentecost" means "fiftieth." The occasion for this Jewish festival is the harvest of first fruits of crops. In the Old Testament the festival is called "feast of weeks," "feast of harvest," and "day of the first fruits" (Ex. 34:22, 23:16, Num. 28:26).

world. During that festival the promises given through the prophets and given by Jesus were at long last fulfilled: God poured out the Spirit on the followers of Jesus (Acts 2).<sup>1</sup>

The church has learned more about the Spirit of God from what happened on the Day of Pentecost than from any other event in the church's history. In that sense the story of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2 is the great revelation of the Spirit.

Three miracles occurred that day. Each one was a sign that communicated important truth.

There was a sound of a violent wind but no wind (Acts 2:2). As we saw earlier, both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* may mean either spirit or wind. The sound of the wind alerted the disciples of Jesus to the fact that the Spirit of God was present.

The second miracle was that a tongue of fire stood over each of Christ's followers (Acts 2:3). This sign made it clear that the Spirit was being given not only to Peter who was the spokesman for the group that day but also to the entire community of Jesus' followers. This was a first: for the first time in history God's Spirit was coming into the lives not just of selected individuals but of all God's covenant people, men and women alike, young and old alike. The old age was passing away, and a new age was dawning in which the Spirit would live in everyone's heart. That is why Peter spoke of "the last days" (Acts 2:17)—the old age was coming to an end.

The third miracle was that the disciples spoke in other tongues (Acts 2:4), foreign languages that they had not previously learned.<sup>2</sup> This meant that the Spirit was equipping the disciples to give a verbal witness about Jesus to the pilgrims who were in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival.

Here are seven things we learn about the Spirit from this story. First, the Spirit of God is also the Spirit of Jesus. This is not surprising, since Jesus promised his disciples that it was they who would be given the Spirit. But

1 It is not clear how many of Christ's followers were present that day. It may have been the twelve (Acts 1:26), or the 120 people mentioned in Acts 1:15, or the 500 people mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6, or some other number. In Acts 19:1-7 Luke may be speaking of disciples of Jesus who were not present at Pentecost and who did not at that time receive the Spirit. However, it seems more likely that the disciples of Acts 19 are disciples of John the Baptist.

2 The phrase "other tongues" (Greek *heterais glossais*), which is used nowhere else in the New Testament, suggests that the disciples spoke foreign languages. This made it possible for the thousands of pilgrims from various parts of the Roman Empire to understand them. In the New Testament, the other references to speaking in tongues say simply "tongues" (Greek *glossai*). That can be a reference to unintelligible speech rather than foreign languages; the descriptions of it in 1 Cor. 12:1-3 and 1 Cor. 14:6-12 seem to suggest unintelligible speech.

Peter spelled it out clearly in his sermon. He said that both God (Acts 2:17, 18) and Jesus (Acts 2:33) poured out the Spirit that day.

Second, the Spirit is very powerful. The people of Israel had always known this. It was taught in the Old Testament, and his disciples had seen the power of the Spirit in the life of Jesus. The three miracles at Pentecost confirmed the power of the Spirit.

Third, the Spirit is personal, not just an impersonal power. There are passages in the Old Testament in which the Spirit seems to be an impersonal power,<sup>1</sup> but at Pentecost it is evident that the Spirit is personal rather than impersonal.

Fourth, the message that the Spirit empowered the disciples to preach on Pentecost was not about the Spirit but about Jesus. It is true that Peter began his sermon by identifying the source of the miracles as the Spirit (Acts 2:16-21), but he quickly moved onto his primary topic: “I speak to you concerning Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 2:22).

Fifth, despite the Spirit’s close relationship with God and with Jesus, the Spirit is distinct from them. This is clear in Peter’s sermon. Jesus poured out the Spirit (Acts 2:33); the Spirit is therefore distinct from Jesus. God poured out the Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18); the Spirit is therefore distinct from God. And to this we might add that God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24); God is therefore distinct from Jesus. The distinction between the Spirit and God becomes clear here in a way it was not clear in the Old Testament where the Spirit was sometimes simply the presence of God, as in Ps. 51:11. Peter spoke with clarity about the distinctiveness of the Three Persons: “Having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

To use anachronistic language, Peter is here speaking of the Spirit as the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. The personhood of the Spirit and the distinctions of the Three Persons are important components of the Trinitarian understanding of God.

Sixth, the Spirit was given to the church. The emphasis at Pentecost is on the Spirit and the Christian community rather than on the Spirit and each individual Christian. The coming of the Spirit to the community makes it possible for the community to include in its membership not only those who like the disciples knew Jesus in person but also many others—3000 that day alone (Acts 2:41)—who had not known Jesus in person but who knew about him through the preaching of the gospel. His Spirit is in all their

hearts (Acts 2:39).

Seventh, the Spirit was given to the church to guide and empower the church to carry out its mission to the world. Before his ascension Jesus spoke about that mission and said that the Spirit would give the disciples the power they needed to carry it out: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). The Spirit has continued to guide and empower the church since the Day of Pentecost.

The epistles of the New Testament refer repeatedly to the work of the Spirit in the life of the church. Many of the things they say were already evident at Pentecost, but some are the product of the church’s continuing experience of the Spirit and reflection on that experience.

To the work of the Spirit we now turn our attention.

## THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Before I describe some of the work the Spirit does, I want to make three comments.

First, I am not suggesting that the Spirit alone does the work described here. There is overlap in the work of the Three Persons of the Trinity. For example, the first work of the Spirit I will describe is bearing witness concerning Jesus, but the Father does this too (see John 5:37). In fact, all six of the things described below may be attributed to one or both of the other Persons of the Holy Trinity. On the other hand, not all of the work of God is shared by all Three Persons. For example, the church has never believed that the Father or the Spirit died for the sins of the world.

Second, the work of the Spirit as described here is not contingent on what the church is doing. What I am saying is more radical than that. I am saying that the Spirit is always doing these things, even when the church is not aware of it. The church is not called to pray that the Spirit will do these things. The church is called to recognize, and to trust, that the Spirit is doing these things.

Third, what is being said here about the work of the Spirit has not been learned by observing the Spirit at work in the church. It has rather been learned by trusting what the New Testament says about the work of the Spirit in the church.

## THE SPIRIT BEARS WITNESS CONCERNING JESUS

The Spirit bears witness concerning Jesus. I am describing this work first

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 31:3-5, Judg. 14:6, 19.

because this is the most characteristic work of the Spirit. In fact, it is the defining work of the Spirit.

Today many people assume that the defining work of the Spirit is to generate enthusiasm. When they say “That church really has the Spirit,” they mean that the church is enthusiastic. They sometimes assume that the inverse is true also—any church that displays great energy and enthusiasm must be filled with the Spirit. Although this assumption is understandable, it is mistaken. Enthusiasm is not the defining work of the Spirit.

What defines the presence of God’s Spirit is that a community’s faith and life are centered on the historical Jesus. This truth is taught in multiple places in the New Testament. In the *paraklete* sayings, for example, Jesus said four things about the Spirit and himself:

- The Spirit “will remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).
- The Spirit “will testify on my behalf” (John 15:26).
- The Spirit “will glorify me” (John 16:14).
- The Spirit “will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14).

In addition, Jesus instructed the disciples to wait in Jerusalem so that “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you . . . you will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). That is exactly what happened. The disciples waited in Jerusalem until the Festival of Pentecost, during the festival the Spirit came and filled them all (Acts 2:4), and they all began immediately to proclaim God’s mighty works (Acts 2:6, 11). After that Peter preached a sermon about “Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 2:22).

In addition to the New Testament teaching that the work of the Spirit is centered upon the historical Jesus, two of the New Testament writers rejected proposals that the characteristic activity of the Spirit is something other than giving witness to Jesus. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul answers several questions that the church had asked him in an earlier letter.<sup>1</sup> Apparently one of the questions the church had asked Paul was something like this: Is speaking in tongues the defining work of the Spirit? Paul replied that it is not, and he reminded his readers that they had spoken in tongues before they became Christians. He then emphasized that it is the confession “Jesus is Lord” that is the true sign that the Spirit is at work (1 Cor. 12:1-3).

John wrote his first epistle in part to argue against the teachings of docetists. One of the things docetists taught was that Jesus was divine but that his body was not physical. John replied as follows: “By this you know

<sup>1</sup> We do not have the letter from the church to Paul. In 1 Corinthians Paul uses the word “concerning” to introduce his responses to the church’s questions (1 Cor. 7:1, 7:25, 8:1, 12:1, 16:1).

the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3).

For these reasons I say that the defining work of the Spirit is to bear witness concerning Jesus. Although the Spirit teaches about other things in addition to Jesus (see John 16:13), it is Jesus that is characteristic of the Spirit’s work.

## THE SPIRIT CREATES THE CHURCH

The second work of the Spirit is creating the church.

We have seen that from the beginning God’s purpose was to create a community of people to be God’s own: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” In the Old Testament era God called Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be that community. Today as in the past God is the God of the Jews, and the Jews are God’s people. The church has not displaced the Jews as God’s elect people. That view, known as supersessionism, is not consistent with the ministry of Jesus. He was a Jew until he died, and he never suggested that his fellow Jews should cease being Jews. Supersessionism is also at variance with the memorable metaphor Paul used in Romans 9-11. Paul wrote that Israel is the Lord’s olive tree and that the Gentile members of the church are a branch grafted onto the original Jewish tree (Rom. 11:17-24). Today there are about sixteen million Jews in the world, and the church numbers more than 2 billion, but that must not mislead us. Israel is still God’s tree, and the church is still a graft. “The gifts and the calling of God [to Israel] are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29).

Although the church does not replace the Jews as God’s people, it does exist because of the extension of the boundaries of God’s covenant people beyond the Jewish people. The first Christians, all of whom were Jews, were amazed that God was incorporating Gentiles into the covenant people along with Jews. Their amazement is evident in the story of the Roman centurion Cornelius. When God sent Peter to tell Cornelius about Jesus, Peter discovered that God was fully accepting Cornelius and his Gentile friends into the covenant people even though they were not Jews. Peter said:

I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is lord of all” (Acts 10:34-36).

Luke mentions that Peter and his Jewish companions were “astounded” (Acts 10:45) that the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius and other Gentiles.

The leaders of the early church worked hard to incorporate this new thing, the coming of Gentiles into God’s covenant people, into their thinking. Here is one detailed account of the understanding at which they arrived:

You [Gentiles] were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near [to God and to us Jews who were already near God] by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances [as prerequisites for participation in the covenant people], that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death the hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you [Gentiles] who were far off and peace to those [Jews] who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.<sup>1</sup>

In this passage the author makes two things very clear. First, it is clear that the unprecedented incorporation of Gentiles in the covenant people was carried out “through him”—through Jesus. During his public ministry Jesus healed Gentiles as well as Jews (Mt. 8:5-13). But the principal evidence that God was bring Gentiles into the covenant was what happened when the gospel of the death and resurrection was preached. What happened was that enormous numbers of Gentiles welcomed the gospel. The church is truly Jews and Gentiles “in one body through the cross.”

Second, the author makes it clear that it is “in one Spirit”—the Holy Spirit—that Gentiles and Jews know God. As they come to know God through the gospel of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles who had been separated for centuries are given by the Spirit a shared life of faith in Jesus. Just as ancient Israel

shared a common life of faith in God, so the church shares a common life of faith in Jesus as the Messiah of God.

From Pentecost forward the church has shared a common life characterized by faith in Jesus. Luke names four of the elements in the life of the first church in Jerusalem: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The apostles’ teaching would have included stories about Jesus’ life and work—stories that otherwise would not have been known to the pilgrims who became Christians at Pentecost—and also instructions about the moral life expected of all Jesus’ followers. The “breaking of bread” was the Lord’s Supper that the church ate in remembrance of Jesus and his sacrifice. “The prayers” were worship services. The “fellowship” was the common life of this faith community. The Greek word that is translated “fellowship” is *koinonia*, and it means “shared life.” The first Christians were a new faith community whose common life was a gift of the Spirit.

Paul told the church at Rome, “The Spirit is your life” (Rom. 8:10, REB), and he concluded his second letter to the church at Corinth with a blessing that includes “the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14). It is therefore perfectly appropriate that in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 381 the Spirit is called “the giver of life.”<sup>1</sup> The Spirit’s work is always life for the faith community, not death; it is constructive for the community, not destructive.

It is because the shared life of the church is a gift of the Spirit that the Spirit may be said to have created the church.

## THE SPIRIT PROTECTS THE CHURCH

Having created the church, the Spirit protects the church. I mentioned earlier that the Spirit protected the people of God during the Old Testament era. The Spirit continued to protect God’s people in the New Testament era and throughout the history of the church. The New Testament speaks of this work of the Spirit repeatedly. For example, Jesus told his disciples that when they are taken into court because of their faith in him, the Spirit will give them words to use in their defense (Mt. 10:19).

In the Gospel of John this idea is expanded in four passages in which the Spirit is described as a *paraklete* or attorney.<sup>2</sup> Jesus said that the Spirit was “another *paraklete*” (John 14:16), which suggests that Jesus had been protecting his disciples and that when Jesus leaves the Spirit will take over

1 Eph. 2:12-18. The information in brackets was inserted to clarify the intention of the writer. J. L. Houlden summarizes that intention as follows: “The subject is now the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles in the Church.” J. L. Houlden, *Paul’s Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 286.

1 See Appendix 4, The Nicene Creed.

2 John 14:16-17, 14:25-26, 15:26-27, 16:1-15.

the work of protecting the disciples. The Spirit will be with the disciples “forever” (John 14:16), an explicit statement that the gift of the Spirit is permanent rather than temporary as in the Old Testament era. The Spirit is not with the world but with the disciples only (John 14:17).

The Spirit will convict the world (John 16:8-11). One conventional interpretation of this is that the Spirit will prepare the hearts of unbelievers to receive the gospel. This is a possible meaning of the text, but there are three reasons to think that is not what Jesus meant:

- Jesus had said earlier that the world cannot receive the Spirit (John 14:17).
- Elsewhere in the Bible, as we have seen, the Spirit is not said to work with the world but only with the covenant people of God.
- Perhaps most tellingly, the text itself does not sound very much like the Spirit is preparing the world to receive the gospel. If that were the meaning, why, for example, would the world need to be convicted “about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no more” (John 16:10)?

Some scholars have proposed an alternative interpretation that seems to me much more plausible.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is speaking here, just as he was in Matthew 10:19-20, of an occasion on which the disciples will be taken to court and prosecuted for their faith in Christ. During the trial the world will attempt to prove three things: First, the disciples have sinned by believing in Jesus; second, they cannot be right to trust in one who died on a cross; third, Jesus’ death, which was carried out according to Jewish law, was an example of God’s justice. The Spirit will defend the disciples by turning the tables on the world. The Spirit will prove three things: First, it is the world who have sinned by not believing in Jesus; second, the resurrection of Jesus vindicates Jesus as a righteous man, not a sinner; third, it was not Jesus who was judged at the cross but rather the devil.

If this is the correct interpretation of John 16:8-11, then it emphasizes the protective work of the Spirit.

This work of the Spirit includes not only protecting Christians from those who oppose them. It also includes protecting them from losing their faith and from forfeiting the gift of salvation. Paul used a striking metaphor for this. He said that God “has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 5:5). Just as a seal can guarantee that the sealed document or package has not been tampered with, so the Spirit guarantees that God’s people will not

be harmed. Paul expressed this beautifully in this Trinitarian passage:

In Christ you also—once you had heard the message of the truth, the good news of your salvation, and had believed it—in him you were stamped with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; and that Spirit is a pledge of the inheritance which will be ours when God has redeemed what is his own, to his glory and praise. (Eph. 1:13-14, REB)

Paul is saying that every Christian has the Spirit, and the Spirit is a seal that insures that in the end all Christians will receive their inheritance, or, as Jesus said, inherit the kingdom of God (Mt. 25:34)

The Spirit not only makes Christians secure but assures them that they are secure and thereby protects them from the doubts that might come to them. The church does not have to be afraid. The Spirit is a Spirit of love not of fear (2 Tim. 1:7). “The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit of God affirms to our spirit that we are God’s children; and if children, then heirs” (Rom. 8:15-17, REB).

## THE SPIRIT GUIDES AND EMPOWERS THE CHURCH

I have said that the Spirit, by bearing witness concerning Jesus, creates and gives life to the church and protects the church and its faith and life. Along the way I have alluded to the fact that the church has a mission to carry out. Jesus said that the church is to be a witness to the good news about him and his saving work (Acts 1:8).

The fourth work of the Spirit is to guide and empower the church to carry out this mission. The Spirit began to guide and empower the church at Pentecost and continued to do so in the following decades, as seen in the stories told in Acts. For example, at Antioch the entire church was guided when “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2), and the entire church was empowered to preach the gospel in new places after they fled Antioch in order to escape persecution (Acts 12:19ff). Acts contains other stories of the Spirit guiding and empowering individuals. Peter was guided to go and preach to Gentiles (Acts 10:1ff), and he and James were empowered to preach the gospel when they were brought before a council of religious leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 4:1ff).

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible: Companion to the New Testament*, 370-71.

The guiding and empowering work of the Spirit did not end with the close of the New Testament era. The Spirit has continued to do this same work without interruption across the centuries.

The Spirit's guidance takes two distinct forms. One is to guide the church by helping the church to discern what it should be doing, and the other is to guide the church without the church's being aware. Sometimes Christians are able to discern what God wants them to do, but at other times they don't feel any particular sense of guidance. Spiritually these different experiences are of no great importance. Whether we are able to discern the Spirit's guidance or not, we can trust that the Spirit is guiding and empowering us so long as we are acting responsibly and attempting to carry out the mission that Christ has given to the church.

When the church came into being, there was no real precedent for the world mission on which she was sent. Almost all earlier religions had been ethnic and local, though some had been disseminated around the Roman empire. Jesus sent the church off on a missionary enterprise unlike anything that had happened before in history. Christianity was the first world religion.

It is because the Spirit guides the church that the church knows what its mission is. And it is because the Spirit empowers the church that the church has the resources to carry out its mission.

The church gives her witness about Jesus to the entire world—"to the ends of the earth," as Jesus said (Acts 1:8). We call this witness *evangelism*, telling the good news.

But the church also gives her witness about Jesus to herself. The church can exist as the church only by remembering her Lord, so in the church we tell each other the story of Jesus, over and over. Jesus told the disciples to observe the communion meal of bread and wine "in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24-25) in order to insure that they would never forget him and what he did on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

## THE SPIRIT GIVES SPIRITUAL GIFTS TO THE CHURCH

The fifth work of the Spirit is to give spiritual gifts to God's people. This is one of the principal ways the Spirit empowers the church for its mission. Spiritual gifts are forms of empowerment. They are skills, talents, and abilities of various kinds. Earlier we saw that the Spirit did this for selected individual leaders in ancient Israel. In the Christian church the Spirit gives spiritual gifts to all of God's people. Both Peter and Paul wrote about the

spiritual gifts.<sup>1</sup> In the following passage, Paul says twice that every Christian receives a spiritual gift:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them *in everyone*. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor. 12:4-7, italics added)

The best context for thinking about the spiritual gifts is the church. The gifts are not given to help individuals to be successful in their careers or their personal lives. They are given to members of the church to help the church to carry out its mission to the world.

Today some Christians are interested in the distinction between natural abilities and supernatural gifts. For example, they carefully distinguish the natural gift of preaching from the supernatural gift of speaking in tongues. Paul showed no interest in this distinction. His concern was that God was equipping the church with the gifts it needed to carry out its work in the world. I think we would be wise not to place too much emphasis on this distinction.

There is no reason to believe that the lists of gifts given by Paul and Peter include all the spiritual gifts. For example, some Christians have a gift of music, some have a gift for ministry with young people, and some have a gift for pastoral counseling. Even though these gifts are not mentioned in the New Testament, they are gifts given by the Spirit because they make it possible for the church to carry out its mission.

All of the Spirit's gifts are resources for the mission God has given the church. That is why Paul insisted that love is more important than the gifts (1 Cor. 12:31-13:13). If the church has great gifts but does not love people, it will not be able to carry out its mission. If it loves people, it will be able to do so.

## THE SPIRIT SANCTIFIES THE CHURCH

Neither in the Old Testament era nor in the life of Jesus was this next work of the Spirit evident, but it is taught in the epistles of the New Testament. The Holy Spirit is working to make the church holy.

Of course, in a sense the church already is holy. Having been forgiven of all her sins, the church possesses a holy standing before God. Nevertheless,

<sup>1</sup> The principal passages are Rom. 12:4-8, 1 Cor. 12-14, Eph. 4:11-16, 1 Peter 4:10-11.

as we all know only too well, the moral life of the church is very far from perfect. There is nothing new about this. The moral life of the church in the New Testament era was deeply flawed.

So the church needs to be morally transformed. The Spirit is steadily doing this, one Christian at a time. A biblical word for being morally changed is *sanctification*. Both Paul and Peter wrote that Christians are given “sanctification by the Spirit” (2 Th. 2:13, 1 Peter 1:2).

On rare occasions moral transformation takes place in an instant, but usually it is a process of gradual and even imperceptible change. Paul said the change is like fruit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). The growth of fruit is slow, but it is steady.

We are aware of some of the means the Spirit uses to transform Christians into good people. Moral instruction can be transformative, and so can sermons exhorting us to live moral lives. Arguments about why we should live morally can change us as can the study of moral virtues. We are helped by hearing stories of people’s moral failures and successes such as Peter’s cowardly denial of Jesus that was followed seven weeks later by his courageous sermon at Pentecost. Hardships can strengthen us morally: “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character” (Rom. 5:3-4).

It seems probable that the Spirit also is working to transform the church in ways of which we are not aware. Since the sources of so much of our moral conduct lie hidden in what we today call the subconscious, it seems likely that the Spirit is working beneath the level of our consciousness to transform us morally.

Each Christian is not only an individual but also a member of the church, and how church members behave as individuals is affected not only by their individual free decisions but also by their participation in the life of the church. It is a true instinct that leads us to trust that what happens during worship services will help make us into better people. When we hear the Word preached and take the bread and wine in sincerity, the Spirit strengthens us to resist temptations and helps us to love our neighbors.

The Spirit is involved in our private prayers as well as in our corporate worship services. Of many remarkable things said about the Spirit in Romans 8, none is more remarkable than this:

The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spir-

it himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost beings knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God’s people as God himself wills. (Rom. 8:26-27, REB)

This statement seems to have no parallel elsewhere in Scripture. We can express it in anachronistic language by saying that Paul thought that the Third Person of the Trinity helps the church to pray to the First Person of the Trinity. Apparently his reference to “our inarticulate groans” means that, when we are unable to find words for our prayers, the Spirit will do that on our behalf. Such is the love of God for us that, even when we are too weak properly to ask for God’s help, the Holy Spirit will hear our groans and ask on our behalf. If in our weakness we are impatient or lack compassion for those who are suffering or are too timid to speak the gospel, the Spirit knows those weaknesses and offers prayers on our behalf.

To summarize:

- The Spirit makes the ancient message about Jesus Christ a vivid, living message in every generation.
- The Spirit creates the church.
- The Spirit protects and assures the church.
- The Spirit guides and empowers the church on its mission.
- The Spirit gives spiritual gifts to the church.
- The Spirit shapes the lives of Christians into the image of Christ.

This is a radical teaching because it says that the Spirit’s work is not conditional on our conduct. The Spirit is doing these things, whether we are asking for them or not. That raises the question: Does the church cooperate in this work of the Spirit?

## COOPERATING WITH THE SPIRIT

As we have seen, scattered through the Bible are passages which tell of Spirit taking control of an individual’s life and working through that individual without his or her cooperation. For example, King Saul had an experience which is described this way: “The Spirit of God possessed him, and he fell into a prophetic frenzy” (1 Sam. 10:10). Apparently the Spirit took complete control of Saul and used him to prophesy, much as a puppeteer controls and speaks through a puppet.

We see this also on the Day of Pentecost: “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave

them ability” (Acts 2:4). At Pentecost the disciples did not need to cooperate with Spirit or to draw on their knowledge of other languages; the Spirit took possession of them and miraculously used them to communicate to those who heard them.

The best name for this kind of relationship is *possession*. It is not surprising that the Spirit is able to possess or take control of people. After all, we human beings are able to take control of other human beings. We can do this with drugs and with hypnosis. We can do it also by exerting a psychological influence that is so strong that the other person cannot resist. I am not talking here about simply influencing someone but about taking full control of someone. God’s Spirit sometimes does this.

So the question is not whether the Spirit can do this. That is a given. The question is whether this is the ideal relationship between Spirit and an individual.

I believe the answer is no. I think that possession is at best a temporary relationship, one that Spirit employs en route to creating a more important relationship. The more important relationship is that human beings live in “the communion of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14). Communion is better than possession.

In support of this is the fact that, if all that God wants from human beings is to take control of their lives, there would seem to be no reason why God would not just go ahead and do that for everyone, immediately. Presumably God has the power to do it.

But the long biblical story of God’s forgiving and reconciling human beings and patiently gathering them into a covenant community, shows that what God desires is to live in loving communion with human beings. If God wanted us to control us like puppets, this story of God’s love and sacrifice for us would be superfluous. God wants persons, not puppets. God is creating a family and, like parents in healthy human families, God is respectful of the freedom, admittedly very limited but nevertheless very real, of the children.

The desire of God to be in communion with human beings rather than to take possession of them has important implications for their lives. It means that they are not called to be passive before God but rather to cooperate with God. But how can they do that? In particular, how do they cooperate with the Spirit?

In addition to the passages which show the Spirit taking possession of people, the Bible contains many passages which speak of people cooperating (or failing to cooperate) with the Spirit. In Scripture we are told to be

baptized in the Spirit, to walk in the Spirit, to sow to the Spirit, to follow the Spirit, to be good stewards of the gifts of the Spirit, to be filled with the Spirit, to worship God in the Spirit, to pray in the Spirit, and to keep the unity of the Spirit. We also are told not to resist the Spirit, not to tempt the Spirit, not to grieve the Spirit, and not to quench the Spirit. Perhaps all these things are summed up in Paul’s lapidary phrase, “Live in the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5). We are to live our entire lives in cooperation with Spirit.

What does this mean? Some of the above phrases are reasonably clear. For example, there are 18 biblical passages that refer to being filled with the Spirit or being full of the Spirit, 14 of them in Luke-Acts. In 16 of the 18 passages there is a reference to speech. Acts 4:31 is representative: “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” Paul wrote just once about being filled with the Spirit, and the speech he had in mind was worship: “Let the Holy Spirit fill you: speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and songs” (Eph. 5:18-19, REB). It seems reasonable to conclude that being filled with the Spirit means being empowered to speak words of witness and worship.

On the other hand, it is difficult to know what some of the other phrases mean. For example, there is only one reference to quenching the Spirit. Paul wrote, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Th. 5:19), but he did not say what that means.

Parenthetically, the image of being filled with the Spirit, like the image of being baptized, suggests water, as a glass filled with water. The image of quenching suggests fire, and the tongues of fire at Pentecost suggest this, too. Earlier we saw that the Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, also means wind, and at Pentecost there was the sound of a rushing wind. So in the New Testament the Spirit is variously presented as wind and fire and water. We might characterize all these descriptions of cooperating with the Spirit something like this: “Let the Spirit move you like a wind. Let Spirit fill you up like water. Let the Spirit burn in your hearts like a flame of love.”

This is inspiring language, and it certainly shows that the church is called to cooperate with the Spirit. But of course this language does not tell us exactly how to cooperate with Spirit. Instead of attempting to determine the precise meaning of each of the biblical phrases, we will review the activities of Spirit and indicate some of the ways the church might cooperate with the Spirit in each of them.

The principal work of Spirit is bearing witness concerning Jesus. The church cooperates with the Spirit in this work by remembering Jesus. The

church must never, ever forget that Jesus lived and taught and healed, and that he suffered and died and rose again. And the church cooperates by sharing the message about Jesus with others, that is, by evangelism.

The second work of Spirit is to create the church and give it its common life. Christians cooperate with the Spirit in this work by believing in the church and by participating wholeheartedly in its life.

The third activity of Spirit is to protect the covenant people. In particular, Spirit protects the faith and life of Christians and of the church. We cooperate with Spirit in this work by doing our best to keep the faith. We are told: "Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit" (2 Tim. 1:14).

The fourth work of Spirit is to guide and empower the church on its mission to the world. The first thing the church must do in order to cooperate with Spirit's guidance of the church, is just to believe in it. We need to trust that Spirit is guiding the church. We then cooperate by participating in the mission God has given to the church. I will describe that mission at length in Chapter 10.

The fifth work of the Spirit is to give spiritual gifts to all members of the church. We cooperate with the Spirit in that work by being good stewards of them, using them to serve the Lord by serving the Lord's people and by serving the world.

The sixth work of Spirit is to transform the church morally from the inside out. Christians cooperate with the Spirit in this work by intentionally committing themselves to walk in the way of Jesus, and then by trying conscientiously to do just that.

I will say more about the work of the Spirit in Chapters 9 and 10.

### THE SPIRIT, DIVINE AND PERSONAL

We are now in a position to answer two important questions about the Spirit. First, is the Spirit divine? Second, is the Spirit personal? The answer to both questions is yes.

The Spirit is God's Spirit. In fact, the Spirit is so closely associated with God that a case can be made that the Spirit is simply the presence of God in the world; I will consider this suggestion in a moment. But clearly the Spirit is not an angel or a human being but God.

The Spirit is personal. Here we face two questions. One is whether the Spirit is a person or a power. Another is whether the Spirit is distinct from

God and distinct from the risen Christ.

The Spirit is very powerful, of course. But the power of the Spirit is the power of a person, not of an impersonal force. The power of the Spirit is more like the power of, for example, a president of the United States, than it is like the power of electricity. We know this because the Spirit's power is used to do things that only persons can do: to guide the church, to give gifts such as intelligible speech, and to shape people so that they are loving and kind and gentle. These are things that cannot be done by an impersonal power, however great. The fact that the church can cooperate with the Spirit in these various works also suggests that the Spirit is personal.

Also, the Spirit is spoken of in terms that are appropriate only for persons. For example, Paul urged the Ephesians not to grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). A man named Ananias lied to the Spirit (Acts 5:3). The Spirit helps Christians to pray (Rom. 8:26). Clearly the Spirit is personal, not an impersonal force.

The more difficult question is whether the Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and the Son. I believe that in the *paraklete* sayings in John a clear distinction is made between the Spirit and Jesus. The Spirit is "another" Advocate, that is, another one distinct from Jesus (John 14:16). The distinction between Jesus and the Spirit is clear also in Jesus' saying that he must leave so that the Spirit may come (John 16:7).

A distinction between the Father and the Spirit is found in the fact that we pray to the Father with the Spirit's help; no New Testament writer would say that we pray to the Spirit with the Father's help. A distinction is also being made when it is said that God sends or pours out the Spirit (Acts 2:17). No one would suggest that the Spirit sends or pours out the Father.

Our study to this point has brought us to the doctrine of the Trinity. We shall deal with that doctrine in Chapter 12, as a way of summarizing what we have learned about God. In the meantime, we shall study in more detail four themes that have already been mentioned repeatedly, namely, salvation, Christian living, the church, and the last things.

## CHAPTER 8

# SALVATION

## INTRODUCTION

Religion is about salvation. It also is about God and many other subjects, but it is necessarily about salvation. When philosophers argue about whether or not God exists, they are not being religious, just philosophical. It is only when people begin to seek help—salvation—from God that they are being religious. Salvation is understood very differently in the different religions, but all religions speak of salvation in some sense.<sup>1</sup>

The Jewish and Christian religions are no exception. The Bible is about salvation. In the Old Testament era salvation was principally a social matter: God saved the people of Israel. Their salvation was almost exclusively a this-world matter. God saved Israel from captivity in Egypt, gave them a land of their own, and protected them so that they survived.

In the New Testament era the understanding of salvation was expanded dramatically. The people of God no longer have biological ties; persons from every ethnic group may experience the salvation that Christ gives. Moreover, salvation is for the future life as well as the present life. Death cannot “separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:39). And while salvation continues to have a very important social component, the gospel of Christ also calls for a response from individuals.

In this chapter our subject is the salvation that Christ has provided. This salvation is the solution to the human predicament that was discussed in Chapter 4, and it has been made available by the work of Christ that was discussed in Chapter 6.

### SALVATION IN THE PAST, IN THE PRESENT, AND IN THE FUTURE

The Bible and the church teach that salvation has past, present, and future dimensions. In one sense Christians have already been saved, that is, they

have already come to have faith in Christ. In another sense they are being saved, that is, they are being transformed into good people. And in yet another sense they will be saved, that is, in the end they will be glorified in heaven.

In some churches it is traditional to describe these three aspects as justification, sanctification, and glorification, respectively. This helps clarify things. However, the writers of the New Testament did not always use such precise language. For example, they spoke of God’s forgiveness as past, present, and future. God has forgiven Christians of their sins (Eph. 4:32), God is continually forgiving them of their sins (1 John 1:9), and “in the age to come” God will forgive them of their sins (Mt. 12:32). The terminology is not important; what is important is that we recognize that there are three dimensions to salvation. Something really has happened already in the lives of Christians, something that is finished and does not need to be repeated. Something really is going on continually in Christians’ lives, an unfinished process. And Christians really do have something to look forward to in the life to come.

The past, present, and future dimensions of salvation appear together in several passages in the New Testament. For example, in what may be the oldest Christian writing we have Paul wrote: “You turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Th. 1:9-10). Paul is saying that in the past the church at Thessalonica had turned to God, in the present they were serving God, and in the future God’s Son will appear from heaven and their salvation will be complete.

The three aspects of salvation are displayed also in this passage: “Therefore, now that we have been justified through faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ . . . and we exult in the hope of the divine glory that is to be ours” (Rom. 5:1-2, REB). In the past Paul and his readers were justified. In the present they are living at peace with God. In the future they will share in God’s glory.<sup>1</sup>

In this book I will attempt to describe all three of these dimensions. I will describe the past dimension in this chapter, the present dimension in Chapter 9, and the future dimension in Chapter 11.

### TWO PATHS TO FAITH

Before I describe the initial dimension of salvation, I want to explain why it is appropriate to do so. This is not as straightforward as it may seem. The reason is that, while many churches emphasize the initial dimension,

<sup>1</sup> Other passages that allude to the three dimensions are Rom. 6:22, Phil. 1:6, and Titus 2:11-13.

<sup>1</sup> On some possible implications of the fact that the religions understand salvation differently see S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2001).

most do not. As a result, today there are two paths by which people come to have faith in Christ. On one path the initial act of faith is emphasized, and on the other it is not. The difference between these two constitutes one of the most important differences in the Christian churches today.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to understand the differences in the two paths. It can be difficult for those who are familiar with only one of the paths to understand the other one, so I will begin with personal examples taken not from religion but from family life and friendships. I have no awareness of when I first came to have faith in my mother and to trust that she loved me and that she was a competent person and a good mother. I never made a conscious decision to trust her. I just naturally grew to trust her. And it was a matter of great consequence that I did, because it made my life much better than it would have been had I not trusted her.

On the other hand, I can remember when I came to have faith in certain of my friends. I can remember deciding to trust them to be trustworthy friends and to believe what they said. That faith also was of great consequence for my life because it led to rich experiences of friendship that otherwise would not have been possible.

My faith was real in both cases, and it was important in both cases. There really are two paths to faith.

This is true of Christian faith as well as other kinds of faith. The Christian church has always known this. The Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church are the most ancient churches. For almost two thousand years they have baptized their infant children and treated them as members of the church. When their children reach the age of discretion they are confirmed into the life of the church. Many Protestant churches follow the same practices.

Members of these churches, almost two billion of them today, were never encouraged by their churches to be converted to the Christian faith. To these churches it would not have made sense to invite their children to come to Christian faith. After all, they had never embraced any other religious beliefs than Christian beliefs, and they had never practiced any other religion than the Christian religion. In that sense they had nothing from which to be converted. They had grown naturally to trust in Christ and to welcome the grace and forgiveness that Christ gives. This is the path that the majority of

Christians have taken to faith in Christ.

But hundreds of millions of other Christians have come to faith in Christ by the second path. Many Protestant churches emphasize the necessity of conversion for their own children as well as for everyone else. Many of these churches do not baptize their infant children until they have experienced conversion, so baptism is for them a marker of their initial act of trusting in Christ. And some of these churches that do practice infant baptism nevertheless teach that it is necessary for their children to experience a conversion. Some of them associate this with the rite of confirmation.

Both of these paths to faith have their origins in biblical religion. The belief that infants are included in the faith community and do not need to be converted into it goes back to ancient Israel. All of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah were born into the Hebrew faith community. They were not converted into it. They might be good members or bad members of the faith community, but they were all members.

In the New Testament era things began to change. Jesus brought together a “little flock” (Luke 12:32), a small, new faith community within the larger Jewish faith community. He did this by calling his listeners to make a response to his message about the kingdom of God. The individuals who accepted his message and followed him became members of a new community of faith. They were born into the Jewish faith community and then converted into Jesus’ little flock also.

This process was intensified at Pentecost. Peter called his listeners to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38). Those who accepted this call became members of the new community, the church. Three thousand were added that day alone. They had been born into the Jewish faith community, and now they were also converted into the new faith community that recognized the crucified Jesus as Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36).

So the Bible tells the story of a transition from a Jewish faith community whose members<sup>1</sup> had entered by birth rather than by conversion, to a Christian faith community whose members entered by means of a conversion. That is the origin of the two paths by which people come to faith.

But the story doesn’t end there. It was only in the first generation of the

<sup>1</sup> Martin E. Marty refers to the two kinds of churches as “catholic” and “baptist.” Martin E. Marty, “Baptistification Takes Over,” *Christianity Today* (September 2, 1983) 27:33-35.

<sup>1</sup> Not quite all of the members of the Jewish faith community were descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Some were Gentile converts to Jewish faith. The book of Ruth tells the story of such a person; see Ruth 1:16-17.

church that all its members had come to faith by conversion.<sup>1</sup> After that the church had to address the issue of the status of the infant children of the first converts. The church's response was to initiate a practice similar to that of the Jewish faith community. They baptized their infant children much as Israel had circumcised her infant male children. The church confirmed their children at the age of discretion and taught them that they were Christians. The question then became, not whether their children were Christians—they were—but whether they would live as good Christians.

Before I attempt to offer a way of coordinating these two understandings of how people come to faith, I want to note two things. I will take the Roman Catholic Church as an example, but what I am saying here applies to Orthodox Churches and to many Protestant churches as well.

First, the Roman Catholic Church evangelizes people who have not grown up in the Christian faith and calls them to be converted to faith in Christ. Every year thousands of people who are not Christians are converted and become Roman Catholics. They come from other religious faiths or from no faith at all.

Second, the Roman Catholic Church does not invite “cradle Catholics” to become Christians. It does invite them other kinds of conversion, for example, to work for peace and justice, to care for the needy, and to practice more meaningful spiritual disciplines. Conversion is very important to the Roman Catholic Church, but the Church does not call its young children to be converted in order to become Christians.

Now we come to the question: What shall we say about the two paths to Christian faith?

First, we need to acknowledge that people do come to faith in Christ by both of these paths. Every year tens of millions of people are received into their churches as infants and then nurtured in the faith, and at confirmation or some other time they come to “own” the faith for themselves. And, on the other hand, every year millions of other people undergo an experience of conversion in which they intentionally receive God's gift of salvation by putting their trust in Jesus Christ.

Second, the issue of overriding importance is not whether one has arrived at faith by this path or that one. The issue is whether one has arrived at faith

at all. If one is trusting in Christ as one's Savior and Lord, then it is a matter of secondary importance whether one came to faith naturally or abruptly.

Third, there is a sense in which even those Christians who arrived naturally at faith have experienced a conversion. What I mean is this: If at the time of her birth an infant is not trusting in Christ—which clearly is the case—and if by the time she reaches the age of, let us say, twenty, she is trusting in Christ, then somewhere along the way she became a person with trust in Christ. Even if the moment she did this was not apparent to her or to anyone else, still, it happened. Even if her church does not emphasize the moment that she did it, it happened. Even if later on she can't remember that she did it, it happened. Whether conversion is dramatic and obvious or quiet and imperceptible is not the issue. The issue is that at some point one moves from being a person who is not trusting in Christ to one who is. That is what is meant by conversion, and it is the subject of this chapter.

## GOD AND GRACE

In order to understand the past experience of salvation we will explore three themes: grace, faith, and salvation. They all appear in a well-known statement by Paul to the Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8).

I begin with grace. The word “grace” is used frequently in the New Testament, and it is a familiar term in the life of the church today. Here in America, John Newton's hymn “Amazing Grace” is one of the best known and most loved hymns. I will offer seven comments about grace.

First, grace is love. God's grace is God's love. This is a simple idea and an obvious one, but it needs to be stated because it is sometimes overlooked. There are kinds of love that are not grace. For example, God deeply loved Jesus (John 17:26), but that love is not grace. It is important to specify what kind of love God's grace is.

Second, grace is love that takes the initiative. God is gracious toward human beings prior to anything they do. God's grace is not a response that God makes to initiatives that human beings have taken. It is rather an initiative that God takes and to which human beings are called to respond.

Third, God's grace is God's love for people even though they do not deserve it. Earlier we said that it is characteristic of religions that their adherents seek salvation from their god or gods. Christianity is unusual and may be unique in that it affirms that God provides salvation not only for re-

<sup>1</sup> In fact, there are hints in Acts that not all of the original church members came by personal conversion. Some may have entered the community because of their parents' faith. See, for example, the reference to “your household” in Acts 16:31. The Bible does not emphasize individualism in the way our modern world does.

ligious and morally upright people but for all people.<sup>1</sup> God does this because God in grace loves all people and “desires everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4).

Fourth, God’s grace is God’s love for persons who are in need. God is on the side of the needy and helpless. In spiritual terms that includes all human beings. God has compassion on them all and sympathy for them all. That is grace.

Fifth, God’s grace actively helps people who are needy. God’s grace is more than feelings of compassion and sympathy. Grace includes actions of compassion and sympathy. God in grace acts to help the needy.

Sixth, God’s grace is given generously. There is nothing stingy, parsimonious, reticent, or calculating about the way God acts in love to help undeserving, needy human beings. God’s grace is unconditional.

Seventh and finally, God’s grace is successful. There is a victorious quality about God’s grace. God does not just attempt to help the needy. God succeeds in helping them and in meeting their needs.

Since God’s grace is love that acts, one way to describe it is to recite some of God’s acts of grace. The call of Abraham, the rescue of Israel from Egypt, the sending of the prophets, and the deliverance from captivity in Babylon were all acts of God’s grace, that is, of God lovingly helping needy, undeserving people. For the New Testament church by far the most important act of God’s grace was the coming of Christ and his suffering, dying, and rising again to save human beings. In fact, when Paul wrote the words “by grace” in Ephesians 2:8 he many have been thinking “by the cross.” In the cross of Christ God’s grace is displayed most fully—there we see the extent to which God is prepared to go in order to save needy and undeserving people.

Since the first Good Friday and Easter Sunday God has continued to act to help people benefit from what Christ achieved for them. These continuing acts of grace are innumerable. They include empowering the church to preach the gospel, saving those who accept Christ, and producing the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of Christians.

To the responses of human beings we now turn our attention.

1 The writers of the Bible recognize the difference between good and bad people; see, for example, the contrast in Psalms 1 between those whose “delight is in the law of the Lord” and those whom the psalmist calls “the wicked” (Ps. 1:2, 4). On the other hand, the writers of the Bible also recognize that there is an equally important sense in which no one is perfectly good. For this reason everyone needs God’s forgiveness. By definition, forgiveness cannot be deserved. It is true that sometimes people speak about “those who deserve to be forgiven.” This is a reference to the good people in the sense found in Psalms 1. But in the strict sense forgiveness is by definition undeserved: When you hurt someone unfairly, what you deserve is to be hurt in return. If you are rather forgiven, you have been given a gift you did not deserve.

## HUMAN BEINGS AND FAITH

### FLEXIBLE LANGUAGE

God’s initiative of grace elicits a response from human beings. Interestingly, the early church employed several different words to speak about that response. Here are two passages that reflect the flexibility of their language:

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. (Acts 2:38)

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9)

In these two brief sentences four different words are used for the response that people are to make in order to experience God’s gift of forgiveness and salvation: repentance, baptism, confession, and belief. Does this mean that one must do four things in order to receive the gift of salvation? The answer, I think, is that these are not four responses, nor are they four steps in a single response. Rather, they are four ways of thinking about a single response.

Let me explain. In the writings of Paul and John the most prominent word for our response to God’s grace is “faith.” In the New Testament, the noun “faith” and the verb “believe” are part of the same linguistic family.<sup>1</sup> To believe is to have faith. Following John and Paul, I shall use “faith” as the fundamental name for our human response to God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

I understand repentance to be a metaphor for faith. To repent is to change your mind, to turn around, to reverse course. Thus the move from having no faith to having faith is an act of repentance.<sup>2</sup>

I understand confession to be a verbal expression of faith that Jesus is Lord.

I understand baptism to be a non-verbal confession of faith that Jesus is Lord. In the early church baptism was the initial public confession of faith that converts made.

Both verbal confession and confession-by-means-of-baptism may be understood as performative utterances. A performative utterance is one in

1 The Greek word for the verb “believe” is *pisteuo*, and the Greek word for the noun “faith” is *pistis*.

2 Repentance is frequently understood as feeling regret for one’s sins and turning from one’s sins. This is true in the Bible, and it is true of many people today. But the Greek word for “repentance,” *metanoia*, can mean any sort of turning around including turning from unfaith to faith.

which to say something is to do it. Here are some examples: At an auction to say, “I bid \$100,” is to bid \$100. To say “I apologize” is to apologize. To say “I swear to tell the truth” is to swear to tell the truth. To say “I promise to be on time” is to promise to be on time.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, sincerely to confess “I believe in Jesus as Lord” is to believe in Jesus as Lord. That is the case both for verbal confession and for confession by means of baptism.

In summary, I think of faith, repentance, baptism, and confession not as four separate responses to God’s grace but a single response described in different and mutually illuminating terms.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to ask why the Christians in the New Testament era were so flexible in the language they used about the human response to the gospel. The reason, I think, is that the human response to God’s grace was for them a secondary concern. Their primary concern was what God had done in Christ. That is what they emphasized in their preaching. This was especially evident on the day of Pentecost. Peter initially did not even ask his hearers to respond. The sermon actually ends with Peter informing everyone that Jesus is Lord and Christ. Only when the audience asked Peter what they should do about his message did Peter prescribe a response for them (Acts 2:36-38).

### TRUST: INSIGHT AND DECISION

We who live in the part of the world where Christianity has been the predominant religion can easily overlook the fact that other religions do not emphasize faith the way Christianity does. People have responded to their gods in many ways, by prayers, good works, sacrifices, and so on. It is the Christian religion that has made faith the fundamental response of human beings to God. Here is how one influential scholar has expressed this fact:

In Christianity, for the first time, “faith” became the prevailing term for man’s relation to the divine; in Christianity, but not before it, “faith” came to be understood as the attitude which through and through governs the life of the religious man.<sup>3</sup>

1 Justus Hartnack, “Performative Utterances” in Paul Edwards, editor, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. & The Free Press, 1967), VI:90-92.

2 I am not suggesting that these distinctions were always made by Paul and other authors of the New Testament. They were not. This is my interpretation of the flexible language of the New Testament.

3 Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* translated by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1951), I: 89.

Since faith is the basic response we make to Christ, it is helpful to understand it as well as we can. The fundamental meaning of Christian faith is trust in Christ. Trust includes an intellectual component: I believe *that* Christ died and rose again. It also includes a personal or volitional component: I believe *in* Christ who died and rose again to save us from our sins.

We may call the two components “insight” and “decision.” Insight and decision are not ordinarily experienced as two steps to faith. Many Christians never realize that faith comprises both insight and decision. They trust in Christ and only later realize that their faith involved both insight and decision, both their minds and their hearts.

Both insight and decision are important. Insight without decision is just information. It is not personal trust. On the other hand, decision without insight is a leap into the dark. Though some Christians have praised leaping into the dark as an act of courage, it would be truer to say that God invites people to leap into the light. As Paul expressed it, “I know whom I have trusted” (2 Tim. 1:12, REB).

God’s grace and our faith fit together like a hand and a glove. The relationship between them is one of giving and receiving. God in grace gives; we in faith receive God’s gift. John described faith as an act of receiving: “To all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12). For John, to believe in Jesus is to receive him and thereby to become a child of God.

Receiving is a wonderful metaphor for faith, but we must not allow it to mislead us. Faith is not passive. It is active. But the action is one of receiving rather than of giving.

On the other hand, we do not offer our faith to God in exchange for salvation. There is no barter involved. Rather, God in grace loves us and offers us salvation as a free gift. We in faith receive the salvation that God offers. We trust God to be our Savior.

### THE INTRINSIC NECESSITY FOR TRUST

Understanding faith in this way enables us to respond to a question that troubles many people. It is the issue of arbitrariness. The question is, “Does God set arbitrary conditions that people must meet in order to be saved?” Is it arbitrary of God to say that people must put their trust in Jesus in order to receive the gift of salvation? After all, many people never even hear about Jesus. For that matter, not everyone has heard that there is only one true and living God and that God created the world.

Let me begin by saying that setting the conditions for salvation is God's prerogative. Human beings are not in a position to object if God sets an arbitrary condition. The question is not whether God can set arbitrary conditions but whether God has in fact done so.

I am convinced that God has not set arbitrary conditions for salvation. My conviction about this comes from remembering the crucifixion of Jesus. To me it seems incoherent to think that Christ would have made the personal sacrifice he did to save sinners and then set arbitrary conditions that people must meet in order to receive his gift of salvation.

The principle that God does not act arbitrarily guided me when I wrote earlier about the relationship between faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. It is an important guide for all of my thinking about God.

In order to understand why faith is not an arbitrary but an intrinsically necessary condition for salvation, consider two friends. There is nothing arbitrary about the fact that two people can be good friends only if they trust each other. Mutual trust is intrinsically necessary for friendship. Likewise, it is intrinsically necessary for us to trust God if we are to be reconciled to God and live at peace with God.

In summary, God in grace loves us and through Christ makes provision for our salvation. We hear the gospel of Christ and respond by trusting God to save us. We thereby receive salvation as a free gift from God.

We turn now to some biblical descriptions of that free gift.

## BIBLICAL IMAGES OF SALVATION

In Chapter 6 we saw that the writers of the New Testament used a wide range of images to speak about the salvation that Christ provided. The same thing is true of salvation as it is experienced by Christians. Presumably the reason for the variety of images is that salvation is a spiritual reality that is so profound that no single image can do it justice. What I will do now is to describe very briefly eight clusters of images of salvation.<sup>1</sup> The images are reasonably distinct from each other, though there is some overlap. In my description of each cluster I will indicate the context from which the image has been taken, the understanding of the human predicament that is assumed, and some implications of the image for how Christians live their lives.

<sup>1</sup> I am here treating these images as referring to the same thing. They are treated differently in Reformed theology. See Appendix 7, Calvinism.

## FREEDOM

The first image of what happened to us when we trusted Christ is that we were redeemed or liberated. The context for this image is a slave market. In Chapter 4 we saw that human beings are victims of evil powers, and in Chapter 6 we saw that Christ has set us free from slavery to those powers. The image of redemption was important in the Exodus story, and the New Testament writers used this image repeatedly. Paul wrote: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

Since salvation is liberation, we are to live in freedom and to refuse to become enslaved again. A Scandinavian theologian, Anders Nygren, suggested that the theme of freedom is dominant in four chapters of Romans. Paul wrote about freedom from God's wrath (Romans 5), freedom from sin (Romans 6), freedom from law (Romans 7), and freedom from death (Romans 8).<sup>1</sup>

## LIFE

Several of the biblical images of salvation are clustered around the idea of life. Salvation is pictured in the New Testament as new birth, regeneration, resurrection, eternal life, abundant life, new life, and a new creation.<sup>2</sup> The context for these images might be said to be a maternity ward (new birth) or a cemetery (resurrection from the dead).

The images of new birth and resurrection are surprising; presumably they were intended to surprise. It is understandable that Nicodemus was puzzled when Jesus talked to him about a new birth (John 3:1-16). Equally surprising are the following words of Paul: "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:4-5). Elsewhere Paul wrote about a future resurrection of Christians from the dead, but here he uses the image of resurrection to speak of the salvation that Christians have already experienced. The images of abundant life and eternal life are emphasized in the gospel of John.

Since salvation is new life, Christian living is living this new life. The call to follow Jesus is not a call to withdraw from life but to live life to its fullest. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The outcome of living life abundantly was expressed beautifully by

<sup>1</sup> Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* translated by Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 187-349.

<sup>2</sup> John 3:1-16, Titus 3:5, Eph. 2:4-5, 2 Cor. 5:17.

Irenæus, a French bishop in the second century: “The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive.”<sup>1</sup>

## HEALING

The third cluster of images includes healing, health, and wholeness. The context for these images may be said to be a hospital. The understanding of the human predicament is that it is sickness or brokenness. These images lie behind the word “salvation” itself. The Greek word for “to save,” *sozein*, also means “to heal” (see Mt. 9:22). Jesus spoke of himself as a physician (Mark 2:17), and his miracles of healing are signs that point to the spiritual healing he came to provide. This image is especially helpful to many Christians today because therapy and the therapeutic are prominent themes in our culture.

The image of Christian living that healing suggests is that we are to live lives of wholeness and integrity. In a lovely prayer the American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier referred to lives of wholeness and integrity as “ordered lives”:

Drop thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The Beauty of thy peace.<sup>2</sup>

## JUSTIFICATION

The fourth cluster of images is legal in character. Their context is a courtroom. These are the images of justification and acquittal. The human predicament is understood as legal guilt and therefore as being under divine judgment for breaking God’s laws. Paul emphasized these images in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians (Rom. 3:21-5:21, Gal. 2:15-21). These legal images for salvation dominated the minds of the Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. This is not altogether surprising. Calvin was trained as a lawyer, and Luther’s father had wanted him to be a lawyer.

The challenge of these images for Christian living is that, having been acquitted by God from the fact of our guilt, we must learn to live without

being overwhelmed by feelings of guilt. Because ours is a fallen world, there often is a discrepancy between the fact of guilt and feelings of guilt. Some people who commit terrible crimes feel little or no guilt, and some other people whose offenses are relatively mild carry a heavy burden of guilt. The fact that God has justified us—acquitted us of our sin—needs to become a part of Christian experience in such a way that we live with joy and gratitude because we have been justified by God’s grace.

## TRUTH

A fifth cluster of images includes knowledge, truth, and light. The context for these images is the life of the mind and of the conscience. The human predicament is understood as ignorance, false beliefs, and false moral values. Jesus spoke of himself as “the truth,” and he said that eternal life is “to know God” (John 14:6, 17:3). Paul spoke of salvation as knowing God and as being rescued from the power of darkness (Gal. 4:9, Col. 1:13). He also said that all wisdom and knowledge are in Christ (Col. 2:3). The early church resisted a movement called Gnosticism in which salvation was reduced to the possession of arcane knowledge. However, the church did not go so far as to reject the idea that being saved means coming out of darkness and into the light.

Since salvation is moving from darkness into the light of Christ, Christian living is continuing to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18) and in the knowledge of the way of life he taught.

## ADOPTION

The sixth, seventh, and eighth clusters of images all have as their context persons and personal relationships. The sixth image is adoption into God’s family. It is an image used only by Paul.<sup>1</sup> The human predicament is understood as having no spiritual family, being spiritual orphans, or else as belonging to the family of the devil (John 8:44). To be adopted by God into God’s own family is to be loved by God and delivered from loneliness and insecurity. Christian living is understood as life in the family of God, the church. Family life speaks to human beings at a deep, primal level.

## FORGIVENESS

The seventh image of salvation is forgiveness. The human predicament

1 *Gloria enim dei homo vivens*. Irenæus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, quoted in Henry Bettenson, editor, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 104.

2 John Greenleaf Whittier, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind” in *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* (Macon, Georgia: Celebrating Grace, Inc., 2010), 413.

1 Rom. 8:15, 23, 9:4, Gal. 4:5, Eph. 1:4-5.

is understood moral failure that hurts God. The meaning of forgiveness in its interpersonal context is very similar to the meaning of justification in its legal context. Paul treats them as equivalent in Romans 4:5-7. To be forgiven by the Father in heaven (Mt. 6:9, 12) is more or less equivalent to being justified by God the judge (Rom. 3:21-25). Theologian H. R. Mackintosh wrote of forgiveness and justification: "How these ideas, if rightly interpreted, really differ, is hard to see."<sup>1</sup> Negatively, forgiveness means sinners will not be condemned by God. Positively, it means sinners are accepted by God.

The most famous of all biblical stories of forgiveness does not employ the word. It is the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). On Pentecost Peter spoke of forgiveness (Acts 2:38). Years later John wrote: "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name" (1 John 2:12).

Christian living is life lived in the freedom of knowing that we have been forgiven. It also is life lived in an effort to be forgiving toward those who wrong us. Jesus' command to forgive one's enemies may be the most difficult assignment Christians have (Mt. 6:14-15). Paul described the relationship of being forgiven by God to our forgiving those who hurt us this way: "Be kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

## PEACE WITH GOD

The last cluster of images includes reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18), a new covenant (1 Cor. 11:25), and peace with God (Rom. 5:1). The context is that of conflicted relationships between individuals and groups. The human predicament is understood as estrangement from God and hostility toward God. Salvation means that we are no longer God's enemies but God's friends. Christian living means living in friendship with God and Christ (James 2:23, John 15:14-15).

There is a close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation. God in Christ has forgiven sinners whether they know it or not. They begin to benefit from God's forgiveness when they trust in God's mercy and forgiveness. One of the benefits is that they can then be reconciled to God.

## CONCLUSION

The variety of biblical images makes it possible for the church to present the gospel in terms that people can understand and appreciate. Of course, even when we employ all the images of salvation, our knowledge of salvation remains incomplete, but seeing the images together gives us our fullest understanding of God's gift of salvation. We are grateful that by the sacrificial work of Christ we have been set free from evil powers, have been given a new life, have been healed of our spiritual diseases, have been acquitted of our guilt, have learned the truth about God, have been adopted into God's own family, have been forgiven of our sins, and have been reconciled to God.<sup>1</sup>

1 H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, 12.

1 For a fuller statement on these themes see Appendix 8, Further Thoughts about Salvation.

## CHAPTER 9

## CHRISTIAN LIVING

## INTRODUCTION

Some academic theologians address Christian living as part of their doctrine of the church. This is appropriate in the sense that the one must share in the life of the church in order to live as a faithful Christian; the New Testament offers no support for private Christian living. Nevertheless, I am devoting a chapter to Christian living because I think that Christian living raises issues that are not conveniently dealt with in the chapter on the church. I will, however, say several additional things about Christian living in the chapter on the church.

There are two large themes in this chapter, and they are parallel to the themes of grace and faith in the previous chapter. The first is God's work in the lives of Christians; the second is the response Christians make to God's work. I think that Christian living is always a response to God's initiatives and never an initiative we take toward God.

The conventional word for God's work in Christians' lives is "sanctification." Because of its etymology the word "sanctification" is usually defined as God's setting Christians apart to live holy lives. This is very important, but personal holiness is not the entire story of Christian living.

Therefore, rather than write specifically about sanctification, I will discuss two important things that God does to make all of Christian living possible. The first is that God guides us, and the second is that God empowers us. Both guidance and power are indispensable; if God did not guide and empower Christians, they could not live as Christians. They also are sufficient; because God guides and empowers Christians, they know how to live and have the resources to live as Christians.

I hold a somewhat radical view of God's guidance and empowerment. I believe that God does these things unconditionally. We have to act in order to benefit fully from God's guidance and empowerment, but God's work is not contingent upon our acting.

In order to clarify my understanding of God's guidance, I will describe a popular understanding of it and then add to it a practice that is not often discussed but is widely practiced.

The popular understanding is frequently spoken of in terms of finding the will of God or of discerning one's vocation. The meaning of this is ambiguous because the phrase "the will of God" is used to refer to four different things today.

First, "the will of God" may refer to the great purpose for which God created the world. Throughout this book I have referred to my conviction that God's purpose in creating the world is to bring together a family of people to be God's own people, people who receive God's love and who begin to learn to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves. This is a very important topic, but it is not the subject now.

Second, the phrase "the will of God" is used to refer to what is morally right. Christians believe that right is right, not because society approves of it or our consciences approve of it, but because it is the will of God. I will return to this idea in a moment.

Interestingly, the third use of the phrase "the will of God" does not seem to occur in the New Testament, but it is widely used in the church today. The phrase is used to confess our faith in God in the face of tragedy. For example, suppose a Christian young person is killed in a car crash on her way home from church. Some Christians may respond by saying, "It must have been the will of God." If we were to respond to this coolly and neutrally, we might disagree with this statement.<sup>1</sup> We might want to say that God does not will that young people die in car crashes. And we would be right.

But when a tragedy occurs, people usually do not speak coolly and neutrally. They speak from their hearts. And when people say of a tragedy, "It must have been God's will," they are saying that even though this event is terrible, and even though they don't understand it, and even though it looks as if God has either lost control of things or else has not bothered to protect this young Christian—in spite of all this, they are saying, they are still trusting in God. What has happened is a challenge to their faith in God, but they are still confident that things are not out of control and that God does care.

<sup>1</sup> Some Christians would agree with the statement. See Appendix 7, Calvinism.

Understood in this way, “it must have been the will of God” is a confession of wonderful faith in God. Although technically it would be more accurate to say “Even though this has happened, I continue to trust in God” than to say “It must have been God’s will,” what really matters is that a confession of faith in God is being made.

This is also an important topic, but it is not my topic in this chapter.

A fourth use of the phrase “the will of God” refers to a plan that God has for an individual’s life. I am not speaking now of God’s general plan for all people, but of a particular plan for a particular individual. This is the topic to be addressed now.

In the New Testament, when the phrase “the will of God” is used to refer to God’s plan for an individual, it refers to one of three things:

- It is God’s will for every individual to become a Christian. We see this in passages such as the following: “God our Savior . . . desires everyone to be saved” (1 Tim. 2:4).
- It is God’s will for every person who has become a Christian, to live as a good Christian. Paul says this very simply: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Th. 4:3).
- God sometimes calls some individuals to do some special work. An example of this is Paul’s repeated reference to the fact that he was an apostle “by the will of God.”<sup>1</sup> Being an apostle—a missionary—is not God’s plan for all Christians, but it was God’s plan for Paul. It is God’s will for all people to be Christians and for all Christians to be good Christians, but it is not God’s will for all Christians to be apostles.

Some Christians believe that God has a very detailed plan for every individual. Other Christians believe that God has special work for some Christians but not for all. The reason that Christians disagree about this is that the Bible does not tell us how detailed God’s plans are for each individual. How detailed God’s will is for everyone is a theoretical matter concerning which we will continue to disagree.

However, Christians are concerned principally not about theoretical matters but about the practical matter: how can they make decisions in such a way as to align their lives with God’s will for them, however detailed or undetailed that will may be?

On this practical matter, Christians have developed a number of helpful practices. The first and most obvious is that, when Christians have an important decision to make, they pray and ask God to guide them in their decisions.

1 Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1.

A second practice is to read the Bible and seek in it guidance for their decisions.

A third practice is called “putting out the fleece.” The phrase comes from a story in the Old Testament about a man named Gideon who felt called to lead Israel in a military campaign but was not sure of his call, so he asked God to give him a sign. He put some lamb’s wool outside his tent; the next morning, there was no dew on the ground but the wool was full of water. He did the same thing that night, and the following morning, the ground was covered with dew but the lamb’s wool was dry. Gideon understood this to be a sign from God confirming that he was to lead Israel in the campaign, and he did so (Judg. 6:36-40). Today many Christians who feel a sense of God’s leadership ask God to confirm that sense by a sign of some kind. For example, a Christian who feels called to do graduate study may ask God to confirm that call by providing a scholarship.

A fourth practice is a special kind of prayer. Sometimes when Christians have to choose between several options, they pray and ask God to close the wrong options and to open the right option. This is sometimes known as “open and closed doors.”

A fifth practice is called “waiting upon the Lord.” The idea is simply that we often have some time before a decision must be made, and we wait for God to give us an inner sense of direction.

A sixth practice is simply to be practical. For example, a college student who must declare a major may ask questions such as “What do I like to do?” and “What do I do well?” and “What can I get trained to do?” and “What needs doing today?” Then he might decide that, since he likes working with children and seems to do it well, and that he can get good training to be a teacher, and since good teachers are needed today, he will major in education.

All of these practices are helpful to Christians. However, each can be abused. For example, waiting on the Lord can become procrastination. But God certainly has guided Christians who have followed these procedures.

What I want to do now is to describe another way of going about making decisions in such a way as to align one’s life with God’s will. It is a way that is often used but not often discussed. This way involves three steps:

- First, you commit yourself to doing God’s will. Whatever God wants you to do, you will do. Of course, this is a commitment that all Christians need to make, over and over, and a good time to make this commitment is when you are facing an important decision.
- Second, you make the wisest, most responsible decision you are able

to make. This is the part that makes some Christians uneasy. They worry that if they make decisions themselves, they would miss God's will. I do not think that is the case, as the next step will show.

- Third, you trust God to guide you. This is the important point. God is not playing games with Christians. God will guide them in the way they should go, provided they are open to doing the will of God and provided they act as responsibly as they can. I believe that we are entitled to trust God to guide us.

The point of this presentation is to reinforce what I wrote in the beginning: God is always guiding Christians. Sometimes God guides them by making them aware of what God wants from them; they discern God's will. At other times they don't have a clear sense of what God wants them to do, and they do not claim to have discerned God's will. Yet they live as responsibly as they can, trusting that the Spirit of the Lord is directing them into the way they should go.

The issues in guidance, then, are three. Are we willing to do God's will? Are we acting as responsibly as we can? And are we trusting God to guide us? If we can say yes to the first two questions, then we will not miss God's will for us.

## GOD EMPOWERS CHRISTIANS

I turn now to the second way in which God helps us to live as Christians. God provides us with power, energy, and strength. I will describe a popular understanding of how God empowers Christians, and then I will present my own understanding.

The popular understanding of God's empowering work that I want to describe has several names: the deeper life, the higher life, the victorious life, the overcoming life, the normal Christian life, and the Keswick teaching about Christian living. This vision of Christian living is taught in many churches and denominations. Here is a summary of its teaching.

First, there is a secret to living the victorious Christian life.

Second, many Christians, even dedicated Christians, do not know the secret of Christian living. As a consequence they cannot live victoriously.

Third, the secret to victorious living is to cease striving to live faithfully and to begin depending completely upon God.

Fourth, when Christians cease striving and begin depending completely on God, God will begin to work in their lives.

Fifth, these Christians will then live a victorious life. A victorious life is described in terms of holiness but also in terms of happiness, of success, and in other ways. Jack Taylor, a gifted proponent of the deeper life theology, writes:

I have seen the key [to victorious living] open the lock of personal disillusionment, marital disharmony, self-condemnation, fear, anxiety, depression, and fling open the door upon a new and wonderful life!<sup>1</sup>

This teaching about the deeper life has a fine goal, namely, to help people experience God in ways that transform their lives. It has an important truth, namely, that Christians are dependent upon God. And it provides meaningful help for millions of discouraged Christians. I expect it will continue to be a help for Christians in the future.

Nevertheless, I do not agree with the emphases in this understanding of Christian living. I will comment on each of the five points that I listed above.

First, I do not agree that there is a secret to Christian living. The New Testament does not teach that there is such a secret. It is characteristic of the Christian religion that its truths are open and public, not secret or arcane.

Second, it follows that I do not believe that there are sincere, dedicated Christians who, because they do not possess certain secret knowledge, are unable to live victoriously.

Third, I agree that we are dependent upon God. In fact, all churches teach this. However, I do not think that we must cease striving in order to depend on God. The New Testament repeatedly calls us to strive to live as faithful Christians. It is not the case that, if you strive to live as a faithful Christian, that means that you are not depending upon God. Striving is compatible with depending. It is possible to strive and to depend at the same time, and it is important to do just that. An old gospel song said, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."<sup>2</sup> I understand the deeper life doctrine to be saying that we are to trust (depend) rather than to obey (strive). This is a mistake. We are to trust God, and we are also to obey God.

Fourth, I agree with the deeper life doctrine that God works through us. However, I do not agree that it is only when we have discovered a secret and ceased striving and begun depending that God begins to work in our lives. The truth is rather that God works through us all the time. In particular,

1 Jack Taylor, *The Key to Triumphant Living* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 27.

2 John H. Sammis, "Trust and Obey" in *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*, 509.

God is always empowering Christians. This empowerment is not reserved for a few Christians who know a secret. It is always going on in the lives of all Christians.

The deeper life movement says: "God will empower you to live victoriously if you cease striving and begin to be completely dependent." I would propose this alternative: "God is empowering you every day, so get on with living your life by trusting in God and obeying the Word of God."

Fifth, I disagree with the deeper life teaching's promise that a Christian can live completely victoriously. Here I want to be very careful. All of us need to say two things about Christian living, and all of us find it difficult to keep the two in balance. On the one hand, Christian living is difficult, and on the other hand it is wonderful. If we emphasize the difficulty too much, we do not do justice to the wonderfulness of Christian living. But if we emphasize the wonderfulness of Christian living too much, we do not do justice to the difficulty of Christian living.

It seems to me that the deeper life teaching overreaches by promising that Christians can experience complete success, complete happiness, and complete holiness. Some proponents of the deeper life are careful not to say this, but others are not so careful.

The issue here is perfection. If what is being promised is complete success, happiness, and holiness, then that is a form of perfectionism and it is unbiblical. The biblical teaching about perfection is expressed this way by Paul:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:10-14)

When we adopt Paul's point of view, we will carefully avoid any suggestion that by following Christ we can experience a perfect life. After all, Christ was crucified when he was in his early thirties.

In contrast to the deeper life teaching, let me now summarize what I believe about God's empowering work in the lives of Christians.

First, we all depend on Christ's help. We could not be Christians and we could not live as Christians without the grace of God.

Second, we also strive with all our might to live faithfully and obediently.

Third, we do this in ways that are knowable to all Christians; there are no secrets.

Fourth, we do it in the company of other Christians, of the church.

Fifth, we strive for perfection, but we know that we fall very far short of it.

Sixth, we do not excuse our failures, however. We acknowledge that we are responsible for them.

Seventh, every day we are grateful that we live in the grace and mercy of God.

Much of what I have attempted to say here is summarized in the following wonderful passage:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:3-5)

I have not written this first part of this chapter in order to derogate the work of those with whom I disagree. I have written it because I think it is true and I think it is important for all Christians to understand that God is always at work in their lives, guiding and empowering them to live as Christians. Here are four ways God is doing that.

First, the Spirit of God is with us all. In Chapter 7 I emphasized the biblical teaching that God pours out the Spirit upon all Christians. The Spirit is not present simply to observe us or to judge us. The Spirit is present to guide us and empower us.

Second, we live in the Christian community, the church. God uses the church to shape and form our lives. Here are some factors in the life of the church that God uses to guide and empower us:

- We are guided and empowered simply by participating in the common life (*koinonia*), the Christian fellowship of the church.
- We are guided and empowered as we unite with our fellow Christians in worshiping God.
- We are guided and empowered as we share with our fellow Christians in the Lord's Supper.

- We are guided and empowered as we listen along with our fellow Christians to the good news about Jesus as it is read from the Bible and proclaimed in sermons or through music.
- We are guided and empowered as we work alongside our fellow Christians to share the gospel with people, to do deeds of mercy, and to create a more just and peaceable world.
- We are guided and empowered as our experiences in the life of the church reinforce our Christian hope that God will finish the work God has begun in our lives, so that we do not despair about the future.

Third, we are able to read and study the Bible for ourselves, and God uses the Bible to guide and empower us. Until the invention of printing by moveable type in the fifteenth century, very few Christians were able to own or read the Bible for themselves. Today many, perhaps most, Christians can do that. This is a good thing. We still need to hear the Bible read and preached in church, but we can read and study for ourselves, too. And when we do that conscientiously, God uses the Bible to guide us and empower us to live as Christians.

Fourth and finally, we have the spiritual gifts that God has given us, and these are particular forms of guidance and empowerment for each of us. As we attempt to be good stewards, good managers, of our gifts, we are effectively guided into particular kinds of service, and, of course, the gifts themselves are forms of empowerment.

I have been speaking about God's work in our lives. For the remainder of the chapter I will be speaking about the ways in which we are to respond to God's work. I want to describe five broad goals to which God calls us. They are moral integrity, church loyalty, devotional life, growth in other areas of life, and service to others.

## MORAL INTEGRITY

Moral integrity is an area that most people readily recognize as part of Christian living; Christian living is moral living. In the Bible the call to moral integrity takes several forms.

The most familiar form is laws, rules, and principles. A classic example of these is the Ten Commandments. Here is a brief summary of those famous commands:

- Do not have any other God.
- Do not make any idols.

- Do not make a wrongful use of God's name.
- Observe the Sabbath day for rest and worship.
- Honor your father and your mother.
- Do not commit murder.
- Do not commit adultery.
- Do not steal.
- Do not tell lies about your neighbors.
- Do not covet what others have.<sup>1</sup>

A second form of the call to moral integrity is wisdom. Wisdom is a mastery of life and its difficulties. In the Bible it is often expressed in pithy sayings called "proverbs." Here are six examples of practical wisdom:

- If you want people to like you, forgive them when they wrong you.
- It is better to meet a mother bear robbed of her cubs than to meet some fool busy with a stupid project.
- Being cheerful keeps you healthy. It is slow death to be gloomy all the time.
- Enthusiasm without knowledge is not good.
- Do yourself a favor and learn all you can.
- When you give to the poor, it is like lending to the Lord, and the Lord will pay you back.<sup>2</sup>

A third form of the call to moral integrity is lists of virtues. For example, here are five virtues named in Colossians 3:12:

- Compassion, that is, caring for those who are suffering.
- Kindness, that is, showing acceptance to those who have made big mistakes.
- Humility, that is, respect for God and respect for other people.
- Gentleness, that is, refusing to control others or to manipulate them.
- Patience, that is, refusing to lose your temper and also being persistent in pursuing your goals.

A fourth form of the call to moral integrity is the example of others. The most important example for Christians is, of course, Jesus Christ. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks of Jesus' humility as an example for Christians to follow, and in 1 Peter 2:21, Peter speaks Jesus' way of dealing with suffering as an example for Christians to follow.

All of these forms—commands, wisdom, virtues, and examples—direct us

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 20:1-17, Deut. 5:6-21.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. 17:9, 12, 22, 19:2, 8, 17, TEV.

toward the same high moral standards.<sup>1</sup> They do so in different ways that appeal to different people at different times, but they are all God's call to us to live with moral integrity.

People who attempt to live with moral integrity face a cluster of five problems. This is true of Christians, and it also is true of others who attempt to live up to standards of conduct. These problems are closely related to each other; the first leads naturally to the others.

- The first problem is legalism. Legalism is keeping the letter of the law while failing to keep the spirit of the law. Jesus vigorously opposed legalism (Mt. 23:1-36).
- The second problem is self-righteousness. When we have lived according to the rules, we may look with contempt on those who have not. Jesus opposed self-righteousness (Luke 18:9-14).
- The third problem is hypocrisy. This is pretending that we have kept the rules when actually we have not (Mt. 23:27-28).
- The fourth problem is thinking of the law as more important than human beings. Jesus emphasized the fact that God gave the law about the Sabbath for the welfare of people, and he opposed the idea that the welfare of people should be subordinated to the law (Mark 2:27). I think that what he said about the Sabbath is true about all God's laws; they are for the benefit of human beings.
- The fifth problem is attempting to justify oneself before God by keeping the law rather than by trusting in God's grace and mercy. Paul emphasized that salvation does not come by keeping the law but by trusting in Christ (Rom. 3:27-31).

There are two ways to overcome these problems. The first is simply to be very careful to avoid each of them. This means that we must ask ourselves: "Am I legalistic? Am I self-righteous? Am I hypocritical? Am I keeping the law in ways that hurt people? Am I attempting to justify myself before God?" And then we must answer with great honesty.

The second way to deal with these problems is to avoid the first of them, legalism, in such a way as to undercut the others. The struggle against legalism begins by focusing one's attention on the spirit rather than the letter of the law. What, in fact, is the spirit behind all the rules? What are the rules

and wisdom and virtues and examples in the Bible all about?

The answer, I believe, was provided by Jesus when he responded to the question, "Which is the greatest commandment in the law?" As we saw earlier, Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God and the second greatest is to love our neighbor (Mt. 22:34-40), and he then added that these two commandments summarize all the law and the prophets—and, we might say, all the wisdom and virtues and examples. In brief, we are called to a life of love. By recognizing that, we can avoid legalism and the problems that arise from it.

In the twentieth century some theologians recommended a vision of Christian life known as "situation ethics." This vision rightly emphasized the importance of situations for knowing right from wrong. For example, in most situations it is right to drink a cup of water, but not when you are stranded on a desert island with others and there is only one cup of water for everyone to share. Situation ethicists rightly emphasized the importance of love, just as Jesus did. But then they said that law and love are in opposition to each other, and this, I think, was a mistake. The proper relationship between law and love is not that they are alternatives. Rather, love is behavior; it is a way of acting toward God and others. And the rules—and, we could add, the wisdom, the virtues, and the examples—show us what it is to act in love toward God and our neighbors. We do not have to choose between law and love. Rather, we commit ourselves to love and then we count on the laws (and wisdom and virtues and examples) of the Bible to guide us into genuine ways of love. For example, keeping the Sabbath is a way of loving God, and not bearing false witness is a way of loving other people.

It was in connection with love that Jesus gave the command, "Be perfect" (see Mt. 5:43-48). The perfection of which he spoke is best understood not as sinless perfection but as a perfection of love. Jesus' followers are called to love God so dearly that they never deliberately defy God and to love other people so much that they never deliberately hurt other people. They cannot claim to be sinless, for "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 John 1:8). But whatever sins they commit arise not from defiance of God or hatred of people but from being distracted, or tired, or misinformed. Jesus calls Christians to love God and neighbor, and it is possible for them to do that.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I believe this is what John Wesley meant by perfection, though that is debatable. See his 1740 sermon "Christian Perfection" in Albert C. Outler, editor, *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 252-271. It was later holiness churches that taught that "entire sanctification" or "sinless perfection" is possible, and they then added that it could be acquired in a single experience subsequent to the experience of conversion.

<sup>1</sup> This is controversial. Some students of the Bible believe that the moral standards of the wisdom literature are not as high as the standards given in the commands, virtues, and examples. They say that the prudential ethics of the wisdom literature does not rise to the level of God's apodictic commands. This is not a view I hold.

## CHURCH LOYALTY

We have seen that God's purpose has always been to create a community of persons who freely choose to love God and to love one another, so it comes as no surprise that loyal participation in the Christian community is an essential component of Christian living. Much of what needs to be said about our life in the church will appear in the following chapter, but here I want to make two points.

First, in America today we tend to praise the individual who is independent of other people. This is not all bad. There certainly is a place for talking about individual responsibility. But in reality we are never completely independent of other people. Our lives are interdependent with the lives of others. This fact is taught throughout the Bible. God calls us to participate in the community of faith and to be committed to that community as our spiritual family. There is no private religion in the Bible.

Second, in church life we are both givers and receivers. We are called to give our loyalty to our fellow Christians, to give our love, to offer our service, to give our prayers, to bear one another's burdens.

We also are receivers. As we saw earlier, we receive much of God's help for our lives through our fellow Christians. We are shaped and formed by God as we participate in the common life of the church, in worship, in Bible study, in prayers, in fellowship, and in ministries.

Just as love is the principal concern of moral life, so it is the principal component of church life. "This is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (1 John 3:23).

## DEVOTIONAL LIFE

Living as a Christian involves being a moral person and a church person, but there is more to it than this. Living as a Christian is living in relationship with God. Relationships must be nurtured, and they must be expressed. One of the objectives of Christian worship is to nurture and express the church's relationship with God. Devotional practices are the individual counterpart to the church's practice of worship. In devotional life, we nurture and express our relationship with God.

Surprisingly, the Bible, which is our written authority for Christian faith and life, does not prescribe a set form of devotional practices for us. In other religions devotional practices are prescribed. Muslims are taught to

pray at five set times each day and to adopt a particular posture when they pray. Hindus are taught to sit in the lotus position and to repeat set mantras. Christians, on the other hand, are not explicitly told what devotional practices will help them to express and to nurture their relationship with God. Perhaps God did not prescribe a single devotional practice because we are all so different that no single practice would be helpful to us all. In any case, the result of the Bible's not prescribing a set devotional practice is that Christians have developed many such practices. To take but one example, Richard Foster has provided descriptions of no fewer than twenty-one kinds of Christian prayer.<sup>1</sup>

A familiar form of devotional practice among many Christians today is the quiet time. The quiet time includes two practices, Bible study and prayer. Here we see quite clearly the two needs of relationships being met: We study the Bible in order to nurture our relationship with Christ, and we pray in order to express our love for Christ.

Bible study is a wonderful devotional practice. There are other ways to use the Bible in devotional life also. For example, we can simply read it. We can memorize it. We can listen to it by reading it aloud or by listening to it others read it. We can meditate on it, repeating a single verse many times. We can even sing it.

Prayer is one of the most representative of all Christian practices. In prayer, all of our deepest beliefs about God and ourselves and the meaning of life come into play.

I understand prayer in much the way children do. It is simply talking to God. I believe that God listens to us and responds to us when we pray. Of course, we cannot control or manipulate God by our prayers, but God does listen to us. The reason that God listens and responds to us does not lie in us—not in our faith, or our persistence, or our holiness, or in how many of us are praying—but in God. Our prayers matter to God because God loves us and therefore welcomes our prayers.

I learned this simple understanding of prayer from Jesus, who said: "Pray then in this way: Our Father" (Mt. 6:9). I understand Jesus to be saying that when we pray we should think of ourselves as God's children and of God as our Father. Just as parents who love their children are attentive to them, so God who loves us is attentive to us. And just as wise parents do not allow their children to control or manipulate them, so God does not allow us to control or manipulate God.

1 Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

Our prayers really make a difference to God, just as the conversations that children have with their parents make a difference to parents. God has ordered the world in such a way that our lives can make a difference. We make a difference by the way we live, and we make a difference to God when we pray. Leonard Hodgson put it this way:

If we cannot be content to think of prayer as wholly concerned with the self-disciplining of our own minds, or as an attempt to cajole God into doing something other than what He intends, or as a futile request to Him to do what He is going to do anyway, there remains only one possible alternative. Our thought about prayer must rest on the foundation of belief that God voluntarily waits upon our asking.<sup>1</sup>

This simple, yet biblical and profound, way of thinking about prayer is supportive of the most sincere form of prayer. We are free to talk to God about whatever concerns us—and also, of course, to talk about what concerns God, namely, the kingdom of God. We are free to make requests of God—not demands, but requests. We are also free, of course, to offer to God our worship, our thanksgiving, our confession of sins, our sincere commitment of our lives, and even—in appropriate ways, and following biblical examples—our complaints (Jer. 12:1-4). We are also free to use the many prayers that are written in the Bible as guidelines for our prayers, and to use other written prayers.

There are additional resources for devotional life besides the Bible and prayer. Some Christians use devotional guides of various kinds, and others read devotional classics. Some keep spiritual journals. Some practice meditation and contemplation. All of these have proved helpful to Christians in expressing their love for God and in nurturing their relationship with God.

### GROWTH IN OTHER AREAS

Let me begin by confessing that this next set of issues is open-ended. “Growth” is a metaphor and may be used to refer to many different things. In fact, I could have spoken earlier of growth in moral integrity, church loyalty, and devotional life. Here I want to employ the metaphor of growth for concerns other than these three.

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom*, II:168.

We begin with three areas of growth mentioned in the gospel of Luke: “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52, KJV). I expect that what Luke meant by “favor with God” is something like what I have described above as devotional life. The other three areas of Jesus’ growth—wisdom, stature, favor with human beings—may serve as patterns for our growth as well.

We have seen that wisdom is practical, but it also is intellectual. It concerns the life of the mind. Some Christians do not think that our minds are of concern to God. In fact, some think God is opposed to our growing up intellectually. However, many Christians believe that our minds matter and that God expects us to grow in wisdom.

The Christian church has a long history of commitment to the life of the mind. Jesus was a rabbi with disciples, a teacher with students. Paul was a Christian teacher, and so were many other Christian leaders such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. The great universities of Europe grew out of Christian monasteries, and the churches established many of the great universities of America, including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Brown. Churches still own and operate many universities and colleges in America. Churches publish enormous amounts of literature. Christians publish many books, and American Christians send missionaries abroad to do educational work. While it is true that some Christians have been anti-intellectual, it also is true that from the beginning the church has made a serious commitment to the life of the mind.

Stature means physical health and well-being, and Christians have an interest in this as well. Jesus healed people who were sick, and on occasion he fed crowds of people. From its inception the church fed the poor. In the middle Ages the church established hospitals for the sick and alms houses for the poor. Many hospitals in America were founded by Christians, though today the cost of operating a hospital is sometimes too great for churches to fund alone. Churches show their commitment to people’s physical well-being by building family life centers and by sending missionaries to do medical, dental, and agricultural service abroad.

Favor with human beings means social skills. Jesus grew in his ability to get along with people, and this is an important area of growth for Christians as well. It is important for Christians to learn how to relate well to others. In order to do this, it is important to become aware of one’s own feelings such as shame, anger, anxiety, and frustration. The Bible is filled with wisdom about how to get along with others, wisdom that is just as relevant today as

it was in the ancient world.

Christian living, then, involves growth in intellectual life, in physical well-being, and in social skills. Other areas could be added to these such as growth in the ability to create a good marriage and good family life, growth in the ability to manage your time and money, and growth in Christian citizenship.

### SERVICE TO OTHERS

Moral integrity, church loyalty, devotional life, and growth in other areas are mostly what has been called the journey inward. Christian living also involves the journey outward, that is, reaching out to persons other than oneself.<sup>1</sup>

There are many forms of service to others. One is Christian missions to the wider world. Another is evangelism, the sharing of the good news about Jesus with people who do not yet trust in Christ. Another is benevolent service, the ministries of compassion for people who are physically or mentally ill, the dying, the lonely, and all who suffer. Another is education, the teaching of truth and skills to others. Another is public service, the effort to shape public life and public policy so that they will be more just and peaceable, and, where possible, more compassionate.

The forms of service will vary from one Christian to another, partly because we have different gifts, partly because our opportunities differ, and partly because the needs around us vary. The important thing is for every Christian to be regularly involved in some form of service to others. To take the inward journey while failing to take the outward journey is a form of narcissism, and it is spiritually lethal.

### SUMMARY

God is at work in the lives of all Christians, making it possible for them to live as Christians. God guides and empowers all Christians throughout their pilgrimage on earth. God calls Christians to live lives of moral integrity, church loyalty, devotional practice, growth in other areas, and service to others.

Christianity is not a private religion; it is not just a relationship between

the self and God. It is a communal religion. When we became children of God, we also became sisters and brothers to all other Christians. It is as members of the family of God that we attempt to live as responsible Christians. To the life of that family of God we turn our attention in the next chapter.

1 Elizabeth O'Connor, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968).

## CHAPTER 10

# THE CHURCH

## INTRODUCTION

The church may be understood through various interpretive grids. For example, today multiple historical and sociological interpretations of the church are available. These can be insightful. My initial task in this chapter is to offer a theological interpretation of the church, that is, to describe the church in its relationship to God. I will do this in two ways, by means of historical narrative and by means of images.

### THE HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF THE BIBLE

Most of the Bible is historical narrative. Naturally there are many subplots in the narrative, but the central plot is that God is creating a people to be God's "treasured possession" (Ex. 19:5).

In the Old Testament era the people of God were the people of Israel, that is, the biological descendants of Abraham and Sarah who occasionally were joined by other persons such as Ruth (Ruth 1:16-17). God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). Already here, at the beginning of the historical narrative, the people of God are both an object of God's blessing and an instrument for conveying God's blessing to all the world.

God made a covenant with Israel. The covenant is summarized in words that appear about twenty times in the Bible: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Jer. 7:23). Israel's covenant relationship with God was the principal factor in her self-understanding. When Israel was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., she was devastated not only by the military defeat but also by the thought that God was cancelling the covenant. As the leaders were being led away into captivity, Jeremiah said to them, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31-33).

Jesus spoke of himself as providing that new covenant (Luke 22:20).

He was carrying forward the work of creating a people of God. The central image in Jesus' preaching was the kingdom of God, the gracious reign of God over the people of God. Jesus urged people to seek God's kingdom more than anything else in life (Mt. 6:33; see also Mt. 13:44-45) and to enter the kingdom as little children (Mt. 18:3). Some people accepted Jesus' invitation, but others rejected it. To those who accepted it Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The reference to a "little flock" suggests that Jesus intended to found a new community. That he called as his closest disciples precisely twelve men is reminiscent of the twelve patriarchs of Israel and suggests that Jesus was thinking of the new community as a renewed Israel. Jesus prayed for his new community: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one" (John 17:20).

On the festival of Pentecost the new community received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit then empowered the community to set out on an audacious mission. In the past religions had been local or tribal, as Israel's was, but Jesus said that the message about him was to be taken "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God's original promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth was being carried out as the new community welcomed Samaritans (Acts 8:14-25), God-fearing Gentiles (Acts 10), and eventually Hellenistic and non-Hellenistic Gentiles (in Col 3:11, these two are called *Greek* and *barbarian*). Within a few years there were small Christian congregations in several cities across the Mediterranean world.

The writers of the New Testament referred to each congregation as a *church* (Greek, *ekklesia*) and to two or more of them as *churches* (Acts 9:31, Gal. 1:2). This was a natural usage; *ekklesia* means an assembly or congregation. However, the writers extended their use of *ekklesia* to a second sense, to refer to the people themselves, independently of whether or not they were assembled. This allowed them to use *ekklesia* to refer, not just to the people of a single congregation, but to all the followers of Christ in all the congregations. *Ekklesia* in this sense is an aggregate of all Christians.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that the central plot in the historical narrative of the Bible is God's working to create a people to be the people of God, implies three things. First, the church exists because God has created it.

Second, the church is not incidental to God's purposes. From the begin-

<sup>1</sup> This usage appears in various places in the New Testament. It is especially evident in Ephesians. See Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 3:21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32.

ning God intended to create a people and to do this through Israel and then to expand it through Jesus. God's eternal purpose is "to gather up all things in [Christ]" (Eph. 1:10).

Third, the church has intrinsic value. The church also has instrumental value, of course; for example, God uses the church to evangelize the world. But before we begin to speak about the church's instrumental value to God, we need to recognize that it has intrinsic value to God. The church is first the object of God's love and then the instrument to take that love to the world.<sup>1</sup>

## BIBLICAL IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

A theological account of the church can draw not only on the historical narrative of the Bible but also on numerous images of the church found in the New Testament. Biblical scholar Paul Minear has studied these images with great care. In a book entitled *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, he describes 96 New Testament images for the church.<sup>2</sup>

With so many images to choose from, where shall we begin? I want to survey three of the images that Minear emphasizes. They are the people of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit. They are among the most frequently used in the New Testament, and they are associated with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

### PEOPLE OF GOD

As we have seen, the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of God's choosing Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be the people of God. The initiative was with God: God chose Israel, and Israel became the people of God. This is beautifully described in Deuteronomy:

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that

the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Dt. 7:6-8)

The New Testament affirms that the relationship that existed between God and Israel now exists also between God and the church. Peter wrote of the church: "You are a chosen race . . . God's own people . . . Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

We who are members of the church today know from our own experience that God took the initiative to bring us into the church. Long before we knew God or loved God or were interested in God, God knew us and loved us and called us to be part of the church. Claude Welch describes this relationship as the *convocatio* and *congregatio* of the church: the convocation or call of God and the congregation or coming together of the people.<sup>1</sup>

The ancient people of Israel and the Christian church have a close relationship. As the people of God, the church is a continuation and extension of Israel, the original people of God. In his letter to the Romans Paul employed a striking analogy to speak of the relation of the church to Israel: Israel is the olive tree, and those of us non-Jews who are followers of Jesus are branches grafted onto that tree (Rom. 11:17-24). I believe that analogy is true today. The church has not superseded Israel as God's people but rather is a branch of Israel. God's covenant with Abraham is in effect today for Israel, just as the new covenant that God made through Jesus is in effect today for the church.

### BODY OF CHRIST

A second image of the church is that it is the body of Christ. In the New Testament it was Paul who developed it most fully: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12:27). "As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:4-5).

This is an extraordinary image. It displays the close ties that exist among all Christians, even when they are not aware of them or refuse to acknowledge them. Today we speak of being "members" of a church—or of some other group—without realizing that the word "members" is taken from the image of a body and its parts.

This image suggests an instrumental understanding of the church.

<sup>1</sup> R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church* (London: The Epworth Press, 1960), 24.

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

<sup>1</sup> Claude Welch, *The Reality of the Church* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 64.

Christ uses his body the church in the way we use our bodies to do our work in the world. Through the preaching that the church does, Christ communicates God's Word to the world. Through the compassion that the church expresses, Christ communicates God's love for the world.

In this image as in the image of people of God, there is a pattern of divine initiative and human response. Christ gave his body upon the cross, thereby making it possible for the church to come into being as the body of Christ.

### FELLOWSHIP OF THE SPIRIT

Similarly, the Spirit regenerates the church, and the church came into being as the fellowship of the Spirit. The image of the fellowship of the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14) emphasizes the life shared by all members of the church. That life is a gift from God. In this shared life, this *koinonia*, the barriers that separate human beings from one another and from God are overcome. The walls created by differences of race, language, gender, age, education, and class are being dismantled. The life that the Spirit gives is abundant and eternal. Peter actually speaks of Christians as participating in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). While this does not mean that we become God, it does mean that by the Spirit God shares the divine life with us.

The Father chose the church in eternity; the Son died for the church in history; the Spirit regenerates the church in an experience that began at Pentecost and continues today.

People of God, body of Christ, and fellowship of the Spirit—these are very powerful images of the church. Each one says something distinctive about what unites the church. As God's people, we are all bound together by God's call. As Christ's body, we share in a common mission. As the fellowship of the Spirit, we are bound together by our common life of love and trust.

All of us can recognize that these are beautiful affirmations about the church. But are they realistic? Is the church as we experience it today, with its many faults, really the people of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit?

The answer is yes. In spite of its many serious flaws, the church is still all of these things. It is important for us to remember this. In America today many people have faith in Christ but have given up on the church. Given the church's failures, this is understandable. These wonderful things that are said about the church in the New Testament are an antidote to our giving up on the church.

### THE PRESENCE OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

What I have written thus far about the church is general in character, and it is time now for me to speak about the church in more specific terms. The church expresses itself in visible ways in the world. Here are some examples of expressions of the church in the world: a woman's missionary organization, a chapter of Gideons, a youth group, a seminary, and a local congregation. All of these are fine expressions of the church. Does any one of these have a special status that sets it apart from the others?

I believe that one does. It is the local congregation. Two things set local congregations apart from these other expressions of the church. First, the New Testament refers repeatedly to local congregations; it never refers to any of these other expressions. Except for a single church council (see Acts 15:1-35), local congregations are the only ecclesial bodies mentioned in the New Testament.

Second, local congregations are more adequate expressions of the church in the world than these other expressions. The reason is that the only prerequisite for being a member of a local congregation is to be a believer and to profess one's faith in Christ by baptism, and the same is true of the church.<sup>1</sup> Each of the other expressions of the church has some additional prerequisite. Women's missionary groups have only female members; Gideons must be men; youth groups accept only young people; seminaries accept mostly prospective clergy. There is nothing wrong with these specialized groups, but somewhere in the world there needs to be an expression of the church that has precisely the same prerequisite for membership that the universal church does, namely, that one has professed faith in Jesus Christ. That is the role of local congregations.

For this reason I believe it is important for all Christians to participate in the life of a local congregation. It is not enough to be part of a women's Christian group, a men's Christian group, a youth Christian group, or a clergy Christian group. For the sake of our spiritual health we need to participate in a group in which women and men, children and youth and adults, clergy and laity, meet together as the church. That happens in local congregations.

<sup>1</sup> I am here thinking of baptism as being completed at confirmation. I will explain this later in the chapter.

## FELLOWSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

We use the word “church” today to refer both to a fellowship of people and to an organization. We have been speaking up to this point of the fellowship of people. But the church is also an organization. It has buildings, budgets, programs, and personnel just as other organizations do.

The distinction between the church as an organization and the church as a fellowship is important. In order to emphasize the distinction, one Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, went so far as to use the word “church” for the organization and to reserve the Greek word *ecclesia* for the fellowship.<sup>1</sup>

This leads to a question: What is the proper relationship between the church as a fellowship and the church as an organization? Three answers may be given.

The first is that the organization is what matters, and the fellowship is incidental. From this it follows that the fellowship should be used to make the organization strong. I believe that this answer is mistaken and that it leads us into the sorts of abuse of people that Jesus opposed in his ministry. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not the other way round (Mark 2:27). We might paraphrase that and say that the organization called the church is made for the human beings who make up the church, not the other way round.

The second answer is that the fellowship is what matters, and organizations are so inimical to the welfare of the fellowship that we must avoid them altogether. I think that this position also is mistaken. The reason is that we can never fully avoid organizations. We may make our church organizations smaller, less formal, and more user-friendly, but we will still have them. The desire to avoid organizations is a utopian fantasy.

The third answer is that the fellowship is what matters, and the organization exists to serve the people. I think this is the true answer. It is easy to state but difficult to implement. It is a goal toward which we in the church should work.<sup>2</sup>

Next we turn our attention to the mission of the church.

## THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The mission Jesus completed in his earthly life was only the beginning

of a divine project to rebuilt the human family of God, and Jesus commissioned the church to continue that work. After his resurrection he told his first followers, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21).

## THE MISSION OF JESUS AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Jesus’ mission was to serve people rather than to dominate them. He told his followers to follow his example:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

Jesus also said that his followers should be prepared, as he was, to experience suffering as they carried out their mission: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark. 8:34). Not all suffering is cross-bearing. Cross-bearing is suffering that one voluntarily accepts in order to be of service to others. It is cross-bearing for a young adult voluntarily to postpone his career in order to care for his dying parent, or for a pastor voluntarily to share in the sufferings of members of her congregation in order to help them bear those sufferings.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:21-23)

The mission of the church is to continue the work that Christ began, and that is a work of service that involves suffering. We will survey the following components of that work of Jesus and the church:

- Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom of God.
- Jesus healed people of diseases and cast out evil spirits.
- Jesus taught a way of life.

<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 9, Church Governance.

- Jesus created the nucleus of a new faith community.
- As Jesus did these things, he continued to worship God.

## THE GOOD NEWS

The church, like her Lord, has been sent to preach good news to the world. The good news is that God has acted in Jesus to save the world. Shortly before his ascension, Jesus said: “You will be my witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The church was a missionary church from the beginning. The Christians went out from their own cities and nation to proclaim God’s mighty act in Jesus to people everywhere. The book of Acts tells the story of the church’s expansion from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria and thence across the Roman world. It is the story of a struggle for a gospel unhindered by boundaries of race, nation, language, or class.

It is the gospel that sets the church apart from many other fine service organizations. The church is different from, for examples, the Red Cross, Bread for the World, and Doctors without Borders, because in addition to the help the church gives people, it also gives them a particular message of good news about God.

The Greek word for *good news* is *euaggelion*, and from it we get the English word *evangelism*. Efforts to evangelize can take several forms. For example, the church may evangelize simply by celebrating the good news during its corporate worship services. This is presence evangelism, and in some countries today, such as some Muslim countries, the only place that Christians are permitted to speak about the good news is among themselves as they worship God.

A second form of evangelism is proclamation. Proclamation may be verbal, written, or broadcast. Because the good news is a historical narrative about Jesus, and because no one living today was present when the history happened, the only way for people to know about the gospel story is for someone to tell them:

How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:14-15)

A third form of evangelism is persuasion, that is, efforts to urge people to accept the good news. It is not clear how much persuasion the church

of the New Testament era did, nor is it clear how much persuasion the church today should be doing. Some churches today believe that this is their assignment, but other churches think that efforts to persuade are intrusions into work that should be left to God. In any case, persuasion is being done today, and people are being brought into the family of God by it. On the other hand, some people have been deeply offended by high-pressure efforts to persuade them to accept the gospel, much as they would be offended by high-pressure efforts to get them to buy a used car, and they have reacted to the efforts to persuade them by hardening their resistance to the gospel.

To me it seems wise for the church always to celebrate the gospel in its worship services, and always to proclaim the gospel in and outside those services, but to be cautious about engaging in persuasion.

Some Christians have a special gift for evangelism. Paul mentioned this when he wrote, “Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists” (Eph. 4:11). Naturally those persons should use their gift for evangelism responsibly. But we must avoid the assumption that individual evangelists are the sole or even the principal bearers of the good news, for the entire church always celebrates the good news. George Sweazey has emphasized this:

There is just one basic method of evangelism. It is the one to which all the others have to be related. It can be described in just five words: THE CHURCH IS THE EVANGELIST. The evangelist is not a person at all, but a fellowship. God put his Church on earth as his intended instrument for evangelism. Evangelism is a team accomplishment. The evangelists are not the revival preachers or the zealous “personal workers”—they are the whole congregation.<sup>1</sup>

This seems to me to be true to the narrative of Acts.

## HEALING

God sent Jesus into the world to save the world from evil in all its forms. The hard core of evil is sin, and Jesus saved the world from sin by his life and message and by his death and resurrection. Jesus also saved people from other forms of evil such as suffering. He healed people’s diseases, and he rid their lives of demons.

The church is called to extend Jesus’ mission of healing across the cen-

<sup>1</sup> George E. Sweazey, *The Church as Evangelist* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978), 47-48.

turies. To do this the church has built hospitals and sent out medical missionaries. In the past it established alms houses for the poor, and today it supports a wide range of ministries to people who are poor. The church believes that by serving the poor and the sick, it is serving Jesus himself, for he said: “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).

The church also helps people with their demons. In the industrially developed world today millions of people do not interpret their problems in terms of personal demons, but that does not prevent them from having to wrestle with demons such as addictions, alienation, guilt, rage, and anxiety. The church helps them by providing counseling and other kinds of pastoral care. In this it is following the example of Jesus.

Through the work of its members who are doctors, nurses, pathologists, dentists, and so on, the church is a healer. Through the work of its members who are counselors and therapists, the church is a therapeutic community in which those who are wrestling in their souls with forces of darkness find support and wisdom and hope for their struggle.

## TEACHING

Jesus probably was the most influential teacher who ever lived. He taught about God, and he taught a new way of life. He intended that his work as a teacher would be carried on by the disciples to whom he assigned a mission of “teaching [all nations] to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20).

The church is called to extend Jesus’ mission of teaching. In the patristic era the church was routinely described as “the school of Christ,” and its mission was understood to be the education of the world.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on the astonishing speed with which the church became the largest religion in the Roman Empire, T. R. Glover has written: “How did the Church do it? If I may invent or adapt three words, the Christian ‘out-lived’ the pagan, ‘out-died’ him, and ‘out-thought’ him.”<sup>2</sup> In the medieval era the church founded schools that have evolved into the great universities of Europe such as Oxford and Paris. In the era of the Renaissance and Reformation the church translated the Bible into the language of the people in order to “cause a boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost,” as

1 See, for example, Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 52.

2 T. R. Glover, *The Jesus of History* (New York: Association Press, 1917), 200-201.

the translator William Tyndale said to one of his critics.<sup>1</sup> In the modern era the church pioneered Sunday Schools in which children who were working in mines or factories or on farms six days a week learned to read and also learned about Christ. Today the teaching work of the church continues in parishes, in Christian educational institutions at every level from pre-school through graduate school, and in innumerable specialized study programs.

By his work as a teacher Jesus was liberating people from ignorance and misinformation. As the church continues that liberating work today, it lives out Jesus’ saying, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

## A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

Jesus was a loyal Jew. From his childhood he participated in the religious life of his people. He noted with approval that not one letter in the law and the prophets would ever be lost (Mt. 5:18). He never advocated leaving the Jewish community.

But within the Jewish community he did find a new faith community, which became the nucleus of the church. Initially it included only those Jews who embraced Jesus and his message. One of the steps Jesus took in forming the new community was to assign a group of twelve men to be his special disciples. This act would have been clearly understood by Jesus’ contemporaries as an allusion to the twelve patriarchs of Israel and therefore as a re-establishing of the covenant people of God.

Jesus devoted much of his work to nurturing the faith and life of his “little flock” (Luke 12:32). He taught them to be humble rather than arrogant, to be peacemakers rather than troublemakers, and to forgive their enemies rather than to get revenge. He called them to live a life of radical kindness, especially toward the poor and the tax-collectors, prostitutes, and others whom society tended to treat with contempt.

The church is called to extend the mission of Jesus of creating and nurturing a faith community. Following Jesus’ death and resurrection, the church, which at first had only Jewish members, learned to welcome into its membership Samaritans, then God-fearers, then Hellenistic Gentiles and even pagan Gentiles. Today one third of all human beings on earth are members of Christian churches. Perhaps it was this to which Jesus was referring when he said, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these” (John 14:12).

1 Quoted in Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers*, 333.

Paul wrote this about the church's mission to nurture her own faith and life:

Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4:15-16)

## WORSHIP

Throughout all his work, Jesus continued to be loyal to God. He told his followers to "strive first for the kingdom of God" (Mt. 6:33). He could have added, "even as I have done." In synagogues and occasionally in the temple, Jesus continued to worship the God of Israel. In prayer he said to God, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4). To glorify God is to honor God in such a way as to display God's majesty before others. Jesus did this by faithfully carrying out his mission.

Jesus's worship of God is an example for the church. Along with its mission to reach inward and nurture its own faith and life and to reach outward to offer good news, healing, and teaching to the world, the church must reach upward to "ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor" (Ps. 29:2).

Churches in the United States today are experiencing conflicts regarding worship services. Some Christians find that they are better able to worship the Lord in traditional worship services, and others find that they are better able to worship the Lord in services that have a contemporary feel, especially as regards music. Some churches have responded by providing more than one kind of worship service, and others have blended traditional and contemporary elements into their worship services.

The principal theoretical question is whether some types of worship services are religiously, theologically, or pastorally superior to others. Informed and good people disagree about this. I tend to think that the differences in the worship services are cultural rather than religious, and that therefore in principle all are to be welcomed. I agree with Paul Basden about this; in his book *The Worship Maze*, Basden described five styles of worship—the liturgical, the traditional, the revivalist, the praise-and-worship, and the seeker. He asked about these styles of worship:

Is it conceivable that the differences of style highlighted in this book are less a sign of fragmentation than a sign of unity within diversity? Might not this multiplicity of worship experiences stand as a witness to a modern-day Pentecost rather than to the sign of Babel? What would happen if believers stopped judging the way in which their sisters and brothers worship God and instead chose to be grateful for every expression of genuine worship within the larger Christian family?<sup>1</sup>

We do need to recognize that some people find praise-and-worship worship services so distracting that they have difficulty worshipping God. For such persons it is responsible stewardship rather than selfish consumerism to make arrangements to participate in worship services in which it is possible for them to worship the Lord. On the other hand, it is honorable for Christians to participate for the sake of others in worship services in which their own needs for worship are not being met; parents may do this for their children, for example. It is a good idea for Christians who do this to seek out other opportunities to participate in services in which they are able to worship the Lord.

In summary, the mission of the church is to continue to carry on the work that Jesus began:

- Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, and the church follows his example by evangelism.
- Jesus worked to heal people and to free them from evil of all kinds, and the church follows his example by works of healing and compassion.
- Jesus taught about God and about a new way of life, and the church follows his example by educational work that today takes many diverse forms.
- Jesus founded a new community and then worked to nurture its faith, and the church follows his example by "building itself up in love."
- The church carries out these things in the context of, and with the support it receives from, following Jesus' example of offering worship to God.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Basden, *The Worship Maze: Finding a Style to Fit Your Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 147. Basden is also the editor of another book on the same subject: Paul A. Basden, editor, *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: Six Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

## BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Most religious communities provide their adherents with a creed, a code, and a cult, that is, with a set of beliefs, a set of instructions for moral conduct, and set of religious ceremonies. Christianity provides all three. The two principal religious ceremonies of Christianity are baptism and the Lord's Supper.

In most churches these ceremonies are called sacraments. The way the church came to use this word is curious. The early church took baptism and the Lord's Supper very seriously. They believed that God is present and at work in them in a mysterious way. The Greek word for a mystery is *mysterion*. In early Latin translations of the New Testament the Greek word *mysterion* was translated with the Latin word *sacramentum*. That is how the church came to speak of these and other ceremonies as sacraments.

A widely-used definition of sacraments is that they are "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace."<sup>1</sup>

Across the centuries the church has developed a rich sacramental theology. Some theologians identified as many as 35 sacraments. In the medieval period the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church settled on seven official sacraments: baptism, confirmation, the Lord's Supper, confession and penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick. These remain the sacraments of those churches today, though the word *sacrament* is also used less formally to refer to any means that God uses to help us. A Roman Catholic bishop, James Niedergeses, once commented to me, "We are all sacraments to each other."

### THE CONSENSUS ABOUT BAPTISM AND EUCHARIST

In most churches today there is a consensus about four things concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper.

First, it was Jesus who commanded the church to baptize and to observe the Lord's Supper. He commanded baptism when he said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19). He commanded the Lord's Supper when he said: "Take, eat, this is my body. . . . Drink from [this cup], all of you" (Mt. 26:26-27). Jesus did not command any of the other five sacraments, though he did give his blessing to marriage when he

attended a wedding in Cana (John 2). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances in the sense that Jesus commanded them. Many Baptist and other churches prefer to call them ordinances rather than sacraments. They do this because they do not accept all of the complex sacramental theology that other branches of the church have developed.

Second, baptism and the Lord's Supper display the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. When baptism is conducted by submersion into water, it offers a picture of Jesus' burial and resurrection. In the Lord's Supper the bread signifies Jesus' body and the wine, his blood. The church hears the gospel in the reading and preaching of the Word, and it sees the gospel in baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Swiss Reformed theologian Emil Brunner has pointed out that in eras when church leaders have failed to preach the good news of salvation, the church was reminded of the gospel by observing baptism and the Lord's Supper:

The Lord surely knew what he was doing when, on that last night, he said to his Disciples, "This do in remembrance of me." Without the Sacraments the Church would long ago have disappeared. . . . The Sacraments are the divinely given flying buttresses which save the Church from collapse. . . . The Sacraments, thank God, speak a language independent of the Pastor [who may fail to proclaim the gospel]. They are a part of the message of the Church least affected by theological or other tendencies; and that is their special blessing.<sup>1</sup>

Third, Christ promised to be present when these ceremonies are observed. When commanding his disciples to baptize he said, "And remember, I am with you always" (Mt. 28:20). When commanding them to observe the Lord's Supper he said, "This is my body. . . . this is my blood" (Mt. 26:26, 28). Although the churches disagree vigorously about *how* Christ is present in these sacraments, especially in the Lord's Supper, they agree *that* Christ is present in them. We meet Christ in baptism and in the Lord's Supper.

Fourth, God uses baptism and the Lord's Supper to help the church. The water, words, and bodily movements of baptism, and the bread, wine, words, and bodily movements of the Lord's Supper are signs that point beyond themselves to the presence of God and the grace of God within them. Here again is the definition of "sacraments" from *The Book of Common Prayer*

<sup>1</sup> Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* translated by John W. Rilling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, no date given; published in German in 1936), 127-128.

<sup>1</sup> "An Outline of the Faith commonly called the Catechism" in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 857.

of the Episcopal Church: “The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.”<sup>1</sup>

The grace that God communicates through the sacraments is not magical. It is not a spiritual substance. It is the love of God that confirms Christians in their faith, binds them together into a community, transforms them morally, helps them cope with life’s difficulties, and makes it possible for them to follow the way of life that Jesus taught.

One way to understand better how God’s grace is given in baptism and the Lord’s Supper is to consider how God’s grace is given through Scripture. God uses the words of Scripture, when they are read aloud in church, to communicate grace to those who hear; we are helped by God when we hear the Word of God read. Similarly, God uses baptism and the Lord’s Supper to communicate grace to those who see and hear and taste; we are helped by God when we obey Christ and observe baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Alongside the church’s consensus concerning baptism and the Lord’s Supper there are disagreements, and to these we now turn our attention. Paul wrote that there is “one baptism” (Eph. 4:5), but today the churches have substantive disagreements about baptism. Three questions are: What is the proper mode of baptism? Who are the proper candidates for baptism? What are the effects of being baptized?

## THE MODE OF BAPTISM

The Greek word *baptizo* means “dip” or “immerse.” Many churches practice baptism by immersion, including not only Baptists but also, for example, the Eastern Orthodox. However, most churches practice baptism by other modes such as pouring or sprinkling water on one’s forehead.

There is no instruction in the Bible about how to baptize. The earliest instruction we have is in a document called *The Didache*. It says that if enough water is available baptism should be by immersion, but if there is not enough water for immersion, water may be poured the head of each candidate three times.<sup>2</sup>

In defense of baptism by a mode other than immersion, two things may

1 *The Book of Common Prayer*, 857.

2 *The Didache* 7 in J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, editors and translators, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 259. The dating of *The Didache* is complicated, but there seems to be a consensus among patristic scholars that no instructions about baptism are earlier than those in *The Didache*. See Berthold Altaner, *Patrology* translated by Hilda C. Graef (Freiburg: Herder and Edinburgh-London: Nelson, 1960), 50-54.

be said. One is that it is difficult to visualize how at Pentecost the earliest church can have baptized 3,000 people at one time by immersion, especially as this seems to have taken place in the temple area where there was, as far as is known, no body of water large enough to immerse thousands of people (see Acts 2:41). The second is that it is the meaning of baptism and not the mode of baptism that matters most. Churches who use grape juice rather than wine in the Lord’s Supper are similarly operating on the principle that it is the meaning not the mode that matters.

There is a second issue concerning the mode of baptism. Until the twentieth century the officiants at baptism always employed the words of Jesus and baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19-20). It is a curious phrase. It is not clear what the background of Jesus’ statement is, nor is it clear what Jesus meant by “the name”—singular—of the Three Persons. The phrase has a formulaic character, and *The Didache* emphasizes that it was in fact to be used as a formula when baptisms were performed.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the formula does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament in connection with baptism. Moreover, in Acts there are references to baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38, 10:48) and “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 8:16, 19:5). A few churches today think of these phrases as formulas. Sometimes known as “oneness Pentecostals,” they refuse to use the Threefold Name when they baptize and insist that baptism must be in Jesus’ name.<sup>2</sup>

This departure from the church’s ancient practice does not seem to me to be justified. The fact that there are two phrases, “in the name of the Lord Jesus” and “in the name of Jesus Christ,” suggests that we are not dealing with a formula. It seems probable that Luke used these phrases not as a formula but to distinguish Christian baptism from the earlier and widely-known baptism of John the Baptist. This is confirmed by the fact that Paul baptized some people who previously had been disciples of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-5).

## THE CANDIDATES FOR BAPTISM

All churches baptize adult converts who have come to Christian faith from other religions or from no religion at all. Most churches also baptize

1 In *The Didache* 7 the formula is repeated twice in the space of about 150 words.

2 Eileen W. Lindner, editor, *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches 2012* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 176.

the infant children of church members. This has been done at least since the second century and perhaps since the New Testament era. On the other hand, Anabaptists, Baptists, and others have insisted that baptism be reserved for believers. They have done this in order to achieve two objectives. First, they wanted to restore the New Testament practice as they understood it. Second, they wanted to create a believers church.<sup>1</sup>

The first objective is elusive. It is not certain that infants were not baptized in the New Testament era. There are references to the baptism of a “household” (Acts 16:15) and a “family” (Acts 16:33); while it is not certain that household and family baptisms included infants or very young children, it is possible that they did.

Also, in general the practice of restorationism—restricting the practices of the church today to New Testament practices—must be done with care. For example, most Christians seem to agree that the fact that the New Testament churches did not construct church buildings does not mean that we today should not do so. Likewise, all church members today are not required to sell their possessions and pool their wealth in a communitarian way as the church in Jerusalem apparently did (Acts 2:44-45). I do not think that restorationism is a sufficient reason to restrict baptism to believers.

The second objective is much more persuasive. Since baptism is a rite of initiation into the church, the simplest way to have a church of professing believers is to reserve baptism for professing believers.

The goal of a believers church is highly desirable. Those who try seriously to live the challenging way of life to which Jesus calls us need as much support as possible. One of the most helpful sources for support is a community whose members have all professed faith in Christ. The church can be such a community if it initiates only believers into its membership.

The fact that some churches practice infant baptism and others do not constitutes one of the most intractable divisions in the church today. This is a fact that is sometimes overlooked.

In my judgment, the Baptists and others who made the decision to depart from the older churches on this practice bear a special responsibility for helping to heal this division.

But I also think that both groups must work to heal the division. On

1 There is a third possible reason for reserving baptism for believers. It is to insure that the language about baptism in the Bible will “fit” the candidates. It does seem odd to say of an infant that in baptism his “old self was crucified with [Christ]” (Rom. 6:6). However, reserving baptism for believers did not achieve a retrieval of that language because the churches that baptize infants had never stopped using it.

the Baptist side, our churches already appreciate the immense value of children’s growing up as part of the life of the church. Many of our churches express this by conducting ceremonies of blessing for infants. Some churches take it a step further. They do not require that persons who were baptized as infants in other churches and who apply for membership in their church be baptized in the Baptist way. This is not a new thing. The church of the most famous Baptist pastor of the seventeenth century, John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, practiced open membership in this way.<sup>1</sup>

One very persuasive argument for open membership is that baptism is initiation, and persons who have practiced their Christian faith for years are no longer in a position to be initiated into the faith and life of the church. You can’t be initiated into a practice in which you have already been engaged for many years.<sup>2</sup>

On the other side, churches that baptize infants can experience the grace of belonging to a community of faith by taking confirmation seriously. In confirmation people can be asked to confess for themselves the faith that was confessed on their behalf when they were infants. When this is done, churches whose members have been confirmed are believers churches as much as Baptist churches are.

## THE EFFECTS OF BAPTISM

In the New Testament baptism is closely associated with salvation. For example, on Pentecost Peter expressed his understanding of the meaning of baptism with these words: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38) Later Paul wrote about baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom. 6:3-4)

The close link between baptism and salvation raises three questions. First, is baptism itself a saving act? So far as I am aware, no church teaches

1 Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 48.

2 Malcolm O. Tolbert, *Shaping the Church: Adapting New Testament Models for Today* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2003), 58-60.

that baptism itself—apart from God—is a saving act. No church claims that, by baptizing people, it is saving them, nor does any church teach that adults who undergo baptism are thereby saving themselves. All churches agree that salvation is a work done by God, not by human beings. They also agree that salvation is a generous gift God freely gives rather than a reward for those who deserve it.

Second, does God ever give the gift of salvation to people who are not baptized? Or, to turn the question around, is it necessary to be baptized in order to receive the gift of salvation? The answer is that God does give the gift of salvation to unbaptized people, and it is not necessary to be baptized in order to receive the gift of salvation from God. Most churches agree about this, though not quite all.

Third, if we accept that baptism does not save and that God is free to give the gift of salvation to unbaptized people, how can we take seriously the fact that in the New Testament baptism is linked so closely to salvation?

To me it seems wise to begin with this fact: In the New Testament era, the church's primary concern was to proclaim the good news about what God had done in Christ to save the world; inviting people to respond to this good news was a secondary concern. As a consequence, when the church did invite a response, it was flexible about the language it employed. People were invited to turn around (to repent is to change one's mind) and to put their faith in the Lord Jesus and then to confess their faith by being baptized (Acts 2:38, Rom. 10:9). Faith and baptism were intimately related because in the early church baptism was the normative way to confess one's faith. The Anglican theologian Leonard Hodgson has written:

The question is sometimes asked whether it was a man's faith or his baptism which made him a member of the Church. This is the kind of question to which no direct answer can be found in the New Testament because the circumstances which gave rise to it had not yet arisen.<sup>1</sup>

The circumstances to which Hodgson referred arose only at the Reformation when the various churches developed different baptismal practices. In fact, one church stopped baptizing altogether. In the seventeenth century, the Friends (Quakers) rejected baptism because it had become the occasion for so much conflict in the church, and also because they hoped that, by

making Christianity less ceremonial, they could make it more spiritual.

In these new circumstances a good way to be faithful to the New Testament linking of baptism and salvation is to employ the church's traditional sacramental language. Baptism is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of salvation. Just as people use this sign to confess their faith in God, so God uses it to communicate the gift of salvation. Baptism is not God's salvation just as it is not people's faith, but it is a *sign* of God's salvation just as it is a *confession* of people's faith.

## A QUESTION ABOUT THE LORD'S SUPPER

The phrase "Lord's Supper" is used in 1 Corinthians 11:20. This ceremony is also called Holy Communion (fellowship), the Eucharist (thanksgiving meal), and the Mass.

We have seen that all churches agree that Christ is present in the Lord's Supper. The question we want to address now is, how is Christ present in this meal?

The Roman Catholic Church teaches a distinctive metaphysics of the Lord's Supper. On this view, all objects in the world are characterized by both substance and accidents. We cannot observe substances directly, but we normally infer them from their accidents, which we can observe. For example, the substance of a car is that it is a car; its accidents might include that it is an old, blue, dirty, Toyota, and the like. The Catholic Church says that in the Mass the accidents of the bread (its smallness, whiteness, dryness) and of the wine (its redness and liquidity) remain unchanged, but the underlying substances are changed from bread to the body of Christ and from wine to the blood of Christ. This teaching is called transubstantiation.<sup>1</sup>

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther held a similar doctrine. For him both the accidents and substance of the bread and wine remain unchanged, but in the Lord's Supper the substances of Christ's body and blood are added to them. This is consubstantiation, the joining of substances.

Another reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, said that the only sense in which Christ is present is that he is remembered by those who participate in the Lord's Supper. This is known as the memorialist view. In 1529 Luther and Zwingli met at Marburg in Germany and debated their differences concerning the Lord's Supper. Their discussion left the issue unresolved. It also left

1 Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom* II:115-116.

1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 1993), §§1373-1381.

the Reformation divided.

Still another reformer, John Calvin, “tried to steer a middle course between Zwingli, whom he felt had too little regard for the outward signs [of the Lord’s Supper], and Luther, who extolled them immoderately, thus obscuring the mystery itself.” Calvin taught that Christ is present in the bread and wine not as substance but spiritually. This teaching is the spiritual presence of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Today many Baptists and others hold to Zwingli’s memorialist-only view. This has not always been the case. The Second London Confession, the most influential of all Baptist confessions, has the following affirmation of the spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and wine:

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible Elements in this Ordinance, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally, and corporally, but spiritually receive, and feed upon Christ crucified & all the benefits of his death: the Body and Blood of *Christ*, being then not corporally, or carnally, but spiritually present to the faith of Believers, in that Ordinance, as the Elements themselves are to their outward senses.<sup>2</sup>

And today, among Baptists who insist that their view is memorialist, many affirm Christ’s presence not in the bread and wine but in the ceremony itself, as the host who invites us to his table, for example. That too is a form of spiritual presence.

I appreciate that Roman Catholics affirm the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper by means of the substance-accidents metaphysics. Apart from its being traditional, however, I know of no reason to think in terms of that metaphysics. It is not taught in the Bible, and, though it may be philosophically defensible, it is not today a widely held way of understanding our world among scientists or modern people generally. On the other hand, neither can I agree with Zwingli that at the Supper the only presence of Christ is in our memories. I think our memory of Christ is immensely important, but I also feel sure that Christ is present independently of our memory of him. What convinces me that this is true is the words of Jesus, “This is my body

. . . . This is my blood.” My view is that Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. Therefore it is important for those who are participate to do so in a way that is worthy (1 Cor. 11:27-34), that is, that takes seriously the presence of Christ and the fact that he is feeding us spiritually in this meal.

We turn now to the important matter of the church’s unity.

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

### BIBLICAL TEACHINGS ABOUT THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

We have seen that the central plot of the biblical narrative is that God is creating a people to be God’s own. We also have seen that one of the principal New Testament metaphors for the church is that it is the body of Christ. In these biblical teachings it is assumed that the church is a single, united community.

The classic biblical teaching about the unity of the church is the long prayer that Jesus offered to the Father on behalf of his disciples (John 17:1-26). For months Jesus had been helping his disciples to know and to trust God. Now, as he was about to leave them, he prayed that the Father would protect them and their faith and their unity. He also prayed for “those also who through their words put their faith in me,” that is, for all Christians. He prayed four times that all Christians would be one (John 17:11, 21, 22, 23).

Jesus was praying for a publicly visible unity for his followers. We know this because he said that it was a unity that would help create a situation in which “the world may believe that you sent me.” He compared the unity of all his followers to the mysterious unity that he himself shares with his Father. He asked that the love that the Father has for him would also be in his followers. Here is part of Jesus’ prayer:

I have made your name known to the men whom you gave me out of the world. . . . They have believed that you sent me. . . . Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name. . . . that they may be one. . . . It is not for these alone that I pray, but for those also who through their words put their faith in me. May they all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, so also may they be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. The glory which you gave me I have given to them, that they may be one, as we are one; I in them and you in me, may they be perfectly one. Then the world

1 See a discussion of these distinctions in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 148-163, 246-248. The quotation is from p. 247.

2 Chap. XXX, “The Second London Confession” [1677] in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959), 293.

will know that you sent me, and that you loved them as you loved me. (John 17:6, 8, 11, 20-23, REB)

Across the centuries this beautiful prayer of Jesus has provided inspiration for numerous efforts to achieve Christian unity.

## FORMS OF DISUNITY

The disunity of the church takes a variety of forms. Sometimes Christians in a congregation simply do not get along with each other. This was already the case in the New Testament era, which is why Paul advised his readers to respect each other, to be patient with each other, to practice forbearance, and to forgive each other. Peaceableness is one way to live out Christian unity in face-to-face relationships within congregations.

Sometimes the disunity of the church takes the form of principled disagreements about beliefs and practices. Paul repeatedly urged his readers to adopt beliefs and practices that are appropriate. In addition, in Romans 14-15 he described a process for negotiating principled disagreements. At that time the two major issues in the church at Rome were ones that churches today rarely encounter: whether or not it is permissible for Christians to eat meat that was not kosher (not slaughtered according to Jewish regulations), and whether or not it is appropriate to observe certain days—presumably Jewish holy days—as especially holy days.<sup>1</sup> One group in the church at Rome believed that Christians should observe Jewish holy days and not eat meat that isn't kosher. Paul called this group *the weak*; today we might call them *traditionalists* because they felt obligated to keep the ancient Jewish traditions. The other group believed that it isn't necessary to eat only kosher meat and that every day is equally holy. Paul called this group *the strong*; today we might call them *progressives* because they felt that in these matters Christians had moved beyond the Jewish traditions.

Most Christians are progressive traditionalists: they retain some traditions and move beyond others. For example, I am a traditionalist about worship; in the worship of God I am most helped by traditional music, liturgies, and sermons. But I am a progressive about psychology and counseling; I am glad the church today embraces psychology and provides counseling services to help her members navigate personal problems.

In Romans 14-15 Paul outlined seven principles for negotiating principled disagreements. The first three are for progressives, the fourth is for

traditionalists, and the last three are for both groups:

- Progressives should welcome traditionalists, but not in order to argue with them (14:1).
- Progressives must never look with contempt on traditionalists (14:3).
- Progressives should not act in ways that hurt traditionalists (14:15, 21).
- Traditionalists should not pass judgment on progressives (14:3-4).
- Traditionalists and progressives should help each other (15:2).
- Traditionalists and progressives should work for peaceful relations (14:19).
- Traditionalists and progressives should live harmoniously so that they can worship God together (15:5-6).

Today as in the past the church experiences disunity in the form of strife among its members and in the form of principled disagreements about beliefs and practices. These forms of disunity are serious and must be addressed.

But, as serious as these forms of disunity are, they are not the most serious forms. For nearly half of the church's almost 2000-year history, it has experienced a third kind of disunity, the official severing of ties known as a schism. In A.D. 1054, for a variety of reasons including principled disagreements about beliefs and practices, the Orthodox churches in the east and the Roman Catholic Church in the west parted company. Then, in the sixteenth century, multiple Protestant groups splintered away from the Roman Catholic Church. These included the Church of England, the Lutherans, the Reformed, and the radicals. Over the past five centuries many additional Protestant churches have come into being.

Those who work for Christian unity will always need to address the issues of strife among members and principled disagreements. But when the disunity of the church takes the form of different denominations, that is especially problematic because it is an official, institutional, and publicly visible form of disunity. It impedes in a special way the visible unity for which Jesus prayed. It also limits the church's ability to carry out the mission Christ has given it.

## THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Soon after the Great Schism of A.D. 1054, some Christian leaders began to make efforts to reunite the divided church, and similar efforts were made following the Protestant Reformation. For example, in 1626 a Lutheran theologian, Peter Meiderlin, created what has become a kind of slogan for those who are committed to the unity of the church: "*In necessariis*

<sup>1</sup> A. E. Harvey, *The New English Bible: Companion to the New Testament*, 534.

*unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas.* [In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”].<sup>1</sup> Half a century later, in 1679, a Puritan writer, Richard Baxter, wrote eloquently about Christian unity: “God will own no church which is so independent, as not to be a member of the universal; nor any person who is so independent, as not to come to him as in communion with all the Christians in the world. . . . The union of Christians tendeth to convert the world, as it is notorious that their divisions have hindered their conversion. . . . Uniting love is the glory and perfection of the church.”<sup>2</sup>

Early in the twentieth century, a great new impulse for church unity burst on the scene. It quickly generated a movement and created institutions to carry out its work. The impulse arose first among Protestants, but it soon included the Eastern Orthodox, and eventually it included, in a carefully defined way, the Roman Catholic Church. This is important because the Catholic Church has more members than all of the other churches combined.<sup>3</sup>

This modern ecumenical impulse is usually dated from a missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. With hindsight, it is not surprising that missionaries living in non-Christian countries would have found their work impeded by the presence of multiple, sometimes contentious, churches and denominations. The 160 missionary boards represented at the Edinburgh Conference, and the 1,200 missionaries in attendance, urged greater cooperation among the churches, and to facilitate that cooperation they founded an International Missionary Council. In 1925 an independent Conference on Life and Work met for the first time, in Stockholm; it brought together representatives from many churches to discuss moral and social issues. In 1927 another independent group, the World Conference on Faith and Order, held its initial meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland. Faith and Order brought together representatives from many churches to discuss the theological and ecclesial agreements and disagreements of the churches.

It was hoped that the three groups could merge their work quickly, but the Second World War intervened. It was not until 1948 that, meeting in

Amsterdam, Faith and Order combined with Life and Work to form the World Council of Churches. Then, at the meeting of the World Council in New Delhi in 1961, the International Missionary Conference was merged into the World Council. Those present in New Delhi reaffirmed the 1948 description of themselves as a “fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.”<sup>1</sup>

In the United States a Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America was founded in 1908, and in 1950 it merged with another ecumenical group to form the National Council of Churches. Today it is called the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and it has 37 member denominations. Across the years many conservative Protestants have been distrustful of the National Council of Churches; in 1942 some of them organized an alternative organization, the National Association of Evangelicals.

The 1960s were a time of social and political upheaval both in the United States and abroad. At that time many Christians became convinced that the church had become irrelevant to the life of society. Both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, in an effort to “let the world write the agenda,” took stands on a variety of political and social issues. Some of these, such as support for the Civil Rights Movement, have proved to be wise. Others, such as the World Council’s support for Communist regimes in some developing African nations, now appear to have been ill-advised.

Many Christians who were deeply committed to Christian unity were troubled by the councils’ increased emphasis on political and social issues. They felt that—to use their language—too much attention was being given to Life and Work and too little attention to Faith and Order. In an effort to secure more emphasis on Faith and Order, in 2003 a group of 16 theologians wrote a small book entitled *In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity*. Independently of this effort, a new ecumenical group was organized in 2001, called Christian Churches Together in the USA. It brings together five families of churches: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Historic Black Churches, and Pentecostal and charismatic churches.

So, in a sad irony, even the organizations working for Christian unity are now divided.

1 See [www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/self-understanding-vision/basis](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/about-us/self-understanding-vision/basis).

1 Rupertus Meldenius [Peter Meiderlin], *Paranaesis Votiva pro Pace Ecclesiae* (1626).

2 Richard Baxter, “The True and Only Way of Concord of All the Christian Churches” in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (Ligonier, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994), IV: 705, 708, 712.

3 One estimate of numbers is as follows: In mid-2015 the world population was 7,324,782,000. The Christian population was 2,309,108,000 or about 33.4% of the world population. The membership of the Roman Catholic Church’s was 1,239,267,000 or about 54% of the Christian population of the world. Todd M. Johnson and others, “Christianity 2015: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39:10 (January, 2015): 29.

## THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

From its beginning the modern ecumenical movement was not content just to affirm the invisible, spiritual unity of the church. It intended to live out a publicly visible unity of the kind that Jesus prayed for.

Some ecumenists thought that the ideal kind of visible unity was to merge churches, and in fact some church mergers have occurred. The Church of South India has been one of the most successful. Formed in 1947, it brought together the Anglican Church, the Methodist Church, and Presbyterian, Congregational, and Dutch Reformed churches. The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925; it brought together Methodists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and, later on, Brethren. Here in the United States the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957. It is a merger of a group of Lutheran and Calvinist Churches of German origin (the Evangelical and Reformed Church) with a group of Congregational and Christian churches of English origin (the Congregational Christian Churches). In 1968 the United Methodist Church was formed by a merger of the Methodist Church with the Evangelical United Brethren.

Today ecumenists do not expect all the churches to merge into a single church. That fact became especially apparent when the Roman Catholic Church committed itself to ecumenism during its Second Vatican Council (1962-65). It was always the case that many churches never showed any interest in ecumenical efforts. In fact, over the past century more churches have divided than have merged.

Ecumenists understand this, and they have committed themselves to a kind of unity that, while it is visible, does not involve a merger of churches but is rather a fellowship of churches in which each of the churches brings its particular insights, traditions, and gifts to all the others for their enrichment. The classic description of this unity was written by an American Methodist theologian, Albert Outler, and was adopted by the World Council of Churches meeting in New Delhi in 1961. In one gracefully worded paragraph Outler described the kind of visible unity for which the ecumenical movement works:

We believe that the unity which is both God's will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Savior are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully-committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith, preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one

bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages, in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people. It is for such unity that we believe we must work and pray.<sup>1</sup>

Here, according to this statement, are the ten components of the visible unity for which the ecumenical movement strives:

- All are baptized into Jesus Christ.
- All confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.
- All are brought into one fellowship that includes all Christians, living and dead.
- All hold the one apostolic faith.
- All preach the one Gospel.
- All share together in Holy Communion.
- All worship God together.
- All reach out together in witness and service to the world.
- All accept the others' members and ministers.
- All act and speak together for the tasks to which God calls them all.

## THREE LEVELS OF ECUMENISM

Efforts to live out the unity of the church occur on three levels. We have been giving attention to the denominational level where so much progress has been made in the past century. This is an important level, and all of the church can benefit from the work done at this level. But, of course, most Christians cannot contribute very much to ecumenism at this level.

At the personal level, individual Christians who are members of different denominations often live, study, work, and play side by side with great appreciation for each other's faith and life.

At the middle level, the level of congregations and parishes, much is being done, and much more could be done. Congregations from different denominations can meet together to worship God. In their own worship services, they can pray for each other. They can engage in common ministries such as care for the poor. They can meet to discuss their respective

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/1961-new-delhi/new-delhi-statement-on-unity>.

practices and beliefs, with a view to understanding each other better and to being enriched by each other's traditions.

### SUMMARY

The church is the fulfillment of the purpose for which God created the world. It is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Spirit. The church is present in the world in many forms, the most important of which is local congregations. The church is an organization as well as a fellowship; the organization exists to serve the welfare of the fellowship. The mission of the church is to carry forward the work of Jesus in the world. The church obeys Christ's commands to baptize and to observe the Lord's Supper, confident that in so doing she is remembering the gospel and that Christ is present with her and meeting her spiritual needs. Baptism is a rite of initiation, and the Lord's Supper is a meal in which Christ feeds his people spiritually. The church prays together with her Lord that she may be one as the Father and the Son are one.

## CHAPTER 11

# CHRISTIAN HOPE

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout this book I have been writing mostly about God's work in the past and present. As we turn our attention to God's work in the future, a question immediately arises: Is it even possible to know anything about the future?

There is a conventional view that the future is utterly unknowable to us. In my judgment, this is not the case. We do in fact know some things about the future. For example, currently (I am writing this in 2016) about 800 million people on our planet do not have enough food to eat. *We know* that, say, two years from now, there will be many people on earth who do not have enough food to eat. That is real knowledge about the future.

So why do so many people assume that we can't know anything about the future? There seem to be two answers. First, our knowledge of the future is different in a fundamental way from our knowledge about the past and the present. The difference is that we have experienced the past and we are experiencing the present, but we have no experience of the future, nor can we. So it is correct to say that we don't have any *experiential* knowledge of the future. But that is not the same as saying we have no knowledge whatever of the future. Experiential knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge.

The second reason people say we can't know about the future is that they recognize that what we say about the future could be mistaken. Things might turn out differently than we think they will. For example, in the example of poverty above, it's theoretically possible that all the wealthy nations could unite and address poverty and eliminate all the poverty in the world in just two years. That is exceedingly improbable, but it's theoretically possible, and that means that we could be wrong about the future.

But it doesn't follow from the fact that we might be wrong when we talk about the future, that we don't have any knowledge of the future. After all, we might be wrong when we speak about the past, but we don't conclude from that fact that we have no knowledge of the past.

In fact, we have frequently been wrong about the past. For example, on November 3, 1948, the *Chicago Tribune* carried the following headline in

huge letters: “Dewey Defeats Truman.” The reporter and editors who wrote that headline thought that Thomas Dewey had defeated Harry Truman in the presidential election that day. They were wrong; Truman had defeated Dewey. The fact that what we say about the past and present may be mistaken doesn’t mean that we have no knowledge of the past and present, and the fact that what we say about the future may be mistaken doesn’t mean that we have no knowledge of the future.

Even though our knowledge of the future is not experiential and could be mistaken, it is real knowledge. The question then is, how can we know the future?

It seems to me that basically there are two ways to know the future. I will call them “extrapolation” and “revelation.” We can know the future by becoming informed about the way things are at present and reasoning about the directions in which things are likely to move. That is what I did with the account of world hunger above. Or, we can know the future by having it revealed to us by God, whose knowledge of the future transcends our own. In this chapter we will be concerned principally with what God has revealed to us about the future, but we will do a little extrapolating, too.

We begin with the importance of the future.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FUTURE

God created us human beings so that the future is important to us. We lean into the future. We live by hope. On one occasion Paul linked the phrases “without hope” and “without God.” He wrote, “Yours was a world without hope and without God” (Eph. 2:12, REB).

Given the forward-leaning nature of human beings, it is not surprising that hope was important throughout the metanarrative of the Bible. God’s call to Abraham and Sarah included a promise about what the future would hold for their descendants (Gen. 12:1-3). The future became an even more dominant element in Hebrew religion after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Israel understood that national tragedy to mean that God had nullified the covenant that God had made with her. But then the prophet Jeremiah announced that God would be making a new and even better covenant with Israel and Judah (Jer. 31:31-34). In the following years the hopes of Israel came to be focused upon a Messiah, a promised, chosen, anointed servant of the Lord who would bring salvation to the covenant people.

The early Christians saw those messianic hopes fulfilled in Jesus. But

Jesus not only fulfilled the promises of the past but gave new hopes for the future. The early Christians continued to look forward to the future with hope, and they expressed their hope for the future in distinctly Christian terms. They spoke specifically of the *parousia*, the presence or coming of Christ, which today is sometimes called “the second coming of Christ.”

So the future is important to human beings, and biblical religion has an orientation to the future. These things need to be emphasized because today some people say things about the future that can embarrass Christians and make them want to discard the future orientation of their faith altogether. When Christian groups claim they know exactly when the end of the world will come, when they arm themselves and become paranoid about outsiders, when they are led by fanatics to commit mass suicide, when individuals become so preoccupied with the future that they become indifferent to present responsibilities, many Christians may want to eliminate from their faith and practice any reference to the future. This is understandable, but it is not wise; the better wisdom is to be clear about exactly what the Christian hope is.

### THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT THE FUTURE

In my judgment, the most important thing about the future is that it is in God’s hands. The ultimate destiny of the world and of our lives will not be determined by an accident, nuclear or otherwise; it is not in the hands of other people; it will not be determined by the evil powers. The future belongs ultimately to God alone.

In many ways, this is a sufficient hope for the church. All that we need to know about the future in order to live and to die as faithful Christians is that God will bring the world to its appropriate end.

### WELL-FOUNDED HOPE

Our confidence that the future is in God’s hands is well founded. We have “reason for the hope” that is ours (1 Peter 3:15, KJV). Three things support us in our Christian hope.

The first is historical. It is the resurrection of Christ on the first Easter morning. “We know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:14). Christ is the first fruits of God’s work of resurrection, and we will be the later fruits (1 Cor. 15:20, 23).

The second reason for our hope is our experience of the love of God.

The love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). As we live our lives in God's love, we become convinced that death can't prevent us from experiencing that love:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38-39)

The third support for our Christian hope is the Bible. It contains a great deal of information about God's plans for the future. Jesus himself spoke about the future, and so did those of his followers who wrote the books of the New Testament.

So far I have called attention to five things about our hope for the future:

- It is possible to know some things about the future.
- The future is important to human beings.
- The future is important in biblical religion.
- The most important thing about the future is that it is in God's hands.
- Three reasons for our hope as Christians are that Christ is risen, we have experienced the love of God, and Jesus and the New Testament writers spoke about the future.

We turn now to the specific themes of eschatology, the doctrine of the last things.

## THE THEMES OF ESCHATOLOGY

Some theologians write about the last things in terms of four themes.<sup>1</sup> They are the resurrection of the dead, the coming of Christ, the last judgment, and the final destinies of human beings, namely, heaven and hell. We will begin our survey of these in a moment.

For many Christians today there is another theme that is as important as these. It is the millennium. The word "millennium" is from two Latin words, *mille annum*, that mean "thousand year(s)." The Bible speaks explicitly of a millennium in just one passage, Revelation 20:1-7. In the nineteenth century the millennium became a dominant topic in the thinking of some Protestant Christians, many of them in England and America. Prior to that time the millennium had been a minor theme in much of the church. For

example, the Apostles' Creed refers to the coming of Christ, the judgment of the living and the dead, the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, but it makes no reference to the millennium.

Because of its importance to many Christians today, we will give attention to the millennium as well as to the four traditional themes.

## DEATH AND RESURRECTION

### DEATH

In the Bible, death has two faces. First, it is a fact of nature. In the world that God has created, all living things eventually die. To die is to go "the way of all the earth" (Josh. 23:14).

The writers of the Bible distinguished between better and worse deaths. I do not think that they ever said that death is good, but they did recognize that some deaths are not as bad as others. The Hebrew Scriptures speak of a man who grows old, who sees his children and grandchildren flourishing, who is respected by his family and at peace with his neighbors, as being "gathered to his people." For example: "Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people."<sup>1</sup> A death of this kind is not said to be a good thing, but clearly it is not as bad as the death of a man who dies young, without children, by violence, innocently, and unnecessarily.

The second face of death is very different. Death is the great destroyer of human beings. It is "the last enemy," as Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:26). It separates us from those we love. It lays waste to our families and our friendships. It is a direct consequence of sin and of God's judgment (Gen. 3:3). It is the wages human beings receive for their sin (Rom. 3:23).

Because the second face of death is so unpleasant, many people today tend to suppress the awareness of death. We employ euphemisms to do this. We say that a person is "terminally ill" rather than "dying," and that a person "passed away" rather than "died." This denial of death is not good for us.

There is a third thing to be said about death in addition to its being both natural and our greatest enemy. Christ has defeated death:

<sup>1</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *Well-Founded Hope* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), 31-32.

<sup>1</sup> Gen. 25:8; see also Gen. 35:29, 49:33.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . . Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:26, 54-57)

Christians experience Christ's defeat of death in two ways. First, in the present, Christ's victory over death helps us to overcome our fear of dying and death. The writer of Hebrews referred to this when he wrote of Jesus:

He himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Heb. 2:14-15)

Christians appropriate the freedom from the fear of death that Christ has provided in different ways, some quickly and some more slowly, some quietly and some dramatically. When the elderly Simeon saw the infant Jesus in the temple, he offered a prayer that can serve as a pattern for God's people in every age:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32, KJV)

Our second experience of Christ's victory over death will come in the future, namely, at our own resurrection, and to that we now turn our attention.

## RESURRECTION

In the minds of many people today, the Christian understanding of the resurrection of the dead is entangled with the Greek understanding of the immortality of the soul. This is a complex and controversial subject.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to clarify the issues I will offer some generalizations about the Greek view.

The Greek view is that human beings comprise two parts, body and soul. The soul is good, but the body is evil, because all physical things are evil. The human problem is that the soul, which is innately immortal, is

trapped in the prison house of a body that, because it is physical, will die. Death frees the pure, naturally immortal soul from the body so that it may live forever.

The biblical view differs from the Greek view at every point. The biblical view is that God created human beings, so everything about them—the physical as well as the spiritual—is good. Further, the biblical view is that human beings are sinful in a radical sense, so nothing about them, whether spiritual or physical, has escaped the corrosive effects of sin. The human problem is not that the spiritual in us is trapped in a physical body; the problem is rather that we are sinners who are going to die, spiritually as well as physically. Finally, it is not death that will deliver us from our problem, but rather God. God will do this by raising us from the dead. And our resurrection will be bodily as well as spiritually.

A recovery of the biblical understanding of resurrection is good for us because it reminds us, in a way that the Greek view does not, that our hope must be in the Lord alone. We cannot deliver ourselves from the last enemy, death; only God can do that.

In the resurrection our bodies will be transformed. They will be changed from mortal, perishable bodies into immortal, imperishable bodies (1 Cor. 15:53-54). This means that there will be continuity between the persons we are now and the persons we are then, and there also will be discontinuity. Paul used a memorable image for the continuity and discontinuity:

And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. (1 Cor. 15:37-38)

I understand Paul to be saying something like this. We know the difference between an acorn and an oak tree. An acorn is small and an oak tree is huge, and they do not look alike; they are discontinuous. But there is also continuity between them, since it is only because a particular acorn was planted that a particular oak tree exists. So it is with the resurrection. There will be discontinuity between ourselves as we are at present and ourselves as resurrected, but there will be continuity as well. We see this in Jesus. The Jesus whom the disciples met after the resurrection was the same person who had been with them before the crucifixion, but he was so changed that at times they didn't even recognize him (Luke 24:13-35).

<sup>1</sup> For an authoritative discussion of the issues see Krister Stendahl, editor, *Immortality and Resurrection* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965).

Of course, there is a great mystery about the resurrection. But enough has been revealed in Scripture for us to live with hope for it.

## THE COMING OF CHRIST

Belief in the second coming<sup>1</sup> of Christ is not the special possession of any one Christian group; all Christians believe in the coming of Christ. All trust that the work that Christ did when he came in the first century was for their salvation, and they trust that Christ will come again to complete the work he has begun. He said, "I will come again and will take you to myself" (John 14:3). His parables about the wheat and tares and about the wise and foolish virgins were about his future coming (Mt. 13:24-43, 25:1-13). His return was integral his entire message, as we see in this passage:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. (Mark 8:34-38)

The return of Christ was not only woven into the fabric of Jesus' message; it was woven into the faith of the New Testament church, and it is woven into to the hope of Christians today. It is almost impossible for us to imagine what the Christian faith would be like if it did not include the hope that Christ will complete the work that he has begun in the world and in our lives.

So all Christians believe in the coming of Christ. But not all agree concerning precisely what that involves. One difference concerns whether or not we can know the date of Christ's return. Another concerns whether Christ's coming will include a literal return to our planet and, if so, whether he will rule the planet for a period of exactly one thousand years. To those two issues we now turn.

<sup>1</sup> Although the phrase "second coming" does not appear in the New Testament, Jesus did say that he would "come again" (John 14:3, 28).

## KNOWING THE DATE OF CHRIST'S COMING

Some Christians believe that it is possible to know the date of the coming of Christ, and others think that we can have no idea when Christ will come. This disagreement has arisen because the New Testament seems to offer support for both views. For example, Jesus told his disciples that there are signs of his coming that are like the leaves that come out on a fig tree just before the figs appear (Mt. 24:32-35).

On the other hand, immediately after the teaching about the fig tree Jesus said that no one knows when he will come: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt. 24:36). Jesus said the same thing on other occasions. For example, immediately before his ascension into heaven, he and his disciples met:

When they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority." (Acts 1:6-7)

My conclusion about the teaching of Jesus and of the New Testament is that we cannot know the time of Jesus' coming. I therefore interpret the teaching about signs such as the fig tree in the light of what I believe to be the clearer and more emphatic teaching that we cannot know when Jesus' coming will be.

Because the time of Jesus' coming is unknown to us, we live in a particular way. On the one hand we live as if Jesus will not come for millions of years. We make plans, we buy insurance, we build houses and schools and hospitals and church buildings, we cultivate friendships that take years to develop, we plant gardens and flowers, we try to improve society, and we work for justice and peace in our societies. On the other hand we also live as if Jesus' coming is imminent. We worship God, we say our prayers, we confess our sins, we attempt to live peaceably with others, and we bear witness concerning Christ, as if this were the day of his coming.

There is a very good reason for us to live as if the coming of Christ might happen today or as if it might happen millions of years. The reason is that Christ might come soon or he might not come for millions of years. Perhaps we are among "the early Christians," or perhaps not.

The important thing is that we continue to hold in our hearts the hope that in his own good time Jesus will complete the loving and saving work he

has begun upon earth. We do not have to know when that will happen in order to pray over and over in the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10).

## THE MILLENNIUM

The second question about Christ's coming concerns the millennium. Here is part of the biblical passage in which a thousand years is explicitly mentioned:

He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. . . . They [Christian martyrs] came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. . . . They will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years. When the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison. (Rev. 20:2-7)

There are three principal views of the millennium.

The first is called "amillennialism," which means "no millennium." It is the view that the thousand year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20 is, like so many other things in that book, symbolic rather than literal. The millennium is a symbol for the spiritual rule of Christ over his church, perhaps in this present life, perhaps in the life to come, or perhaps in both. In any case it is not a historical period during that Christ will reign politically and militarily, as it were, on earth.

The second view is that Christ will return in order to launch a historical period during which he will be the ruler of the entire world. This is called "premillennialism," which means that Christ will return before the millennium. There are two principal versions of premillennialism, historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism. Historic premillennialism is the simpler view. It says simply that Christ will return to earth and will establish on earth a reign that will last for a thousand years.

Dispensational premillennialism is a more complicated view. It says that Christ will come in the heavens to take his people away from the earth; this is called the rapture of the church (see 1 Th. 4:13-5:11). The rapture will be followed by seven years of great troubles on the earth; this is the great tribulation. After the tribulation Christ will return to the earth with his people and will fight a great battle against the devil and all evil powers, called the battle of Armageddon. Christ will win this battle, and he will then reign on

the earth for a thousand years. This is the millennium. During the millennium Satan will be bound. The millennium will be followed by the final judgment and then by eternity.

This view is popular among many American Christians today. It is presented in a scholarly form in the *Scofield Reference Bible* and elsewhere, and in a popular form in a series of "Left Behind" novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins; three movies have been made from these novels.

The third view of the millennium is called "postmillennialism." This is the view that Christ's return will occur after the millennium. The idea is that the work of the church will succeed in the world; all of the world will be evangelized, most of the world will be converted, the world will be organized in moral ways, and after a long period—this may or may not be a thousand years precisely—of peace and justice, Christ will return to the world and the world will welcome him as its Lord. This optimistic view was widely held in the nineteenth century and contributed to the church's extraordinary missionary expansion during that period. The chorus of a hymn published in 1896 expresses this view well: "For the darkness will turn to dawning, / and the dawning to noon-day bright, / and Christ's great kingdom shall come on earth, / the kingdom of love and light."<sup>1</sup> Postmillennialism went out of favor about the time of World War I but is making a comeback in some churches today.

Many sincere Christians have held to each of these views and have made strong cases for their views. Each of the three has much to commend it. For example, those who promote the amillennial view are correct to notice the symbolic character of much of the teaching of the book of Revelation. In fact, in the same passage in which the millennium is mentioned, Christ is described as having a sword coming out of his mouth and as riding a horse, Satan is called "that ancient serpent," and an angel is said to have a key to a pit that has no bottom to it (Rev. 19:21-20:2). If these are symbols—and surely they are—then why should we not think that the millennium is also a symbol?

Those who promote the premillennial view are quite justified in attempting to take seriously all that the Bible says about the future. The individual pieces that make up the complicated view of dispensational premillennialism—the rapture, the tribulation, Armageddon, the millennium, the judgment—are found in the Bible. However, they do not all appear together in any one passage, so the pattern into which they have been placed is not biblical. Dispensational premillennialism is like a patchwork quilt; biblical

1 H. Ernest Nichol, "We've a Story to Tell" in *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*, 427.

patches have been put together to form a scenario that is not found in the Bible. The simpler view of historic premillennialism does not seem fantastic in the way the dispensational view does.

Those who hold the postmillennial view are right, I think, to believe that in the future as in the past Christ will continue to bring more and more people to follow him as his disciples. They are also right to say that Christ does this work through the church as she proclaims and lives out the gospel message. The church is not an ark carrying a few people safely out of a doomed world; it is a messenger giving witness to the fact that God has by no means given up on this present world but is working to make it what it should be.

My personal understanding is that the millennium is a symbol for the final victory by which Christ will complete the work he has begun in the church and in its members. God's will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven. The reign of Christ on earth will be a moral and spiritual reign over the lives of his people. Whether it will also be a physical and political reign, I do not know.

Here I want to repeat my conviction that the belief that God will be in control of the future is a sufficient belief for Christians. As long as we are trusting that God will be in charge of the future, we do not need a detailed theory of the millennium in order to live and to die as faithful Christians.

## THE JUDGMENT

Our immediate reaction, when we think about God judging the peoples and nations of the world, is to feel a sense of terror. Upon further reflection, however, we realize that the final judgment also has a positive character. God's judgment upon our individual lives means that God takes us and our conduct seriously. God's judgment upon the world means that God is determined to establish justice throughout the entire world. Judgment is a morally serious idea; when it is denied or even neglected, the moral seriousness of our individual and corporate human behavior is undermined.

The Hebrew people were aware of the positive character of God's judgment, and it was for them a source of comfort. They recognized that someone was always making judgments, and they knew that many of these judgments were being made by powerful people who mistreated poor and powerless people. They began to hope that God, the truly righteous judge, would condemn the actions of unjust, powerful people and set everything right. For example, at the time of the Exodus the Israelites lived under the

judgment of the powerful Egyptians who kept them in an unjust slavery. They looked forward to the judgment of God. The Lord said to them:

I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. (Ex. 6:6)

Israel was saved by those "mighty acts of judgment." Here is how one of the psalmists expressed his conviction that God is the judge and that human beings should therefore act with justice:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute." (Ps. 82:1-3)

In the New Testament, this positive understanding of God's judgment recurs in a different way. The judgment has been moved forward to the end of the world, the judge will be Christ, and in the judgment Christ will not only punish evil but reward good:

All of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Cor. 5:10)

Jesus spoke of himself as the judge:

For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. (Mt. 16:27)

It is reassuring to Christians to know that Jesus will be the judge at the final judgment. The one who judges us all will not be a stranger; he is the one who died upon a cross to save us from our sins and who has given us the gift of salvation. We have no reason to be terrified of him.

It is important to emphasize that there will be nothing arbitrary about the judgment that Jesus renders. In fact, he will not decide anything that has not, in one sense, already been decided. John expressed this fact when he wrote:

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. (John 3:19-21)

John is here saying that people are already in the process of judging themselves either by rejecting the light that Jesus brought or by accepting it. Those who reject Christ have already been judged; those who accept Christ have already been judged and acquitted of their sins and given the gift of eternal life.

That there is nothing arbitrary about Jesus' judgment is evident also in the following words of Jesus:

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven. (Mt. 10:32-33)

Jesus will acknowledge those who acknowledge him and deny those who deny him. There is nothing arbitrary about that.

In summary, at the final judgment God's will shall be fully done and righteousness will prevail throughout the world. The idea of the judgment, when it is separated from the unbiblical notion of arbitrariness, is a morally serious idea that is supportive of goodness and decency and that is an encouragement to the church in its missionary and evangelistic work.

## THE FINAL DESTINIES OF HUMAN BEINGS

### HELL

The Bible contains vivid pictures of the destiny of people who reject God. For example, Jesus referred to hell as Gehenna, which means that it is like the garbage dump of Jerusalem "where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched" (Mark 9:48). It is understandable that across the centuries hell has played an important role in the church's preaching to the unconverted.

However, I do not think that hell played that role in the New Testament

era. The fullest accounts we have about the evangelistic message of the early church are the sermons summarized in the book of Acts, and in none of those is hell used to motivate people to believe in Christ. Hell was not part of the apostolic message to the world. The early Christian preachers began with an assumption that their listeners would welcome news of God's salvation, and they preached that God's salvation had arrived in the person of Jesus Christ.

It is true, of course, that across the centuries preaching about hell has brought many people to faith in Christ, and of course we are grateful that these people have come to faith. Even so, no one should say that evangelistic preaching that does not include references to hell is unbiblical, since the precise opposite is the case: evangelistic preaching that includes references to hell has no precedent in the Bible.

Because hell is so horrifying, Christians have disagreed vigorously about it. They have developed four principal views about hell. Behind all four views lies the assumption that God will raise people from the dead.

The first is that hell is an eternal separation from God, an existence of endless torment. This is the traditional view. The strength of this view is that it takes the Bible's teaching about sin and judgment very seriously. But it also has weaknesses. One is that everlasting torment does not seem like a just judgment for even very depraved human beings; it seems more like torture than justice. A second weakness is that this view does not allow for a final victory of God over evil.

The second view about hell is that there is no hell and that all people will finally be saved. This is universalism. Its chief strength is that it affirms the final victory of God over all evil. Its weakness is that it seems to suggest that in the end God does not respect the decisions that human beings make in this present life, since all people are saved even if they have determinedly rejected God throughout their lives on earth.

The third view is that those who finally resist God cease to exist as persons. This is annihilationism. Its strength is that it is a merciful view that also manages to portray God as respecting human decisions. However, it does not show how God is finally victorious over all evil.

The fourth view is that hell is real but temporary. On this view, hell is purgatory. This view is usually combined with either universalism or annihilationism. That is, some who are sent to hell reconsider things and finally are saved. Or, even in hell people refuse to reconsider and finally cease to exist. The strength of this view is that it takes judgment very seriously. Its

weakness is that it does not account for the fact that the Bible seems to say that hell is everlasting.

Perhaps no one of these views is the entire truth. I, at least, cannot see that any one does justice to all the biblical teachings. So instead of choosing one of them and attempting to justify it, I will identify what I believe to be four principles that should govern our thinking about hell.

First, and most important, God is going to do what is right. I am not saying that God is going to do what we think is right, but I am insisting that God is perfectly righteous. The goodness of God is indispensable to our Christian faith, for if God does not do right, then God is evil, and our faith in God is misplaced. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of saying, in connection with hell or any other subject, that God always does what is right. People who are troubled about hell should begin their reflections on the subject by reflecting on this great biblical truth: God always does right because “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

Second, God respects our decisions. Out of love for us God honors the choices we make in life. God loves us more than we can possibly imagine, and God wants us to experience that love and to benefit from it. But God never forces that love upon us because when love is forced it ceases to be love and becomes an assault. God takes an interest in us, encourages us, woos us, pursues us, persuades us, urges us, and lures us, but even when we decide to sin or to reject God entirely, God does not override our decision.

Third, in this life some human beings reject God. They do so deliberately and repeatedly. That is, at least, the effect if not the precise intention of the lives of many people. People do not think that God is important; they do not think that Christ is important. They are willing to do a little religious observance, but then they want to get on with what they think of as the important things in their lives. The thought of loving God is uncongenial to them. They act selfishly and even cruelly. They spend their lives on things that do not matter very much, and they neglect or reject the things that matter most of all. Many never suspect what their lives might have been.

Fourth, I understand hell in the same way I understand God’s judgments on Israel in the Old Testament era. God’s judgment is part of a frequently repeated cycle:

- God calls Israel to be the covenant people.
- Israel breaks the covenant.
- God judges Israel for her disobedience.
- Israel repents.

- God calls Israel to be the covenant people.

I think that the divine punishment is retributive, that is, deserved; if it were not, it would be simple violence. But I think the divine punishment is also restorative. God always judges in order to restore relationships with Israel. What is true of God’s punishment of Israel is, I believe, true of all divine punishment whether in the world or the world to come.

Taken together, these four principles constitute a warning about the possibility of hell that is biblical but that does not portray God as a torturer or suggest that our human behavior has no consequences.

For me, the most sobering biblical expression about hell is not the references to fire or to darkness. The most sobering is a phrase that Paul used three times in the first chapter of Romans: “God gave them up” (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). At some point, instead of continuing to attempt to win people’s trust and love, God will let people go. When God lets us go, there is no longer any hope for us; we are lost.

C. S. Lewis once commented that finally there are only two kinds of people, those who say to God, “Your will be done” and those to whom God finally and sadly says, “Your will be done.”<sup>1</sup> If in the end God gives us what we, without divine grace and help, want, we shall inhabit a world of which we are the center, miserably curved in upon ourselves forever.

It is good for us that the Bible alerts us to this possibility. On the other hand, the Bible also contains hints of another possibility. Here is an example: “We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10).<sup>2</sup>

This raises the question: May we hope that in the end all people will be saved? I am not talking now about whether all people will be saved; I am talking about whether we may *hope* that all people will be saved. I am not talking about either universalism that says, “I know all people will be saved,” or the traditional view that says, “I know some people will not be saved.” I am asking what we may hope for.

Paul wrote that love “hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7). It is right and proper for Christians to hope that all will be saved—while always remembering that it is possible that in the end there may be some who are not.

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1946), 72.

2 Many church members have been conditioned to overlook passages such as this. Some others are Ps. 65:5, Isa. 25:6-9, John 10:16, 12:32, Rom. 5:18, 8:21, 11:32, 1 Cor. 15:22, 2 Cor. 5:19, Heb. 2:9, Rev. 21:24-26.

## HEAVEN

With relief we turn now from the dreadful subject of hell to the wonderful subject of heaven. It is difficult to know which is more striking, the nearly complete absence of any hope for heaven in the Old Testament or the vigorous witness to that hope in the New Testament. Here as elsewhere Jesus is our ultimate authority, and he said a great deal about heaven. Here are a dozen examples:

- He taught his followers to pray, “Our Father art in heaven” and “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:9-10).
- He himself began a prayer with these words: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Mt. 11:25).
- He said that those who are persecuted for his sake will be given great rewards in heaven (Mt. 5:12).
- He said not to swear by heaven because it is God’s throne (Mt. 5:34).
- He said that many people will come from the east and the west to sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 8:11).
- He told a young man to give away his wealth and to follow Jesus in order to have treasure in heaven (Mt. 19:21).
- He said that there is joy in heaven over a sinner who repents (Luke 15:7).
- He told his friends Mary and Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25).
- He defended belief in the resurrection in a debate with some Sadducees (Luke 20:27-40).
- A few hours before he died Jesus told his disciples, “I go to prepare a place for you. . . . I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:2-3).
- At the last supper he told his disciples that he would not drink wine with them again until they all drank it together in the Father’s kingdom (Mt. 26:29).
- He told the thief who was crucified alongside him, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Jesus’ words give us hope. We believe in and hope for everlasting life in heaven together with God and angels and all the people of God.

We are aware, of course, that many of our contemporaries have doubts

about heaven. The background for many of their doubts is our increasingly secular culture. It is true that most American people are religious; in fact, most are professing Christians. But much of our American culture is not religious.

For one thing, our government is religiously neutral. We require that our government neither support religion nor interfere with it. We do this in order to provide all our citizens with maximal religious freedom. In that sense our government is secular rather than religious, though of course many of the people in government are themselves religious.

In addition, our culture is shaped by science and technology, and these are secular. Scientists work only with natural causes, without any reference to anything supernatural. Napoleon is supposed to have asked the great scientist Pierre-Simon Laplace where the Creator fit into his scientific understanding of the world, and Laplace replied, “Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis.” Science is committed to methodological secularism. This is perfectly proper. It becomes a problem only when some overly enthusiastic person says that science gives us the only knowledge we have about reality.<sup>1</sup>

So our government is secular, and science and technology are secular. In addition, much of what human beings today create—music, painting, fiction, poetry, theater, movies, and television—is secular.

We all live in this secular environment, and we all are shaped by it, so it is not surprising that many of our contemporaries have doubts about the supernatural, and, in particular, about eternal life in heaven with God. That is only to be expected. We are all the products, at least in part, of our environments.

But in the church we think that our secular culture has settled too soon for too little. We attempt to provide another environment to balance the influence of the secular environment in which we all live. The culture of the church takes Jesus’ messages more seriously than it takes the secular culture. The church is a community of persons who are committed to a non-secular understanding of reality.

We Christians live in two environments, a secular culture and the Christian church. This gives us a good place from which to think about the supernatural—about God, resurrection, eternal life, and heaven. If we lived only in the secular world, or only in the church, it would be difficult to keep a sense of balance about the supernatural. Being in both places positions us to assess the concerns about eternal life that secularism inspires. I want now

<sup>1</sup> For more about theology and science see Appendix 2, Science and Christian Theology.

to describe and comment on five of those concerns.

One thoughtful concern takes this form: We really shouldn't believe in eternal life with God in heaven, since no one can possibly know whether or not there is life after death. It's true that none of us can know *from personal experience* whether there is life after death. But this fact cuts both ways. In the absence of experiential knowledge, we are just as free to believe in life after death as to doubt it. We simply do not know enough about the future to conclude that despair is the more reasonable position.

A second concern many people feel is that heaven is just too good to be true; therefore the Christian hope is an exercise in wishful thinking. It is true that eternal life with God is immensely good and something we wish for. But that doesn't mean it isn't true. When I was in my early twenties I fell in love with Caroline Toler. I wanted more than anything else in the world to marry her. Marriage to her seemed just too good to be true, an exercise in wishful thinking if ever there was one. Only it wasn't. We have been married now for more than fifty years.

A third concern many of our contemporaries feel about heaven is the inverse of the second concern. It's that heaven is not appealing. People have a vague sense that heaven would be boring. They are not thrilled by the thought that in eternity it will be 11:00 o'clock Sunday morning forever. We can understand this. Boredom is a real problem for some people. But this concern overlooks the fact that the world around us, the world that God created, is fascinating to us. Surely this suggests that the world to come will be fascinating, too.

A fourth concern is this: many of our contemporaries assume that belief in heaven is childish, like belief in the tooth fairy. They think that in order to be a modern adult one must give up the childish hope for eternal life with God.<sup>1</sup> It is true that children who are brought up in the church and in Christian homes believe in heaven. And it is true that some of their beliefs about heaven ought to be outgrown—for example, that heaven is located somewhere up in the sky.

But it is not true that the Christian belief in eternal life is the exclusive property of children. Jesus believed in it. Thousands of Christian martyrs, sustained by a hope for eternal life, have faced torture and death with courage and an equanimity we can barely comprehend. Today as in the past, many mature, thoughtful, informed Christian adults live in the hope that

God's salvation is not for this lifetime only.

A fifth and final concern felt by many of our contemporaries is that hope for heaven is unrealistic. I feel some sympathy for the four earlier concerns, but this one I find tendentious. People with a hope for heaven are realists about death. I think that a truer example of unrealism is an attitude toward death that is widespread in America today. As I mentioned above, many of our contemporaries are engaging in a denial of death. They find it difficult even to say that people have died. Instead they say that the illness was terminal or the accident fatal, or that the person is deceased or has passed away. In my judgment, Christians are realistic to take death seriously enough to reflect on the possibility of life after death and heaven in particular.

Now we turn to the ways in which the reality and wonder of heaven are presented in the New Testament. The longest passage about heaven is a passage in Revelation about the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:10-22:5). In that passage the reality of heaven is pictured as a city with twelve foundations. The wonder of heaven is pictured by the opulence of streets of gold, walls of jasper, gates of pearl, and precious stones embedded in the foundations. The city has no night or darkness. In it there is a river, clear as crystal, with cool water to drink at all times. Fruit trees bear a variety of fruit year round, and the leaves of the trees provide healing for the nations. The powerful of the earth will submit all that they have to God. Elsewhere we read that God will give a great party, a banquet. There will be music and wine and food and celebration.<sup>1</sup>

If these images seem attractive to us, imagine how attractive they must have been to first-century Christians living in desert areas, whose lives were characterized by poverty, hunger, and disease. Heaven was for them a security, peace, happiness, and beauty they had never before experienced.

The Bible teaches that heaven is real and wonderful, but it teaches more. It teaches that in heaven we will all be good people. God has already begun a process of changing us, and we live in the hope that God is going to finish that work. Paul wrote to the Philippians: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). John wrote, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when [Christ] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). We will be like Christ; if that were not in the Bible, we would think it was disrespectful to say it.

I find this transformation of ourselves much more mysterious than I

<sup>1</sup> The American novelist John Updike wrote a splendid short story about this. John Updike, *Pigeon Feathers and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962), 116-150.

<sup>1</sup> Isa. 25:6-9, Rev. 5:11, Mt. 22:1-10.

do some of the things that puzzle other people about the Christian hope. How can we possibly become like Jesus? We are naturally so self-centered, so shaped by the fallen world around us, so reluctant to give up wrong ideas and habits. Our commitments to love are so tenuous. I do not understand how we can be changed so that we are good from the inside out, so that holiness is perfectly natural for us. I simply hope for this and trust that it will happen, and that in the end we will love God with all our hearts and love others as we do ourselves.

And there is something else. Once we have been transformed into good people, it will be possible for us to live together as a true community. Once our self-centeredness and other moral failures are removed, there will be nothing to prevent us from being a close-knit community, a communion of saints.

One of the oddest suggestions ever made about heaven is that we will not know each other there. I don't know where this originated. I suppose the idea is that, if we know each other there, and if we notice that some of the people we love aren't there, then heaven will be spoiled for us. In any case, it's not a biblical idea.

One possible answer to the question of whether we will know each other in heaven is, do we know each other now? It is very difficult for us human beings, especially once we have become adults, to be truly open to each other. We hide behind our personas. We share parts of ourselves, but not all. Our marriages, our friendships, our communities, even our nations, all suffer because it is too risky for us to be completely transparent with each other. In the life to come, because God has made us into good persons, there will be nothing to conceal and so no risk in openness. We will be a true covenant people of God living together in full communion with each other.

The fact that we will be transformed will make something else possible, too. This is the ultimate thing we know about heaven: We will see God's face (Rev. 22:4). The background for this statement is the centuries-long tradition of Jews and of the early church, that no one can see God. Human beings can hear the Word of God with their ears, but they cannot see the face of God with their eyes. "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). God is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17).

Part of the reason we can't see God is that there is what philosopher

John Hick calls an epistemic distance between ourselves and God.<sup>1</sup> But there is another, more profound reason we cannot see God. It is that our vision is clouded by our moral imperfections. The truth we are able to see depends on the kinds of people we are. Once we are morally transformed, it will be possible for us to see God. Paul expressed our hope this way: "Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). It is not accidental that this great statement about seeing and knowing God appears in a chapter devoted to the subject of love. In heaven the knowledge of God and the vision of God will be given to us, not because we have become more intelligent, but because we have become more filled with love. Lovers know things that others can't know, and the vision of God is one of them. That is why Jesus said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt. 5:8). When we become like Jesus, loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbors as ourselves, we will know God in the same, full way that Jesus did.

The church has designated this experience the Beatific Vision. For most people it is a vision that can be experienced only in the life to come. However, the Bible has allowed for exceptions. For example, Moses caught a glimpse of God for a brief moment (Ex. 33:17-34:9). But it is only in the life to come that most of us will see God, and the vision we have there will be greater than Moses' vision because it will be an everlasting one.

When I think about heaven, I think about a passage written centuries before the New Testament era. It is an extended promise made to Israel and Judah about a future time when God will bring them to their true destiny. It also is, I think, a promise to all people about a glorious future:

Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world—a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine. Here he will suddenly remove the cloud of sorrow that has been hanging over all the nations. The Sovereign Lord will destroy death forever! He will wipe away the tears from everyone's eyes and take away the disgrace his people have suffered throughout the world. The Lord himself has spoken. When it happens, everyone will say, "He is our God! We have put our trust in him, and he has

1 John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 79. Hick used the phrase to refer to the fact that there is a gap in our knowledge about God. Because God is transcendent, we cannot know about God in the way we know about other things.

rescued us. He is the Lord! We have put our trust in him, and now we are happy and joyful because he has saved us.” (Isa. 25:6-9, TEV)

### SUMMARY

The future is important to human beings, and hope is an important component of biblical religion. The most important thing about the future is that God will be in charge. The reasons for our Christian hope are that Christ is risen, we have experienced the love of God, and the Bible teaches us about our hope.

The biblical view of death is that it has two faces. It is a fact of nature, and it is also our greatest enemy. Christ came to deliver us from the fear of death in this life and from the fact of death by means of the resurrection in the life to come. The resurrection is a mighty act of God at the end of the world in which those who have died are made alive again and transformed, bodily and spiritually.

All Christians believe in the coming of Christ. Some think that they know when it will occur, but the Bible teaches that we cannot know, and we must live accordingly. The three views of the millennium—that it is a symbol, that it is Christ’s literal future reign, and that it is a period of preparation for Christ’s return—all provide support for Christians to live faithfully.

The final judgment is terrifying, but it also is comforting because it means that God will set everything right at last. There is nothing arbitrary about it. Jesus himself will be the judge. Concerning hell, God does what is right, God respects people’s decisions, some people seem determined to reject God, and God’s judgment is restorative as well as retributive. The risk they face is that God will let them go, but love “hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7).

Heaven is pictured in the Bible as a new Jerusalem, and as a big banquet. It is real. It is wonderful. We will be transformed into good people. We will be the family of God. And best of all, we will see God face to face.

## CHAPTER 12

# FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout this book I have been writing about God. I have devoted a chapter to the understanding of God that was available before the coming of Christ, a chapter to the person of Christ, and a chapter to the Holy Spirit. These come together in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The central affirmation of the doctrine of the Trinity is that the one, true God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is unique to Christians. It is true that some other religions speak of divine triads or trios, but they do not speak of Jesus, his Father, and their Spirit, so they are not speaking about the Trinity. Christians have no interest in the numbers three and one in general; their interest is in the one true God and the Three Persons, Jesus, his Father, and their Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity is a universal Christian belief. It is not the private belief of the Eastern Orthodox, or of Roman Catholics, or of some groups of Protestants. It is shared by all Christians. It is true, of course, that a few churches have denied the doctrine of the Trinity; this is the case with the Unitarians and with some Pentecostal groups. But numerically these groups are small, and they are relegated to the margins of the Christian church by their denials. To say this is not to criticize them; they are aware that this is the case. It is also the case that some individual church members have doubted or even denied the doctrine of the Trinity.

The understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is a living tradition in the churches. Theologians sometimes say that Christians do not take the doctrine of the Trinity seriously. Some say that most Christians are effectively unitarians; others say that most Christians are tritheists, believers in three gods. It seems to me that these two claims effectively cancel each other out. My own view is that most Christians are Trinitarian in their faith and life *in the same sense* that the Christians of the New Testament churches were Trinitarian in their faith and life. I will explain below what I mean by this.

Trinitarian faith and life are transmitted in the churches in multiple ways. The most obvious is the New Testament itself, which is primarily

about Jesus but is also about the Father and the Spirit. Trinitarian faith and life are also transmitted by the baptismal formula taken from Matthew 28:19. They are transmitted by Trinitarian hymns. In churches that recite creeds they are transmitted by Trinitarian creeds. Both the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed confess faith in God the Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian faith and life are transmitted by doxologies such as the "Gloria Patri" and by benedictions such as the one found in at the end of 2 Corinthians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:14). The Trinitarian understanding of God also is transmitted in books and in art.

It seems to me that there are four principal questions concerning doctrine of the Trinity:

- The question of revelation: Has it been revealed that one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- The question of history: How did the doctrine of the Trinity come to be officially formulated?
- The question of rationality: Is it reasonable to believe that one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
- The question of relevance: What difference does believing in the Trinity make?

### THE REVELATION OF THE TRINITY

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are confident that they have a revelation of the Trinity. The source of their confidence is their conviction that revelation has been given not only in the Bible but also in the creeds and councils of the church. They point out that the first ecumenical council, at Nicæa in A.D. 325, and the second ecumenical council, at Constantinople in A.D. 381, affirmed and defended the doctrine of the Trinity. Since they believe that the work of these two councils and the creeds that they endorsed are divinely given revelation, they are confident that the doctrine of the Trinity is a revealed doctrine.

We who are Protestants have a somewhat different understanding. We believe that God's revelation was given in the history of Israel, especially of Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Scriptures that record that history. We respect the work of councils and we benefit from their creeds, but, when we are asked if we have a revelation of the Trinity, we do not look to the councils

and creeds. We look to the Scriptures as the written Word of God. We want to know if the Trinity has been revealed in the Bible.

### THREE PROPOSALS ABOUT THE BIBLICAL REVELATION OF THE TRINITY

There are several ways to affirm that a revelation of the Trinity has been given in the Bible. The first is the way of proof-texting. We begin with an understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, and then we attempt to locate texts in the Bible that support this doctrine.

This procedure is popular, but it also is problematic. One problem is that it is unwise to begin with a doctrine and then try to find support for it in the Bible; it is better to begin with the Bible and see what we find there. A second problem is that, in order to find support for the doctrine, we may neglect the meaning that the writers of the Bible intended. So far as I can tell, no writer of the Bible intended to explain that God is both one and three. When we assert that they did intend to do that, we are acting anachronistically and imposing our agenda on them rather than following their agenda.

A second way to affirm that the Trinity is revealed in the Bible is to interpret individual biblical texts in such a way as to demonstrate that the Trinitarian understanding of God lies behind the texts. Two fine examples of this are Karl Barth's interpretation of Genesis 1:27 and B. B. Warfield's essay, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," which contains an interpretation of Matthew 28:19.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with this procedure is that, while it is possible to show that biblical texts permit the Trinitarian understanding of God, it is difficult to show that they require it.

A third way to affirm that the Trinity is revealed in the Bible is to point out that the doctrine of the Trinity is a compound doctrine. That is, it consists of several simpler ideas such as the following:

- There is only one true God.
- The Father is God.
- The Son is God.
- The Spirit is God.
- The Father and Son are distinct but not separate.
- The Father and Spirit are distinct but not separate.
- The Son and Spirit are distinct but not separate.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III:1, The Doctrine of Creation*, 191-206. B. B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity" in *Biblical Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 133-171.

The doctrine of the Trinity is then shown to be a biblical doctrine by locating texts in the Bible in which each of these ideas is asserted. For example, there is an intentional teaching that God is one in the *Shema*, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deut. 6:4). Further, when John writes, “The Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1), there is an intentional teaching that Christ is divine and also that Christ is distinct from the Father. Further, when Jesus refers to the Spirit as “another Advocate” (John 14:16), there is an intentional teaching that the Son and the Spirit are distinct.

The problem with this procedure is that, even when we have located texts that affirm all of the discrete beliefs that together make up the doctrine of the Trinity, we cannot point to a biblical passage in which all of those beliefs appear together. The component parts of the doctrine of the Trinity are biblical, but the pattern into which they are all placed, the doctrine proper, is still not biblical because there is no passage in the Bible that affirms that pattern.

At this point we might begin to look wistfully at our friends in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. We might begin to wonder if there is a biblical revelation of the Trinity.

### WHY IT WAS POSSIBLE FOR THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS TO REFER SO OFTEN TO THE THREE PERSONS

I believe that the Trinity has been revealed in the Bible. In order to see how this is the case, we need to come at the issue in a very different way than the three ways listed above.

We begin with a demonstrable fact: the New Testament contains about 115 passages in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are mentioned together.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of a historian, this is astonishing. Except for Luke and Acts, the writers of the New Testament were Jews who had become Christians. For Jews the most fundamental religious truth is the *Shema* with its emphatic confession that there is only one God. How can we possibly account for the fact that these devout Jews referred again and again to Father, Son, and Spirit? They certainly did not renounce their Jewish belief that there is only one true God; they always assumed it, and sometimes they asserted it.<sup>2</sup> How did they come to write repeatedly, casually, without

explanation or defensiveness, of Father, Son, and Spirit, when the oneness of God was the principal belief of their inherited religion?

Occasionally I meet someone who is puzzled that no New Testament writer ever explained how God could be both one and three. I do not find that puzzling. What is puzzling to me is that devout monotheistic Jews casually alluded to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit about ten dozen times. That is the fact that cries out for explanation.

I know of only one plausible explanation. It is that the writers had participated for years in a community in which this kind of Trinitarian language was routine. The writers had become accustomed to Trinitarian language.

This leads to another puzzling fact. How did it become conventional in the churches to use this Trinitarian language? I think the solution to this is that the faith of the earliest Christians was directed toward the Three Persons. The church was made up of people who had responded in faith, as their Jewish ancestors had before them, to the God of Abraham and Sarah, the Creator of the world. But that is not all. They also had responded in faith to Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord. But that is not all. They also had responded in faith to the Holy Spirit, whom they understood to be God present with them, guiding and empowering them as a community on a mission to the world.

In this sense, the religious faith of the church was Trinitarian from the beginning. Consider, for example, the sermon of Peter on the day of Pentecost, the day the church was born. The sermon was in two parts. Peter began by speaking about the Spirit who that day had been poured out on Jesus' followers (Acts 2:14-21). He then went on to speak about Jesus who had died and risen again and through whom people could receive forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:22-36). And throughout the sermon Peter spoke repeatedly of God who planned that Jesus should die and who poured out the Spirit that day on Jesus' followers (Acts 2:17, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 30, 32, 33, 36). Peter certainly did not give a lecture on the Trinity that day, but he did speak emphatically and at length of Jesus, his Father, and their Spirit. He spoke about the Three Persons together in this sentence:

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you both see and hear. (Acts 2:33)

Naturally this Trinitarian religious faith of the early Christians was ex-

1 See Appendix 10, New Testament References to the Three Persons of the Trinity.

2 Mark 12:29, 1 Cor. 8:4, 6, Eph. 4:6, 1 Tim. 2:5.

pressed in their shared religious life. When they came together for worship and other purposes, the early Christians routinely made reference to the Three Persons. The New Testament contains hints of places in their shared life where they did this. Here are some examples:

First, we may assume that the kind of affirmations that Peter made at Pentecost continued to be made in the church's life.

Second, some early Christians referred to the cross of Christ, about which they spoke and wrote constantly, in Trinitarian terms. For example, the author of Hebrews refers without comment to "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God" (Heb. 9:14).

Third, some early Christians spoke of conversion by saying that those who were converted believed in Christ and that God put a stamp of ownership on them by giving them the Spirit (Eph. 1:11-13).

Fourth, the church baptized new members in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt. 28:19).

Fifth, when Christians prayed for each other, they asked God to give the Spirit of wisdom and power to the church so that the church could be faithful to her Lord, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:16-17).

Sixth, the early Christians urged one another to be filled with the Spirit and to give thanks to God in the name of Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18-20).

Seventh and last, they dismissed their worship services with a benediction that was Trinitarian: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor. 13:14).

The writers of the New Testament did not live in a vacuum. They no doubt shared in the life of the early Christian churches. These churches comprised people who had responded in faith to Jesus, to the Father, and to the Spirit, and who lived a communal life together in which reference to the Three Persons was routine.

That is, I think, the only plausible explanation for the extraordinary fact that devoutly Jewish Christians wrote casually about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

This leads us to another question: how did these Christian churches come to have this Trinitarian faith and life in the first place? The answer is that their faith and life were direct responses to God's actions. God acted by sending Jesus, and people responded to Jesus as well as to God. God and Jesus acted by pouring out the Spirit, and people responded to the Spirit as well as to God and to Jesus.

This understanding of the pattern of the revelation of the triune God

may be summarized as follows:

- History: God acted in the history of Jews, forming them into the faith of the *Shema*, faith that God is one. Then, God acted by sending Jesus. Then, God and Jesus acted by pouring out the Spirit at Pentecost.
- Trinitarian faith: The early Christians were people who had religious faith in Yahweh (whom they now called *Abba*, Father), and who responded with religious faith in Jesus their Lord and Savior, and who responded with religious faith in the Spirit of God who was guiding and empowering them on their mission.
- Trinitarian life: It was quite natural that, since the church shared a Trinitarian religious faith, they would live a Trinitarian life together. In their shared life they made repeated references to the Three Persons.
- The New Testament: Because the writers of the New Testament had participated for years in the Trinitarian faith and life of the church, they made casual references in their writings to the Three Persons.

I am convinced that this is how the revelation of the Trinity was given. This is a plausible account of how the 115 Trinitarian passages came to be written, and I do not think there is any other plausible account.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE *VESTIGIA TRINITATIS*

If this account is true, then the Three Persons were not revealed until the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. In other words, the Three Persons were not revealed in the Old Testament era or in the Old Testament. What role, then, does the Old Testament play in the revelation of the Trinity? I think it played a preparatory role, and I think that role had three components.

The first component is simple, obvious, and immensely important. The Old Testament taught explicitly that there is only one true God. That belief is an indispensable component of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Second, the Old Testament was written before Jesus came and before the Spirit was given to all God's people at Pentecost. Therefore it does not record those events. However, it does contain promises of both of them. Those promises prepared the minds of Jewish people so that when Christ came and the Spirit was poured out, they had categories for grasping these things as God's acts in history. The Old Testament prepared the minds of God's people to interpret those two great acts.

Third, the Old Testament also contained hints of the fact that there is diversity within the life of the one true God. For example, it refers to the angel of the Lord, the Spirit of the Lord, and the Wisdom of God. These themes seem to have prepared the minds of Christians to receive the revelation, given later in Christ and at Pentecost, that in some wonderful way there is a plurality within the inner life of the one true God.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the Hebrew Scriptures provided a tripartite blessing in Numbers 6:24-26, which may have prepared Christians to give and to receive the tripartite benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14.<sup>2</sup>

Since the Old Testament prepared the minds of the early Christians to accept and interpret the revelatory events of the coming of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit, we may wonder if God has also provided signs in the created world that can prepare the minds of non-Jews to receive and interpret those revelatory events. Theologians have argued that God has created such signs, and they have named them *vestigia trinitatis*, traces of the Trinity. Some that have been proposed are the three-leaf clover; the root, branch, and fruit of a tree; the three aspects of time, past, present, and future; and the three forms of H<sub>2</sub>O, steam, water, and ice.

Whatever we may say about preparations for receiving the Trinitarian understanding of God found either in the Old Testament or in the created world, the important point is that it is in events recorded in the New Testament—the events of the coming of God’s Son and the pouring out of God’s Spirit—that the Triune God has been revealed.

## THE HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The revelation of the Trinity given in the New Testament led the early church to develop a formal doctrine of the Trinity. Almost everything about the historical development of the official doctrine of the Trinity is controversial. I shall review just a few of the most basic points.

### THE SOURCE OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

First, those who developed the official Trinitarian doctrine shared the Trinitarian faith and life that we have seen in the New Testament churches. They continued to reflect on Jesus and the Spirit, and they did this in the

1 G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958).

2 H. A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), I:147-49.

context of the church’s common life. They carefully studied the Old Testament and the New Testament as they developed their doctrine.

It is important to emphasize this because it has sometimes been said that the doctrine of the Trinity is a speculative construct created by people who were influenced too much by Greek philosophy and too little by the Bible. This simply is not true. A doctrine of God that was really Greek and philosophical would have been polytheistic or unitarian, not Trinitarian. The great neo-Platonic philosopher, Plotinus, developed a doctrine that some see as influencing the Christian doctrine; but Plotinus spoke of four divine beings, not three, and he said that one of the four was the true God while the others were lesser gods. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity was formulated to refute exactly that kind of idea. Greek philosophy is not the source of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The New Testament is.

### THE ERRORS THAT THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AVOIDS

The second factor in the development of an official doctrine of the Trinity was that the church rejected ideas that it believed to be untrue. I will mention three of the untrue ideas that the church rejected.

First, Christians insisted that they did not believe in three gods. An important theologian of the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote a book entitled *On Not Three Gods*.

Second, in the second century, the church rejected a proposal made by several thinkers, including Noetus and Sabellius and perhaps Praxeas. Their teaching is called “modalism” because they thought of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as three modes or roles that a unipersonal God played at different times. That is, during the period before Christ, God was the Father; during the period that Christ was on earth, God was the Son; and since the ascension of Christ, God has been Holy Spirit.

The first book ever written about the Trinity, *Against Praxeas* by Tertullian, was written to oppose modalism. The church opposed modalism because it was not true to its Trinitarian faith and life, and it did not do justice to the New Testament. For example, the New Testament says that in his prayers Jesus asked the Father to send the Spirit to Jesus’ followers (John 14:16) The church understood passages such as this to mean that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are more like Three Persons than like three roles that a single actor might play.

The third idea that the church rejected came in the fourth century, and it constituted the most serious threat to the doctrine of the Trinity. It was

the teaching of Arius, and I wrote about it in Chapter 5. Arius said that Jesus was less fully divine than the Father, and a little later some Arian sympathizers added that the Spirit was also less fully divine. The church rejected these ideas completely; it had no interest in demigods or lesser deities. The church believed that Jesus and the Spirit were divine in the same way that the Father was divine.

### THE TECHNICAL VOCABULARY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The third aspect of the church's developing its official doctrine of the Trinity was the creation of a technical vocabulary. The most important example is, of course, the word "Trinity" itself. It does not appear in the New Testament. Late in the second century a Greek writer named Theophilus of Antioch used a Greek word, *trias*, to speak of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Originally *trias* was used to refer to any triad or trio, but Christians came to use it particularly of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Early in the third century a western writer, Tertullian, in his book *Against Praxeas*, used the Latin word *trinitas* to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It too means simply a triad or trio.<sup>1</sup> Our English word "Trinity" is a transliteration of the Latin word *trinitas*.

The church had to decide what word to use to answer the question, "Three what?" Tertullian also provided the Latin word for this. It was *personae*, and its meaning has been debated. *Persona* could be used to refer to a mask worn by an actor or to a role played by an actor; we see this usage reflected in the phrase "Dramatis Personae" which still appears on some theatre programs today and means "the characters of the drama." It is more likely that Tertullian used the word in a legal sense, to refer to one who has legal standing. In any case, he did not mean a role or mask; he wrote his book precisely to refute that idea.

While the Latin-speaking church became accustomed in the third century to referring to three *personae*, persons, the Greek-speaking church did not settle on a term until the fourth century. The term was *hypostasis*, a common Greek word for a human being.

The church also had to decide about what word to use to answer the question, "One what?" Naturally this question could be answered with the word "God." However, some Gentiles, who had not learned to follow the Hebrew practice of speaking of one God but were accustomed to refer to many gods, could use the word "God" of the Father in one sense and of the

1 G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1936), 93-94.

Son and the Spirit in another sense. This was true of Arius and Eunomius and others in the fourth century. To counter this, Greek-speaking Christians began to refer to one *ousia*, one being, of God.

The Latin-speaking Christians usually spoke of one *substantia*, substance, of God, though Augustine preferred to speak of one *essentia*, essence, of God. The church of the fourth century said that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit shared in one *ousia* or *substantia* or *essentia* of God. In particular, as we have seen, they emphasized against Arius that Jesus was *homoousion to Patri*, of one and the same substance with the Father. The Latin phrase for this was *consubstantialis Patri*, consubstantial with the Father.

Across the centuries the church has continued to develop its technical vocabulary for speaking about the Trinity. For example, it conventional now to distinguish the economic Trinity—the Three Persons as they act in the created world—from the immanent Trinity—the Three Persons as they share their life together independently of the created world. Also, it is conventional now to speak of the movement of the Son and the Spirit in the economic Trinity as missions, and of the movement of the Son and Spirit in the immanent Trinity as processions. The technical vocabulary for speaking about the Trinity is vast.<sup>1</sup>

### OFFICIAL STATEMENTS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

By the second half of the fourth century the framework of the doctrine of the Trinity was in place, and it was not unusual for writers to refer to the doctrine explicitly. For example, the Emperor Theodosius wrote the following into the Theodosian Code, the official law of the empire, on February 27, 380: "We desire that all peoples who fall beneath the sway of our imperial clemency should . . . believe in one deity, the sacred Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

The official doctrine was endorsed by the second ecumenical council that met at Constantinople in A.D. 381. The creed of that council, the Nicene Creed, contained some of the technical vocabulary but not all of it.<sup>3</sup> Much more of the technical vocabulary was used the following year, by a

1 The best introduction to the doctrine known to me is Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999). A convenient book for learning the technical language is Michael O'Carroll, *Trinitas: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Holy Trinity* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987).

2 Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 256.

3 See Appendix 4, The Nicene Creed.

synod also held at Constantinople; the synod wrote a letter to the church at Rome that included the following:

You, and I, and all who do not wish to overturn the word of truth, must agree in this confession of faith; for in it are set forth the ancient doctrines which are conformable to baptism, which teach us to believe in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and which declare that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have the same Divinity, the same substance, and the same power; and that the three perfect hypostases, or three perfect persons, are co-equal and co-eternal. Therefore, we have rejected the hypothesis of Sabellius, which confuses the Three Persons by denying their characteristics; neither do we receive the blasphemy of the Eunomians, of the Arians, or of the Pneumatomachoi, who divide the substance, the nature, and the Divinity of the Godhead, and who, denying the uncreated, consubstantial, and co-eternal Trinity, speak of a trinity which they represent as having been created, or as consisting of diverse natures.<sup>1</sup>

#### BOOKS ABOUT THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The official doctrine of the Trinity was developed in an extended discussion that culminated in the ecumenical councils at Nicæa and Constantinople. It also was developed in the books of individual writers. Many of their books are almost forgotten today, but others such as the one by Augustine are still read and studied. Augustine began writing his book *The Trinity* in A.D. 399, and it took him twenty years to complete it. Early in the book he wrote:

With the help of the Lord our God, we shall undertake to the best of our ability to give them the reasons they clamor for, and to account for the one and only and true God being a trinity, and for the rightness of saying, believing, understanding that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are of one and the same substance or essence.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine and other writers did several things in their books. Some defended the doctrine of the Trinity against various challenges. Some provided reflections on the meaning of the technical terms and on their relationships to each other. Some affirmed the existence of *vestigia trinitatis*, traces of the Trinity in the created world. Some contained other kinds of speculation. And some contained arguments that were designed to show the reasonableness of the doctrine. It is to that issue, the reasonableness of the doctrine, that we now turn.

#### THE RATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

The church has followed two paths in its effort to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity is rational. One is philosophical. This involves defining the meaning of *ousia* and *hypostasis* or of *substantia* and *persona* in such a way as to show that it is not self-contradictory to say that one being is Three Persons or that one substance is Three Persons.

Modern theologians continue to argue philosophically that the doctrine of the Trinity is rational. For example, philosopher and theologian David Brown asserts the following at the conclusion of his book *The Divine Trinity*:

The conclusion of my argument then is clear. It is that not only can the doctrine of the Trinity be defended as logically coherent, but also there are sufficient grounds for believing it to be true.<sup>1</sup>

Theologians disagree about whether a philosophical defense of the rationality of the doctrine is successful. Some agree with David Brown that it does. However, Leonard Hodgson, who was deeply committed to the doctrine of the Trinity, thought that the doctrine could not be shown to be rational; he said that, in the fourth century, the church simply affirmed its Trinitarian faith and left it to the philosophers to make what they could of it.<sup>2</sup>

The second way of demonstrating the rationality of the doctrine has a wider appeal than the philosophical argument. It is to demonstrate the rationality of the doctrine by the use of analogies. The argument is quite simple. If there are entities in the created world that are both one and three, then there can be no compelling reason why God cannot be both one and three.

1 Theodoret, *A History of the Church* [translator not named] (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1843), V:9.

2 Augustine, *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), I:1, 4 [p. 67].

1 David Brown, *The Divine Trinity* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1985), 305.

2 Leonard Hodgson, *For Faith and Freedom*, II:43-44.

Before I proceed, I want to be very clear about what question I am attempting to answer. I am not now answering the question, "How has the Trinity been revealed?" I attempted to answer that question earlier; the Trinity is revealed in the acts of God that are recorded in the Bible and nowhere else. The question I am attempting to answer now is: "Is the doctrine of the Trinity rational, or is it self-contradictory?" In other words, when we say that one God is Three Persons, is that like saying that we have discovered a circle that has three sides? We know that the idea of a circle with three sides is self-contradictory; is the idea of a God with Three Persons also self-contradictory?

Two kinds of analogies may be used for the Trinity.

One is impersonal analogies. An example of an impersonal analogy is the three forms of H<sub>2</sub>O, steam, water, and ice.

The other kind of analogy is the personal. For many Christians, myself among them, personal analogies are much more helpful than impersonal analogies, simply because God is personal.

There are two kinds of personal analogies for the Trinity.

One is to say that God is like a community or family of Three Persons; this is called the social analogy because it speaks of God as a society with three members.

The other personal analogy is to say that God is like an individual human being, and then to say that a human being is made up of three components. Augustine was fond of this analogy. He believed that, since human beings are created in the image of God, God's threeness as well as God's oneness is reflected in human beings. One way that Augustine expressed this was to say that a human being is mind, memory, and will. Mind is something like what we today call consciousness, and memory is what we call the unconscious. The self who wills or decides sits, as it were, on the boundary of the conscious and the unconscious. This analogy is called the psychological analogy because it uses a psychological understanding of an individual human being to speak of the threeness of God.

The church has always accepted both the social analogy and the psychological analogy as appropriate ways of defending the rationality of the doctrine of the Trinity. But the church also has been aware that each of these analogies can be exaggerated in such a way that it becomes erroneous. Without a strong affirmation of the fact that the Three Persons are one, the social analogy becomes tritheism, belief in three gods. And without a strong affirmation of the fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three, the

psychological analogy becomes modalism.

Under the influence of Augustine and later of Thomas Aquinas, many academic theologians in the west have tended to prefer the psychological analogy. Because of the use of the word "person" for the Three and because of texts such as John 14:16, many Christians who are not academic theologians have tended to prefer the social analogy.

I myself find the social analogy more helpful. My principal reason for this is that the relationship between Jesus and his *Abba* seems to me to be a relationship between two persons. I will mention four suggestions that theologians have offered concerning the social analogy that I find helpful as I think of the Trinity in social terms.

First, in the twelfth century, a theologian named Richard of St. Victor wrote a book on the Trinity in which he spoke of the Father, Son, and Spirit as persons who are bound together by love. Many modern theologians have accepted this idea and have felt that the analogy of Three Persons bound together by love is an excellent way to understand God.

Second, in the twentieth century, Leonard Hodgson raised the intriguing question of whether it is the unity of God or the threeness of God that has been revealed most fully. We tend to assume that we understand God's unity and that it is God's threeness that is a mystery. But Hodgson pointed out that it is the threeness that is most clearly revealed, by the historical events of the sending of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit.

He went on to say that we should not be surprised if the unity of God is mysterious; after all, when we think about it, our own unity is in many ways mysterious. He spoke about his own life as a professor at Oxford University to illustrate the mystery of our unity. He said that in the early morning he said his prayers, and he felt that this was what life was all about. Then he worked on his lectures, and he thought that this was what life was all about. In the afternoon he worked on plans for his college's future, and he thought that this was what life was all about. Then he had tea with a beautiful lady, and he thought that this was what life was all about. In the evening he visited friends and enjoyed stimulating conversation, and he thought this was what life was all about. At the end of the day, he wondered what held together all these different interests. The unity of the self is a mystery, even to that self. Should we then be surprised, he asked, that the unity of God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, is a mystery?<sup>1</sup>

Third, Hodgson also suggested that there are two kinds of unity. He

1 Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet and Co., Ltd., 1943), 184.

called them mathematical unity and organic unity. Mathematical unity is characterized by absence of multiplicity; among living things, a single cell organism comes closest to mathematical unity. On the other hand organic unity is not characterized by absence of multiplicity; it is characterized by having a strong power binding together its multiplicity. Among living things, human beings have organic unity to a high degree. Hodgson proposed that the unity of God should not be understood as mathematical but as organic.

Fourth, another twentieth-century theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, has argued that the social analogy does not lead to tritheism when it is remembered that the relations of the Three Persons are intrinsic to who God is:

The trinitarian persons are not to be understood as three different individuals, who only subsequently enter into relationship with one another . . . . The unity of the trinitarian Persons lies in the circulation of the divine life which they fulfil in their relations to one another.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Christians can use the social analogy and the psychological analogy for the Trinity reinforces my sense that there is nothing self-contradictory in affirming that one God is Three Persons. In fact, I do not think that Christians have to prove that the doctrine of the Trinity is self-consistent. The burden of proof rests with those who insist that the doctrine is self-contradictory. So far as I am aware, not one has shown that this is the case.

### THE RELEVANCE OF THE DOCTRINE

In the twentieth century there was a renaissance of writing about the doctrine of the Trinity. In much of that writing special attention was given to the effects the doctrine has upon those who believe in it and to the uses to which the doctrine may be put. Theologians proposed political, economic, psychological, philosophical, and others kinds of uses for the doctrine.<sup>2</sup> What I want to do here is to review some of the traditional uses and effects of the doctrine in the life of the church.

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* translated by Margaret Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), 175.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 11, Effects and Uses of the Doctrine of the Trinity.

### THE TRINITY AND OUR RELIGIOUS FAITH

The Trinitarian understanding of God is relevant to our religious faith. Like the early Christians, we have responded to God's acts in history with faith in God, faith in Christ our Savior and Lord, and faith in the Holy Spirit. And, as was true in the early church, our common life reflects our Trinitarian faith. We baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. We sing hymns to the Father, to the Son, and to the Spirit. We conclude our services with a benediction that is Trinitarian.

Certainly none of us would want a Christianity that omitted any one of the Three Persons. We certainly could not omit the Father. We certainly could not leave Christ out of Christianity. And we would not want to attempt to live as Christians without the help of the Spirit. Although some Christians are not very interested in the doctrine of the Trinity, they are Trinitarian in the same way that the Christians of the New Testament era were Trinitarian, namely, in their faith and life. Important as the doctrine of the Trinity is, participation in the Trinitarian faith and life of the church is more important still.

### THE TRINITY AND OUR WORSHIP OF GOD

Second, the Trinitarian understanding of God is relevant to our worship of God. It is possible to worship God without being Trinitarian, and some people are drawn to such worship. They simply worship God as Creator and friend, and do not worship God as the Savior who died upon the cross and rose again.

However, our worship is greatly enriched when we turn away from worshipping God in a unitarian manner to worshipping the Father who creates, reigns, loves, and sends the Son; and the Son who came, lived, loved, died, and rose again; and the Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts, binds us together in a fellowship of love, works to transform us, guides and directs us on our mission to the world, and protects us and seals us for our final destination, which is to be enfolded in the eternal life and love of Jesus, his *Abba*, and their Spirit.

### THE TRINITY AND OUR PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

Third, the Trinitarian understanding of God is relevant to our preaching of the gospel. Of course, an evangelistic sermon is not a lecture on the doctrine of the Trinity; it is not supposed to be. The central component of an evangelistic sermon is the affirmation that Christ died for our sins and

rose again the third day. That message takes center stage. But in the background is an understanding of God as Creator and as one who acts in history. And in the foreground is an understanding that God's Spirit will come into the lives of those who respond to the gospel with faith. Peter spoke of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). One way or another, a meaningful presentation of the gospel will eventually do the same.

### THE TRINITY AND ECUMENISM

Fourth, the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to ecumenism. In chapter 10 I tried to emphasize the importance of the unity of the church. A firm commitment to the Trinitarian understanding of God is a prerequisite for participating in ecumenical work. The Constitution of the World Council of Churches says:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

To be truly ecumenical, you must be Trinitarian. Christian unity is made by possible by our sharing a common set of beliefs, and for more than 1500 years the church has been explicit that the Trinity is at the center of those beliefs. If you are truly Trinitarian, you are already ecumenical in the most important sense of that word. That is, you already share the distinctively Christian understanding of God and are therefore equipped to participate in efforts to bring the divided churches together into a fellowship.

### THE TRINITY AND THEOLOGY

Fifth, the doctrine of the Trinity is an important factor in theology. For about twenty years I asked each student in my Christian theology classes to write a "Credo," a personal statement of his or her Christian beliefs. Over and over again, with no prompting from me, students organized their Credo's by speaking of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It is not just lay Christians who think this way. Many academic theologians have allowed Trinitarianism to provide the basic structure for their theologies, just as it

provided the basic structure for the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.

### THE TRINITY AND THE GREAT QUESTIONS OF LIFE

Finally, the doctrine of the Trinity provides the most fully Christian answer to the greatest questions of human existence.

The first great question is: Are we alone in the universe, or is Someone there? The Christian answer is that Someone is there, a Creator God who knows us and loves us all.

If we accept that answer, the second question is: What is this loving God going to do about our human dilemma, our overwhelming problems, including the final problem, death? The Christian answer is that God has already done something that is decisive. By sending Christ, God has rescued us from our loneliness, our suffering, our guilt, and our death.

If we accept that answer, the third question is: What conceivable difference can the ancient history of Jesus and his crucifixion make in our experience today? The Christian answer is that God's Spirit is now present within us, reminding us of what Jesus did for us and empowering us to live out the salvation that Jesus has provided for us.

Many Christians assume that the doctrine of the Trinity is abstract speculation of no interest or relevance to the lives of ordinary Christian people, but that is a mistake. The doctrine of the Trinity is a fascinating understanding of God, entirely biblical, perfectly reasonable, and enormously important to the life of the church and to the lives of all Christians today.

### CONCLUSION

In some wonderful and mysterious way, the one, true, living God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These Three Persons live a life of knowing and being known, of speaking and listening, of trusting and being trusted, of loving and being loved. As astonishing as it may seem, we human beings have been called to share in their eternal life. We have already begun to share in the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and we will be enfolded in their life and love throughout eternity.

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2013-busan/adopted-documents-statements/wcc-constitution-and-rules).

## APPENDIX 1

# FUNDAMENTALISM

## INTRODUCTION

Fundamentalism is a trans-denominational movement that exists in and has dramatically influenced many churches in the United States and around the world.

### THE ORIGINAL FUNDAMENTALISM

Fundamentalism began among Protestants in North America. In the nineteenth century, Protestants were the dominant religious group in America, but they were not a united group. They spent a lot of time and energy arguing about which of them was the true church. In the early twentieth century many of them set those arguments aside. They did this in response to four challenges.

The first challenge was the Enlightenment, whose characteristic emphases included individualism, reason, freedom, and progress.

The second challenge was the historical-critical study of the Bible. This study was historical because it took seriously the historical setting of the biblical writings. It was critical because its practitioners put their own questions to the text.

The third challenge was biological evolution.

The fourth challenge was liberal Protestant theology, which was theology that had accommodated the Enlightenment, the historical-critical study of the Bible, and biological evolution. Liberal Protestant theology was expressed not only in theological monographs but in many biographies of Jesus and also in the social gospel.

As American Protestants became aware of these challenges, they responded to them in various ways. Some welcomed the challenges, piecemeal or wholesale. Others wrote books resisting the challenges.

Others set aside their denominational differences and organized a common front to oppose the four challenges. They referred to the challenges collectively as *liberalism*. They understood liberalism to be the thin edge of the

wedge of secularism and therefore a grave threat to the faith and life of the church. This common front was the original Fundamentalist movement, and in 1920 one of its proponents, a Northern Baptist newspaper editor named Curtis Lee Laws, coined the word *Fundamentalists* to refer to himself and his friends who intended “to do battle royal for the fundamentals.”

Fundamentalism began as a loose coalition of Protestant co-belligerents united in a struggle against liberalism.

### GENERIC FUNDAMENTALISM

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, many commentators referred to the terrorists as “Islamic fundamentalists.” This is a curious usage, since, of course, the terrorists were not a coalition of American Protestants who united to oppose liberalism. Nevertheless, this generic usage of the word “fundamentalists,” which had originated before 9/11, makes sense because there are family resemblances between the original, American, Protestant Fundamentalists and extremists in other religions. These family resemblances are sociological rather than theological or religious. When writers speak of Muslim fundamentalists, Jewish fundamentalists, and so on, they are speaking sociologically.<sup>1</sup>

The largest and most authoritative study of fundamentalism in this generic sense is a five-volume set entitled *The Fundamentalism Project*.<sup>2</sup> The editors, Martin Marty and Scott Appleby, wrote an introductory essay describing some of the family traits shared by the various fundamentalist groups. I will summarize part of their essay.

First, fundamentalism is a religious impulse driving a religious movement. Fundamentalism cannot be understood without taking its religious character into account.

Second, fundamentalism is a reaction against the modern world. It is important to be aware of this reactionary character of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a kind of traditionalism, but it is not the only kind. Long before the modern world came into existence there were traditionalists in the world’s religions, but fundamentalism did not exist at that time because the modern world had not yet emerged. Today there are in the various re-

1 I will follow the practice of historian Grant Wacker and write “Fundamentalism” for the original Protestant movement and “fundamentalism” for other movements which share family resemblances with it.

2 Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, editors, *Fundamentalism Project*, five volumes (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995).

ligions forms of traditionalism that are not fundamentalist. They maintain their traditions without making much effort to oppose modernity.

Fundamentalists do not reject everything about the modern world. They are selective about what they reject and what they accept. For example, some Islamic fundamentalists use a modern technology, the internet, to communicate their opposition to a modern idea, that women should participate in public life as fully as men do.

A third family trait is that fundamentalists react to modernity by fighting against it. They could have responded to modernity in other ways. They could withdraw from modern society, as the Amish do. Or they could ignore modernity, as some traditionalist Catholics do; Malcolm Muggeridge once commented that it was a matter of complete indifference to him whether the Earth went around the sun or the sun around the Earth.

But fundamentalists neither withdraw from modernity nor ignore it. They fight it. They fight it because they perceive the modern world as a threat to their corporate and personal identity. Fundamentalists believe that their faith and their community are at risk of being destroyed by what Walter Lippmann called “the acids of modernity.”

A fourth family trait is that fundamentalists are selective about the aspects of their tradition they retain. They don’t retain everything. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures describe a world in which patriarchy, polygamy, and slavery were all widely practiced. Jewish fundamentalists retain patriarchy but not polygamy or slavery.

A fifth family trait is that, as Marty and Appleby wrote, “in the process of interpreting the tradition, evaluating modernity, and selectively retrieving salient elements of both, *charismatic and authoritarian male leaders* play a central role.”

A sixth family trait is that fundamentalism includes a particular vision of history. Fundamentalists remember the past as better than the present. They think of the present as a time of crisis. They see the future as a time when their religion will be victorious. They usually reject the concept of progress as an appropriate category for interpreting history.

A seventh family trait of fundamentalism is that fundamentalists set unequivocal boundaries between themselves and outsiders. Sometimes they take extreme steps to separate true believers from unbelievers. To outsiders these extreme steps make no sense, but from the point of view of fundamentalists they make perfect sense. The religious community sees itself as fighting for its life against modernity, and the only way to survive is to keep

the insiders inside and the outsiders outside. They see it as risky even to associate with outsiders for fear of contamination.

Finally, the goal of fundamentalists is to eliminate the offending elements in modernity and to replace them with their own religious faith. They are not working toward either peaceful co-existence with liberalism or a containment of liberalism. Their intention is to overturn liberalism. Marty and Appleby call this a totalitarian impulse.

This sociological interpretation of fundamentalism offers helpful insights into the original Protestant Fundamentalism in the churches in the United States, to which we now return.

## THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN PROTESTANT FUNDAMENTALISM

It is widely assumed that the original Fundamentalism was Southern, rural, and anti-intellectual. In fact, it was stronger in the North than in the South, it was stronger in urban than in rural areas, and some of its original leaders such as J. Gresham Machen were intellectuals.

Because the first Fundamentalists were Protestants in a predominantly Protestant nation, they felt a sense of entitlement to exercise dominance in American society. In the 1920s they lost a series of battles for control of denominations such as the Northern Presbyterian Church and the Northern Baptist Convention, and they felt publicly humiliated by journalists’ accounts of the Scopes trial in 1925. By the 1930s it had become clear that they were not in fact culturally dominant, and many of them withdrew from their denominations. New leaders arose who were less intellectual and, in some cases, anti-intellectual. Many observers thought that Fundamentalism died out in the 1930s; in fact, it continued to flourish as a subculture.

In the 1940s a group of Fundamentalists who were critical of certain aspects of Fundamentalism separated from the movement; these are evangelicals such as Billy Graham. In the late 1970s Fundamentalism reappeared in American life as a political force, the Moral Majority. Fundamentalism remains an influential movement in our nation today.

## THE THEOLOGY OF AMERICAN PROTESTANT FUNDAMENTALISM

Even though theology is important to Fundamentalists, it is not easy to identify their theology with precision because the Fundamentalist coalition is so diverse and so loose. There is no central authority to provide an autho-

rized version of Fundamentalist theology.

From 1910-1915 twelve pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* were published; they contain 90 articles, and they represent an early, somewhat irenic version of Fundamentalism. Many of the articles are polemical in character. They are defenses of traditional beliefs against revisionist presentations in liberal Protestant theology.

Another representative but less irenic presentation of the theology of Fundamentalism is known as “the five fundamentals.” The story of the five fundamentals is complicated. In 1910 the General Assembly of the Northern Presbyterian Church endorsed five points of doctrine. They were the inerrancy of the original manuscripts of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, the penal substitutionary interpretation of Christ’s passion and death, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the authenticity of the miracles recorded in the Bible. Beginning in the 1920s the phrase “the five fundamentals” was sometimes used of these five and sometimes used of revised five-point lists that included the deity of Christ and/or the pre-millennial return of Christ.

#### STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF AMERICAN PROTESTANT FUNDAMENTALISM

Because the word *Fundamentalist* is often used today in a pejorative way, it is well to begin any assessment of Fundamentalism with a reminder that Fundamentalist Christians are, after all, Christians. They are our sisters and brothers in the Christian family, even though they do tend to stir up feuds at family gatherings.

The Fundamentalist enterprise of identifying the fundamentals of our Christian faith is a good enterprise, one that all Christians can appreciate. On the other hand, ironically, Fundamentalists do a poor job of describing the fundamentals of the Christian faith, in large measure because they are more intent on defending the faith than on giving a balanced account of it. For example, the pamphlets called *The Fundamentals* included essays arguing that only one person wrote the book of Isaiah, but they do not have any essays arguing that the one, true, living God is in some wonderful and mysterious way Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In my judgment, it is religiously unimportant whether Isaiah was written by one or two or three persons, but it is religiously very important that God is Holy Trinity. Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, so the fundamentals of our Christian faith are too important to be left to Fundamentalists.

The Fundamentalist determination to respond to modernity was also a good thing. However, their response was a blunt instrument. What was needed was a thoughtful assessment of what is true and what is false about modernity. Fundamentalists have not provided that assessment. Ironically it is, I think, the liberal Protestants whom Fundamentalists attacked so militantly who have done a better job of tracing out how modernity and the Christian faith are related.

The Fundamentalist impulse to defend the Christian faith is also a good thing. Christians have been defending their faith ever since Peter argued at Pentecost that he personally had witnessed Christ after the resurrection. There are serious challenges to the truthfulness of the faith today, including a resurgent atheism, and it is a good thing to respond to those challenges. However, Fundamentalists do not do a very good job of this. They do not always distinguish their friends from their enemies, so they often are more interested in criticizing fellow Christians than in challenging unbelief. They routinely engage in personal attacks. They feel threatened, and their fear often expresses itself as anger. Often their defense of the faith is needlessly angry and militant, and that is counter-productive.

Fundamentalism began as a coalition of Protestants who came together in spite of their denominational differences. In that sense, it is an ecumenical movement, and ecumenism is a good thing. However, Fundamentalism frequently has been a divisive rather than a unifying factor in the church. It has divided denominations, congregations, and families in unedifying ways.

#### CONCLUSION

Most Christians live in a world that is bounded by secularism on the left and Fundamentalism on the right. Most Christians intend not to wander off into either of the extremes.

Fundamentalism creates a special problem for other Christians. Non-fundamentalist Christians can see that the Fundamentalists are serious about their faith. They know they do not want to be like the Fundamentalists even though Fundamentalists are clearly sincere in their faith. This leads them to wonder if they themselves are really good Christians. Their uncertainty is understandable. It also is unfortunate. The antidote to it is for them understand very clearly that Fundamentalism is not the only expression of Christian faith and life. In fact, it is not a particularly good expression. True, it has been formed by the Christian gospel, but it also has been de-formed

by the militant and indiscriminating way it has responded to modernity.

One of the greatest challenges which we Christians face is how to relate in a Christian manner to fellow Christians with whom we have serious disagreements. As Paul's teaching about the body of Christ with diverse members and diverse gifts makes clear, Christian unity is not a matter of uniformity. Because Fundamentalists are militant and exclusive, it is difficult for the rest of us to relate to them in a Christian way, but that is what the Lord wants us to do.

This can be especially difficult for those who have themselves been hurt by Fundamentalism. Two recent writers were who were deeply hurt by Fundamentalism in their youth but who have retained their Christian faith in a non-Fundamentalist form and written about the experience are Randall Balmer, author of *Growing Pains: Learning to Love My Father's Faith* and Philip Yancey, author of *Soul Survivor*.

## APPENDIX 2

# SCIENCE AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

## INTRODUCTION

Christianity, like other religions, provides its adherents with a distinctive world-view. From the beginning Christian theologians engaged in conversation with partners who held different world-views. Much of the development of early Christian theology is the product of a fruitful conversation with Hellenistic philosophy. It was only natural that when modern science arose, Christian theologians would engage in conversation with it.

In my judgment, the most interesting and promising conversation between science and theology occurs when all parties agree on two things: the standard scientific account of the universe, and the orthodox account of the Christian faith.

## THEOLOGY AND THE RISE OF MODERN SCIENCE

Although human beings have always been observers of the world in which they live, there are important differences between the traditional observation of the world and the modern scientific study of the world. The philosopher Francis Bacon offered an early, convincing account of the differences, namely that, whereas traditional observers take the world more or less as it presents itself, modern scientists formulate questions and then probe the world for answers. Scientists, Bacon wrote, "put nature to the question." Here is R. G. Collingwood's comment on Bacon's insight:

What [Bacon] was asserting was two things at once: first, that the scientist must take the initiative, deciding for himself what he wants to know and formulating this in his own mind in the shape of a question; and secondly, that he must find means of compelling nature to answer, devising tortures under which she can no longer hold her tongue. Here, in a single brief epigram, Bacon laid down once for all the true theory of experimental science.<sup>1</sup>

1 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 269.

Modern science understood in this sense originated early in the seventeenth century in Europe. The most celebrated early modern scientists were Galileo who was a canon of the Roman Catholic Church and Isaac Newton who was a Unitarian Protestant who taught at Cambridge University. Galileo remained a loyal son of the church even after the church ordered him to stop promoting the Copernican view that the Earth goes around the sun. Newton wrote commentaries on apocalyptic books in the Bible and felt that his work on the Bible was more important than his work on gravity and optics, a view no one today shares.

Historians of ideas naturally ask why modern science arose first in Europe. After all, the civilizations of China and India were much older than that of Europe, and they were literate and immensely sophisticated. Why did modern science appear first in Europe rather than in those civilizations?

One of the early answers to this question was suggested by the mathematician-philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in 1925. He said that the Christian understanding of God as both rational and personal contributed to the rise of modern science. More recently Ian T. Barbour elaborated on his proposal, suggesting that four Jewish-Christian ideas contributed to the birth of modern science.<sup>1</sup>

First, a rational God has created a rational universe. This means that human beings are able to understand the universe by using their minds.

Second, God is a personal and therefore a free God. This means that God chose what kind of universe to create. As a consequence, human beings cannot understand the universe simply by reasoning about how it ought to operate. Rather, they must examine the universe in order to discover what kind of universe God has chosen to create. In other words, they must be empirical as well as rational. This distinguishes modern science from the earlier Hellenistic science. Greek philosophers such as Aristotle believed that the One—God—is rational but not personal. In Greek science it was thought that things behave the way they do because it is in their natures to do so. Therefore the way to understand the world was to reason about it, all the way back to first principles. When the church silenced Galileo, it was defending Aristotle as well as the Bible.

Third, a good God created a universe that is good. This suggests that taking the trouble to understand the universe is a worthwhile activity. This idea is missing from religions whose goal is to escape a universe they regard as evil.

Fourth, God and the universe are distinct in something like the way a composer and her music are distinct. God is divine, and the universe is not. This means that it is not a sacrilege to run experiments on things in the universe in order to understand them. This is in contrast to religions that teach that the Earth is divine and that therefore discourage the use of many of the methods of modern science.

Several factors other than these theological ideas contributed to the rise of modern science. Economics, technology, and the presence of universities throughout Europe surely played a role. Nevertheless, these four teachings are found in Christianity, they are not all found in the religions of India and China or in Hellenistic science, they do open an intellectual space for modern science, and modern science was born into that part of the world where these teachings were available and sometimes prominent.

## RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION

In our country today only a few people are aware of the contributions of Christian theology to the rise of modern science. Many more are aware of conflicts between science and theology. They remember that the church silenced Galileo. Many Americans remember the Scopes trial of 1925 in which a public school teacher in Tennessee was fined for teaching evolution. It is regrettable that so many people know about conflicts between religion and science and so few know about the close associations between them. Some people find it difficult even to imagine any relationship between science and theology other than that of conflict.

Nevertheless, there are other relationships. Ian Barbour has proposed that four relationships are possible. In addition to *conflict*, there is *independence*, that is, a relationship of separate domains. Stephen Jay Gould coined a phrase for this relationship: “Non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA).

The idea behind NOMA is simple. There is a boundary between science and theology. Science asks one kind of question: How does the world work? Theology asks another: What is the meaning of the world? When science and theology come into conflict it is because they have ignored the boundary between them. Ignoring the boundary results in *isms*. It is scientism, not science, to say “The universe evolved, so there is no God.” It is creationism, not creation, to say “God created the world so it is only 6,000 years old.”

Clearly there is truth in NOMA. However, separate domains is not the whole story. For one thing, many individuals are both scientists and people

<sup>1</sup> Ian T. Barbour, *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1997), ch. 4.

of faith. Some of them are unwilling to keep their science and their faith in separate compartments. They want to understand how to correlate their theological convictions with their scientific convictions.

Also, scientists, functioning entirely as scientists, sometimes ask questions that in principle cannot be answered by science. These questions have been called limit questions or meta-questions. An obvious example is, “What existed before the Big Bang?”

In view of these things many thoughtful people today believe that a *dialogue* between science and theology is important, and this is Barbour’s third relationship. Theology can benefit from understanding what science has to say about the nature, history, and operations of the world, and science can benefit from understanding theology’s account of the meaning of the world in general and of human existence in particular.

This brings us to Barbour’s fourth relationship, namely, attempts to *integrate* science and theology. The physicist-theologian John Polkinghorne believes that the people who are in the best position to do integrative work are persons who are both scientists and theologians. He has written a book entitled *Scientists as Theologians* in which he compares the work of three such persons, namely, Ian Barbour, Arthur Peacocke, and himself.

Polkinghorne has proposed a revision of Barbour’s taxonomy. He thinks that the best integration of science and theology requires us to identify consonance and to avoid assimilation: “The search for consonance is the basis of my own approach to the question of interrelationship.”<sup>1</sup> One of the consonances that interests him is the methods of science and theology. In both science and theology, acolytes are apprenticed and socialized into a community of discourse in which there already is agreement about many matters. Both allow their acolytes to challenge the established agreements. In both there is a place not only for gathering information but also for the elusive quality of judgment that is important both in creating hypotheses and in adjudicating between conflicting claims.

Practitioners of both science and theology are critical realists. They are realists because they intend to describe reality as it actually is. They are critical because they are aware that they are not simply recording reality in the way film in a camera records a scene. Instead, they contribute to the construction of their understanding of reality by their use of language (and, in the case of science, by their use of mathematics). Even so, their work is not merely functionally successful but is the creation of verisimilitudinous

1 John Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians*, 7.

accounts of reality that display the way the world really is. Critical realism occupies a place between the simple certainty to which the Enlightenment aspired and the relativism that present-day deconstructionists endorse.

The risk for those who search for consonance is that they will accept too easy an assimilation. One example of this is the description of Christ as a new emergent in an evolutionary sense. Polkinghorne thinks that this proposal, made famous by the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, is a seriously defective Christology. Another example is a proposal by the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg that “Modern field theory offers a way of thinking about spirit.” Polkinghorne comments: “To a physicist a field is about as spiritual as a tenuous gas!”<sup>1</sup>

To summarize: Christian theology contributed to the creation of modern science. Although conflict does occur between the two, it isn’t inevitable. Scientism and creationism should be avoided. Up to a point science and theology occupy separate domains, but that isn’t the whole story. A conversation between science and theology is to be welcomed. It is important, when seeking consonance between the two, not to accept too easy an assimilation.<sup>2</sup>

## THE STANDARD ACCOUNT OF THE UNIVERSE

Modern science has generated a standard account of the universe. It is shared by the majority of working scientists, though some scientists dissent from some parts of it. The standard view is taught in schools and appears regularly in the media, so many members of the general public are familiar with its broad outline.<sup>3</sup>

It is an evolutionary world-view. It says that about 13.8 billion years ago the universe came into being in an explosion of unimaginable force and heat. Following this Big Bang the universe expanded and cooled rapidly, and it continues to expand today. The basic building blocks of the universe are the four fundamental forces (gravity, electro-magnetism, and the weak

1 Polkinghorne, *Scientists as Theologians*, 8.

2 The usual assumption is that, in the conversation between science and theology, science is the dominant partner. To the public it seemed sensible to ask Albert Einstein what he thought about God, but no one would have thought to ask Mother Teresa what she thought about special relativity. For genuine conversation to occur, each partner must treat the other with respect.

3 For a clear and authoritative account of the standard account by a scientist who is a devout Christian, see John Houghton, *The Search for God: Can Science Help?* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1995), Chapter 2.

and strong nuclear forces) and sub-atomic particles. Initially the particles coalesced into lighter elements such as hydrogen and helium. Eventually these coalesced into stars. Some of the stars expanded as they aged. They then collapsed, and in their collapse they acted like giant furnaces, crushing the lighter elements together and thereby creating the heavier elements such as carbon. These stars, called *supernovas*, then exploded, scattering the heavier elements across the universe. Planets were formed out of lighter and heavier elements.

It was in this way that about 4.5 billion years ago Earth came into existence. About 3.5 billion years ago life emerged on our planet. Gradually there appeared living creatures that possessed consciousness. The dating of the origins of the earliest humans is only approximate, but somewhere between 50,000 and 250,000 years ago there were beings on Earth who were either pre-human or human.

Some Christians think that this standard scientific account is not compatible with the Christian world-view. They therefore reject part of it, especially the evolution of life. Other Christians see this account as compatible with the Christian world-view and as occupying a domain separate from it. They seek for consonances between the two. This is my understanding.

## SCIENTIFIC METHODS

The various sciences exist in a kind of hierarchy. At the base is physics, the study of the particles and the fundamental forces. Chemistry is the study of the components of matter that are listed in the periodic table. Biology is the study of living creatures. Psychology is the study of human consciousness and personality. Sociology is the study of human communities. History is the study of the lives of human beings in the past. Astronomy is the study of the universe beyond the atmosphere of Earth.<sup>1</sup>

Each science employs methods that are suited to its subject. For example, astronomers gather data by means of telescopes, but telescopes are of no use to biologists. Psychologists gather data by means of questionnaires, but questionnaires are of no use to chemists.

In a book entitled *Method in Theology* the theologian Bernard Lonergan defined method as “a normative pattern of recurrent and related operations yielding cumulative and progressive results.”<sup>2</sup> He then proposed that there is a general method that transcends the specific methods of individual disci-

plines. He thought that the general method is an accurate account of all of the ways in which human beings can acquire knowledge. He expressed the general method as four imperatives: Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, and be responsible. To be attentive is to observe carefully. To be intelligent is to create hypotheses to account for what one observes. To be reasonable is to test one’s hypotheses. To be responsible is to be truthful about what one initially observes and about the results of testing one’s hypotheses.

I find this analysis helpful. However, I think that we human beings sometimes grasp reality in ways that are more intuitive and imaginative than this analysis seems to allow. Even physicists use their imaginations. Perhaps Lonergan intended to affirm the intuitive and imaginative grasping of truth when he spoke of being intelligent.

These observations help to provide an answer to an important question: Is science the only way to know about reality? If by the word *science* we mean the work of modern, professional scientists, then science certainly is not the only way of knowing reality. Human beings surely had some knowledge before modern science existed. Also, a scientist knows her newborn baby in ways that are not available to her just as a scientist.

It is curious that anyone should ever have suggested that science is the only way to know about reality. The claim is untrue and also, ironically, unscientific.

## SCIENCE AND GOD

Can modern science be a means by which people may know about God? In the Bible we read that God communicates not only through the special revelation that was given in the history of the Jewish people and recorded in the Bible, but also through a general revelation that is given through the created world. So pre-scientific people learned about God from their observation of the natural world. What happens when our knowledge about the world becomes scientific? Does science suppress the world’s witness about God? I think the answer is no.

Some Christians believe that the world as described by science contains evidence that God exists. They are prepared to use that evidence to argue for the existence of God. The most popular argument of this kind is the argument from intelligent design.<sup>1</sup>

1 Nancey Murphy, *Reconciling Theology and Science* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 1997), 12-18.

2 Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), 4.

1 A fine example of this is Michael J. Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

This seems to me to over-reach. A more modest view is to think that the universe described in the standard scientific account is something for whose existence a personal, purposive, Creator God provides a plausible and intellectually satisfying account.

Here is the best example I know (I described this in Chapter 2). Scientists have discovered that the universe must be of a particular kind in order to produce and sustain conscious life as we know it. Multiple factors must be precisely ordered. One of these is the strength of gravity and the attendant rate of expansion of the universe in the first moments following the Big Bang. According to Stephen Hawking (who is emphatically not a person of faith) in his wildly popular book, *A Brief History of Time*, if the rate of expansion of the universe at the Big Bang was 1/1,000,000 faster (or gravity that much weaker), it would have been too rapid for stars ever to form; that means there would have been no heavy elements, no planets, and therefore no life as we know it. On the other hand, if the rate of expansion had been 1/100,000,000,000,000,000 slower (or gravity that much stronger), the universe would have collapsed long ago, and that also means there would have been no life as we know it.<sup>1</sup> The initial rate of expansion of a universe that could give rise human life had to fall within a range that is razor thin.

Facts such as these have been discovered by scientists, who refer to them as “the anthropic principle.” They lead naturally to the question: “How does it happen that we are here?” One response is simply to say, “Well, we got lucky.” This answer, though understandable, is effectively a refusal to engage in the quest for understanding that characterizes both science and theology.

John Polkinghorne says that there are just two possible answers to the question raised by the anthropic principle: “Either there is one world whose fruitful potential is the expression of divine purpose or there are many worlds, one of which just happens to be right for the evolution of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Both of these accounts of the anthropic principle—a purposeful Creator or multiple universes—are plausible. Science cannot adjudicate between them. It cannot neither prove nor disprove either account.

As a Christian, Polkinghorne believes that “there is a divine purpose behind this fruitful universe, whose fifteen-billion-year history has turned a ball of energy into the home of saints and scientists.” But he is careful about how he describes this: “The theistic conclusion is not logically coercive, but it can claim serious consideration as an intellectually satisfying understand-

ing of what would otherwise be unintelligible good fortune.”<sup>1</sup>

So far we have been thinking about the world’s witness concerning God’s existence. The psalmist said that the heavens declare God’s glory (Ps. 19:1). Does science say anything about that?

Science has dramatically increased our knowledge of the size, age, and functioning of the world. With this increased knowledge comes an enriched understanding of the Creator of the world. For example, God’s wisdom is more subtle than we had realized. God’s interest in the non-human world is greater than we knew. Since God employed a process for creating human beings that required billions of years, God is much more patient than we were aware.

Genesis says that human beings are made from the dust of the earth. Science says the same thing, and it also tells us the origin of that dust. As mentioned above, it says that the heavy elements such as carbon were created when stars collapsed and crushed lighter elements such as hydrogen and helium together. These stars then exploded, scattering the heavy elements across the universe. This in turn led to the formation of planets such as our Earth. Since we human beings have emerged from the heavy elements of the Earth, we are, quite literally, made from stardust. In the age of science, the heavens continue to declare God’s glory.

## SCIENCE AND HUMAN ORIGINS

One of the most famous and enduring conflicts between science and theology was launched in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*. Darwin’s thesis was that many things in nature that appear to have been designed, things such as the human eye, can in fact be accounted for without reference to design or a Designer. Random mutations that occur in living organisms from one generation to the next happen to equip certain organisms to survive and procreate. Given enough time, mutations appear that seem to have been designed, but in fact they occurred accidentally.

Darwin’s thesis constitutes a challenge to the Christian faith at four points.

First, this account of the origins of human life differs from the account in Genesis. Genesis says nothing about evolution. Where Genesis speaks of each creature reproducing “after its kind,” evolution speaks of the interconnectedness of all life on this planet.

1 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, 121.

2 John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, 7.

1 John Polkinghorne, *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, 9, 10.

Second, the evolutionary account undermines a popular argument for the existence of God. Known as the teleological argument, it says that, because things such as the human eye seem to have been designed, there must be a Designer, and that is God.

Third, the evolutionary account of human origins seems to undermine the biblical teaching that human beings are unique bearers of the image of God and therefore possess a special dignity.

Fourth, the evolutionary account of human origins seems to suggest that death occurred long before human beings had evolved far enough to know right from wrong and therefore to be capable of committing sin. Where Genesis speaks of death as a consequence of sin, evolution speaks of death as having occurred for billions of years before sin entered the world.

I think these four arguments are mistaken.

It is true, of course, that Genesis and the evolutionary account of the origins of human life differ. But they come into conflict only if we take the Genesis account as scientific. I don't know of any good reason to do that. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, the Bible contains accounts of creation in the Bible that no one takes them as scientific. For example:

Woe to you who strive with your Maker, earthen vessels with the potter! Does the clay say to the one who fashions it, "What are you making"? or "Your work has no handles"? Woe to anyone who says to a father, "What are you begetting?" or to a woman, "With what are you in labor?" Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker: Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands? I made the earth, and created humankind upon it; it was my hands that stretched out the heavens, and I commanded all their host. (Isa. 45:9-12)

In this passage are four distinct images for the Creator: God is like a potter who makes pottery, like a father who begets a child, like a woman who gives birth to a child, and like a nomad who puts up a tent. In Genesis we see a different image of the Creator: God is like an oriental monarch who issues commands such as "Let there be light," and these are carried out. I know of no hermeneutic that requires us to interpret Genesis as science that would not require us also to interpret Isaiah as science, and no one does that. It seems to me, therefore, that we should understand Genesis and Isaiah as true and important accounts of creation, but not as scientific ones.

They are telling us why the world exists, not how the world operates.

The second argument is that evolution undermines the teleological argument for the existence of God. This is true, up to a point. But Christians are not required to embrace the teleological argument, so the loss of that argument should cause them no particular concern. In retrospect, we can see that it was never a good idea to call on God to fill in the gaps in our knowledge about particular things in the world, gaps such as how an eye can have the power to see things. On the other hand, it seems to me to be possible to see design in the universe as a whole. A good example of this is the anthropic principle.

As for the third argument, that evolution undermines the teaching that human beings are made in God's image, it is worth remembering that Genesis speaks of even more modest origins for human beings than science does. It says human beings were made from dust. If the biblical teaching that human beings were created from dust does not undermine the image of God in them, why should the scientific teaching that they were created from lower animals do so? In my judgment, Darwinian evolution does not undermine the dignity of human beings. Those who embrace the standard evolutionary account of human beings are as free as the psalmist to say of human beings, "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5).

The fourth argument is that evolution undermines the teaching of Genesis that death is a consequence of sin. It is true that the evolutionary account includes that all living creatures are mortal and eventually die. Genesis teaches that, for human beings, death has an additional meaning, a second face. It is not only an inevitable, natural event but a symbol of human sin and alienation from the living God who commanded: "In the day you eat [the forbidden fruit] you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). Evolution does not undermine that second meaning of death.

My conclusion is that no conflict exists between the Christian teaching about human beings bearing God's image and the Darwinian teaching about human origins.

## SCIENCE AND HUMAN FREEDOM

If the evolutionary account of human origins does not rule out the dignity of human beings, what about scientific determinism? Is it not the case that science describes a universe in which everything that happens is an

effect of a previous cause, and therefore that everything is causally determined? Can there be freedom in such a universe? And if human beings are not free, can they be morally responsible? And if they are not morally responsible, how much dignity remains for them?

I think that the dignity of human beings does depend on their possessing freedom. I also think there is room in the scientific account of the universe for human freedom. I will explain why.

When we reflect on our experience of the world, we notice three kinds of events. Some events appear to be determined, as when a tree limb that breaks falls to the ground. Others appear to be random, as when a tornado uproots one tree while leaving its neighbors untouched. Still other events appear to be freely chosen, as when a homeowner decides to plant a new tree in her front yard. I will refer to these as determined, chance, and free events.

Because we observe chance and freedom as well as determinism, when scientists argue that everything is causally determined, they are de facto making a claim that we have misinterpreted our experience. They are saying that the chance and freedom that we think we observe are actually illusions. All events are causally determined.

Some scientists do say this. Albert Einstein famously wrote:

I am a determinist. Everything is determined . . . by forces over which we have no control. It is determined for the insect as well as for the star. Human beings, vegetables, or cosmic dust, we all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible player.

But he added:

I am compelled to act as if free will existed because if I wish to live in a civilized society I must act responsibly. I know that philosophically a murderer is not responsible for his crime, but I prefer not to take tea with him.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to denying freedom, Einstein also denied that anything happens by chance: “God does not play dice.”

On the other hand, Einstein’s younger friend and frequent sparring partner Niels Bohr denied that everything that happens is causally deter-

mined. He said that in the sub-atomic world events occur randomly. Bohr’s view of quantum mechanics is now part of the standard model of particle physics. On one of several occasions when Einstein said, “God does not play dice,” Bohr countered with, “Einstein, stop telling God what to do!”<sup>1</sup>

Today it is neuroscience that seems to provide the principal challenge to human freedom. Neuroscience has made it clear that the human mind is dependent on the human brain. Since the mind, and therefore the self, is dependent on the brain, and since the brain is a physical organ that presumably operates deterministically, it is difficult to understand how the self could be free to make choices.

Of course, what is true of freedom is also true of life. Our bodies are composed entirely of physical elements and compounds, none of which is alive, and yet we are alive. Life is an emergent quality of our physical bodies. I believe that freedom is an emergent quality in the same way that life is.

The debate about freedom and determinism has a parallel in Christian theology. Some theologians affirm a theological determinism (predestination) at the expense of chance and of human freedom. John Calvin said that God has foreordained every event that occurs and that human beings are not free in the full sense of the word. He also denied that there are any chance occurrences. He wrote, “God does not permit, but governs by his power.”<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, other Christian theologians have affirmed that human beings are free in the full sense of the word. They think that God did not foreordain every event that occurs. Some events happen by chance, and others happen because human beings choose to make them happen.

The same argument exists in philosophy as in science and theology. Some philosophers make the case for determinism at the expense of freedom and chance. Others affirm freedom along with determinism and chance.

In view of these ancient disagreements it seems likely that freedom will remain an essentially contested concept. The idea of essentially contested concepts was first proposed in 1956 by the Welsh philosopher W. B. Gallie.<sup>3</sup> It seems sensible to say that when ideas are essentially contested, we are not intellectually obliged to accept any one of them.

So I take seriously what we observe, namely, some determinism, some chance, and some freedom. I do not think that these are folk concepts that

1 Walter Isaacson, *Einstein*, 326.

2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III:23:1. See Appendix 7, Calvinism.

3 W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), ch. 8.

1 Quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 391-93.

must be discarded now that science has provided us with more sophisticated ones. I think our experience of all three is veridical, truthful.

If this is true, then most of the history of the universe has resulted from the fruitful interplay of determinism and chance. The third factor, human freedom, is a latecomer. Since the emergence of human beings, the world exists as the result of the fruitful interplay of determinism, chance, and human freedom.

### CONCLUSION

I believe in God. I do this not because of science but because of Jesus whose story is told by the church and in the New Testament. Having heard his story, I have put my faith in Jesus and in the One he taught us to call *Abba*. I realize that others have made other choices. I respect them and their choices, and I enjoy and benefit from conversations with them. But I think the Christian account of things is true and that to the extent that others deny that account, they are mistaken.

I am aware, of course, that someone has to be wrong about this. I know that in principle it may be that I am wrong and my agnostic friends are right. But the fact that I recognize that in principle I could be wrong does not mean that my trust in God is tentative or trivial. It is not. I hold it with deep conviction, and it shapes my life in profound ways. I live with hope that a time is coming when we will all know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12).

## APPENDIX 3

# DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT THE BIBLE

## INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 I discussed the immense amount of agreement Christians have about the Bible. In this appendix I will survey the nature of some recent disagreements about the Bible.

Naturally, Christians disagree concerning interpretations of the Bible. This is unavoidable. The Bible is a large book about profound subjects. It is inevitable that, if millions of Christians read and study the Bible for themselves, they will arrive at different understandings of various passages in the Bible. There is no way to prevent this from happening except for Christians to stop reading and interpreting the Bible for themselves, and that is not going to happen, nor should it.

It follows, then, that the church must be prepared to live with different interpretations of the Bible. That is going to be a way of life for the church for the indefinite future, and we must not waste our time and energy deploring it.

## THE NATURE OF RECENT DISAGREEMENTS CONCERNING BIBLICAL INERRANCY

In recent years, however, the sharpest disagreements in the church concerning the Bible have not been over different interpretations of the Bible. The sharpest disagreements have been over whether or not the Bible is true, not only in its great message (which all Christians agree is the case), but also in every detail recorded in the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Two positions are held concerning this issue. One group says that every statement recorded in the Bible is accurate; they say that the Bible is inerrant. The other group does not say that every statement in the Bible is accurate; they do not say that the Bible is inerrant.

<sup>1</sup> This disagreement has been particularly acute among American evangelicals. In this appendix I will give special attention to the form of the disagreement in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in America. The disagreement led to radical changes in the Convention and to the formation of at least two new Baptist denominations.

At first glance these two seem completely incompatible. Even so, I have come to believe that they aren't, and I think I can demonstrate that this is the case. I hope that you, my readers, will come to see this as I do. However, even if you do not, I hope that you will feel the force of the argument that I will offer. I recognize that my understanding is a minority view, but I am unable to see any way to avoid it.

### INERRANCY IS THE POSITIVE POSITION

The first step in the argument is to notice that, even though the word "inerrant" seems to be a negative word, it represents the positive position. That is to say, biblical inerrancy is an affirmation that the truthfulness of the Bible extends not only to its great message but also to every detail recorded in the Bible, not only to matters of faith and morals but also to matters of science and history.

It is the second position that is negative. People who decline to affirm that every statement in the Bible is true are rejecting the invitation to make the positive claim that the Bible is without error of any kind.

### DEDUCTIVE AND INDUCTIVE REASONING

The second step in the argument concerns two kinds of reasoning. How did Christians arrive at these two positions? In quite different ways, as it turns out. Inerrancy is arrived at in a deductive manner. For example, from the fact that Jesus was truthful, and from the fact that Jesus accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as truthful, the conclusion is drawn that the Hebrew Scriptures are truthful. Again, from the fact that God is truthful, and from the fact that the Bible is God's Word, the conclusion is drawn that the Bible is truthful. This is a deductive process, reasoning from premises to conclusions.

Both of these syllogisms seem to me to be correct. That is, their premises are correct, and the reasoning is in proper form; therefore, their conclusions are correct. They provide good reasons to accept the inerrancy of the Bible.

The argument that leads Christians to reject biblical inerrancy is quite different. It is an inductive argument. As people read the Bible, they notice things that seem not to be inerrant. From this they conclude that it would be inaccurate to affirm that the Bible is inerrant. I shall illustrate the kind of biblical passages that lead to this conclusion. My purpose in giving this illustration is to show that those who do not affirm biblical inerrancy have

good reason for the position they take.

Following his baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the desert east of the Jordan River. During this time he was tempted by the devil. There is a record of these temptations in two of the Gospels, Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13). Here is the sequence of the temptations according to Matthew:

1. Change stones into bread.
2. Throw himself down from the temple.
3. Worship Satan.

Here is the sequence of the temptations according to Luke:

1. Change stones into bread.
2. Worship Satan.
3. Throw himself down from the temple.

The difficulty becomes clear when we ask: What was the sequence of Jesus' temptations? Frankly, I do not know the answer, and I do not think anyone else does either.

Let us notice two things about this example.

First, you do not have to be a rationalist, or an unbeliever, or a hater of the Bible in order to see the problem. Faithful, believing Christians who love the Bible can see it.

Second, the problem is not very important. The two important issues in the story are whether or not Jesus was really tempted—he was—and whether or not he sinned—he didn't. On these issues Matthew and Luke agree, of course.

Nevertheless, the order of the temptations differs in the two gospels. It is not hard to understand why some people would read these two passages and say: I do not think that the phrase "biblical inerrancy" is an accurate description of what I read in Matthew and Luke about the sequence of Jesus' temptations.

That is how the two positions are arrived at: inerrancy by deductive argument, non-inerrancy by noticing things in the Bible.

### DEEPLY HELD CONVICTIONS

The third step in the argument is to recognize that each side holds its conviction very deeply. The disagreement about biblical inerrancy is one which engages the hearts of people as well as their minds. Sincere Christians are intensely committed to these two positions. Feelings on this subject run high. Why is that?

Those who believe in biblical inerrancy seem to do so primarily out of

loyalty to God. That is, they are committed to biblical inerrancy because they think that in no other way can they hold to the premises that God is truthful and that the Bible is God's Word. Loyalty to God is a noble motive.

Those who resist biblical inerrancy seem to do so primarily out of a determination to speak with integrity. That is, they refuse to affirm biblical inerrancy because they believe that it would be disingenuous to do so, given what they read in the Bible. Integrity is also a noble motive.

Of course, both groups are loyal to God and both groups act with integrity. But the intensity with which the two positions are held seems attributable to the motives that I have described.

### IMPASSE?

At this point we seem to have reached an impasse. Two groups of intelligent, sincere Christians, disagree about whether or not to describe the Bible as inerrant. They are intensely committed to their different views for good reasons and with good motives. What more can possibly be said?

For many years I suspected that there had to be something more going on in the disagreement concerning inerrancy than what I have described above. Why? Because both positions had a true and important point to make. Those who affirm inerrancy are right: God is truthful. Those who refuse to affirm inerrancy are right: the sequence of Jesus' temptations differs in Matthew and Luke. Somehow, I suspected, there had to be more to this story.

### QUALIFYING INERRANCY

As it turns out, there is more, and it is found on the side of those who affirm biblical inerrancy. Sophisticated, informed supporters of biblical inerrancy have other things to say in addition to what I described above. They qualify their position thoughtfully and carefully. I believe that these qualifications are important and that the disagreement between the two groups is reconfigured when the qualifications are taken with the seriousness that they deserve.

I am going to give eleven examples of the qualifications of biblical inerrancy. Notice that these qualifications are made, not by those who oppose biblical inerrancy, but by the most intelligent and sophisticated supporters of biblical inerrancy. For example, many of the qualifications appear in a document called "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy." This is a

statement written in 1978 by 284 Christian scholars to define and defend the inerrancy of the Bible. Their work may be taken as representative of the best modern thinking on biblical inerrancy.

### ONLY THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPTS

The first qualification is this: Only the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible were inerrant. Inerrancy is not being claimed for modern texts or translations of the Bible.

There is an enormously important qualification. Many Christians have not had an occasion to give much thought to the implications of the fact that the Bible is an ancient book. It was written over several centuries and in ancient languages. The various writings were collected slowly and laboriously by Jews and then by Christians. For more than a thousand years the Bible was copied by hand. It was not until about A.D. 1450 that printing by movable type was invented. Naturally, all of the handwritten copies of the various books of the Bible are not identical; slight variations slipped in across the centuries. No informed person disputes this.

Those who defend the inerrancy of the Bible recognize that all of this is true, and they respond by saying that their claim for complete inerrancy applies only to the autographs, the original manuscripts, not to any copies or translations.

This qualification means two things. First, it means that we are dealing here with a very technical matter. The argument is about handwritten Greek and Hebrew documents that, everyone agrees, no longer exist and which were never brought together in one place. Second, it means that we are not talking about the Bible as we have it today. For example, I have on the desk beside me the Revised English Version and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. To the best of my knowledge, no one has ever claimed that either of these is inerrant. The debate about biblical inerrancy is not about these two fine translations, but about ancient manuscripts that no longer exist.

### ONLY WHAT WAS INTENTIONALLY TAUGHT

The second qualification that sophisticated inerrantists make is this: What is inerrant in the Bible is what the writers intentionally taught, not everything they thought. The Princeton theologian Charles Hodge made this distinction in his influential *Systematic Theology*:

[The doctrine of the full inspiration of Scripture] denies that the sacred writers were merely partially inspired; it asserts that they were fully inspired as to all that they teach, whether of doctrine or fact. This of course does not imply that the sacred writers were infallible except for the special purpose for which they were employed. They were not imbued with plenary knowledge. As to all matters of science, philosophy, and history, they stood on the same level with their contemporaries. They were infallible only as teachers. Isaiah was infallible in his predictions, although he shared with his countrymen the views then prevalent as to the mechanism of the universe. Paul could not err in anything he taught, although he could not recollect how many persons he had baptized in Corinth.<sup>1</sup>

A few pages later Hodge makes this further observation:

The question, therefore, is a question of fact. Do the sacred writers contradict each other? Do the Scriptures teach what from any source can be proved not to be true? The question is not whether the views of the sacred writers were incorrect, but whether they taught error? For example, it is not the question Whether they thought that the earth is the centre of our system? but, Did they teach that it is?<sup>2</sup>

This too is an important qualification. What the writers thought was not inerrant, but what they intentionally taught was. This qualification might be a help with the example that I gave of Jesus' temptations; perhaps Matthew or Luke was not intentionally teaching the sequence of Jesus' temptations, only that Jesus was tempted and that he resisted the temptations.

### THE WRITERS WERE HUMAN BEINGS

The third qualification of biblical inerrancy is that it is recognized that the Bible was written by human beings, and it is recognized that the manner of inspiration is a mystery. In other words, in the kind of sophisticated inerrancy we are describing no claim is being made that the Bible was simply dropped out of heaven, or that it was simply dictated word for word by God to the

1 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, no date [first published, 1872]), I:165.

2 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, I:169.

writers. Rather, in some mysterious way, God worked through the writers to achieve a definite result, and the result was a collection of inerrant writings.

### THE REVELATION WAS PROGRESSIVE

The fourth qualification is that the Bible includes progressive revelation. Informed advocates of biblical inerrancy do not claim that all of the parts of the Bible are equally important; they recognize that the message in the Song of Solomon is not as important as the message in John 3. All that they claim is that the message in both is true. Later revelation may be more important than earlier revelation, but it cannot correct the earlier because there are no errors in the earlier.

### THINGS WERE REPORTED PHENOMENOLOGICALLY

The fifth qualification is that the writers of the Bible reported things as they appeared to them. Here is how one writer, Paul Little, expressed this:

For instance, the Scripture describes things phenomenologically—that is as they *appear* to be. It speaks of the sun rising and setting. Now, we know that the sun does not actually rise and set but that the earth rotates. But we use *sunrise* and *sunset* ourselves, even in an age of scientific enlightenment, because this is a convenient way of describing what appears to be. So we cannot charge the Bible with error when it speaks phenomenologically. Because it speaks in this way, it has been clear to people of all ages and cultures.<sup>1</sup>

This is an important qualification. It means that the writers used ordinary language, not scientific language. The language they used was embedded in their culture. Nevertheless, what they wrote was truth and not error.

### THE BIBLE CONTAINS NON-LITERAL LANGUAGE

The sixth qualification is that the writers did not use only literal language. Sophisticated supporters of biblical inerrancy are fully aware that the Bible contains poetic language, images, metaphors, and figures of speech. It is not true to say that they believe that everything in the Bible is literal. All that they are insisting is that, whether the language is literal or figurative, what is given is truth and not error.

1 Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 67.

## THE BIBLE CONTAINS INEXACT LANGUAGE

The seventh qualification is that the writers felt free to use inexact language. Here is how this is expressed in “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy”:

We further deny that inerrancy is negated by Biblical phenomena such as a lack of modern technical precision, irregularities of grammar or spelling, observational descriptions of nature, the reporting of falsehoods, the use of hyperbole and round numbers, the topical arrangement of material, variant selections of material in parallel accounts, or the use of free citations.<sup>1</sup>

The same point is made by two scholars, Russ Bush and Tom Nettles, who offer a comprehensive understanding of biblical inerrancy: “If God allows imprecision on some matters, it is not the task of the contemporary critic to decide a priori that God has failed to communicate truth. God defines truth.”<sup>2</sup>

This is an important qualification, for this reason. All Christians agree that the great message of the Bible is true; the disagreement is not about the Bible’s great message but about more detailed matters; this qualification makes it clear that “imprecision” or “lack of modern technical precision” in detailed matters does not negate the inerrancy of the Bible.

## SOME QUOTATIONS IN THE BIBLE ARE PARAPHRASED

The eighth qualification is that the writers of the New Testament felt free to quote the Old Testament freely and sometimes to paraphrase it; they were not making an error when they did not quote it verbatim.

## THE BIBLE CONTAINS SEVERAL KINDS OF LITERATURE

The ninth qualification is that the Bible contains several kinds of literature. Every sentence in the Bible is not a didactic statement; there are narratives, songs, prayers, proverbs, parables, and so on. All that inerrantists are saying is that what is given in the Bible, in the several genres of literature found there, is truth and not error.

1 “The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (Walnut Creek, California: The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, no date given [1987]), Article XIII.

2 L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 421.

## THE BIBLE DOES NOT ALWAYS APPEAR TO BE INERRANT

The tenth qualification is that defenders of biblical inerrancy recognize that the Bible contains some passages that do not appear to be inerrant. Bush and Nettles refer to these as “apparent discrepancies, verbal differences, seeming contradictions, and so forth.”<sup>1</sup>

Some supporters of inerrancy work hard to resolve these difficulties. Other inerrantists such as B. B. Warfield refuse on principle to deal with them. They both acknowledge that these passages are problems or difficulties or inadvertences, but they insist that they are not errors. This is an especially important qualification, because it is precisely these kinds of passages that have led many other Christians to be unwilling to affirm the inerrancy of the Bible.

## THE WORD “INERRANT” ISN’T IMPORTANT

Finally, some defenders of inerrancy do not insist that the word “inerrant” itself be used by everyone. All that they ask is that the full truthfulness of the Bible be affirmed.

In my judgment, these eleven qualifications are enormously important, and those who intend to discuss this matter should pay close attention to them. Unfortunately this has not always been done.

## CONCLUSION

The disagreement among American Protestant Christians concerning how to describe the Bible has been going on for about a century. In fact, before the controversy about inerrancy there were controversies that dealt with related issues. One dealt with whether the inspiration of the Bible was verbal or dynamic, that is, with whether it was the words or just the concepts of the Bible that are inspired by God. Another controversy dealt with whether the truth that God gives in the Bible is propositional or non-propositional.

I myself have come to the conclusion that these controversies are misguided. In particular, the difference between affirming or not affirming the inerrancy of the Bible is less important than it seems. When we take seriously the careful qualifications of biblical inerrancy that are provided by sophisticated scholars, it becomes very difficult to see how their view differs from the view that all Christians hold, which is that the great message of the

1 Bush and Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, 414.

Bible is true.

Occasionally someone asks me which side of the disagreement I am on. I give them the only answer I can: I think that the positions are *de facto* the same. To repeat what I wrote above, the view I hold is a minority view. I know that, and I know that my readers may not agree with what I have written here. Nevertheless, it seems to me to be the case.

I believe that the wisest words ever written about the Bible may well be these:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

This is what I understand the entire church to have confessed across the centuries, and it is what I think all Christians today can agree upon. I invite my readers to consider this position carefully and to ask whether the time has come for us to stop arguing about this issue, to accept one another as fellow Christians, and from now on to spend the energies that we have been spending on this disagreement, in affirming the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation.

#### APPENDIX 4

### THE NICENE CREED

The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of all Christian creeds. It is included in the liturgies of the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, and many Protestant churches. It probably was issued by the Second Ecumenical Council meeting at Constantinople in A.D. 381. It takes its name from the fact that it carries forward the teachings of the creed issued by the First Ecumenical Council that met at Nicæa in A.D. 325.

The literature about the creed is vast. A good introduction is J. N. D. Kelly's magisterial *Early Christian Creeds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1976), Chapters X-XI. The translation below is that of *The Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 326-327.

In the creed the Greek phrase *homoousios to Patri* ("of one Being with the Father") was used at Nicæa and again at Constantinople to oppose the theology of Arius. The Latin word *filioque* ("and the Son") was added by the western church centuries after Constantinople and has never been accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The presence of this controversial word in this most ecumenical of creeds is an ironic reminder of the tragic disunity of the church.

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father. [Greek: *homoousios to Patri*]  
Through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation

## THE QUEST FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Jews and Christians have in common a belief that God has acted in history and that God's historical acts provide the fullest understanding of God that is available to us. For Jews the archetypal act of God was the Exodus; for Christians it is the life and ministry of Jesus.

Apparently no one attempted to write a biography of Jesus until the eighteenth century. This is surprising because people talked about Jesus and wrote about him constantly. But they did not write biographies of Jesus because they understood the four Gospels to be biographies and to provide everything people needed for their faith and their lives.

What happened to change things is the modern, critical, scientific study of history. R. G. Collingwood has described the differences between pre-modern and modern history this way. The pre-modern historian is respectfully attentive to his authorities. He waits to hear what they tell him. Then, in a kind of scissors-and-paste operation, he combines their information into a coherent narrative. The modern historian, on the other hand, studies the same materials as the pre-modern historian, but to her they are sources and not authorities, and she is not deferential to them. She formulates a question of her own, and then she compels the sources to answer her question.<sup>1</sup>

What modern historians did with other sources, they also did with the documents of the New Testament and with other ancient documents that contain information about Jesus. They treated them as sources rather than authorities, they formulated questions to put to the sources, and they attempted to compel the sources to answer their questions. They have done this in a quest to understand the historical Jesus. The quest for the historical Jesus has produced dozens, perhaps hundreds, of biographies of Jesus and thousands of discrete studies devoted to particular aspects of his work and teaching.

Over the years the quest itself has undergone dramatic changes.<sup>2</sup> The original quest began in the mid-eighteenth century with the work of a philosopher of the German Enlightenment, Hermann S. Reimarus. He was the first scholar to focus his attention principally on the first three Gospels, now

he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the death,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son. [Latin: *filioque*]  
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

1 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 269.

2 I found helpful the overview of the quest in the initial essay of Beilby and Eddy, *The Historical Jesus*.

a standard practice. He was looking for the Jesus behind the Gospels, not the Jesus of the Gospels. He dismissed the stories of Jesus' miracles because he assumed that miracles do not happen.

Reimarus wrote with the intention of discrediting Christianity, but many of his successors wrote their biographies of Jesus in order to help modern people appreciate Jesus and follow him. Many of these authors were liberal Protestants. Although their biographies of Jesus (usually called "lives of Jesus") were diverse, they all assumed that the historical Jesus could not have been what orthodoxy said he was. They wrote to liberate Jesus from the bonds of orthodoxy.

To a large extent the original quest for the historical Jesus was brought to an end by a single book published in 1906. Its English title is *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, and its author was Albert Schweitzer. In the book Schweitzer summarized and assessed many of the critical lives of Jesus written since Reimarus. He pointed out that the authors of the lives had projected so many of their own values and beliefs onto Jesus that their books were as much autobiographies as biographies. He wrote: "The historical Jesus' of most 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal 'lives' . . . never had any existence."<sup>1</sup>

Schweitzer also pointed out that the authors of the lives of Jesus had ignored one aspect of Jesus' teaching in particular, one which is emphasized in the Gospels, namely, Jesus' concern about eschatology, the end of the world. Schweitzer said that Jesus taught that the end of the world was imminent and that Jesus was disappointed when it didn't arrive. Despite that disappointment, Jesus remained an absolutely faithful servant of God to the end of his life.

As a result of Schweitzer's book, for almost half a century there was something like an intermission in the quest for the historical Jesus. Historians, rather than attempting to write lives of Jesus, tried to find ways to avoid projecting their own values onto Jesus. Theologians worked out ways to understand eschatology that were true to Jesus and also relevant to modern people. New Testament scholars analyzed the forms in which stories about Jesus had been orally transmitted; this work is known as form criticism. They also developed a consensus about the sources of the first three Gospels. Mark was earliest; Matthew and Luke shared a common source known as Q (for the German word *Quelle* which means "source"), and Matthew and Luke each had his own source. This work is known as source criticism.

1 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* translated by W. Montgomery (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1968, first published 1910), 399.

During the intermission one of the most influential scholars was the German Lutheran Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann argued that the historical study of Jesus is not relevant to Christian faith. In fact, he said, pinning one's faith in God to the historical Jesus is a form of works salvation, an attempt to save oneself by doing good works. He said that in his indifference to the historical Jesus he was following the example of Paul who wrote: "Even though we once knew Christ after the flesh, we know him no longer in that way" (2 Cor. 5:16).

In 1953 one of Bultmann's former students, Ernst Käsemann, delivered a paper in which he argued that his teacher was mistaken and that the historical Jesus is important for Christian faith. This paper launched a second phase known as "the new quest for the historical Jesus."

Leaders of the new quest drew on newly available information about first-century Palestine. These include the Dead Sea scrolls, Jewish documents discovered at Qumran near the Dead Sea beginning in 1947, and Christian scrolls discovered at Nag-Hammadi in Egypt beginning in 1945.

The new questers emphasized Jesus' teachings more than his life. They developed theories about how Jesus' teachings were transmitted orally from the period when he spoke them, which ended in about A. D. 30, to the time they were written, which began about twenty years later. They believed they could distinguish in the Gospels layers of tradition such as sayings of Jesus, reports of the apostles, developments in the oral period, and contributions of the authors of the Gospels. The new questers developed sophisticated criteria for assessing the probable historicity of sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. Here are five of those criteria:

- Source. If sayings are found in the earlier sources, Q and Mark (or even Paul), or if they are found in multiple sources, then they are more likely to go back to Jesus himself.
- Multiple attestation. If a saying attributed to Jesus appears in different layers of the tradition, it probably goes back to him.
- Linguistic. If a saying attributed to Jesus contains an Aramaism—an idiom that suggests that the Greek version of the saying is a translation of an Aramaic original—then it probably goes back to Jesus, since Jesus almost certainly taught in Aramaic rather than Greek.
- Double dissimilarity. If a saying attributed to Jesus has no relevance to the situation of the early church and no obvious parallels in the Jewish background, then it probably goes back to Jesus.
- Embarrassment. If a story or saying might have embarrassed the early

church, then it probably goes back to Jesus. For example, the baptism of Jesus by John was awkward for the early church because of its suggestion that Jesus had sins of which he needed to repent. Jesus almost certainly was baptized by John.

Sayings that did not meet criteria such as these were thought to have come not from Jesus but either from the period during which the stories about Jesus were being circulated orally or from the authors of the Gospels themselves.

Because the new questers were so careful about their methods and so rigorous in their determination not to project their own values onto Jesus, they represent an advance on the first quest. In particular, the new quest usually emphasized Jesus' Jewishness. This contrasts sharply with the lives written during the original quest, many of which present a Jesus who seems less like a first-century Jew than like a nineteenth-century European Protestant.

Still, there are problems. One is that some of the criteria seem to be in tension with others. For example, the criterion of dissimilarity from Jesus' Jewish background is in tension with the criterion that an Aramaism is likely to go back to Jesus.

In 1985 Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan co-founded the Jesus Seminar, a loose network of scholars engaged in the study of the historical Jesus. Eventually about 150 scholars became members of the seminar. Funk claimed that these scholars were free to be objective about Jesus because they are not constrained by ecclesiastical authorities in the way earlier scholars had been. One dramatic expression of their freedom is that some members of the seminar think that the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* is as trustworthy as the canonical Gospels for knowing Jesus' teachings. The Jesus Seminar has been discontinued, but some of its scholars are still at work (I am writing this in 2016).

Unlike the early new questers, some members of the Jesus Seminar think it is possible to write a book that deals with Jesus' life as well as his teachings. One of them, John Dominic Crossan is a master of social modeling. For example, he points out that peasants who live in colonized regions tend to be more interested in things of the body than in abstract ideas. This suggests that the accounts of Jesus' healing miracles and his dining with sinners probably happened and that they are important for understanding Jesus. Crossan has developed a very sophisticated methodology. He has challenged

other scholars: "If you think you've a better method, let's have a look."<sup>1</sup>

Today, alongside the new quest which is still going on, is what the Anglican New Testament scholar N. T. Wright has named "the third quest."<sup>2</sup> Those engaged in the third quest do not share either a unified theological agenda, a unified method, or a common set of results. Their work is wildly diverse, but Wright thinks it is distinguishable from the work of the new questers. For the third quest a principal question is: Why was Jesus crucified? No reconstruction of Jesus' life and work is credible unless it offers some plausible account of the near-certain historical fact that powerful interests wanted Jesus dead. The third questers think that Jesus was political but not a Zealot or a revolutionary. For the third quest the question of why the church exists is also important. There were other putative messiahs before and after Jesus. When they died, their movements died with them. Why did not the same thing happen after Jesus died?

The quest for the historical Jesus continues today. Like all other human enterprises, it is not perfect. Some questers such as N. T. Wright are traditional Christians, and others such as Marcus Borg are non-traditional Christians. Some such as Bart Ehrman are agnostics. Other such as Reza Aslan, a Muslim, and Amy-Jill Levine, a Jew, are adherents of other religions. It is understandable that, given the wildly diverse results of their study, not all Christians welcome the quest. For myself, however, the quest is important and valuable because it reaffirms in modern terms something that has always been important to Christians, namely, that Jesus was a real, live, flesh-and-blood human being. He was truly man as well as truly divine. The quest is important and valuable also because it enables non-specialists such as myself to gain a clearer understanding of what kind of person Jesus was and of what his teachings and actions meant to those who knew him in the first century. Books such as C. H. Dodd's *The Founder of Christianity*, my own favorite biography of Jesus, do not distance us from the Jesus of the Gospels but help us to understand him better.<sup>3</sup>

1 John Dominic Crossan, "The Historical Jesus: An Interview with John Dominic Crossan" in *The Christian Century* (December 18-25, 1991), 1201.

2 Stephen Neill and Tom Wright. *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 279.

3 C. H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (New York: Collier Books/Macmillan Publishing Company, 1970).

## APPENDIX 6

# THE PENTECOSTAL AND CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS

Many Christians in the modern church have become more aware of the Holy Spirit because of the movement called Pentecostalism. This is the largest, fastest growing movement in the history of the church. It originated in a revival meeting in Los Angeles in 1906-09 known as the Azusa Street Meeting. Today, little more than a century after its beginning, more than 640 million Christians are Pentecostals or charismatics. That is more than 25% of all Christians and about 9% of the population of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The distinctive mark of Pentecostalism is ecstatic experience. Throughout the church's history Christians have had ecstatic experiences. However, until the twentieth century ecstatic experiences were understood to be exceptional rather than normative. In Pentecostalism, for the first time, a particular ecstatic experience, speaking in tongues, was said to be normative for all Christians. Every Christian should speak in tongues. Speaking in tongues is an experience of making utterances that one does not intend and does not understand. Stories of early Christians speaking in tongues are told in Acts 2, Acts 10, and Acts 19, and Paul discussed speaking in tongues in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

Pentecostalism originated in holiness churches with revivalist theologies. Its early leaders believed that one becomes a Christian by undergoing a conversion in which one receives Christ and is saved. This must be followed by a second experience in which one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. The second experience is called the baptism in the Holy Spirit, and everyone who has that experience is given the gift of speaking in tongues as a supernatural confirmation that one has been baptized in the Spirit. Tongues may be used privately to pray, and, when they are interpreted, they may be used publicly to give a message from God.

At first Pentecostalism was found only in denominations which were officially Pentecostal. However, in the 1950s Pentecostalism began to move

outside its own denominations into the other churches. This second wave goes by several names, one of which is the charismatic renewal. Today virtually all churches, including Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox as well as Protestant churches, have members who are charismatic.

As Pentecostalism moved into churches that were not officially Pentecostal, its theology moderated, and today many people whose lives have been affected by the charismatic renewal do not believe that everyone who has experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit will speak in tongues. What they say is simply that Christians should be open to all the gifts of the Spirit, not just the natural gifts such as leadership but also the supernatural, ecstatic ones such as speaking in tongues.

The Pentecostal movement in its various permutations has been used by the Spirit of God to renew the faith and life of hundreds of millions of Christians. It is a source of immeasurable blessing to the church and through the church to the wider world. While I am a bystander rather than a participant in the movement, I also am a well-wisher who feels a profound sense of gratitude for the work of the Spirit in the lives of charismatic Christians.

It seems to me that there are two extremes to be avoided when thinking about the charismatic renewal. On the one hand, it is extreme just to reject it. Some Christian leaders have done this. They have argued that supernatural gifts such as speaking in tongues ceased with the close of the New Testament era, or are the product of psychological issues such as arrested development, or even that they are the work of evil spirits. These are not true assessments, and Paul certainly did not deal with speaking in tongues in this manner. He wrote: "Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:5).

On the other hand, the claim that all Christians are supposed to have an ecstatic experience, whether speaking in tongues or some other, also seems extreme. The New Testament does not teach this. In fact, Paul showed no interest in the distinction between ecstatic and other experiences. What he cared about so passionately was the well-being of the church. He believed that the Spirit of the Lord gives everyone gifts so that they all can contribute to the church's well-being. He also was convinced that what matters most for the church's well-being is love.

God has used the charismatic renewal to enrich the life of the church, and there is every reason to believe that this will continue in the coming years. All Christians can be grateful for this. But it is important to remem-

<sup>1</sup> See *The International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (January 2015), 29. Each year in its January issue this journal publishes this immensely helpful set of data on global Christianity.

ber that the Spirit is with all Christians and has given spiritual gifts to all Christians, including those Christians who have not had ecstatic experiences. The church needs all its members to be good stewards of the gifts that have been given to them, and it must never forget Paul's piercing words: "If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but not have love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

## APPENDIX 7

# CALVINISM

## INTRODUCTION

Calvinism is the vision of the Christian faith taught by John Calvin, the sixteenth century Protestant reformer. Naturally Calvin, an orthodox Christian, held many beliefs in common with all Christians. Usually what is meant by "Calvinism" is a particular group of beliefs that were held by Calvin but that many other orthodox Christians do not have. The principal of these is foreordination. According to Calvinism, God ordains in advance everything that happens in the world. It is in this way that God exercises sovereign rule over the world. Calvinists believe that if anything ever happened in the world that God had not foreordained, then to that extent God would be less than fully sovereign.

In Calvinism several words are used to express God's foreordination of all things. God decrees what will happen, God predestines what will happen, God wills what will happen, and God determines what will happen. There are some nuanced differences in these words, but the big picture is clear enough. Everything that happens in this world was decided in advance by God.

This belief about God is not unique to Calvin. The church father Augustine taught something very like this, and so did the greatest of medieval theologians, Thomas Aquinas, and so did the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. This is not an eccentric view of a few isolated individuals.

On the other hand, neither is it the only view in the church. It has little support in the Eastern Orthodox churches, and there are many Protestant denominations and millions of Protestant Christians whose theology is not Calvinistic. Also, many Roman Catholics do not seem to be very committed to this view (which in the Roman Catholic Church is called "Augustinianism").

The differences between Calvinism and non-Calvinism take on special importance in connection with two doctrines in particular. One is the doctrine of providence, and the other is the doctrine of salvation. We will focus on the doctrine of salvation.

## THE SYNOD OF DORT

Early in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, a celebrated theologian named Jacobus Arminius challenged some of the Calvinist ideas to which the church of the Netherlands was officially committed. In 1610 some of Arminius's followers issued a brief, five-point statement called The Remonstrance ("The Protest"). In 1618-19 the Calvinist majority in the Netherlands responded at a Synod held in the city of Dort (modern Dordrecht). The Synod issued a statement known as the Canons of Dort, in which Calvinism's view of salvation was presented as five points.

The five points are the most popular summary of Calvinistic beliefs. One reason for the popularity is that in English the five points can be presented by means of the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. In fact, at Dort the five points followed the more logical sequence ULTIP: unconditional predestination, limited atonement, total depravity, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. It is important that predestination comes first because, as we shall see, it is the pivotal issue. Once it is in place, the other four ideas follow logically. Here is a brief summary of the teachings of the Synod as they appear in the Canons of Dort.

Unconditional predestination means that in eternity God decided—without reference to God's knowledge of how each human being would behave—which individuals God would save and which God would damn forever. God decreed that one set of individuals would be saved; this is the decree of election. God decreed that the rest would be damned; this is the decree of reprobation. It is important to emphasize that God did not issue these decrees because God knew in advance how people would act. In fact, the reverse is true:

- God issued the decrees in eternity,
- And therefore God knew from eternity how people would act,
- And therefore people act in time and history according to what God had decreed. All those whom God elected hear the gospel and then respond to it with repentance and faith, and those whom God reprobated either never hear the gospel or, if they do hear it, do not accept it.

Limited atonement means that God intended that only the elect would benefit from the salvation that Christ accomplished by his death and resurrection. In a way the phrase is misleading. Dort did not teach that Jesus' sacrifice had limited value; the canons are clear that the value of Christ's

sacrifice "is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world."<sup>1</sup> What is limited about the atonement is God's intention about who will benefit from Christ's sacrifice. It is God's intention that the sacrifice of Christ will benefit only the elect. This, of course, is logically entailed by the fact that God elected some and reprobated others.

The phrase "total depravity" can also be misleading. All Christians believe that human beings are sinners, and that sin affects their entire being (not, for example, just their bodies), and that human beings cannot rescue themselves from their sins. For Calvinists, "total depravity" carries an additional meaning. It means that human beings are spiritually dead in their sins, and so they can no more do anything spiritual than physically dead people can do anything physical. When spiritually dead people hear the gospel, they are not able to repent and believe in Christ. So, according to Calvinism, God first regenerates the elect or chosen people, making them spiritually alive, and then they are able, when they hear the gospel, to repent and have faith. The new birth therefore precedes repentance and faith. Once the regenerate people repent and have faith, they are then justified before God. Of course, God never regenerates the reprobate or rejected people. (Calvinists do not agree on when God regenerates the elect.)

Irresistible grace is a reference to the manner of God's work in the lives of the elect. Since they are spiritually dead, they cannot resist when God regenerates them. Once they have been regenerated, God gives them faith and repentance; they cannot resist this. Once they repent and have faith, God justifies them; they cannot resist this. All of this follows from the fact that God has predestinated them to salvation.

The perseverance of the saints means that those whom God has elected, and then regenerated, and then justified, will persevere in their faith until their deaths. This too follows from the decree of election.

I want to make three observations about these Calvinistic teachings.

First, sometimes the difference between Calvinism and non-Calvinism is said to be a matter of degree. Some Christians describe themselves as four-point Calvinists or three-point Calvinists. While it is true that Calvinism is presented in both rigorous and moderate forms, in the end Calvinism is not a matter of degree but an either/or matter. If you believe that God in eternity sovereignly decreed which individuals would and would not be saved,

1 "The Canons of the Synod of Dort, A.D. 1619," Second Head of Doctrine, Art. III in Philip Schaff, editor, revised by David S. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom With a History and Critical Notes, III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983, first published 1931) III:586.

you are a Calvinist, and you ought logically to accept the other four points. If you do not believe that in eternity God sovereignly decreed who would and who would not be saved, you are not a Calvinist.

Second, the disagreement between Calvinism and non-Calvinism is sometimes presented as a disagreement between those who emphasize the sovereignty of God and those who emphasize the freedom of human beings. This is understandable, but it is also misleading. All Christians believe in the sovereignty of God, and many, perhaps most, Christians also believe in the freedom of human beings. If the disagreement between the two views must be stated with reference to God's sovereignty, it should not be stated by contrasting divine sovereignty and human freedom. Instead it should be stated as a matter of how God exercises sovereignty—is it by foreordaining everything, or not?

But in my judgment it is wiser to state the disagreement not in terms of God's sovereignty but in terms of foreordination. This is clearer and more accurate. Did God foreordain everything that happens in the world—yes or no?

Third, Calvinism's claim about the world is comprehensive. It affirms that God foreordains *everything* that ever happens, without exception. Calvinist theologian R. C. Sproul expressed this forcefully: "That God in some sense foreordains whatever comes to pass is a necessary result of his sovereignty. . . . If there is any part of creation outside of God's sovereignty, then God is simply not sovereign."<sup>1</sup>

The non-Calvinistic vision is not comprehensive in this way. It allows for many things in the world to have been foreordained by God, and many others not foreordained. For example, I myself believe that God foreordained that Jesus would be the Savior of the world. However, I do not believe that God foreordained everything that happens. For example, I do not believe that God foreordained that the human race would fall into sin (Calvinists call this "the decree of the Fall") or that certain individuals would be forever damned ("the decree of reprobation").

Both Calvinists and non-Calvinists appeal to the Bible in support of their views, so I will briefly survey that disagreement.

## CALVINISM AND THE BIBLE

Many Calvinists claim that the Bible provides support for their view only, and many non-Calvinists claim that the Bible offers support for their

1 R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1986), 26.

view only. It seems to me that neither of these claims is justified. I think the actual situation is as follows:

- There are biblical passages that, taken at face value, teach Calvinism; a classic example is Romans 9; let us call these the C (Calvinistic) passages.
- There also are biblical passages that, taken at face value, teach against Calvinism; a classic example is 1 Timothy 2:1-6; let us call these the N (non-Calvinistic) passages.

Calvinists take the C passages at face value, and they then interpret (= offer a meaning other than the face value meaning) the N passages. Non-Calvinists do the reverse; they take the N passages at face value, and they then interpret (= offer a meaning other than the face value meaning) the C passages.

I am not saying that the Bible is inconsistent. What I am saying is that those of us whose minds have been formed by the centuries-long debates about Calvinism find that the natural, face-value meaning of some passages supports Calvinism and that the natural, face-value meaning of other passages undermines Calvinism. Whether this happens to people whose minds have not been formed by this debate (this may include many Eastern Orthodox Christians, for example), I do not know. But this is how things appear to us.

So how do we decide which interpretation is correct? In the end, I think this depends on which teaching of the Bible grasps us more firmly, God's foreordination or God's love. Do we think that the Bible emphasizes that God exercises sovereignty by foreordaining everything that happens, or do we think that the Bible emphasizes God's love for all people? For those who interpret the Bible more historically, the question would be expressed this way: Does the flow of biblical teaching move toward greater and greater emphasis on God's foreordination of all that happens, or toward greater and greater emphasis on God's love for all people?

In the end, God's love is decisive for me as it is for many others. For this reason, when my friend Paul Robertson and I wrote a book about Calvinism, we entitled it *God So Loved the World*.<sup>1</sup>

## A NON-CALVINISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THESE ISSUES

I have tried to describe Calvinism as accurately and sympathetically as I can. Now I want to describe how things look to many of us who are not

1 Fisher Humphreys and Paul E. Robertson, *God So Loved the World* (New Orleans: Insight Press, Inc., 2000).

Calvinists.

First, we recognize that:

- Calvinists are fine, devout Christians.
- Calvinism receives support from the face value meaning of many passages in the Bible.
- Calvinism is an immensely sophisticated theological vision.
- Calvinism is supportive of humility, piety, and worship.
- Calvinism is compatible with Christian experience.
- Calvinists have made enormous contributions to the church and to the world.
- Calvinism shares many important beliefs in common with all Christians.

Second, we believe that there are passages in the Bible that, taken at face value, support our view; we are guided to take these at face value by John 3:16: God loves the world. We believe that there are credible, non-Calvinistic interpretations of the C passages.

Third, many of us believe that the principal flaw in Calvinism is that its teaching about predestination is incompatible with the biblical teaching that God loves all people. Calvinists believe God predestines some people to be lost. We think that, because God loves all people, God would never predestine any of them to be lost.

Fourth, we believe that God is sovereign. We agree with Calvinists that God has the power and the knowledge to do what Calvinists say God has done, namely, predestine that some people will be saved and others not. However, we believe God sovereignly decided not to do that. We do not see any biblical reason or any logical reason to think that God has foreordained *everything* that happens. Instead, we believe that God sovereignly decided to give human beings freedom and then to respect the decisions they make. We do not believe that it is a loss of divine sovereignty for God to relate to human beings in this way. On the contrary, we believe that it is an exercise of divine sovereignty for God to have decided to relate to human beings in this way and then to do so.

Fifth, we believe that everything that God does is good. God is responsible for the good in life; human beings are responsible for their sin, for the suffering that accompanies sin, and for placing themselves under God's condemnation of sin. People sin and suffer and need salvation, not because God foreordained these things but because human beings chose to sin. These things are not God's will but are contrary to it.

Sixth, we believe that God knows the future, but we do not believe that God's foreknowledge predetermines the future.<sup>1</sup>

Seventh, we believe that foreordination is a biblical idea, but we think Calvinists have exaggerated the extent of God's foreordination. We believe that the Bible teaches that God foreordains many things: to work through the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, to anoint Jesus as the Christ, to save the world through Christ, to send Paul as a missionary, and so on. However, unlike Calvinists, we do not believe that God foreordains everything that happens. In particular, we do not believe that God ever foreordains evil, only good, so that sin, suffering, and condemnation are products of human choices and not of divine foreordination.

Eighth, we believe that predestination is a biblical idea, but we understand it differently than Calvinists. We believe that God predestines to salvation those whom he foreknows will trust in Christ: "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined" (Rom. 8:29). We believe that the Bible teaches that God predestines that all who are in Christ will be saved and will be transformed into good people (Eph. 1:4-6).

In conclusion, our principal disagreement with Calvinism, which is centered on the issue of foreordination, ultimately amounts to a disagreement about God's love. We believe it is inconsistent and false to say that God loves certain people and predestines them to be damned forever. We believe that God loves everyone equally and desires that everyone come to experience the gift of salvation.

1 Many non-Calvinists believe God knows everything about the future, but some think that God knows only what is knowable about the future and that the future free choices of human beings are not knowable. Among evangelical Protestants this view is associated with an understanding of God known as "open theism." This is contested subject. A good introduction to the issues is Clark Pinnock and others, editors, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

## APPENDIX 8

### FURTHER THOUGHTS ABOUT SALVATION

In Chapter 8 I wrote about our past experience of salvation, in Chapter 9 about our present experience of salvation, and in Chapter 11 about what we hope our future experience of salvation in the life to come will be. I suggested that already in the New Testament era these three dimensions of salvation were recognized, and across the centuries the church has continued to affirm them. I certainly find them helpful and important. I want now to try to sketch out an understand of salvation that includes all three dimensions.

People understand their spiritual predicament differently, and as a consequence they understand salvation differently. For example, Paul Tillich pointed out that in the era of the church fathers people were preoccupied with death, so the church emphasized that salvation was the gift of immortality. In the sixteenth century in Western Europe people were preoccupied with guilt, so the Protestant reformers emphasized that salvation is justification before God. In the modern era human beings have been preoccupied with the apparent meaninglessness of life, so the church today understands salvation in terms of a meaningful life.<sup>1</sup> I think this is an insightful analysis of our spiritual needs.

Furthermore, people today hope that God will give them help that is not exactly “spiritual.” Here are some examples. Those who are desperately poor hope that God will deliver them from their poverty. Those who are desperately ill hope that God will heal them. Those who are separated from their families and friends hope to be reunited with them. Those who have no jobs may hope to find work. Those who are blind hope to see. Those who are stateless hope to have a place to call home. Those who are anxious hope to find peace of mind. Those who are imprisoned hope to be released. Those who are mentally ill would like to be whole. Those who are overwhelmed by shame hope to feel good about themselves again. At least some of those who are unmarried hope to find a soul mate. Those who are mistreated by society hope for a more just society. Those who are childless may hope to have children. Those who are engulfed by war hope for peace. Those who

are addicted hope to be freed from their addiction. The list could be extended.

One might ask whether people’s hopes are relevant for understanding salvation. Do people really know what is good for them? Is it not the case that the Christian faith not only provides solutions but also teaches us what our real problems are? Should we perhaps ignore what people think they need from God?

There is some truth in this, but it is not the whole story. In the Bible human hopes such as those I have listed are taken very seriously. A good example is the longing of Israel to return from Babylon to her own land. Another example is that Jesus chose the following text to indicate the nature of his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Moreover, it seems insensitive to tell people who remain blind or addicted or totally isolated or mentally ill that they have received all the help that God intends to give them.

Just as our fallenness takes many forms, more than we can know, so our salvation takes many forms, more than we can know. In order to proceed, we must accept that we do not know all that salvation includes. Once we accept that limitation of our knowledge, then we realize that the most we can hope to understand is the overall shape of our salvation, its broad outlines. It seems to me that six general themes of salvation are liberation, forgiveness, transformation, community, heaven, and union with God. These are reasonably distinct from each other, though there are many interconnections among them and some small overlaps between them.

First, salvation is liberation. Our human race and all of us individually are victims of evil powers that we cannot defeat. Some of the powers—our intractable self-centeredness and our mortality, for examples—oppress all of us. Other evil powers—particular addictions and particular illnesses, for example—oppress some of us but not all of us. In Christ, God defeated the evil powers. However, God has not yet destroyed those powers, and they continue to tyrannize us as individuals and as a race. Salvation in its fullness will include the destruction of all the evil powers and thus our liberation

<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 57-63.

from them all. The ultimate power is death, and it too will be defeated by the resurrection of the dead. It is “the last enemy to be destroyed” (1 Cor. 15:26).

Second, salvation is forgiveness. God has forgiven us all of our sins. Just as it is costly for us to forgive those who wrong us, so it is for God, and at the cross of Jesus we see the cost of forgiveness to God. God has forgiven us all, but all of us have not yet benefited from God’s forgiveness any more than the prodigal son had benefited from his father’s forgiveness before he returned to his father’s home. Many human beings are not even aware of God’s mercy. Those of us who have been made aware of it through the gospel message realize that we have been forgiven of all sins past and future. Yet if we are to live spiritually healthy lives, we need to continue to receive God’s forgiveness. That is why we continually pray, “Forgive us our debts” (Mt. 6:12). We live with trust that God always forgives us. We do not presume, but we do trust, and we live with a sense of confidence that we have been forgiven. We do not think of this as a transaction in which we respond to the gospel with faith and God responds to our faith with forgiveness; we think of it rather as a relationship in which we trust that God is generous and gracious and always accepts us in mercy. And we do not think of it only in terms of our private lives. We are all members of the human race for whom Jesus died, and we Christians are all members of the Christian church that is a community of forgiven persons who are learning to forgive others.

Third, salvation is transformation. God is changing us. Our trust in God’s mercy is transformative. We who have experienced God’s forgiveness long to become people who no longer require forgiveness. We want to be the kind of people God created us to be. We want to be morally upright. God’s Spirit works within us to help us become good people. As we participate together in the life of the church and listen to the Word of God in Scripture, God helps us to understand what is good and empowers us to become morally good, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Our moral transformation as church and as individuals is gradual, but it is real. It is incomplete now, but God will complete it in the future: “We will be like [Jesus], for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Our transformation includes not only moral change but other kinds of change as well. We need changes in our attitudes. Some of us have personality disorders. Some of us are mentally ill. Our understanding and our thinking must be changed. In a word, we need to be transformed in order to become the kinds of human beings that God created us to be. Salvation

includes our transformation into fully human beings, fully alive, with all of our potential realized. The French bishop Irenæus was right: “The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive.”<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, salvation is community. One of the most devastating consequences of our human fallenness is the alienation we feel from others. Sometimes it takes the form of hatred or contempt, and sometimes the form of isolation and loneliness. Salvation is the gift of community. God breaks down the walls that separate us from each other, reconciling us to each other. That process is under way now and will be completed in the world to come. As we are transformed into the kinds of persons God created us to be, we will no longer feel any need to conceal our thoughts from others. We will no longer try to compete with others because we know that we have reached our own true destinies. And so the purpose for which God created the universe will be completely fulfilled, and we will live together as a family of God.

Fifth, salvation is heaven. When we imagine what it would be like to be freed from all evil powers, forgiven of all our sins, transformed into the kind of persons God intends us to be, and reconciled to each other, we might think that there is nothing more to be said about salvation. But there is, for if all those things were done while leaving us in a fallen world, our salvation would be incomplete. In the Old Testament era God’s people longed for a good home, the promised land, and in the New Testament era they longed for a good home, heaven. It is as God’s liberated, forgiven, transformed, united people enter into the home of God in the life to come that their salvation will be completed.

Sixth and finally, salvation is union with God. Christians believe that the hard core of the human predicament is spiritual, and the others components are byproducts of that. Our fundamental problem is that as a human race and as individuals we are separated from God. God in Christ has reconciled us and brought us back into communion with God. We who are the church now enjoy peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, in this present life there is still a distance between us and God. We who are the church can hear God’s Word, but we cannot see God’s face. In the life to come, we will see God’s face (Rev. 22:4). We will know as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12). That is the ultimate meaning of salvation: union with God, the beatific vision. This is our Christian hope. It is daring, even audacious,

1 *Gloria enim dei homo vivens*. Irenæus, *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, quoted in Henry Bettenson, editor, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 104.

but we have good reason for it, and the reason was given to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is eternally Three Persons who live together in a perfect community of mutual love. God is bringing us into the life of that community. As John wrote: “We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). Fellowship is shared life, and the life God has shared with us is eternal life; it is eternal because it is the life that the Three Persons have shared eternally. We have now come to share in it, and we will share in it forever. We will not be God; we will always be creatures of God. But we as a community will share in the eternal life and love of the Triune God, and we will “become participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

## APPENDIX 9

### CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Several recent surveys suggest that millions of Americans consider themselves spiritual but not religious. This seems to mean that they take spiritual matters seriously but do not participate in religious organizations such as the church. In the New Testament era things were different. So far as we know, all Christians took the church with great seriousness. Certainly those who wrote the New Testament did. It is true that during that era more attention was paid to the work of the church, for which the church was equipped by the Spirit with spiritual gifts, than to the organization of the church. Nevertheless, we do see in the New Testament the beginnings of church governance, also known as church order (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1).

The goal of church government is to discern where God is leading the church. Each of the forms of government to be described below is practiced in order to know the will of God for the church.

There are three basic types of church government—the episcopal, the presbyterian, and the congregational. The word “episcopal” comes from the Greek *episkopos* (bishop or overseer), and the word “presbyterian” comes from the Greek *presbuteros* (elder).

Churches that have episcopal government include the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, many of the Lutheran churches, and the Episcopal Church. Episcopal government is an oligarchy; it is government by a small, self-perpetuating group within the church. The church is governed by its clergy. One becomes part of the clergy, not by the choice of the people, but by being ordained by those who are already clergy.

The second form of church government is presbyterian. It is found in the Presbyterian churches and in Reformed churches. Presbyterian government is representative government. The church is governed by a group of elders. Some elders are laypersons, and some are clergy. The elders are chosen by the people. Once they are chosen, they have the authority to make decisions for the congregation.

The third form of church government is congregational. It is found in Baptist churches and in churches such as the Christian Churches/Disciples of Christ. Congregational government is democratic government. The members of the congregation make decisions as a group.

These three forms of church government are almost never found in pure form today. For example, in the Roman Catholic Church the clergy are attentive to the views of the people. In the Presbyterian churches the elders sometimes invite the people to participate in decisions in the church, such as the calling of a new minister. And in Baptist churches the congregation may authorize the church staff to make decisions concerning many issues. In other words, in actual church life, the differences between the three forms of government are often moderated. Nevertheless, in the final analysis, the three forms are distinct.

Many Christians have believed, and some today still believe, that the Bible authorizes one or another of these three forms. Those who believe in the episcopal form think that the kind of authority that Paul, for example, exercised over various congregations has been given today to bishops. Those who believe in the presbyterian form point out that the earliest churches were made up entirely or mostly of Jews and probably were governed by elders because in their synagogues they would have been accustomed to government by elders; they also point to the fact that the apostles asked the church in Jerusalem to choose seven men to assist the apostles (Acts 6:1-7). Those who believe in congregational government point out that Paul appealed to the congregations themselves, not just to their bishops or elders, to deal with their problems and to put their common life in proper order (1 Cor. 5-8, for example).

In the past these differences of opinion concerning church government led to divisions in the churches. For example, the Congregationalists and Baptists broke away from the Church of England because they did not want to be under the authority of bishops appointed by reigning monarchs in England.

I myself think that the New Testament does not prescribe how the church should govern itself. I also think it is likely that the earliest churches were governed in various ways. I agree with the conclusion of Eduard Schweizer: "There is no such thing as *the* New Testament church order."<sup>1</sup>

This means that we are free to appreciate the strengths and the weaknesses of each of the kinds of church government. The strength of episcopal government is that it is efficient; its weakness is that the people have little involvement in decision-making. The strength of congregational government is that the people pool their wisdom in decision-making and are thereby helped to become responsible people by their participation in the

church's decisions; the weakness of congregational government is that it is inefficient. Also, Americans who are members of congregationally governed churches have the advantage of feeling no dissonance between the government in their church and the government of the United States, which is a liberal democracy. Presbyterian government stands midway between the others; it is more efficient than congregational government, but less efficient than episcopal government, and it provides more involvement for its people in decision-making than episcopal government but less involvement than congregational government.

Schweizer's view that there is no divinely-ordained form of church government suggests that members of the various churches should ordinarily work within the system of governance they have inherited. Those who set out to change the form of governance of their church should not claim that they are thereby making their church more true to the New Testament. They may be innovators, but it is difficult to see how they can claim to be reformers.

1 Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1959), 13.

## NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO THE THREE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY

Matthew 1:18-23, 3:16-17, 4:1-3, 10:20, 12:18, 12:28, 12:31-32, 22:43, 28:19  
 Mark 1:10-11, 3:29, 12:36, 13:11  
 Luke 1:35, 1:15/41/67, 2:25-32, 3:22, 4:1-3, 4:14-19, 10:21, 11:13, 12:10,  
 12:12  
 John 1:32-34, 3:5, 3:34-35, 6:64-65, 14:26, 15:26, 16:5-11, 16:12-15, 20:21-22  
 Acts 1:1-3, 1:7-8, 2:4/11/22, 2:33, 2:38-39, 4:30-31, 5:29-32, 7:55-56, 8:14-  
 19, 9:17-20, 10:38, 10:39-48, 11:15-17, 15:1-11, 16:6-10, 19:1-8, 20:21-23,  
 20:28, 28:23-25  
 Romans 1:1-4, 5:1-8, 8:1-2, 8:3-4, 8:9, 8:11, 8:15-17, 14:17-18, 15:12-13,  
 15:16, 15:18-19, 15:30  
 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, 3:16-23, 6:11, 6:19-20, 12:1-3, 12:4-6, 12:12/13/28  
 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, 3:3, 3:4-6, 3:17-4:1, 5:5-7, 13:14  
 Galatians 3:1-5, 3:6-14, 4:4-6, 5:21-25  
 Ephesians 1:11-14, 1:17, 2:18, 2:22, 3:1-5, 3:15-17, 4:4-6, 5:17-20, 6:10/11/17  
 Philippians 1:19, 3:3  
 Colossians 1:7-9  
 1 Thessalonians 1:4-6  
 2 Thessalonians 2:13  
 1 Timothy 3:15-16  
 2 Timothy 1:3/13/14  
 Titus 3:4-6  
 Philemon  
 Hebrews 2:3-5, 6:4-6, 9:14, 10:29  
 James  
 1 Peter 1:2, 1:3-12, 3:18, 4:14  
 2 Peter  
 1 John 3:23-24, 4:2, 4:13-14, 5:5-9  
 2 John  
 3 John  
 Jude 20-21  
 Revelation 1:4-6, 1:8-10, 2:7, 3:21-22, 14:12-13, 22:16-18

## EFFECTS AND USES OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

### INTRODUCTION

In the twentieth century Christian theologians explored at great length the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their work provides a sharp contrast with the thought of the philosopher Immanuel Kant who said that the doctrine of the Trinity makes no difference in the world today. He wrote: "From the doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, nothing whatever can be gained for practical purposes."<sup>1</sup>

In replying to criticisms such as this, Christians may speak of the relevance of the doctrine, or of its application, or simply of its importance. They are in fact talking about two distinct things. First, the doctrine has benefitted the individuals and communities who have believed in it. I shall call these benefits "the effects of a doctrine." Second, the doctrine can be employed to support other true beliefs or to foster good practices. I shall call this practice "the use of a doctrine."

While it is not surprising that doctrines have effects, one might wonder if it is not somewhat irreverent to try to use the doctrine of the Trinity. Here it is important to distinguish between the Trinity and the doctrine of the Trinity. It is impossible to use the Trinity, and it would be irreverent to attempt to do so, but there is nothing irreverent about using the doctrine of the Trinity or any other doctrine, for that matter. The writers of the New Testament used doctrines in various ways. For example, in I Corinthians 15 Paul used the doctrine of the resurrection to encourage the Christians at Corinth and to challenge them to live with hope and faithfulness.

I want now to review some modern proposals concerning the effects and uses of the doctrine of the Trinity. In order to achieve a measure of representativeness, I will review proposals in six categories. They are the philosophical, the apologetic, the political and economic, the psychological, the social, and the ecclesiastical.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 6.

## PHILOSOPHY

I begin with the philosophical. For more than a century, some philosophers and theologians have been proposing that the doctrine of the Trinity provides a solution to a perennial philosophical problem. The problem may be stated this way. When one loves, one engages in a relationship with someone other than oneself. If God loves, God presumably engages in a relationship with someone other than God. This suggests that God needs the world in order to be a God of love. But if God needs the world, then God is not fully transcendent as Christians have believed. Therefore, God is either not truly love or not fully transcendent.

Some thinkers believe that the doctrine of the Trinity resolves this dilemma. This doctrine says that in the inner life of the one true God there is a reciprocal love among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God is love, yet God does not need the world in order to be love.<sup>1</sup>

This seems to me to be true. I believe that taking the eternal Trinity seriously helps us to understand how God can be eternally loving without being dependent on the world.

Let us notice in passing that the activity of using the doctrine of the Trinity to resolve perennial philosophical problems, obliquely communicates that we Christians are making serious truth-claims when we speak of one God as Three Persons. That is a desirable byproduct of using the doctrine in this way.

## APOLOGETICS

We turn now to a subject closely related to philosophy, namely, Christian apologetics. The usual definition of apologetics is that it is the defense of the faith. I would add that apologetics is an effort to help people who feel they have intellectual difficulties with Christian faith come to faith by attempting to remove those difficulties. Apologetics is pre-evangelism as well as Christian philosophy.

One of the principal intellectual barriers to faith is suffering. Is it possible to believe in an all-loving and all-powerful God, given the enormous amount of relatively innocent, pointless, human suffering in the world?

1 See Arthur Michael Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple* (London: Longmans, 1960), 183. The entire Appendix C of this book is helpful for understanding the history of the social analogy of the Trinity in modern Anglican theology.

Several theologians have proposed that the doctrine of the Trinity, in contrast to a bare, unitarian view of God, helps us in our apologetic efforts to address the difficulty that suffering causes for faith. For example, Eberhard Jüngel has argued that the doctrine of the Trinity presents God as a Father, Son, and Spirit, who are thoroughly immersed in the suffering of this world.<sup>1</sup> We may trust the Father, Son, and Spirit who suffer with us. People who reject God because of human suffering are usually rejecting a god of the barest theism or the unmoved mover of Aristotle, not the Christian God who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

I believe that these theologians are correct and that belief in the one God is made more plausible for many people today when that God is identified as Jesus Christ, as his *Abba*, and as their Spirit. I recognize that in texts such as the book of Job our Jewish friends have support for trusting God in spite of human suffering. But it seems to me that Christians have even more help in their story of the crucified God. I learned this from Rabbi Harold Kushner who in his bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* wrote:

Christianity introduced the world to the idea of a God who suffers . . . . I don't know what it means for God to suffer . . . but I would like to think that the anguish I feel when I read of the sufferings of innocent people reflects God's anguish and God's compassion . . . and that He and I are on the same side when we stand with the victim against those who would hurt him.<sup>2</sup>

My conclusion is that the doctrine of the Trinity can be useful in apologetics today. We turn now to political and economic uses of the doctrine.

## POLITICS AND ECONOMICS

For about half a century some theologians have been proposing that the unitarian view of God lends support to political arrangements characterized by monarchy and domination. More recently, some have added that the Trinitarian doctrine of God lends support to political egalitarianism and democracy. One of the early proponents of this view was the Czech Reformed theologian, Jan Lockman. In an influential article entitled "The Trinity and

1 Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 85. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 48.

2 Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 85.

Human Life,” published in 1975, he wrote:

I would . . . point to the *content* of the doctrine of the Trinity, and to the important correction which it offers in opposition to every glorification of an authoritarian order. The social character of the triune God forbids any “personality cult” in the political area. Whereas the strict monotheism of antiquity inclined towards a strictly monarchistic political theology, the trinitarian concept of God tends rather to a political theory and practice that is oriented towards community, social interaction and participation.<sup>1</sup>

In another article that was also published that same year, a proposal was made concerning an economic use of the doctrine of the Trinity. Its author was Bishop Christopher Mwoleka of Tanzania. Bishop Mwoleka wrote in support of the Ujamaa way of life, the Tanzanian version of socialism:

I am dedicated to the ideal of Ujamaa because it invites everyone, in a down to earth practical way, to imitate the life of the Trinity which is a life of sharing. . . . The question is: Have we imitated the Holy Trinity in sharing earthly goods? Have Christians tried to do this in all earnest? . . . If the Marxists fail to achieve their goal, the main reason would seem to be that they try to impose the ideal from the outside upon people without the necessary corresponding interior dispositions. . . . We Christians . . . should be able to express them in a concrete material way in a manner that would make the Marxists wonder at our success.<sup>2</sup>

My third example is by a Metropolitan of the Orthodox Syrian Church in South India, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios. His book *Theology of a Classless Society* was published in 1990. In it he proposed: “There is no dogma more permanent for a Christian understanding of God than the dogma of the Holy Trinity. God wants us to look into this venerable dogma again, not [only] as an article of belief, but as one of praxis.”<sup>3</sup> The praxis which he uses the doctrine of the Trinity to support is a classless society, which he describes as follows: “The classless society envisaged in this book, therefore,

1 Jan Lochman, “The Trinity and Human Life” in *Theology* LXXVIII, 658 (April 1975), 180.

2 Christopher Mwoleka, “Trinity and Community,” *Mission Trends* No. 3: *Third World Theologies* edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 151, 153, 154.

3 Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, *Theology of a Classless Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 17.

is not what Marx taught, but a democratic socialism with nationalization of the means of production, and work and just wages for all.”<sup>1</sup>

How are we to respond to Lochman’s use of Trinitarianism to support modern democracy and to Mwoleka’s and Mar Osthathios’s use of it to support socialism? My first comment is that historically it seems unlikely that there existed a cause-effect relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and either democracy or socialism. Neither modern democracy nor socialism was conceived in the matrix of Trinitarian thinking. Modern democracy’s early proponents were Enlightenment thinkers who tended to be deists together with followers of the radical Reformation, some of whom showed more enthusiasm for democracy than they did for the doctrine of the Trinity. Socialism’s most influential proponent was Karl Marx, hardly a Trinitarian Christian.

But if historically Trinitarianism has not had the effects claimed for it, would it not still be possible to put it to the uses that Lochman, Mwoleka, and Mar Osthathios have proposed?

The claims of socialism seem much less compelling today than they did in the past, because of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet we may wonder whether Bishop Mwoleka’s argument is not still true. My judgment is that ultimately he is right; ultimately Christians will share fully all that they have, just as the Father, Son, and Spirit already do. But, in my judgment, to attempt to implement such sharing today, except on a limited and voluntary basis, is a form of utopianism; it is an attempt to achieve in this life what cannot be achieved until the life to come. And it leads to the two well-known consequences of disregard for human rights and low economic production.

Similarly, Trinitarianism can be used to support democratic forms of government. I am not persuaded that belief in the Triune God is either a necessary or a sufficient reason to support democracy. After all, the majority of citizens of the largest functioning democracy in the world today are Hindus, not Trinitarian Christians, and the largest group of Trinitarian Christians in the world today is the Roman Catholic Church, a hierarchical rather than a democratic organization.

We turn now to the proposal that Trinitarianism has psychological effects and uses.

## PSYCHOLOGY

1 Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, *Theology of a Classless Society*, 14.

We tend to think first in this connection of Carl Jung because Jung was fascinated by the doctrine of the Trinity and felt that it was an important symbol for deep structures of human existence. However, we shall review a proposal concerning the usefulness of the doctrine of the Trinity that is Freudian rather than Jungian in character.

Anthony Kelly of Australia has suggested that “trinitarian faith functions as a redemptive critique of religious ideology and its related pathology.”<sup>1</sup> Kelly’s argument is simple enough. Religion is the ultimate refuge of the immature. Persons who are arrested in their development depend on a heavenly Father to protect them because they are afraid to accept the painful growth that is necessary to their becoming mature adults. Their understanding of God as Father is infantile.

The doctrine of the Trinity, Kelly argues, presents a Father who resists infantile dependence. This Father does not spare his only-begotten Son but loves and supports him as he encounters the suffering and death that are the human condition. Kelly thinks that “The essential trinitarian symbolism of Christian faith . . . does not legitimate infantile self-absorption. It is entirely directed to self-transcendence.”<sup>2</sup>

It seems to me that the doctrine of the Trinity may be therapeutic for those with infantile dependence. This is a good thing because, as pastors know from experience, some church members do use their religious beliefs to support the most extraordinary immaturity.

One reason for arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant to contemporary concerns such as therapies, is to present the doctrine in a manner that is credible to people today; people naturally tend to believe in things that they feel are relevant to their lives. Yet, ironically, showing the relevance of a doctrine may have the opposite effect. If the doctrine is presented as relevant to every conceivable human concern, we may begin to feel that it is so pliable that it has no fixed meaning. From here it is a short step to doubting it altogether. There is a saying that everybody’s business is nobody’s business. Similarly, a doctrine that means all things to all people may come to mean nothing at all to anyone at all. For this reason, we should be discriminating in the uses that we make of Christian doctrines. For that reason I would hesitate to associate Trinitarianism so closely with the over-

coming of infantile faith. It seems to me that it would be wiser to turn to teachings such as, for example, Jesus’ call to costly discipleship (Mark 8:34-35) for dealing with problems of arrested development.

## SOCIAL LIFE

We turn now to effects and uses of the doctrine in social life other than political life. Many writers today use the doctrine of the Trinity to support proposals that they want to make concerning human communities such as families, friends, and nations. The argument is that the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit is characterized by equality, mutuality, respect, and love, and that these are the qualities that are needed in human communities, rather than qualities such as dominance and submission or conflict and competition.

As an example of this argument we shall look briefly at the work of some feminist theologians. It may come as a surprise that some feminist theologians are enthusiastic about the doctrine of the Trinity, since so much publicity has been given to other feminist theologians who have resisted or even rejected the doctrine. So I want first to say a word about why some feminists are troubled by the doctrine.

What bothers some feminist theologians is that the masculine words *Father* and *Son* can reinforce the idea that God is male and thereby support patriarchy and hinder the liberation of women in the church. Feminist theologians have adopted several strategies regarding the masculine words. One is to speak of the Holy Spirit in feminine terms; the justification for this includes, among other things, that the Hebrew term *ruach* is feminine and that the second verse in the Bible speaks of the Spirit as brooding over the face of the waters, a verb that may suggest a mothering act.<sup>1</sup>

Another strategy is to replace the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* with a phrase such as “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” Since this substitutes activities for the traditional distinction of each of the Three Persons from the others, it is a form of modalism, though that probably is not what most of its proponents intend.<sup>2</sup>

Here I want to make five comments about the masculine words “Father”

1 Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987) 223-224.

2 One theologian responded to this proposal with a little joke. A young mother goes to her friend the theologian and says, “My pastor baptized my baby in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sanctifier. Will my baby go to hell?” The theologian responds, “No, but your pastor will!” Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 46.

1 Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love: A Theology of the Christian God* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1989), 203.

2 Kelly, *The Trinity of Love*, 209.

and “Son.”

- The oppression of women is a great injustice and human failure. We can all be grateful that by the grace of God the church and the world are learning to treat women and men as equals.
- It is possible that the church’s use of “Father” and “Son” have contributed to the oppression of women. I do not know that that is the case, but it is possible.
- It is not necessary to use “Father” and “Son” in order to speak of the Holy Trinity. In fact, of the 115 New Testament references to the Three Persons together, I can find only three in which the words “Father” and “Son” are present; the most famous is the baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19.<sup>1</sup> Much more representative of New Testament language is 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”
- As I explained in Chapter 10, I am convinced that the early church used the words found in Matthew 28:19 as a formula for baptisms. I think the church today should continue that practice.
- Ministers who are concerned that the use of the traditional formula at baptisms may contribute to the oppression of women can prevent that from happening by including in the sermon or homily a reminder that God transcends gender as God transcends everything else God has created.

Alongside the feminist theologians who are troubled by the doctrine of the Trinity, other feminist theologians have expressed great appreciation for the doctrine. The example I have chosen is an Episcopal priest, Patricia Wilson-Kastner. She is such a splendid writer that I will give her view in her own words.

As a theological notion, the Trinity is more supportive of feminist values than is a strict monotheism. Popular monotheism is by far more of a support for patriarchy than Trinitarianism, because the one God is always imaged as male. . . . [To reject or ignore the

1 The three are Mt. 28:19, John 3:34-35, 1 John 4:13-14. Of course, there are many passages which refer to the Father and the Son without mentioning the Spirit, and in many passages where the Three Persons are mentioned together God is called “Father” with the understanding that Jesus is God’s Son. But so far as I can tell, these three are the only passages in which the words “Father” and “Son” appear in which the Three Persons are mentioned together. In Trinitarian passages, the word used most often for the First Person is “God,” and the word used most often for the Second Person is “Jesus.”

doctrine of the Trinity] deprives feminist Christians of a particularly important, potentially inclusive notion of God. . . . If one images God as Three Persons, it encourages one to focus on interrelationships as the core of divine reality, rather than on a single personal reality. . . . Feminism identifies interrelatedness and mutuality—equal, respectful, and nurturing relationships—as the basis of the world as it really is. . . . The Trinity of persons manifests the harmony and beauty of such a relationship.<sup>1</sup>

In my judgment, women and also men who are committed to human relationships of mutual love, trust, and respect, are entitled to believe that they have an ally in the orthodox Christian doctrine of one God as Three Persons whose common life is characterized by mutual love, trust, and respect.<sup>2</sup>

## CHURCH LIFE

Our final proposals concern the use of the doctrine of the Trinity as a hermeneutic for interpreting the life of the church. This is not a new idea. In the twelfth century a theologian named Joachim of Fiore said that the time before Christ was the age of the Father, the time after Christ was the age of the Son, and the age of the Spirit would begin in the mid-thirteenth century. His ideas were condemned by the Roman Catholic Church at the Lateran Council in 1215.<sup>3</sup>

Modern interpretations of the church in Trinitarian terms tend to be sociological rather than chronological. In an influential essay published in 1946, H. Richard Niebuhr suggested that the life of the churches is characterized, not by Trinitarianism, but by three types of unitarianism. They are

1 Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 122, 127. Kastner-Wilson spelled out the nature of her theology of the Trinity in a fine essay completed just before her death. Entitled “Where Do We Start?”, it is the initial chapter in Ruth C. Duck and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Praising God: The Trinity in Christian Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

2 One of the most extraordinary developments in recent academic theology has been that some otherwise conservative evangelical theologians are teaching that the Son and the Spirit, while equal in divine being to the Father, have roles in which they are eternally subordinate to the Father. They say the same thing is true of women and men: they are equal in being, but women have subordinate roles to men. I am inclined to say that this view of the Trinity is simply heretical, but I suppose Millard Erickson is more accurate when he says that it is not quite heretical but is moving in that direction. Millard Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009). On the other hand, Curtis Freeman says that the teaching is heretical. Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), 185-189.

3 “Joachim of Fiore” in F. L. Cross, editor, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

the unitarianism of the Creator, found in the churches that are interested in natural theology, such as the Reformed and Roman Catholic; the unitarianism of the Son, found in liberal Protestantism; and the unitarianism of the Spirit, found in that large sector of American Christianity where experience is emphasized more than the history recorded in the Bible. Niebuhr proposed that each kind of church needs the corrective that close attention to the other two can provide.<sup>1</sup>

Forty years later the sociologist John F. Wilson emended Niebuhr's proposal. He suggested that the history of American Christianity be interpreted in Trinitarian terms. The Puritans emphasized the sovereignty of God the Father, the revivalists emphasized Christ the Savior, and proponents of the social gospel and the charismatics emphasized the experience of the Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Lyle Schaller, an influential church consultant, made a somewhat similar proposal that is especially intriguing. He suggested that there are four kinds of congregations in America today. First are those that emphasize the Father; they speak of creation, and they sing hymns such as "This Is My Father's World." Then there are those that emphasize the Son; they speak of salvation more than of creation, and they sing songs such as "Amazing Grace." They tend to think of the first kind of congregation as worldly or liberal. Third are the congregations that emphasize the Holy Spirit; they have little interest in denominational identity, and they love to sing lively songs of all kinds. Many of them think of themselves as emphasizing Christ more than the Spirit. Fourth (and most surprisingly) are congregations that emphasize the Bible; these are the Bible churches that do not fit into any of the first three categories. They tend to emphasize Christian doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

A somewhat different ecclesiastical use of the doctrine of the Trinity was made by the great missiologist Lesslie Newbigin in a book entitled *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*. He pointed out that the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated during a period when the church was in a struggle with paganism. Today, however, rather than use this doctrine in their encounter with the non-Christian world, most churches tend simply to honor it because it is venerable. He proposed that the church emphasize

the Trinitarian understanding of God when it proclaims its message to the non-Christian world. He wrote: "The Church's mission to all the nations is a participation in the work of the triune God," and "We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son's loving obedience to the Father."<sup>1</sup>

Another ecclesiastical use of the doctrine of the Trinity is to interpret Christian ministry. Peter Drilling has done this in a book entitled *Trinity and Ministry*. He says that three things characterize the Three Persons of the Trinity. First, each is equal to the others. Second, each has a distinct identity, and that identity can be stated only with reference to the others. Third, each acts in love. These three things, Drilling argues, are true of Christian ministers also. First, ministers are the equal of all other persons, including church members; ministers are not superior beings. Second, a minister has a distinct identity, and it can be stated only with reference to those whom she is called to serve. Third, ministers are called to act in love.<sup>2</sup> This seems to me to be a wise way to think about Christian ministry.

Clearly it is possible to use the doctrine of the Trinity in an effort to interpret the churches and their work, and also to suggest how they might grow in healthy ways.

## CONCLUSION

I want to make two concluding comments about the effects and uses of the doctrine of the Trinity. First, all of these proposals employ the social understanding of the Trinity that we associate with Eastern Orthodox theology rather than the psychological understanding that we associate with Augustine and Western theology. The social analogy is today more acceptable to Roman Catholic and Protestant academic theologians than it was in the recent past. This moves the academic theologians closer to ordinary Christians who have tended to think in social terms of the Three Persons all

1 H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church" in *Theology Today*, III:3 (October 1946), 371-384.

2 John F. Wilson, "Religion at the Core of American Culture" in *Altered Landscapes: Christianity in America, 1935-1985* edited by David W. Lotz (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 362-376.

3 Lyle Schaller, *Looking in the Mirror: Self-Appraisal in the Local Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), chapter 4.

1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Book House, 1963), 50, 78.

2 Peter Drilling, *Trinity and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), chapter one.

along.<sup>1</sup>

Second, as much as I appreciate what these theologians and others have written concerning the uses of the doctrine of the Trinity, I remain convinced that the traditional uses of the doctrine described in Chapter 12 are more important.

1 It is conventional for academic theologians to say that most Christian people are effectively either unitarians or tritheists. Karl Rahner seems to say both; see *The Trinity* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1969), 10 and 42 (note 43). These two proposals would seem to cancel each other out. As an alternative to the conventional assessment, I suggest that persons who believe in the God of Abraham and Sarah, and who also believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, and who also believe in the Holy Spirit who works in the church, are Trinitarian Christians in the New Testament sense. They may not be able to articulate the church's formal doctrine of the Trinity or even to confess their faith in a way which distinguishes it clearly from unitarianism or tritheism, and in that sense they may be said to lack a proper *doctrine* of the Trinity, but they are Trinitarian in their faith and life. The distinction I am making here between the Trinitarian faith and life of Christians and the doctrine of the Trinity is similar to the distinction made by Walter Kasper between doxology and doctrine. The Spirit leads the church to praise God for the divine love given in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8); that is doxology. For Kasper, "The doctrine of the Trinity is as it were simply the grammar of the doxology." Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* translated by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 304.

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