

SALVATION  
BELONGS TO  
THE LORD



*An Introduction to  
Systematic Theology*

JOHN M. FRAME

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P U B L I S H I N G

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*To Debbie, Doreen, and Skip*

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# PREFACE

A

number of years ago I began writing a multivolume series of theological studies that examine major biblical topics from the perspective of the lordship of God. Known as the Theology of Lordship, the series comprises two volumes thus far, and two more volumes are either in progress or planned.

People have sometimes asked me if I intended to make the Theology of Lordship series into a complete systematic theology. I have always answered no. My purpose in that series is not to cover all the topics of systematics but to discuss a few of them in depth. Furthermore, although I have taught the doctrines of Scripture, God, and ethics for thirty-five years, I have never taught some of the other loci of systematics at the seminary level, such as the atonement, the *ordo salutis*, and eschatology. So, I thought I probably was not equipped to write a comprehensive systematic theology.

But in the summer of 2003 Mark Sigmon of the Institute for Theological Studies in Grand Rapids, Michigan, asked if I would tape lectures for a "survey course" in systematics. I have always admired the work of ITS, particularly its ministry to developing churches. Honored to be asked, I delivered those lectures as the in-stitute's course "Foundations of Systematic Theology" in 2004. As a bit of icing on the cake, ITS gave me the right to use that material in any printed form I desired, and P&R Publishing Company quickly expressed interest. Most of the chapters in *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* are enhanced versions of those taped lectures. I've added notes and several additional topics, such as chapter 24 on ethics ("How Then Shall We Live?").

This book will not be part of the *Theology of Lordship* series, but readers of those books will find here the same approach: exegetical, Reformed, and focused on the lordship of God and of Jesus Christ. As in the *Lordship* books, threefold distinctions abound here, some that you won't find elsewhere.

Parts of this introduction to systematic theology summarize the *Lordship* books. Chapters 1-3 and 10 and a few portions of other chapters summarize sections of *Doctrine of God*. Chapters 4-5 anticipate the teaching of my forthcoming *Doctrine of the Word of God*. Chapter 6 recalls elements of *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Chapter 24 summarizes *Doctrine of the Christian Life*, which I'm currently writing. And chapter 25 lists a catalog of lordship triads from all the loci in the manner of the *Lordship* volumes.

Nevertheless, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* is not directed

primarily to readers of the Lordship series but to beginners in theology, people who are seeking a basic introduction. For them I have tried to adopt a more conversational tone (at times, indeed, it may sound just like a voice on a tape!). I have also tried especially hard to explain my technical terms. I do hope that this approach will give such readers the basic lay of the land in the theology of the Bible, and I pray that it will leave them eager for more.

If you are new to reading theology, let me address you now. Survey courses and books have the reputation of being easy and/or superficial, but I consider this work to be college or seminary level in difficulty. I intend to challenge you to think hard about these matters and to learn some technical terms, to ask some tough questions, and to dig deeply into the Word of God. Since *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* is a survey, we will be focusing on the big picture rather than the details. But understanding the big picture takes some intellectual and spiritual discipline—at least as much as it takes to understand the details.

By focusing on the big picture you can sometimes learn important things that you might pass over in a more detailed study. Here I intend to emphasize the general shape of the biblical teaching and to give you some basic categories, some hooks on which you can hang the various things you learn. One of these hooks is a system of threes, the aforementioned lordship triads, which runs through the whole book. This system is mainly a pedagogical device, but I hope it will show you some important ways in which everything in the Bible is tied together. As you will see, the Bible is not a miscellaneous

collection of ideas but a coherent, consistent system of truth in which the major doctrines depend on one another.

I wish to thank Mark Sigmon and the ITS Board for giving me the opportunity to work on this important project. Thanks also to Darrell Yoder and other members of the wonderful ITS staff who assisted me in so many ways. I am grateful again, as so many times before, to P&R Publishing for understanding and appreciating my work. Thanks especially to Ted Ojarovsky for editing this volume.

# PART ONE

## *Chapter 1*

# GOD, THE LORD

Who is God? The Bible most often describes him as Lord. *Lord* is the name of a profoundly *holy person* in covenant *relationship* with us. This chapter will explore the meaning of God's lordship in terms of his control, authority, and presence, as well as the related concepts of transcendence and immanence.

I

n this book I will introduce you to the discipline of systematic theology. I'll discuss the nature of systematic theology itself in chapter 6. But I think we need to do some systematic theology together before we try to define it. Just for now, however, let me say that theology is the human attempt to apply the Bible to people's questions and, indeed, to all human needs.

Systematic theology is topical theology. It studies the Bible not by going from Genesis to Revelation but by exploring topics treated in various parts of Scripture, like the topics of God, man, revelation, Christ, the last days. Theologians have sometimes called these topics *loci*, the Latin plural of *locus* ("place"). So, systematic theology asks "whole Bible" questions: What does the whole Bible teach about God? About sin? About justification by faith? These are some of the topics we'll be looking at.

This book is an introductory survey of systematic theology, and therefore it will not cover each topic in great detail. Many theologians give book-length treatment to, say, God and man, or the person and work of Christ, or the events of the last days.' In this book, however, we will be covering briefly, in twenty-five chapters, the whole content of systematic theology. I'll try to give you the main gist of each

doctrinal area, so that you will have a good foundation. I hope it will motivate some of you to study some specific areas more intensively.

This first chapter, not surprisingly, is about God. In fact, we'll spend three chapters on the doctrine of God, what some theologians call theology proper, because even in a survey this is the foundation for everything else.' How important it is to know God! Jesus prayed to his Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Who is God, anyway? The Westminster Shorter Catechism in one of its most famous definitions says, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth" (SC 4). That's an excellent statement. I think that everything in that statement is biblical. But it's interesting to note that the Bible doesn't contain this kind of definition of God.

How, then, does the Bible introduce us to God? It begins with an act of God: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). I believe Moses wrote the book of Genesis, and he wrote it for the benefit of the people of Israel, whom God had delivered miraculously from slavery in Egypt. These people didn't need a definition of God. They already knew who God was. He was the one who led them out of Egypt. So, the book of Genesis does not include a definition. It begins by telling the people that the God they know already, the God who led them out of Egypt, is also the one who created the heavens and the earth.

How did the Israelites of Moses' generation come to know God? First through the stories of their forefathers. When God spoke to Moses, he identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But to the Israelites these three patriarchs were ancient history. God had helped them centuries earlier. When Moses was born, Israel had been in Egypt for four hundred years. Originally the Egyptians had been friendly to them, but later pharaohs arose who hated them and subjected them to slavery. Israel cried out to God for help, but for those four hundred years God was silent. Many Israelites must have wondered why God did not answer their cries for help. Perhaps some of them even doubted whether the old stories were true.

However, God did answer their prayers. He began by appearing to Moses. We learn about this meeting between Moses and God in Exodus 3, and I think that passage is the real beginning of the biblical doctrine of God. We read about God in Genesis, but the author of Genesis met God in Exodus 3.

In this passage Moses sees a bush that burns but doesn't burn up. The flames do not consume it. It turns out that the burning bush is a place where God is, a place where God wants to talk with Moses. God is everywhere, of course, but sometimes he makes his presence known in a very intense way. So, God calls Moses and tells him to remove his shoes, for the area of the bush is holy ground. God identifies himself as the God of Moses' father and of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He says that he has seen the affliction of Israel and has heard their cry. He now intends to bring them out of Egypt to the land of Canaan, which he promised to their forefathers. Moses is to be his prophet, his spokesman.

Understandably, Moses is overwhelmed by this responsibility. God assures him that he will be successful. God will deliver Israel, and they will worship God on this very mountain, the mountain of the burning bush. But Moses has another question: "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Ex. 3:13).

It seems like an odd question to us. What is God's name? Why would Moses ask something like that? Today, we give our kids names like Billy or Susie without much thought of the meaning of those names. You might call your daughter Elizabeth because you think the name sounds good or because it was your grandmother's name. But in the ancient Near East, names had meaning. Abram meant "high father," and Abram's new name, Abraham, given him by God, meant "father of a multitude." Usually, when a father gave a name to his son, he chose a name that didn't just sound good but conveyed something of his hopes for the child, or his feelings about the child, or the circumstances of the child's birth. So, to ask about God's name is to seek information about him. To seek God's name is to ask what kind of God he is.

We should be interested in God's answer to Moses' question. How does God identify himself? How does God say who he is to the author of the first books of the Bible? We wait with bated breath, on the edge of our seats, to hear God's name.

God's name is, at first, rather bewildering. "God said to

Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you" ' " (Ex. 3:14). God here gives his name in a long form, "I AM WHO I AM," and in a short form, simply "I AM." The long form is difficult Hebrew. It can be translated in present or future tenses, and the relative pronoun translated "who" in the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV hereafter) can be translated in a variety of other ways as well. I can't explore all these translations here, but the main point is that God's answer to Moses is mysterious, to say the least. Even the short form of the name, "I AM," is difficult. It is a familiar phrase, as when one says "I am John" or "I am a teacher." But what can be meant by "I AM" just by itself?

It will help us, however, to go on to verse 15: "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." ' " Here we see the mysterious name in still a third form. We've seen it in a long form, a short form, and now a very short form, a one-word form translated "LORD." The word LORD in the ESV represents the word Yahweh in Hebrew. Yahweh is derived, evidently, from a form of the verb "to be," so it is connected with the repeated "I AM" in verse 14. Some older English Bibles render this word as "Jehovah," but most of them now follow the example of the King James Version and translate it "LORD."

Verse 15 says that this is the way God wants to be known, the name by which he is to be remembered for all generations. So, the English word "Lord"-representing the Hebrew Yahweh,

another Hebrew word, *adon*, and the Greek *kyrios*-occurs over seven thousand times in our Bibles, mostly referring to God the Father or, and this is important, to Jesus Christ.

Our Jewish friends today often use Deuteronomy 6:4-5 as a kind of confession of faith: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." This is a confession of lordship. There is only one God, and he is Yahweh, the Lord. The Christians of the New Testament also confessed lordship: Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). We should notice, too, that over and over again in Scripture, God says he is going to do this or that so that people "shall know that I am the LORD" (as Ex. 6:7; 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4; 29:46; Isa. 45:6; 49:23, 26; Jer. 16:21; 24:7; etc.). So we may say that "God is Lord" is the fundamental confession of the people of God in the Old Testament. The fundamental confession of the New Testament people of God is "Jesus is Lord." That is a way of summarizing the main content of the Bible: "God is Lord" is the message of the Old Testament; "Jesus is Lord" is the message of the New Testament.

So, if we want to know the God of Scripture, we must come to know his lordship. There are, of course, many other concepts that are helpful in understanding God, such as the "infinite, eternal, unchangeable" of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and we shall look at some of those. But we need to start somewhere, and it would be hard to find any starting point more appropriate than that of lordship. So we ask, what does it mean for God to be Lord?

To begin with, I should emphasize that Lord is a personal

name. So, our God is a person. That is a tremendously important fact. We know that in our world there are personal beings, like Joey, Cindy, Yo-Yo Ma, Sammy Sosa, George Bush, and so on. The world also contains impersonal beings, like rocks, trees, the law of gravity, tornadoes, brussels sprouts, matter, motion, space, time, and chance. Secularists usually try to argue that the personal reduces to the impersonal: in the end, Joey, Cindy, and Yo-Yo Ma are ultimately just matter, motion, space, time, and chance. But the Bible teaches the opposite: the impersonal reduces to the personal. Matter, motion, space, time, and chance are, ultimately, tools used by one great Person to organize and run the universe he has made.

Another point that we can get from Exodus 3 is that the Lord is a supremely holy person. That is, he is separate from us and transcendent over us. We may not approach him without supreme respect. Holiness also means that God is supremely righteous and good, and that he must cross a great barrier to have any fellowship with sinners like you and me. But more of that later.

The main meaning of the name Lord is that he is the head of a covenant. In a covenant, God takes a people to be his. The heart of it, often recorded in Scripture, is his saying, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Heb. 8:10; cf. Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3). He rules them by his law (in a written document, as we shall see), and he delivers them from destruction and death. So, the covenant includes both law and grace. We'll think some more about covenants in chapter 9.

The name Lord also tells us about his nature, what kind of God he is. Scripture typically associates three ideas with the idea of lordship, to which I've given the names control, authority, and presence. I warned you that this book would include a lot of threefold distinctions. This is the first of them, and there will be a lot of others that coordinate with these. I will call these the lordship attributes. Let's look at them in turn.

## Control

When God comes to Moses and identifies himself as Lord, he comes in power. He heard the cry of the Israelites, and he comes to deliver them from the oppression of the Egyptians, with a mighty hand and a strong arm. Pharaoh is the most powerful totalitarian ruler of his day, and the might of Egypt is thought to be invulnerable. But God works powerful miracles and gains a decisive victory over Egypt's land, its rulers, its armies, and its gods (Ex. 12:12; 15:11; 18:11). He is gracious to whom he will be gracious, and he shows mercy to whom he will show mercy (Ex. 33:19). So, he judges Egypt but saves Israel. What he intends to do, he accomplishes. Nothing is too hard for him (Jer. 32:7; Gen. 18:14). His word is never void of power (Isa. 55:11). His prophecies always come to pass (Deut. 18:21-22).

This is what we often call the sovereignty of God. Everything that happens in the world comes from him. He is the one who sends rain, thunder, and lightning (Pss. 65:9-11; 135:6-7; 147:15-18). He makes things freeze, then melts the ice. The smallest details of nature are under his control: the falling of a sparrow, the number of hairs on your head (Matt. 6:26-30;

10:29-30). And the events that we call random, that we ascribe to chance, are really God at work. Look at Proverbs 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Just roll dice. Whether you get a six or an eight or a twelve, the number comes from God; it's God's decision.

God rules not only the little things but the big things, too. How could it be otherwise, since the big things are combinations of little things? He determines what nations will dwell in which territory (Acts 17:26). He decides what king is to rule, when, and where (Isa. 44:28). He decides whether the purpose of a nation will stand or fall (Ps. 33:10-11). And he decided, once, that wicked people would take the life of his own dear Son, so that we, we sinners, might live (Acts 2:23-24).

God rules not only the important events of human history but also the lives of individual people like you and me. He knits us together in our mothers' wombs (Ps. 139:13-16). He decides whether we will travel or stay home (James 4:13-17).

Does this mean that God controls even our free decisions? Certainly he does. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in order to harm him. That was their free decision, and they are responsible for it. But, ultimately, it was God who used their evil deed to accomplish his good purpose (Gen. 45:5-8). Indeed, Scripture often ascribes to God even the sinful behavior of human beings. He made Israel's enemies to hate her (Ps. 105:24-25). He hardened Pharaoh's heart against his people (Ex. 4:21; Rom. 9:18). He moved Judas, Herod, and Pontius Pilate to bring about the death of Jesus (Acts 2:23; 4:28).

But God also works wondrously to bring good! God's power, God's control, also brings about our faith and repentance, so that we can have eternal life in Christ. Paul says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). Faith is not something we work up in ourselves. God gives it to us as his gift. He opens our heart to believe (Acts 16:14-15). We believe because he appoints us to eternal life (Acts 13:48). He draws us to himself (John 6:44), gives us faith (John 6:65; Phil. 1:29). Yes, we also choose him, but he chooses us first (Eph. 1:4; John 1:12).

God's control means that he is sovereign over everything that happens in the whole universe. Hear these passages:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,  
unless the Lord has commanded it?  
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High  
that good and bad come? (Lam. 3:37-38)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

Here, in the very first chapter of the survey, I am teaching you the doctrine of predestination. I know predestination is difficult. We ask, for example, if God predestines everything, what happens to human freedom? Good question. We'll deal with it in chapter 7. Another important question is, how can God bring evil things to pass if he is holy, just, and good? That's a real difficult one, and it has brought a lot of grief to some people. We'll have to look at that carefully, but we can't do it now. I hope you can wait until chapter 8 for our discussion of the problem of evil. For now, I will say only that when God brings about human sinful actions, he does it for his own good purposes. We may not always know what those purposes are, but God assures us that they are good. And he assures us of his goodness and justice by sending his own Son to die for our sins.

Authority

The second of the three lordship attributes is his authority. God's authority is his right to tell his creatures what they must do. Control is about might; authority is about right. Control means that God makes everything happen; authority means that God has the right to be obeyed, and therefore we have the obligation to obey him.

God's authority is part of his lordship. When God meets with Moses in Exodus 3, he gives him an authoritative message-Let my people go, that they may serve me-which has authority even over Pharaoh (Ex. 4:12). When God meets with Israel at Mount Sinai, he identifies himself as Lord (Ex. 20:1-2) and then tells them to have no other gods before him (v. 3). God's lordship means that we must obey his Ten Commandments and any other commandments he chooses to give us. So, God calls us to confess his lordship and then go on to obey all his commandments (Deut. 6:4-6). Jesus, too, says over and over again, in various ways, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:21, 23; 15:10, 14; 1 John 2:3-6; 3:22, 24; 5:3; 2 John 6; Rev. 12:17; 14:12). "How," he asks, "can you call me 'Lord, Lord,' when you don't do the things I say?" (Luke 6:46 paraphrased; cf. Matt. 7:21-22).

God's authority is absolute. That means, first, that we shouldn't doubt or question it. Paul says that Abraham "wavered not" in his belief in God's promise (Rom. 4:16-22). Abraham was certainly tempted to waver. God had promised him the land of Canaan, but although he lived there, he owned not one square inch. God had promised him a son, who would in turn have more descendants than the sand of the sea. But Abraham's wife, Sarah, was beyond the age of childbearing,

and Abraham was over one hundred years old before the promise was fulfilled. Nevertheless, Abraham clung to God's authoritative word, even against the evidence of his senses. And so should we.

Second, the absoluteness of God's authority means that his lordship transcends all our other loyalties. We are right to be loyal to our parents, our nation, our friends; but God calls us to love him with all our heart, that is, without any rival. Jesus told his disciples to honor their parents (Matt. 15:3-6), but he told them to honor him even more (Matt. 10:34-38; cf. Matt. 8:19-22; 22:37; Phil. 3:7-8).

Third, to say that God's authority is absolute means that it covers all areas of human life. Paul says that "whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. Rom. 14:23; Col. 3:17, 24; 2 Cor. 10:5). Everything we do is either to God's glory or it is not. God has the right to order every aspect of human life.

## Covenant Presence

God's lordship means that he controls everything and speaks with absolute authority. There is also a third element to God's lordship, and in some ways this is the deepest and most precious. That element is his commitment to us and, therefore, his presence with us.

As noted earlier, the essence of the covenant is God's word, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." God said that to Israel under Moses (Ex. 6:7) and to the New Testament

people of God (2 Cor. 6:16). He declared this promise many times throughout Scripture (Gen. 17:7; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:27; Heb. 11:16; Rev. 21:3). This means that the covenant Lord is one who takes people to be his own.

When God takes us to be his people, he fights our battles, blesses us, loves us, and sometimes gives us special judgments because of our sins (as Amos 3:2). Most importantly, he is with us. He places his name upon us (Num. 6:27), so that he dwells with us and we with him. In the Old Testament, God literally dwelled with Israel, as he placed his theophany, his visible presence, in the tabernacle and then in the temple. In the New Testament, Jesus is Immanuel, "God with us" (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23; cf. Gen. 21:22; 26:28; 28:15; 39:3-4). He is God "tabernacling" among us (John 1:14). And after his resurrection, he sends the Spirit to dwell in us, as in a temple (1 Cor. 3:16).

Control, authority, presence. Those are the main biblical concepts that explain the meaning of God's lordship.

## Transcendence and Immanence

These lordship attributes, as I call them, will help us to get a clear idea of the concepts of transcendence and immanence that theologians often use to describe the biblical God. These are not biblical terms, but the Bible does speak of God's being "on high" (Ps. 113:5; cf. 123:1; Isa. 5:16) as well as "with us." He is both "up there" and "down here." He is exalted, and he is near. When Scripture uses the "up there" language,

theologians call it transcendence. When Scripture speaks of God "down here" with us, the theologians speak of immanence.

There are dangers, however, in the concepts of transcendence and immanence. I think, for example, that some theologians have misunderstood God's transcendence. They think it means that God is so far away from us that we cannot really know him, so far that human language can't describe him accurately, so far that to us he's just a great heavenly blur without any definite characteristics. This concept of transcendence is unbiblical. If God is transcendent in that way, how can he also be near to us? Furthermore, according to the Bible we can know definite things about God. Despite the limitations of human language, God is able to use human language to tell us clearly and accurately who he is and what he has done.

So, I urge you to reject that theological concept of transcendence. If you are going to use that word at all, use it to describe God's en-thronement. When Scripture speaks of God as "high," "exalted," "lifted up," it is not saying that he lives far away from us so that we can't know him. Rather, it's saying that God is King, that he is Lord. In other words, biblical transcendence is God's lordship attributes of control and authority.

Similarly, you should use the word immanence, if you use it at all, to describe God's covenant presence. Some theologians speak as though when God becomes immanent he becomes immersed in the world, hidden in the world, so that he cannot be distinguished from creaturely reality. But that is not biblical.

God is always distinct from the world, for he is the Creator and we are the creature. Yet, he is clearly revealed in the world (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:18-21). God does come to be with creatures, and that's something wonderful and precious.

## Objections to Lordship as a Central Focus

There are, of course, a lot of perspectives by which to look at Scripture, and I think that lordship is an especially valuable one, simply because it is so central to the Bible itself. But some theologians have preferred other approaches. Some, for example, prefer to focus on God's love and mercy. I agree that these are important, but I think their importance is most obvious from a lordship perspective. God's love and mercy are aspects of his covenant presence with his people. Furthermore, God's sovereignty magnifies his love and mercy, displaying their power, assuring us that his love always accomplishes his purpose.

To some, of course, the very emphasis on divine sovereignty is to be avoided. They want to leave more room for human free will (see chap. 7). But divine sovereignty, with the doctrine of predestination, is an important part of the Bible.

Others may object that the idea of lordship suggests medieval feudalism. It is important that we understand lordship first in biblical terms, not in terms of human cultures. The biblical view of God's lordship is very different from feudalism, though there are some things in common. The main difference is God's absolute control and authority, coupled with his presence with his people.

Another objection is that to focus on lordship obscures other biblical emphases. Certainly, any model emphasizes some biblical truth somewhat at the expense of other truth. The reason is that theology is not the Bible. Theology restates the truths of the Bible, so inevitably its emphasis will differ from Scripture itself. The only way to remedy that problem is to restrict theology so that it does nothing but read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation.

Certainly, lordship may profitably be balanced with other models, such as God as Father, Husband, and Redeemer. Of all these, I believe that lordship is most comprehensive, both in its pervasiveness throughout Scripture and in its ability to include and explain other models.

The first thing to remember about God is that he is Lord, Yahweh, the I AM. As the Lord, he is the personal, holy, head of the covenant. He is in full control of the world he has made, speaks to us with absolute authority, and commits himself to us as Immanuel, God with us.

## *Chapter 2*

# WHO GOD IS

# AND WHAT HE DOES

The Bible reveals God to us by describing his acts in history, by giving us authoritative descriptions of him, and by giving us a glimpse into his Trinitarian inwardness. This chapter will look at the first two of these, and chapter 3 will examine the third. God's acts and biblical descriptions display his lordship, his control, authority, and presence.



Who is God? In the previous chapter I emphasized that in Scripture God is preeminently Lord, and that means the one who is in control of all things, who speaks with absolute authority, and who is present with his creatures in covenant commitment.

In this chapter we will look at God's nature in more detail. I warn you that we have a lot of ground to cover here; but again I hope to give you some hooks on which you can hang the many ideas I'll be presenting, and I hope that doing so will make it easier for you. Again, I'll use a threefold pattern, which corresponds somewhat to the last.

The Bible presents God to us by showing us his acts, by giving us authoritative descriptions of him, and by giving us a

glimpse into his inner Triune life. The acts of God correspond to his lordship attribute of control, for these are powerful acts that always accomplish his purpose. The authoritative descriptions, of course, represent God's lordship authority. And the glimpse of God's inner Triune life corresponds to his presence; for it tells us that even before God made the world, he was in intimate personal relationships-three persons committed to one another in love and perfectly present to one another.

In all of his acts, descriptions, and inner life, God displays himself to us as the Lord. Everything he does, he does so that people "shall know that I am the Lord" (Ex. 14:4 and many other passages). As we look through these biblical teachings, I pray that you will see God's lordship more clearly.

## God's Acts

We can classify God's acts in three categories: his eternal decrees, his activity in and with the natural world, and his redemption of sinners. The first corresponds to his authority, the second to his control, the third to his covenant presence. I shall be discussing redemption for most of this book, as it is the main theme of the Bible. In this chapter I will focus on God's eternal decrees and his activity in and with the natural world. Let me begin with the latter.

God's activity in and with the natural world can be further divided into miracles, providence, and creation. Another group of three! But I'm not sure I can associate these three with the lordship attributes, so I'll just jump in to talk about them.

## Miracle

What is a miracle? People sometimes define miracles as exceptions to natural law, but I don't think that definition is biblical. The Bible doesn't say anything about natural laws, and the biblical writers didn't know enough about natural laws to identify miracles as exceptions to them.

When the biblical writers spoke of miracles, I believe what they had in mind can be summarized in the phrase extraordinary demonstrations of God's lordship. When God made the waters of the sea to separate, so that Israel could pass over on dry land, the Israelites probably didn't know much about what natural laws were being suspended or changed-though, interestingly, Exodus 14:21 says that the miracle occurred through the blowing of "a strong east wind." But they did know that God was at work.' They knew that God was working in power, as he had promised, to save his people and to destroy the Egyptian army. God dried the sea so that "the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD" (14:4). The same was doubtless true when God made an axe head float, or raised the dead, or healed lepers. When Jesus gave to the disciples a miraculous catch of fish, Peter did not comment on any natural laws that were stretched or bent. Rather, he focused on Jesus' lordship revealed in the miracle, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8).

The biblical vocabulary for miracle, expressed in various Hebrew and Greek terms, focuses on three ideas: powers, signs, and wonders. These remarkably correspond to the three lordship attributes we have been discussing. Miracles are

powers, instances of God's control over his creation. They are signs, authoritative communications about God's intentions. And they are wonders, events that make us wake up and realize that God is really here, now, in his covenant presence, just as Peter realized after the miraculous catch of fish.

Do miracles still happen today? First, it's important to remember that even in the Bible miracles didn't happen every day. They happened on very special occasions, usually to validate the words of a prophet or apostle and especially as the Father's witness to Jesus his Son. We should not expect them as a regular part of the Christian life. God has not promised that. He does miracles only for his own reasons.

On the other hand, there is no guarantee that God won't work miracles today. If I am right to define a miracle as an extraordinary demonstration of God's lordship, I would remind you that extraordinary is a relative term. There is no sharp distinction between extraordinary and ordinary, between miracle and providence. The "wonder" terms in Scripture apply to floating axe heads, water to wine, and miraculous feedings, but in Psalm 136:4 and 25 they also apply to God's feeding all his creatures. We usually don't think of that as miraculous, but when you think about it, it's pretty wonderful. Feeding a few million Israelites in the wilderness was a wonderful thing; yet, in a way it is even more wonderful that God feeds absolutely every living thing on the earth. So, perhaps from one perspective, God is doing miracles all the time all around us.

Providence

Now let's look at providence. If a miracle is God's extraordinary working, providence is his ordinary working. As we have seen, the line between these two is not sharp. Miracle is wonderful, but providence is wonderful, too.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines providence as "his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions" (SC 11). Note the use of "all." As we saw in the previous chapter, God's control of his world is comprehensive. He makes everything happen that does happen. His "preserving" means various things: that the earth could not continue to exist without God's permission; that Jesus holds everything together (Col. 1:17); that God is postponing his devastating judgment until all his elect are saved (2 Peter 3:5-9); and that God preserves his people from death and destruction at many points during our earthly life (Gen. 45:5). Of course, death comes eventually, but even after our death God continues to preserve us. As David said, "You will not abandon my soul to Sheol" (Ps. 16:10). And "governing" means directing the course of nature and history to God's preordained goal (Eph. 1:9-11).

The catechism doesn't mention revelation as an aspect of providence, but it is important for us to know that everything that happens reflects God's wisdom (Ps. 104, especially v. 24; Prov. 8:22-36) and that his word directs all things (Pss. 147:15-20; 148:5-8). This is why the heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19) and his invisible nature is clearly seen (Rom. 1). In providence, God makes himself known to us.

Finally, concurrence is God's working with even the tiniest

events of nature and history to bring about "the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do."<sup>2</sup> We usually think that when plants germinate, they are carrying out natural laws. True enough, but the doctrine of concurrence shows us that God is also working with and through those laws to achieve his purpose. So, not a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God's will (Matt. 10:29), and he numbers all the hairs of our heads (Matt. 10:30). God rules his world not only from above but also from below. He is working both in heaven and in everything that happens.

Providence, then, like miracle, fits our threefold picture. In providence, God controls everything (by government and preservation); he reveals himself authoritatively; and he becomes present to the world he has made.

### Creation

Having looked at miracle and providence, let's look at the doctrine of creation. Creation is God's act of bringing everything into being, the events of Genesis 1. While miracle and providence display God's lordship in the temporal world, creation displays his lordship at the beginning of time.

The church has always confessed that God made the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. Before "the beginning," when God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), there was nothing but God himself. There are two important issues here. First, God did not make the world out of an uncreated stuff. A human

artist must have material to work with, such as clay, paint, or a canvas. But God used no material. Why? Because all the material in the world is created by him. It is as if a human artist made not only a statue but the clay and all the elements that make up the clay. God made everything in the heavens, the earth, and the sea. There is nothing God didn't create. So, there was no uncreated substance out of which God created the world.

The second issue is that God did not make the world out of himself, out of his own being. That is to say, the world is not God. The world is not divine. In Scripture, God is the Creator, the world is his creation. So, we worship only God, not anything in the world. Contrary to some forms of Eastern religions and Western New Age thought, we ourselves are not God.

If God didn't make the world out of pre-existing stuff and didn't make the world out of his own nature, what is left? What did he make the world out of? The only possible answer, odd as it seems, is nothing.

The Bible doesn't say directly that God created the world from nothing, but it does say that God created all things (so there is no uncreated stuff) and that the world is not divine (so God didn't create from his own nature).

In Scripture, creation ex nihilo is especially important as an analogy of redemption. Salvation is God's new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). Just as God created the world out of nothing and brought light out of darkness, so he brought his people

from sin to righteousness, from hopelessness to the assurance of his love. Paul says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). As with creation, so in redemption everything is of God. Salvation belongs to the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

Many are asking today how long it took God to create. Some believe that he created everything in six literal twenty-four-hour days. Others teach that the days were long periods of time, perhaps geologic ages; that view is called the day-age theory. Others hold that Genesis 1 as a whole is so figurative that we cannot learn anything at all about the chronology of creation. This is a difficult group of issues, and I can't begin to discuss them in a survey of theology. Personally, I see no reason why the days could not have been twenty-four-hour days. But I don't believe we should fight battles over this issue.

On the relation between creation and evolution, we shall take up that issue briefly in chapter 7.

### God's Decrees

We've discussed miracle, providence, and creation: God's lordship in time, God's lordship at the beginning of time. Now we look briefly at God's decrees, which show us his lordship before the beginning of time, way back in eternity.

God's decrees, according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, are "his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained

whatsoever comes to pass" (SC 7). We've already seen in chapter 1 that God controls everything. Here we learn that this control results from a plan, which Scripture calls his counsel, the thoughts of his heart, his wisdom. Obviously, God's actions in the world are not random. God has thought them through. Because he has a reason, a goal, a purpose for everything, he is able to make all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11). That is a great comfort in time of trouble.

God's plan goes back before time, into eternity past: "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:11; cf. 104:24; Isa. 37:26; 46:10; Matt. 25:34; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:4; 3:11).

The most wonderful decree is that God has chosen believers to be in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4; 1 Tim. 1:9). So, nothing can separate us from his love. That's called the decree of election, and we'll talk about that in chapter 13.

## Authoritative Descriptions of God

We've discussed God's actions under the categories of miracle, providence, creation, and the decrees. In each of these acts, God demonstrates that he is the Lord.

Scripture also teaches us about God more directly-by simply telling us what he is like. So, I speak of biblical descriptions of God. These biblical descriptions are of three kinds (getting the pattern now?): names, images, and attributes.

God's names are names like the word Lord, which I have taken as my central theme. Another name is the word God itself, which is a more generic term. The word God can be used of false gods as well as the true, but the name Yahweh, the Lord, can only be used of the true God. Then there are compound names, like God Almighty, Lord of Hosts (which emphasizes that God is surrounded by an angelic army), the Lord Who Provides, and so on. The name Jesus, as we shall see, is an especially important name of God, for it is at the name of Jesus that every knee shall bow (Phil. 2:10).

Images are pictures of God in words, comparing him to people and things in our experience. So, Scripture presents God as a King, Father, Shepherd, Light, Rock, and Shield. King is more or less synonymous with Lord, used thousands of times in Scripture. Father is perhaps the most important image of God, especially in the New Testament. Jesus teaches us to call God our Father, since in a special way God is the Father of Jesus. Through Jesus, God adopts us into his family; and we cry out, "Abba! Father!"-Daddy! (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), as Jesus himself did (Mark 14:36).

People sometimes ask if it would be right to call God our Mother. Certainly in the literal sense God is neither male nor female, for he has no body. So, this is a question about imagery: should we speak of God mainly using male images or female images? There are feminine images of God in the Bible. The Lord says that he gave birth to Israel, so in a sense he is Israel's mother (Deut. 32:18; cf. Num. 11:12; Isa. 42:14-15). But remember that the apostle Paul uses similar imagery about himself when he says that "I am again in the anguish of

childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Gal. 4:19). Paul here represents himself figuratively as the mother of the church, but that doesn't raise any doubts about Paul's gender (cf. 1 Thess. 2:7).

Certainly, the imagery of God in Scripture is preponderantly male. That is not an accident. There were female deities in the pagan religions of Bible times, but the biblical writers studiously avoided suggesting that Yahweh was female. One reason may have been that Scripture emphasizes male leadership in the family and the church. To represent God as female, therefore, would have confused people as to God's authority. It also would have obscured the biblical picture of God as the husband of his people and of Israel as his unfaithful bride. That is a picture that should not be obscured, for it leads to Jesus as the Bridegroom who redeems his church to be his glorious bride.

Let us now consider God's attributes. Attributes are adjectives (like eternal) or nouns (like eternity) that describe what God is like. Again, I will give you three hooks to hang these on, dividing these attributes into love, knowledge, and power. These three correspond to the lordship attributes of presence, authority, and control, respectively. Again, my point is that like the acts of God, his names, and his images, the Bible intends for the attributes of God to reveal his lordship.

I have only space to give you the basic ideas here as well as some Bible passages, and I exhort you to meditate on these passages to get a deeper understanding.

## Attributes of Love

First, let's look at God's love. Surely, this is important, for John says twice that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). When the Bible speaks of God's ethical character, it uses a variety of terms like goodness, grace, covenant faithfulness (Hebrew, *hesed*), righteousness, justice, as well as the word love itself. These are sometimes called his ethical attributes.

These terms have different nuances. Goodness is a more general term and often refers to God's benevolence to all people, even outside the covenant. Grace, of course, is usually used for God's gift of salvation itself, given to his people apart from any works they have done. Righteousness and justice are rather legal terms, indicating that God's conduct measures up to the highest standards-his own, of course!-of fairness and equity.

God's love is allegiance, affection, and action, corresponding to his authority, presence, and control, respectively. Allegiance means loyalty, faithfulness to one's word; affection is emotional fondness; and action represents the good things we do for people we love. God's love has these elements; our love for him and for one another should reflect his.

God loves all his creatures, even his enemies. He makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:43-48), and he does justice for all, giving everybody what he deserves (Gen. 18:25). But God's love, even his righteousness,<sup>3</sup> goes further (John 3:16; 1 John 4:8-10); for as believers in Christ, we don't

get what we deserve. We deserve death, but God has placed that punishment of death on his Son. In Jesus' death, he gets what we deserve. Because of him, we get far better than we deserve, blessings we do not deserve at all. So, in Scripture, God's love, goodness, grace, even righteousness describe that great act by which God brought salvation to the unrighteous, to us.

We should recognize, however, that God is also a wrathful God, a God of judgment. The Bible even says he hates some people—he hates the wicked every day (Lev. 20:23; Deut. 25:16). Sometimes his hatred ends in eternal punishment. We must remember that once he hated us as well (Eph. 2:3), yet reached out in love to save us in Christ. Even while he was hating us, he loved us in Christ before the foundation of the world. See the paradox? It is possible to love and hate the same person at the same time: to hate him for his wickedness and, yet, in the long run to love him so that you want to rescue him from wickedness.

How can God hate people if he is love? First, God's love is a jealous love (Ex. 34:14). As in a human marriage, God has the right to expect us to be faithful to him. When we are not, we incur his wrath. Second, although God is love, he is not obligated to distribute his love equally to all. As we have seen, he loves everybody in the sense that everybody receives some blessings from his hand (Matt. 5:43-48). Indeed, he treats all of us far better than we deserve. However, he reserves his best blessings only for his Son and for the people the Son has purchased by his blood.

## Attributes of Knowledge

Under attributes of knowledge, I would list his speech, truth, and wisdom, as well as knowledge itself.

First, his speech. We will think more about God's word in chapter 4. But note here that only in biblical religion does the Supreme Being communicate truth about himself to his creatures. This is part of what I meant in chapter 1 by saying that God is both absolute and personal. Speech is distinctive to persons. In polytheistic religions the gods speak, but they are not supreme. In Hinduism and other sophisticated religions there is a supreme being, but that being is silent. It is one of the most precious blessings of biblical theism that our God speaks to us, communicating his knowledge to our minds and hearts.

Second, his truth. The Bible uses truth three ways.<sup>4</sup> God is the truth, the true God as opposed to the false (Jer. 10:9-10; 1 John 5:20). He speaks the truth-never lying, never making a mistake (Titus 1:2). And he does the truth, for we have seen that he is the God of goodness and love (Deut. 7:9).

Third, his knowledge. God knows everything, so we speak of his omniscience (Ps. 147:5; John 21:17; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 John 3:20). Scripture says his understanding is infinite, he knows all things, he discerns the thoughts and intents of our hearts. He knows everything, of course, because everything happens by his wise plan.

Some people today, known as open theists, say that God does not know the future completely or exhaustively. Some of these have even said that God makes mistakes in saying what

will happen. But this idea is completely contrary to Scriptures. The test of a true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:21-22 is that his predictions come true. Clearly, the idea is that if a prophet's words prove false, they can't come from God, because God is never wrong about the future or anything else. Indeed, knowing the future is the test not only of a true prophet but also of a true God. In Isaiah 41:21-23 God challenges the false gods to predict the future, for he knows they cannot do it. Only he knows for sure what is going to happen.

Indeed, in Scripture God often gives specific, detailed prophecies. Through God's inspiration, the prophet Samuel told Saul that soon after departing, Saul would meet "two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah" (1 Sam. 10:2), and that they would say this and that and do this and that. All of these events happened precisely as foretold by Samuel. (See also 1 Kings 13:1-4; 2 Kings 8:12; Ps. 139:4; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28.)

Open theists sometimes say that God is ignorant, as in Genesis 18:20-21, where God says he is going to Sodom to see if it is as sinful as some have charged. But if God is ignorant in this passage, he is ignorant of the present, not the future, and open theists profess to believe that God is not ignorant about the present. We have to understand that in this and other passages God speaks figuratively to make a point. In this case, the point is that God is gathering facts for an indictment prior to rendering his verdict on the sin of Sodom.

God has not only knowledge but also wisdom. Wisdom is a heightened form of knowledge that understands the deep

significance of something and its practical relevance (Pss. 104:24; 136:5; Rom. 11:33). Wisdom is knowledge in depth, knowledge going to work. Sometimes in Scripture wisdom can be translated "skill."

Remember with each of these attributes a tremendously important fact: everything Scripture says about God it also says about Jesus. As God is love, knowledge, wisdom, so is Jesus. He is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

### Attributes of Power

We come now to attributes of power, which reflect God's lordship attribute of control. The first, of course, is God's power itself, which is so extensive that theologians have called it omnipotence, meaning that God can do anything. Scripture teaches that there are no limits to God's power, that he can do anything that he wants to do. Psalm 115:3 says that God has done whatever he has pleased (cf. Isa. 55:11; Jer. 32:17). Nevertheless, there are some things God cannot do. Titus 1:2 says that God cannot lie (cf. Num. 23:19), and we can easily extend that to any immoral action. Since God is perfectly holy and good, he cannot do anything evil. Similarly, he cannot do whatever is logically contradictory, like making round squares, because his perfect truth implies perfect consistency of word and action. Furthermore, God cannot do things inappropriate to his nature as God, like buying shoes or celebrating his birthday.

How, then, do we define omnipotence precisely, so that we

can know in general terms what God can do and what he can't? Basically, we cannot provide such a definition. We know that God's power is immensely greater than we can conceive, and we know that he can never fail at something he tries to do. Beyond that, we can only adore the mystery of his great power.

God's power presupposes that he has will, the ability to choose. He chooses whatever he will do, and his power enables him to do it. In the Bible, "will" is used in three ways. First, there is God's decretive will (Gen. 50:20; Matt. 11:25-26; Acts 2:23; Rom. 9:18-19; Eph. 1:11). This is what we earlier called, simply, his decree. His decretive will is everything he has determined to bring to pass.

Second, there is his preceptive will (Matt. 7:21; Eph. 5:17; 6:6). These are God's preferences, his values, which he often communicates to us as his commands for our lives. Clearly, nobody can break God's decretive will: God's decretive will always comes to pass. But we break or violate God's preceptive will all the time. Violating God's preceptive will is another name for sin. We can say that in the decretive sense God does not desire the salvation of all, for not all will be saved. In the preceptive sense, however, he wants everyone to repent of sin and believe on Jesus and, therefore, to go to heaven. It is in that sense that God "desires all people to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4).

A third sense of will is divine vocation, as when we seek to know "God's will for our lives." We find God's will in this sense by being transformed by the Spirit's renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2; cf. Eph. 5:10). God's will in this sense is the wise

application of his precepts to the situations he has decreed for us to be in.

These three kinds of will correspond to God's control, authority, and presence, respectively.

As we move on, it might surprise you to hear me discussing attributes such as infinity, eternity, and immensity as divine powers. Usually, we think of such attributes as indicating something like God's "location." Infinity means he is everywhere, eternity that he is above time, and immensity that he is above space. Well, it is true to say that God is everywhere, above time, and above space, but more fundamentally God is Lord of everything everywhere. He is Lord of time and Lord of space. So, infinity, eternity, and immensity display God's powerful control over these realms of creation.

Infinity is a general term, indicating God's transcendence of the creation. We are finite and limited; he is not. What that mainly means is that our powers are limited by our weakness; God's are not.

Similarly, eternity means that God has complete power over time. Scripture speaks of eternity in many passages, among them Genesis 21:33, Deuteronomy 33:27, Romans 1:20, Ephesians 3:11, 1 Timothy 1:17, and Hebrews 9:14. Time does not limit God as it limits us. Some, like Augustine, have argued that God is "above" time; others, like Oscar Cullmann, that God is "in" time. Scripture doesn't address that question directly. But it does show that God is free from the limitations that we

experience in time. We are limited by our beginning and end; God is not. We are limited by change; God is not (more on this below). We are ignorant of the past and future; God sees all times with equal vividness. We are frustrated, because time passes too quickly for us to complete our tasks or so slowly that we become bored; but God is never limited in these ways: a day with him is as a thousand years and vice versa.

These facts are more in line with the view that God is "outside," or "above," time than the view that he is "in" time. But remember that God is also "in" time. The Bible shows God as one who meets with people over and over again in history. He is everywhere in time, as he is everywhere in space. The important thing is that, unlike us, God is Lord of time, sovereign over time.

Since God is eternal, he is unchangeable in some ways (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 102:25-27; Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). Scripture does occasionally present him as if he were changing. For example, in the book of Jonah he announces judgment on Nineveh, but when Nineveh repents, he does not destroy the city. In that context and others, it says that God was "relenting" (Jonah 4:2; cf. Ex 32:14; 1 Sam. 15:35; Amos 7:1-6). Relenting is a kind of change. Of course, God says in Jeremiah 18:5-10 that whenever he pronounces judgment and the people repent, he will relent. That is a general policy. One might even say that it is his unchanging will to relent in this way.

So, we need to explain God's unchangeability a bit more. How is God unchangeable? (1) He doesn't change in any of his essential attributes. He is love and can never lose his love. (2)

His decrees don't change. (3) His covenant faithfulness is unchangeable; God will never break his promises. (4) The truth of his word will never change; it will always be true.

Let's look briefly at the remaining divine attributes. God's immensity is his lordship over space, as eternity is his lordship over time (1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:1-2; Micah 3:11). So, in an important way God is "outside" space as he is outside time. Omnipresence means that God is not only above space but also in it, in all of it (Ps. 139:7-10; Acts 17:28). We cannot escape from God. He is everywhere, because his power, knowledge, and love are over all his works. In other words, we cannot escape from him because he is Lord.

Incorporeality means that God has no body. Bodies cannot transcend space and time; God does. But he can take on a body, and has, especially in Christ.

Note with this whole list of attributes that God is both transcendent and immanent. He is above the world but also in every part of it. Because God is incorporeal, he is invisible (Rom. 1:20; Col.

1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27). He can make himself visible any time and in any way he wants. So, he is Lord of the visible, Lord of light. His glory is his visibility, the great light that shines out of him when he makes himself visible to us (Ex. 16:6-10). When we come to trust him through Christ, that light comes upon us, figuratively, so that Jesus can say of us that we are the light of the world as he is the light of the world (Matt. 5:14; John 1:9; 3:19; 8:12; 9:5; 11:9; 12:46). To glorify God

is to reflect that light wherever we are, so that we image God more perfectly, so that people everywhere can see Jesus in us (Ps. 19:1; 1 Cor. 10:31; 11:7).

I'll speak of God's spirituality in chapter 12, where we discuss the Holy Spirit.

God's aseity (from the Latin expression *a se*) refers to his selfsufficiency. God has no needs, Paul says to the Athenians in Acts 17:24-30 (cf. Ps. 50:8-15; Isa. 40:19-20; 44:15-17). People have sometimes said that since God is selfsufficient, he can never be sad, but that is not scriptural. The Bible teaches that God has all the emotions we have, though in a more perfect way. Indeed, God grieves, for Paul tells us not to grieve the Spirit of God (Eph. 4:30; cf. Gen. 6:6). God in Scripture often exhorts us in very emotional language: "Turn back, turn back from your evil ways," says God through Ezekiel (33:11; cf. Rom. 8:31-39; 11:33-36).

Some also say that because of God's selfsufficiency he cannot suffer. That is called impassibility. Certainly, God cannot suffer any loss of his attributes or divine nature, but the grief we spoke about earlier is certainly a kind of suffering. Most significantly, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, certainly did suffer as he died on the cross for us. And his Father certainly suffered when he gave up his only Son for us all (Rom. 8:32).

In this chapter we have thought about God's chief actions and attributes. In the next one, we will look at the third important area of biblical teaching about God, the doctrine of

the Trinity.

## *Chapter 3*

# GOD, THREE IN ONE

God is One, but he exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We shall explore the biblical basis for this statement and the various discussions about this topic in the early church.

I

n chapter 2, I said that Scripture presents God to us in three ways: by narrating his actions, by giving us authoritative descriptions of him, and by giving us a glimpse of his inner Triune life. We looked at the first two of these all too briefly. In this chapter we will take a glimpse at the Trinity, which corresponds to the lordship attribute of divine presence; for the Trinity indicates that even before the world was made,

the Father, Son, and Spirit were present to one another. Remember, though, that Scripture gives us only a glimpse, not a treatise. I think some theologians exaggerate what we know about the Trinity. Much that the Bible teaches about the Trinity is very mysterious, and we must bow in humility as we enter into this holy realm.

We can summarize the doctrine of the Trinity in five assertions: (1) God is one, (2) God is three; (3) the three persons are each fully God; (4) each of the persons is distinct from the others; and (5) the three persons are related eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We will look at each of these assertions in turn.

## God Is One

We tend to think of the doctrine of the Trinity as the doctrine that God is three persons. But the word *triune* says not just that God is three persons but also that God is three in one. So, the oneness of God, the unity of God, is part of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Scripture, of course, says plainly that God is one. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4; cf. 32:39). This is important, first, because it is true: there is only one God, only one being worthy of worship, not many, as the Greeks, Egyptians, Babylonians, and Canaanites believed. It is also important because God's unity is necessary to his lordship. Only one person can be fully in control of the world,

Speak with ultimate authority, and be the most intimate presence with people. Because there is only one Lord, there can be only one Savior (Isa. 43:11; John 14:6). Salvation, as we have seen, belongs to the Lord (Jonah 2:9).

## God Is Three

Of course, the Scriptures also teach that in some mysterious sense God is three. The Old Testament attributes plurality to God, though not with the clarity of the New Testament. For example, in the Old Testament God's wisdom is divine, a divine attribute, but it is also distinct from God, a tool he uses in creating the world (Ps. 136:5). The same holds true for God's word, his name, his glory, his spirit, and the angel of the Lord (Ps. 33: 6; Gen. 31:11-13; Isa. 54:1).

Sometimes the Old Testament even speaks of divine triads:

In all their affliction he was afflicted,  
and the angel of his presence saved them;  
in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;  
he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.  
But they rebelled  
and grieved his Holy Spirit;  
therefore he turned to be their enemy,  
and himself fought against them. (Isa. 63:9–10)

You can find some other triads in Psalm 33:6, Isaiah 48:16, and Haggai 2:5-7. But in the Old Testament this is all quite shadowy and mysterious.

By the New Testament, however, it is a settled doctrine that three persons are divine: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. How did this happen? Because before the New Testament was written, the Son and the Holy Spirit both came into the world. Amazingly, the writers of the New Testament, mostly Jews, became persuaded that they should worship a man—that the man Jesus was nothing less than God himself. They saw that the Holy Spirit, who came upon the church on Pentecost, was also fully God. So, though they continued to confess that God is one (as in 1 Cor. 8:4), they recognized three who were God. Often in the New Testament we see three divine persons lined up alongside each other:

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. (Matt. 28:19)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14)

(Compare also Matt. 3:16; John 14:16-18; Rom. 1:1-4; 5:1-5; Heb. 2:3-4; 1 Peter 1:2.)

### The Three Are God

It is important for us to recognize that the three persons really are equal, because each is fully God. That is fairly obvious in the case of the Father and the Holy Spirit. There have been debates over the deity of Christ. I intend to discuss those in chapter 10. But the conclusion of the Christian church

since its inception, and the conclusion of the Bible itself, is that Father, Son, and Spirit are each fully God.

### Each of the Persons Is Distinct from the Others

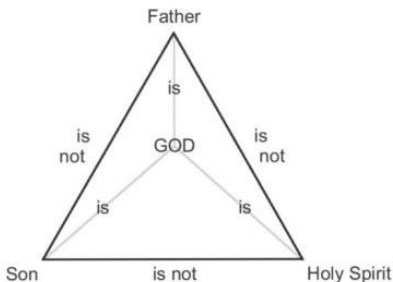
This discussion leaves us with some difficult problems. There is one God, but there are three divine persons. That would appear to be a contradiction, yet God's Word, the Bible, is never contradictory. So where is the reconciliation?

Some have thought to reconcile these positions by saying that God is really one but only apparently three. Father, Son, and Spirit are just the one God playing three different roles. Sometimes he appears as Father, sometimes as Son, sometimes as Spirit. This position is sometimes called modalism, since it makes the three persons only modes, or ways, in which God exists-not real persons. This view is also called Sabellianism, after Sabellius, one of its early advocates. Today, so-called Oneness Pentecostals teach that Jesus is the only divine person; they call this a Jesus Only position.

The church rejected modalism as a heresy. It is clearly unbiblical, for the three persons enter transactions with one another. Jesus prays to the Father (John 17); the Father speaks from heaven while Jesus is on earth (Matt. 3:17). The Father and the Son together send the Spirit into the world (John 14:16), and the Spirit bears witness to Jesus. The Spirit is "another" Comforter, not the same as Jesus. The three glorify and honor one another. Here we see three different persons, interacting with one another, conversing as human beings do, not just one person playing three roles.

So, the three persons are both one and many, both united and distinct. Look at figure 1. The Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son; the Son is not the Spirit; the Spirit is not the Father.

Figure 1



Even though the three are distinct persons, they are nevertheless intimately involved with one another. This mutual involvement is called by the English terms *circumcession* and *coinherence* (by the Latin *circumincessio* and the Greek *perichoresis*). This means that, first, the Father is in the Son and the Son in him (John 10:38; 14:10-11) and, second, both Father and Son are in the Spirit and the Spirit in them (Rom. 8:9). Notice: it's not that the Father is the Son and so on but that the Father is in the Son.

When the Spirit comes, inevitably Jesus comes with him and in him (John 14:18). When Jesus comes, we see the Father in him. As he said to Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). All three persons participate in all the works of God: creation, revelation, redemption, judgment. The three glorify one another (John 7:18; 8:50; 16:14; cf. Ps. 110:1).

There are some differences in focus. In redemption, the Father foreknows, the Son sprinkles blood, the Spirit sanctifies (1 Peter 1:2). To generalize, the Father foreordains, the Son accomplishes, and the Spirit applies the work of Christ to the heart. The Father plans, the Son executes, the Spirit applies. Perhaps this is the intra-Trinitarian basis for the three lordship attributes. The Father is the authority, the Son the controller, the Spirit the presence. Remember that even as the Father is planning, the Son and the Spirit are joyfully cooperating, and the same is true for all the divine tasks.

The Three Persons Are Related Eternally as Father, Son,  
and Holy Spirit

What we have said already pretty well completes the teaching found in the Bible itself about the Trinity. But you should also know something about the way the church has dealt with questions and problems concerning the Trinity. Make no mistake, the Trinity is a difficult doctrine. The church has had to fight terrible battles over it.

### Substance and Persons

First, the church adopted standard terminology to indicate

how God is one and how God is three.' God is one substance, the church declared, and he is three persons. These are philosophical terms, not biblical ones. There is nothing wrong with using terms outside the Bible for theological purposes. We do it whenever we use English words for the Greek and Hebrew languages of Scripture. Indeed, even the word Trinity is not in the Bible. The work of theology is not just reading through the Scriptures but applying the Scriptures to the questions people ask, applying it to their needs. We'll discuss this more in chapter 6.

Substance means something like "what he really is." So, the Father really is God, the Son really is God, and the Spirit really is God. Or you can think of the one substance as the "Godness of God." All three persons have that Godness.<sup>2</sup> But all that means is that they are one God, and they are each that one God. In the original Greek text of the Nicene Creed, we read that the three persons are *homoousios*, that is, of the same substance. Again, that simply means that there is only one God, and each of the three persons is that one God.

Person is a trickier term. Theologians have tried to understand it in different ways. But after all is said and done, you probably can't do better than to think of God's three persons as similar to, analogous to, three human persons.

The church used these terms to show how the heretics were wrong. The Arians said that the Son and Spirit were created beings. On that view the Son and the Father, for example, were not of the same substance. They were not both the one true God. The Sabellians, mentioned earlier, did not believe that God

was three persons; they thought he was only one. So, the church used in its creeds the language that God is one substance, three persons.

But remember: Scripture gives us a glimpse of the Trinity, not a treatise. We don't know very clearly what it means for God to be a substance or for him to be three persons. We don't even know clearly what substance and person mean when applied to God. We have a rough idea of how these terms apply to things in the creation, but we don't know what a divine person is and how precisely it differs from the divine substance.

Remember that these terms are just vehicles for biblical content. Sometimes we get the idea that when we learn technical theological terms like these we are learning information about God that is not in the Bible, stuff we could learn apart from the Bible alone. But that is certainly not right. These terms are only attempts to summarize biblical content. They don't stand on their own. The mystery remains.

### Ontological and Economic Trinities

Another common theological distinction, not mentioned explicitly in Scripture, is the distinction between ontological and economic Trinity. These are not two Trinities but the same Trinity viewed in different aspects. Of course, since there is only one God, there is only one Trinity. Ontological Trinity is the Trinity in itself, as it (or, rather, he) exists apart from the creation, as he would have existed if he had never created anything. In the ontological Trinity there is no subordination

among the persons. Father, Son, and Spirit are equal; that is to say, they are equally God, equally divine.

The economic Trinity, however, is the Trinity in relation to the creation. As we saw earlier, the three persons of the Trinity take on a sort of division of labor with regard to creation and redemption: the Father plans, the Son executes, the Spirit applies. In this great drama the Son voluntarily becomes subordinate to the Father. Jesus says he can do nothing of himself but what he sees the Father do (John 5:19). In John 5:30 he says, "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me." The Father has commanded; the Son obeys. Similarly, the Holy Spirit, when Jesus and the Father send him into the world, "will not speak of his own authority, but whatever he hears, he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:13). See the order? The Father sends; Jesus and the Spirit are sent. The Father speaks of himself; the Son and Spirit speak the words the Father has given them to speak.

The three persons are equal, but they take on different jobs in creation and redemption. Some of those jobs involve obedience and subordination. Is that subordination unworthy of God? Not at all. As Jesus taught us in Matthew 20, for example, it is entirely right for great people to be servants, just as he washed the disciples' feet.

It is important to recognize in any case that the Trinity is both ontological and economic. It is not as if God is really just one person, though he appears as a Trinity to us in the world. That's what the Sabellians taught. But Trinity is what God really and truly is. Through all eternity, he exists as Father, Son,

and Spirit, and he could not exist any other way.

### The Eternal Generation, or Begetting, of the Son

The next church-historical issue I wish to discuss is the eternal generation of the Son, sometimes called the eternal begetting. This doctrine attempts to answer the question, how did the Son become the Son?

One biblical answer to that question is found in Luke 1:35, where the angel says to the Virgin Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy-the Son of God." Here the baby Jesus is called the Son of God because of his conception by the Spirit in the womb of the Virgin. So, he is the Son by conception, or generation, or begetting-these are all more or less synonymous terms. But Scripture teaches that this conception is not the beginning of his sonship. Before he goes to the cross, Jesus prays, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (John 17:5). Jesus was the Son of his heavenly Father even before he was conceived in Mary's womb. The theologian asks, If Jesus was already the Son in eternity, was there some kind of generation, or begetting, or conception in eternity that made him the Son? The theologian wonders if Jesus' begetting in time is parallel to another begetting before time, in eternity.

This question is rather speculative, I think. But Scripture may speak to it, and if it does, we need to hear what it says. Scripture describes Jesus as *monogenes*, a term that may mean

"only begotten" in some passages, such as John 1:14, 18 and 3:16. Now, there's some dispute about that. Some Bible scholars think the word means "unique" rather than "only begotten." But I think the older view is right, so that these passages do say that Jesus was begotten by the Father before the world was made and that he was the only one begotten by the Father, the only begotten Son. So, I'm happy to confess, as we do in the Nicene Creed, that Jesus Christ is "the only begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." The only trouble is that, as with substance and person, I'm not sure what this means. What does it mean for someone to be begotten eternally? When parents beget a son or daughter in this world, the child is younger than the parent. But that's not the case with Jesus. With Jesus, he and his Father are the same age-eternally existing. Earthly generation requires two parents of opposite sexes, but not eternal generation. When earthly parents beget a child, the child is weak, helpless, ignorant; but the Son of God in eternity was never weak, helpless, or ignorant. He became that on earth when he was born of a baby. His earthly generation was like that, but his eternal generation was not. So, eternal generation is evidently very different from earthly generation.

To be honest, I don't think that the phrase eternal generation takes us any farther than the name Son. Jesus is the eternal Son. Sons, by definition, are people who have been generated by fathers. But we know nothing about eternal generation, except that it is the generation of a son.

The doctrine of eternal generation does help us, perhaps, to see why it was appropriate for the Son, not the Father, to be generated as a human child in the womb of the Virgin. Perhaps it also gives us a glimpse of why the Son, not the Father, came into the world as the obedient servant.

### The Eternal Procession of the Spirit

The next historical issue concerning the Trinity is the eternal procession of the Spirit. This is very similar to the eternal generation of the Son. Just as Jesus was begotten, or generated, in history, so the Spirit proceeded, or was sent forth, from God on many occasions, but especially on the day of Pentecost following the ascension of Jesus. So, theologians have asked, is there an eternal procession corresponding to his procession into the world on Pentecost?

The biblical evidence for this doctrine is even more sparse than that for the eternal generation of the Son. People have cited John 15:26 as possibly referring to the Spirit's procession. Listen to it. Jesus says, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me." The word "proceeds" here has been taken to refer to eternal procession. I'm not at all sure that's what it means. I think it much more likely refers to the many times in history that God has sent his Spirit into the world to do his bidding. The Spirit is the one who, over and over again, proceeds from the Father into the created world.

So far as I can see, John 15:26 is the only passage in the

Bible that may refer directly to the Spirit's eternal procession. But we should perhaps say this as well: there must be something about the Spirit's eternal nature, about his eternal relation to the Father and the Son, that makes it appropriate for him to be sent rather than to be the sender-to be the one who proceeds. This eternal qualification to be sent we might call his eternal procession. That, I think, is about as much as we can say.

Since this doctrine has so little direct biblical support, I certainly would counsel you not to make an issue out of it. However, you should know that some people have made a big issue of it, and indeed many still do. The division between the Western and Eastern churches in 1054 was partly over the detailed formulation of this doctrine. The Eastern churches maintained the original version of the Nicene Creed, which says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Western churches, under the influence of Augustine, added that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father "and the Son" (in Latin, *filioque*).

### Trinitarian Models

The last of these historical issues is that of Trinitarian models. People have tried hard to find illustrations of the Trinity, because, after all, the Trinity is very hard to understand. Illustrations or pictures can make instruction easier. St. Patrick compared the Trinity to an Irish shamrock: one plant, three leaves. Of course, that picture isn't a very good one. You can tear the shamrock into three pieces but not the Trinity. The Trinity is immaterial, the shamrock material. And

the Trinity is three persons, while the shamrock is not even one person.

Other theologians came up with more sophisticated models or illustrations. Basically there are two kinds of Trinitarian models: psychological and social.

The psychological model was developed in great detail by Augustine. Augustine thought the Trinity was like a great mind. In the human mind there is intellect, memory, and will, but the three are one. And, when we know ourselves, we are the knower, the known, and the knowledge at the same time. God, of course, has a mind; and, Augustine thought, when God knows himself, his thought of himself is so perfect that that thought itself is a divine being. So, the three persons of the Trinity are God as knower, known, and knowledge. This is an interesting model, but it doesn't do much to account for three persons. In our experience, the known and the knowledge are not persons, nor is the triad memory, will, and knowledge. The psychological model is pretty good in illustrating God's oneness but not his threeness, his substance but not his persons.

Another model of the Trinity comes from the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. That has been called the social model, in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons much like me and my two sons Justin and Johnny. They relate to one another in love. The interesting thing is that on this social model some have seen the Trinity as a model for human society.

That model is good as far as it goes. Unlike the psychological model, it is interpersonal. But this model doesn't help us much to see how the three are one God. Augustine began with a single person, a single mind, and then tried to show how complexities in that mind would make it possible to speak of three. The Cappadocians begin with three but find it hard to show how God is one.

So, the pendulum goes back and forth between these models. In the early twentieth century, Barth and Rahner, the most prominent Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians, respectively, insisted that God did not have three centers of consciousness. They followed, more or less, the Augustinian model; Barth even verged on modalism. But in the later twentieth century, under the influence of Moltmann and others, theologians have tended to favor the social model. However, in my judgment they have not done justice to the fact that God is one God.

I would say that neither model is perfect. We need to find a model that does justice both to God's oneness (for he is far more one than any of us) and his threeness (for he truly is a society of three). Perhaps better still, we need to recognize the mysteriousness of the Trinity and be satisfied without an adequate pictorial model.

## The Trinity and Lordship

Finally, does the doctrine of the Trinity have anything to do with the lordship of God, which has been my main theme in this survey? I think it does. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, was

one of the great heroes of the faith. A defender of the Trinitarianism of the Nicene Creed, he suffered terrible persecution for his doctrinal stand at the hands of Arian heretics. But he kept going, and eventually, through God's providence, his position prevailed.

Why did Athanasius fight so courageously and persistently? It wasn't that he was ready to live or die for philosophical terminology, even the formulation that the Son was "of one substance" with the Father. For him, rather, the important issues were basic and simple: worship and salvation.

Worship. If Jesus the Son of God is only a creature, he said, then we are guilty of idolatry. For Christians had already for nearly four hundred years worshiped Christ as God. He is worthy of worship only if he is equal to the Father, a member of the ontological Trinity.

Salvation. If the Arians were right, Athanasius said, then we are hoping to be saved from sin through a mere creature. Only if Jesus is fully God, a member of the ontological Trinity, can he save us from our sins.

Worship and salvation. In the end, these are matters of lordship, for the Lord is the only one who deserves worship. As Jonah said in his prayer from the belly of the fish, "Salvation belongs to the LORD!" (Jonah 2:9).

## *Chapter 4*

# THE WORD OF GOD

When God reveals himself, he does so as the Lord. His word is his powerful, authoritative self-expression, in which he comes personally to be with us. This word comes in many forms and through many media, including Scripture, God's Word written.

**I**n the first three chapters we studied God the Lord. His lordship entails his control, authority, and presence. In this chapter we will think about how our Lord communicates with us, his word.

In most systematic theologies the study of the word of God and Scripture is the first topic of discussion, coming even before the doctrine of God. The reason is that the word of God is the source, the authority, for everything we say in systematics. So, putting it first makes some sense, since that enables us to understand where the content is coming from before we study the content explicitly.

It also makes sense to understand the God who speaks before we study what he says. That's especially true in this book; for I have emphasized the lordship of God, and now I want to emphasize that God always speaks to us as Lord. So, it is important to understand his lordship in order to understand how he speaks to us.

The order of topics matters, but not very much. Our understanding of God affects our knowledge of the word of God, and our knowledge of the word certainly affects our knowledge of God. So, I should quit fussing about the order of topics and get right into the content of this chapter.

The subject matter of this and the next chapter is sometimes called bibliology. In theologies, you typically run into titles like bibliology, anthropology, hamartiology, Christology, and so on. These are traditional titles of theological topics, called loci, or "places." I prefer to avoid these; I usually speak simply of the doctrine of man, the doctrine of sin, and so on. But you should be aware of these titles and have some idea what they mean. They come from Greek words. For example, bibliology comes from the Greek word for book, from which we get our English word bible.

We will look at the Bible specifically in the next chapter. But bibliology traditionally discusses all the means of God's revelation, all the ways he communicates with us. In this chapter we will speak generally about revelation, or, as Scripture most often calls it, "the word of God."

## The Concept of the Word of God

First, let's consider the concept of the word of God. What does the phrase word of God actually mean? Different definitions are possible, and I don't think we should fight to the death over definitions. But I want to let you know at least what I mean when I talk about the word of God.

We may want to say that the word of God is the Bible. Certainly, the Bible is God's Word, but the word of God is more than just the Bible. God not only speaks to us in the Bible but also through the creation (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1). Sometimes he speaks to people from heaven, or in a burning bush, or in a vision. God's words through Jesus were many, certainly many more than are found in the Bible.

So, we need a broader definition of word of God than just the Bible. I would suggest the following, which shows the relationship of God's word to his lordship: God's word is his powerful, authoritative self-expression. The power corresponds to the lordship attribute of control; authoritative corresponds to the lordship attribute of authority; and self-expression to the attribute of presence. Let's look at each of these expressions in turn.

God's word is powerful. God's word communicates, of course, but it does many things other than communicate. Think of how God created the world in Genesis 1: he created it by speaking, by his word. Psalm 33 tells us:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and by the breath of his mouth all their host.  
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap;  
he puts the deeps in storehouses.  
Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!  
For he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm. (vv. 6–9)

The same is true of providence. How does God control the weather and the seasons? By speaking, by his word:

He sends out his command to the earth;  
his word runs swiftly.  
He gives snow like wool;  
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.  
He hurls down his crystals of ice like crumbs;  
who can stand before his cold?  
He sends out his word, and melts them;  
he makes his wind blow and the waters flow. (Ps. 147:15–18)

Even in the preaching of the gospel, God's word is not only communication but power. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 1:16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek"; and in 1 Thessalonians 1:5: ". . . because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction."

Figurative expressions for the word of God suggest great

power. "Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29; cf. 5:14; 20:9). The only offensive weapon in the Christian's armor is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17; cf. Isa. 49:2). That power is nothing less than the omnipotence of God himself. Isaiah 55:11 reads, "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Like the power of God's own lordship, the power of the word can never fail.

Never take the Word of God for granted. Never treat it as just another academic text. If you ignore it or hear it with a disobedient heart, the way Israel heard Isaiah's message, its power will harden you (Isa. 6:9-10). But if you hear it as young Samuel, responding, "Speak, LORD, for your servant hears" (1 Sam. 3:9), then that powerful Word will use its great power on your behalf.

Don't, however, think of the power of the word as an impersonal force. As we saw in 1 Thessalonians 1:5, the power is the power of the Spirit working as he will.

God's word is authoritative. Some theologians have understood that the word is a power, but they have thought of it as only a power, not also language, a meaningful form of communication. If it is power but not language, then it cannot speak authoritatively to us. Ultimately, that's what liberal theologians want, a word without authority. But God's word is language as well as power, and it is language that is supremely authoritative.

Even the word God spoke in creation was meaningful and authoritative. Through his word, God not only brought things into being, but he also named them: he called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night" (Gen. 1:5). Five times in Genesis 1 God calls created things by giving them names. The same is true in providence. God's direction of the course of nature is not only powerful but also wise (Ps. 104:24). It shows his thought, his meaningful purpose.

God's meaningful speech has authority over his creatures. Remember from the first chapter that God's authority is his right to the obedience of his creatures. When God speaks, we are obligated to believe him and obey him. The whole Bible is a story of God's speaking and man's responding to his word, either in obedience or disobedience. The fall is a story of human beings disobeying God's word and the consequences of that. But through history God sends his word again and again. Sometimes people believe and obey, as when Noah built the ark and when Abraham left his home country. Other times people disobey and suffer the consequences. At every point, the word of God is the issue. The main question is whether people will hear, understand, and obey.

In the New Testament we read over and over again how important is Jesus' word. "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand," says Jesus (Matt. 7:26). Over and over, we read that Jesus' word is to be the foundation of our Christian lives. We are to hear it and do it. See how often the New Testament emphasizes the authority of Jesus' words: Matthew 7:21-29; Mark 8:38; Luke 8:21; 9:26; John 5:24; 6:63,

68; 8:31, 37, 43, 47; 12:47-50; 14:10, 15, 21, 23-24; 15:3, 7, 10, 14; 17:6, 14, 17; 1 Timothy 6:3-4; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:22; 5:2-3; 2 John 6; and Revelation 12:17; 14:12.

The same is true of the words of the apostles. Paul says that God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ "according to my gospel" (Rom. 2:16). He says, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). To the Galatians, he says twice, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8; cf. v. 10; 1 Thess. 4:2; Jude 17-18).

To become a Christian is to come under a meaningful, authoritative word from God the Father, Jesus, his prophets and apostles a word that we have an obligation to believe and obey.

God's word is self-expression. The third element of our definition is perhaps the hardest to describe. In the term self-expression, I put the emphasis on self. What I mean to say is that whenever God speaks he not only reveals his power, not only reveals verbal content, but also reveals himself. That is to say, the word is the very presence of God among us, the place where God dwells. So you cannot separate the word of God from God himself.

Let me make several subordinate points, beginning from the more obvious and moving to the less obvious.

1. The word reveals God. Obviously, when God speaks, he

reveals his mind, his will, his heart. According to Deuteronomy 4:5-8, the nations around Israel learn what kind of God Israel has when they hear his word. The righteousness of God's statutes and rules reveals the righteousness of God himself and, indeed, his nearness to Israel (v. 7).

2. Word and Spirit work together. We saw in 1 Thessalonians 1:5 that the Word comes to us in power and in the Spirit. When the Word works in power, the Spirit is right there working with it. That means that when the Word is among us, God also is among us.
3. God performs all his actions by speaking. There are several classes of divine actions mentioned in the Bible. These include God's eternal plan, creation, providence (including miracle), and his judgments and blessings on creatures. These actions line up parallel to the lordship attributes. The eternal plan shows his lordship attribute of authority, creation and providence show his control, and his judgment and blessing show his presence. But my point here is that every one of these acts God performs by speaking, by his word. His eternal counsel is a form of speech (Ps. 33:1 1; Acts 2:23; 4:28), as is creation (Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6; John 1:3), providence (Ps. 148:8), judgment (Gen. 3:17-19; Matt. 25:41-43; John 12:47-48), and grace (Matt. 25:34-36; Rom. 1:16). So, again, you never find God without his word.
4. God is distinguished from other gods by the fact that he speaks. The word is so important that it is the means by which Scripture distinguishes between him and idols. The

idols are "dumb." God, however, is by his nature "word." See this contrast in 1 Kings 18:24, 26, 29; Psalms 115:4-8 and 135:15-18; Habbakuk 2:18-20; and 1 Corinthians 12:2. As speech distinguishes God from pretenders to deity, it thereby characterizes his nature at a deep level.

5. The persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their role in the divine speech. We usually define the Trinity in terms of a family: the Father and the Son; but when we do that it is hard to bring the Spirit into that particular metaphor. However, Scripture also speaks of the Trinity using a linguistic metaphor: the Father is the speaker (Pss. 110:1; 147:4; Isa. 40:26), the Son is the Word (John 1:1-14; Rev. 19:13), and the Spirit is the breath that carries the word to its destination (Ps. 33:6; 2Tim. 2:16). The words for spirit in Greek and Hebrew mean "breath" or "wind." When I speak to you, my breath pushes words from my mouth that are transmitted by waves in the air to your eardrums, stimulating currents that bring the message to your brain. In the same way, in God, the Father speaks the word, and the Spirit carries that word so that it accomplishes its purpose, as we saw in 1 Thessalonians 1:5. The word is so important to God's nature that it can be used to define the Trinity.
6. The speech of God has divine attributes. It is righteous (Ps. 119:7), faithful (Ps. 119:86), wonderful (Ps. 119:129), holy (2 Tim. 3:15), eternal (Ps. 119:89, 160), omnipotent (Gen. 18:14; 1 Isa. 55:11), and perfect (Ps. 19:7). Only God has these attributes in total perfection. So, the word is God.
7. The word of God is an object of worship. In Psalm 56:4 David

says, "In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?" He repeats this praise for the word in verse 10 (cf. Ps. 119:120, 161-62; Isa. 66:5). This is remarkable, for only God is the object of religious praise. To worship something other than God is idolatrous. Since David worships the word here, we cannot escape the conclusion that the word is divine.

8. The word is God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1: 1). We usually use this passage to show the deity of Christ, and it is an excellent passage for this purpose, as we shall see in chapter 10. But I want you to see that this passage does not only identify Jesus with God; it also identifies God's speech with God. The phrase "in the beginning" takes us back to Genesis 1. In that passage, the word was the creative word of God, the word that made the world. John 1:3 emphasizes the creative work of the word, "All things were made through him [that is, through the Word], and without him was not any thing made that was made." So, the Word that "was God" in verse 1 was not only Jesus, as verse 14 clearly indicates ("And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"), but also the speech of God commanding the light to come out of darkness in Genesis 1:3. (Cf. 2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 1:1-3; 1 John 1:1-3; Rev. 3:14; 19:13.)

So the word is God, and God is the word. Where God is, the word is, and vice versa. God's word is not only powerful and authoritative; it is the very presence of God in our midst. How can we understand this? We can think of God's word, as John did in the first chapter of his gospel, as somehow identical with

Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. When God speaks to us, Jesus is there.

Another way to see the unity between God's word and God himself is to say (as I did in chap. 2) that God's word, his speech, is an attribute of God. And, of course, God's attributes are never separate from him. When we come in contact with God's righteousness, or his love, or his wisdom, we are coming in contact with God. His attributes are not abstract qualities that could exist apart from him. They are his own personal qualities. So, when we encounter God's speech, we encounter him.

In chapter 1, I said that among all the religions and philosophies of the world, only biblical religion teaches the existence of a being both absolute and personal. Here we note an important aspect of personality, namely, speech. Among all the religions and philosophies of the world, only the Bible presents a supreme being who speaks. How wonderful it is to know that our God has the attribute of speech! All other objects of worship are nothing but "dumb idols." But our God comes right into our history and experience and addresses us as his creatures, his servants, his friends. What a privilege!

Another implication is that God's word, wherever we find it, including Scripture, is an object worthy of reverence. I'm not advocating bibliolatry, which is worship of a material object with paper, ink, and so on. The paper and ink are creatures, not God, and we shouldn't bow down to them. But the message of the Bible, what it says, is divine, and we should receive it with praise and worship.

Furthermore, don't seek to know God apart from his Word or read the Word without realizing that you are in the presence of God. Many of you readers are seminary students or are enrolled in some other course of intensive study of God's Word. Don't ever look at the Word merely as an assignment. Say to the Lord from your heart, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears." If you get into the habit of taking the Word for granted, it will harden you rather than bless you. Since the Word is powerful, it never leaves you the same. It will leave you either better off or worse off.

If you have never repented of your sins and turned to Jesus as your only Lord and Savior, there is no better time than now to do that. Otherwise, all this intensive Bible study may leave you so hardened that you will be unable to trust Jesus at a later time. But if you receive Jesus now, even now, he will give you the power to become a child of God (John 1:12).

### The Work of the Word in the World

I have defined the word of God as God's powerful, authoritative self-expression. That is what the word is. Now I'd like to state briefly what the word does in the world.

First, the word plans the world. That is what I described as God's decree in chapter 2. In the decree God determines what will happen, what his controlling power will bring about. So, I see the decree, in this context, as reflecting God's lordship attribute of control.

Second, God's word addresses his creatures; that is, he not

only controls what they do but also speaks to them as one person to another. Here I mean especially his rational creatures, like angels and men; but (at least metaphorically) God also addresses the sun, moon, stars, winds, rains, and all of nature. Whenever he speaks to creatures, his speech, as we have seen, is supremely authoritative. Thus, I correlate God's address with his lordship attribute of authority.

Third, as we saw earlier, God's word is his dwelling place on earth. Where the word is, God is and vice versa.

### The Media of the Word

The third topic I want to explore in this chapter is the media of the word. We often talk about media today, by which we usually mean TV and radio, newspapers and magazines, film, recordings, and so on. Media are ways, means, by which content comes to us. God also uses means to communicate with people. Sometimes he speaks relatively directly, as when he spoke to Israel from Mount Sinai in Exodus 20. But even there he used vibrations in the air to reach their eardrums and nerve currents to reach their brains. He spoke to them in Hebrew or in some other human language. So, most every time God determines to give his word to us, he uses some means from the creation. What are some of these?

As you might expect by now, I will list three classes of means, corresponding to the three lordship attributes: events, words, and persons. Events correspond to the attribute of control, words to authority, and persons to presence.

## Events

Let's look first at events as media of the word. Under this general category I list three subheadings: nature and general history, redemptive history, and miracle.

God reveals himself in nature and general history. David tells us that "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Romans 1:18-32 is another important passage, which I won't quote here but will be referring to below. I want you to read it and meditate on it.

Nature and general history are not the word of God. The word, as we've seen, is divine. But nature and history are media, means, by which the word gets through to us. So, this kind of revelation is called natural revelation, revelation through the medium of nature. We also call it general revelation, because it is available to everybody. And it is quite significant. Through this revelation God's "eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived" (Rom. 1:20). Just think of that! Nobody is ignorant of God. By looking at the creation anybody can see who God is, clearly. Nobody can complain that God hasn't revealed himself clearly enough.

Furthermore, through natural revelation we can know what God expects of us. Romans 1:20 tells us that it leaves us without excuse for sin. Verse 32 reads, "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such [sins] deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." Natural revelation has moral content, clear enough to condemn each of us to hell.

Still more, natural revelation enables us to "know God" (see v. 21): not just to know about him but to know him. Natural revelation is personal, for God himself is personal. So, natural revelation tells us about God's nature (control), his moral requirements (authority), and his personal reality (presence). But, alas, that revelation, rich as it is, does not bring sinners to eternal life with God. From natural revelation, sinners come to know God as an enemy, not as a friend. The wrath of God is revealed against them (v. 18).

Natural revelation tells us much, but it doesn't tell us how to be saved. It gives us law, not gospel. We must learn the gospel from other types of revelation, specifically from preaching (Rom. 10:13ff.; 1 Cor. 1:21).

Before God brings us to believe the gospel, furthermore, we can't even see nature as we should. For without the good news that renews our hearts, our inclination is to repress the truth in unrighteousness, to exchange it for a lie (Rom. 1:18, 21, 23, 25, 28). We don't like to keep it in our knowledge, as Paul says several times in Romans 1. So, if we are to ever understand nature and history rightly, we need to look at them through what Calvin called the "spectacles" of the gospel, the spectacles of Scripture.

God reveals himself in redemptive history. This is the special story of salvation through Christ. It begins after the fall with God's promise of redemption in Genesis 3:15. Then we read about the covenants of God with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, leading to Christ: his incarnation, teaching, death for sinners, resurrection, and ascension. Of course, in contrast

with general revelation, these events do reveal the gospel: God's saving purposes. So this form of event revelation, unlike those discussed earlier, is special revelation rather than general. It is called special because it is not given to everyone and because it contains a special message, the message of salvation. This revelation is a revelation in history, in events. But we can come to know them now only from the record of them in Scripture.

God reveals himself in miracles. You'll notice that I mention miracles as a third kind of event revelation. Miracles are "signs," among other things. Recall our discussion of miracles in chapter 2.

## Words

The second group of media I would like to discuss are word media, that is, word media of the word. Notice how I just used the word word twice. These media are verbal in two ways: they are media of the word of God, and they are media that take the form of human words. I divide these into four categories: the divine voice, the word through prophets and apostles, the written Word, and the work of preaching and teaching. Word revelation is special revelation in the sense mentioned above, not general.

The word of God in the divine voice. A number of times in Scripture people hear the word of God from God's own lips, directly. This happened in the garden of Eden and when the people gathered around Mount Sinai. When Jesus walked on the earth, people on several occasions heard the divine voice

from heaven (Matt. 17:5; Luke 3:22), and on many occasions they heard the divine voice from Jesus, the Son of God incarnate.

Here I wish only to make the obvious point that the divine voice carries all the control, authority, and presence of God's own lordship. With regard to authority, isn't it obvious that when people hear God speaking directly, they have no right to take exception, to doubt, or to disobey what he says?

The word of God through prophets and apostles. Prophets and apostles hear the word from the divine voice, and God appoints them to pass it on to us. Then they themselves speak the prophetic and apostolic word. Now, how authoritative is that? Many writers have suggested that the authority of prophets and apostles is a step down from the divine voice, that because of the human element it is at least a little bit less authoritative. But look at what Scripture says about the prophetic word:

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers-it is to him you shall listen-just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die." And the LORD said to me, "They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I

myself will require it of him." (Deut. 18:15-19; cf. Jer. 1:16-19; Ezek. 13:2-3, 17)

You see that in this passage the prophet is a substitute for the divine voice. The people are terrified at the divine voice, so they ask Moses to bring them God's word. God agrees to this arrangement, and he promises them further prophets. But he also gives here the definition of a prophet: someone who has God's words in his mouth. And he says that anyone who will not listen to God's words ("my words") from the prophet's mouth, God himself will hold him accountable. This means that the words of the prophet are just as authoritative as the divine voice itself.

In the New Testament, as we saw earlier in this chapter, Jesus' words are the foundation of the church and of the Christian life. Without them we are lost. As Peter says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). But where do we find these words today? Jesus himself wrote no books. But he did appoint the apostles to speak for him, and he promised to send the Holy Spirit to aid them-by helping them remember everything Jesus taught them (John 14:26), to lead them into all truth (14:26), and to show them things to come (John 16:13): he will give them words about the past, the present, and the future. (Cf. Matt. 10:19-20, 40-41; John 15:26-27; 17:8, 20.)

After Jesus ascends to the Father, the Spirit does indeed fall on the apostles, and they speak of Jesus (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5, 10; 7:55; 9:17; 13:9-10; 13:52-14:1). They are quite conscious that they are speaking God's words, not just their

own. Paul says that if anyone proclaims another gospel than the one he preaches, he shall be accursed: "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12; cf. v. 16; 2:2). About this gospel, he says that

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:10-13; cf. Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 4:1; 7:40; 2 Cor. 4:1-6; 12:1, 7; Eph. 3:3; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:2.)

The word of God as written Word. Is the written Word, as some theologians have said, a step below the divine voice and the prophetic word? Does the form of writing remove the dynamism and grace of the spoken word? The next chapter will focus on that issue. But even at this point, it should be evident that the writings of the prophets and the apostles carry absolute divine authority. What, after all, is the difference in authority between what Paul says orally and what he writes in a letter? Note also that if there were no written Word, the revelation of two thousand years ago would have been long

forgotten. So, the authority of the apostles today comes to us through the written Word. Their continuing authority depends on the written Word; without it they would no longer be able to rule the church. We shouldn't be surprised when we discover in the next chapter that the written Word, the Bible, has the same authority as the divine voice and as the oral word of the prophets and apostles.

The word of God in preaching and teaching. What about present-day preachers and teachers? Do they, too, have the same authority as the divine voice? Alas, no. There is no promise in the Bible that guarantees they will have the same authority as the apostles. We know, indeed, that our pastors and elders, even seminary professors, make mistakes. Only a few crazy people among them would claim to have the authority of a prophet or apostle.

But let's not stop there. In the Second Helvetic Confession, one of the lesser used Reformed confessions, there is the odd phrase, "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (chap. 1). What that means is not that the preacher is infallible or inerrant but that when he communicates the Word of God truly, the Word loses none of its authority. The Word, when truly communicated, has the same authority on the lips of a preacher as it has on the lips of Paul. God's word always has the same ultimate authority, regardless of the medium by which it comes to us, even if that medium is the lips of a sinful human being.

**Persons**

Appropriately, we need to discuss the third kind of medium by which God's word comes to us (following events and words), namely, persons. God is himself a person, so we should not be surprised that persons can serve as a specially important form of revelation.

He reveals himself personally in theophany, in which God takes on visible form (Gen. 16:7-14; 21:17-20; Ex. 23:31; etc.). It can be the form of a man, an angel, or most often as a heavenly being surrounded by a glorious host of angels. He reveals himself also by incarnation, in the person of Christ. Revelation through Christ is absolutely unparalleled (Matt. 11:25-27). In him, God tabernacled among us (John 1: 14). The apostles saw him, heard him, touched him, handled him (1 John 1:1-3). Those who saw him saw the Father (John 14:9). Of course, God also reveals himself in the Spirit as on the day of Pentecost, when tongues of flame appeared, as well as when he enters our own hearts and gives us new life.

God reveals himself personally also in human persons, who are his image (more of this in chap. 7). Recall, though, that in the fall the image was marred, and God's saving grace renews us in the image of Christ, more and more, as we mature in Christ. It is remarkable that often in the New Testament we are told to imitate those mature Christians who in their persons have become like God. Paul says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 1 Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:6; 2 Thess. 3:7-9; Heb. 13:7). And Paul tells Timothy to be such an example as well (1 Tim. 4:12; cf. 1 Thess. 1:7; Titus 2:7; 1 Peter 5:3).

The most profound personal revelation occurs in and through our regeneration and sanctification, as God writes his word on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). As such, he reveals himself so that we really know him in the deepest possible way. This is not to say that he supplements the Scriptures by speaking additional words to every believer. Rather, he illumines his Word (1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13) so that we come to love it and so that it becomes second nature to us. The word written on our hearts is the same Word written in Scripture.

Reformed theology has traditionally called this process illumination, a process in which we come to understand, believe, and apply the Bible. But in Scripture itself this process is sometimes called revelation (Matt. 11:25-27; Eph. 1:17), because it gives us actual knowledge. I prefer to coordinate this form of revelation with the other two, so that we have the triad of general revelation, special revelation, and existential revelation. These, in turn, correspond to the three lordship attributes. General revelation is primarily a revelation of God's control over the universe. Special revelation is primarily his authoritative words to us. Existential revelation is his word in us, written in our nature and on our hearts.

## *Chapter 5*

# THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

God's written Word has the same power, authority, and divinity as the divine voice from heaven and the word of the prophets and apostles. Its authority implies that it is infallible and inerrant. We shall explore some of the difficulties of making this claim and conclude with some observations about the necessity, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture.



We have been considering the doctrine of the word of God, or revelation, the ways in which God communicates with human beings. Since we know God exclusively through his revelation, these chapters constitute the foundation of everything else we say in theology. In the previous chapter I defined the word of God as his powerful, authoritative self-expression, drawing on what I called earlier the three lordship attributes. So defined, God's word does three things in the world: as his decree, it makes everything happen; as his address, it speaks to us the authoritative words of God; and as his presence, it is God's dwelling place in the world and in our hearts.

I also considered the media of the word: events, human words, and persons. Under human words, we looked at the divine voice, in which God himself directly addresses us in

human words, the word through prophets and apostles, the written Word, and contemporary preaching and teaching. I promised to spend more time on the written Word, as that has a special importance; for without these written words, we would have no access to the divine voice, the words of the apostles, the prophets, or Jesus.

People sometimes think that the facts about Jesus are important but the words about him are much less so. They think it is important that we confess the great facts of Christ's incarnation, atonement, and resurrection, but they don't think it is very important how we look at the Bible. As they understand it, the Bible may contain errors, even as it testifies to Christ. I believe that Scripture itself teaches a very different view. Scripture itself contains a doctrine of Scripture. A sound theology will not only treasure the work of Jesus, but it will also treasure the means God has appointed for us to know about Christ, namely, the written Word, the Bible.

### The Authority of the Written Word

Remember the discussion in our last chapter about the divine voice, God's speaking directly to people? There I argued that the divine voice was absolutely authoritative, that it bore the full authority of God's lordship. Then I discussed the word of the prophets and apostles, and I concluded that their word, too, was absolutely authoritative, not one bit less than the divine voice.

What about the written Word? What about the words the prophets and apostles wrote down? Some theologians have

argued that a written word is always a step down from a living voice. But the Bible itself doesn't argue that way, and it stands to reason that what a person writes has as much authority as what he says—in some cases even more so, since whatever we write is usually intended for more permanent use than our mere spoken words.

Let's look at what the Bible says about itself. In the first place, God intends his revelation to be permanent, not momentary. Forget the theologians, like Karl Barth, who think that revelation is so dynamic that it cannot be preserved beyond the moment of revelation. In Scripture God gives revelation that is to be preserved and passed from generation to generation:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:6-9)

Even before this, early patriarchs such as Jacob put up pillars, memorials, as permanent reminders of divine revelation (Gen. 8:20; 12:7-8; 13:18; 28:18, 22, 35; 35:3; Josh. 24:26-27). In the New Testament, revelation is something to be guarded and preserved. Jude 3 says, "Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once

for all delivered to the saints." "Faith" here means the content of the Christian message that was delivered to the church by the Lord and his apostles. It is not to be changed but must be guarded, kept, preserved, transmitted to all nations and all generations.

Let's look at the forms of written revelation. First, the book of Genesis speaks of the "generations" of Adam, Noah, and so on (as in 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:27; 25:12, 19; 36:9; 37:2). Some have thought that these were titles of books, for Genesis 5:1 speaks of "the book of the generations of Adam." Perhaps these were writings that Moses used in putting together the first five books of the Bible. That is a little uncertain, but clearly there is written revelation in the covenant God made with Israel in the time of Moses.

I mentioned in chapter 1 that Lord names God as the head of a covenant relationship. The covenant always involves words, particularly promises and commands. In a Near Eastern covenant treaty between a great king and a lesser one, these words were written down and put in a holy place as the ultimate law governing the relationship. They served as the ultimate law much as the U.S. Constitution serves as the fundamental law of the United States of America.

Archaeologists have found some of these documents, and they follow a certain literary form that is very similar to parts of the Bible. Meredith Kline and some other scholars believe that the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are, in their literary form, a treaty document, a covenant.' Kline also identifies the same literary elements in the book of Deuteronomy.

In these treaties, and emphatically in the biblical covenants, the great king is the author of the document. This treaty is not negotiated between the two parties; the great king imposes the terms. So, in the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, God identifies himself as "the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." He is the author of the document. Indeed, in Exodus 24:12 we read, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' " Here God is not only the author but also the publisher: he has written the commands with his own finger on the tablets of stone, as we read in Exodus 31:18. (Cf. Ex 32:15-16; 34:1, 27-28, 32; Deut. 4:13; 9:10-11; 10:2-4; 31:14-29.)

The document is a "witness" (Deut. 31:26): not a witness of man to his experience with God but of God's witness against Israel by which God will hold Israel accountable. The document is put in the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle, by the ark of the Lord. So, the written Word becomes known as the "holy scriptures" (2 Tim. 3:15 KJv). Thus, the written Word carries the authority of God himself. It has no less authority than the divine voice or the word of the prophet.

From time to time during the Old Testament period, prophets also wrote down their words, and these were added to the covenant document. Joshua, for example, wrote statutes for Israel to keep and wrote them in the Law of God (Josh. 24:25-26). They wrote their words, first, so that later readers could test whether their predictions came true, determining whether the prophet was a true prophet (Deut. 18:22). They

also wrote so their words could be preserved for future generations and might then perhaps be more favorably received (Hab. 2:2).

Through the Old Testament period, God's people praised God's Word. Psalm 19:7 says, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple." What law is the psalmist talking about? Surely the written law of Moses. Look through the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, and you'll find in nearly every verse praise of God's law, statutes, testimonies, words, precepts—that eloquent redundancy! Again, what the psalmist has in mind here is not the divine voice or the oral words of prophets but the written law of God.

By the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Jews acknowledged what we call the Old Testament as God's Word, God's covenant with Israel. Jesus and the apostles also recognized its authority. They cited it with indications of its supreme authority: "oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2), "holy scripture" (2 Tim. 3:15 KJV), "law," "prophets," "the royal law of liberty" (James 2:8). B. B. Warfield in a famous article shows that even the simple phrase "Scripture says" is, like "It is written," an authoritative citation.<sup>2</sup> What "Scripture says," to the New Testament writers, is what "God says." The Scripture is the words of the Holy Spirit given through human writers (as Acts 1:16).

Furthermore, Jesus and the New Testament taught the authority of the Old Testament. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17-19 that he had come to fulfill, not abrogate, the law and the

prophets. Anyone who teaches others to disobey one of the least commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. He told the Jews that all the Scriptures testified of him (John 5:45), that the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:33-36).

Paul says that the Old Testament Scriptures were given "for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). Think of that! Books written hundreds of years before Paul's time were written to encourage believers of Paul's own time. They were intended by their author-God himself-to be valid and helpful through all time. In that respect the Bible is utterly unique. No other book was intended by its author to meet the needs of people hundreds of years in the future.

Two New Testament passages are especially important in describing the nature of biblical authority. These are not the only passages dealing with the subject. Remember, the authority of the written Word is a doctrine that goes back at least to the time of Moses. But these two passages sum up the overall biblical teaching about the authority of the written Word. The first is 2 Timothy 3:15-17:

And how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

In this letter Paul is concerned about the false teaching and immorality that will enter the church after his own death. How will the church be able to distinguish the true from the false? Paul tells Timothy first to imitate Paul's own life and teaching (vv. 10-14). Of course, in time a generation will arise that has no personal memory of Paul. For them and for Timothy, too, Paul next emphasizes that they should turn to the Old Testament Scripture-holy Scriptures-which Timothy himself studied as a child. That Scripture is "breathed out by God," which is the correct translation of a word sometimes translated "inspired." The word means not that God breathed something into the Bible but that God breathed it out, or, in other words, that he spoke it. The written Word is God's personal speech. It is nothing less than the divine voice. So, it is the ultimate criterion to distinguish what teaching is false and what teaching is true.

The second passage is 2 Peter 1:19-21:

And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The context of this passage is very similar to the last. Again, an aging apostle looks to the time when he will no longer be able to personally advise the church. Again, he anticipates (chap. 2)

a terrible time of doctrinal and ethical confusion. Again, in verses 16-18, he tells his readers to remember his own personal experience and eyewitness testimony. But he also points to something even more sure: the Old Testament prophets. Prophecies, he says, do not come from someone sitting down and trying to interpret events out of his own wisdom. The prophets spoke the words, but their wills did not originate the words. Those words came from God, as the Holy Spirit carried the prophets where he wanted them to go. So, the Old Testament is God's covenant with Israel: his own words, carrying the supreme authority of his lordship.

What of the New Testament? Well, in the nature of the case you won't find in the New Testament any passage where someone looks at the completed New Testament and calls it the Word of God. At the time of the New Testament writers, the New Testament was not a complete book; it was still being written!

But consider this: the religion of the New Testament is essentially the same as that of the Old, centered on the Word of God. People sometimes think that the Old Testament is centered on words while the New Testament is centered on a wordless kind of spirituality. But there is not the slightest suggestion of this view in the Bible itself. Remember how important the words of Jesus are? Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Remember how the apostles told people that their own words are the commandments of the Lord (1 Cor. 14:37)? Well, that shows that the New Testament is just as word-centered as the Old Testament. It also makes it very important for us to be able

to find these words of eternal life, spoken by Jesus and the apostles. God provided a written form for the Old Testament revelation. Can we expect him to do any less for the New Testament revelation, for the fulfillment of the Old Testament?

Note also that the New Testament revelation, like the Old, is a permanent revelation to be passed on to other nations and generations. This is the tradition, the Word given once-for-all, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:2-3, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:2, 2 Peter 2:21, and Jude 3.

The apostles formalized this tradition by writing it down in letters, gospels, and the apocalyptic book of Revelation. As the ancient covenants were to be read aloud to the people, so Paul asks that his letters be read to the churches (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). And he makes his letters the basis for church discipline (2 Thess. 3:14) and the test of people who claim to be prophets or to have the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 14:37). Furthermore, Paul quotes the gospel of Luke as an authoritative word from God (1 Tim. 5:18), and Peter speaks of how ignorant and unstable men twist the letters of Paul "as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). See? Paul's letters are Scripture, like the books of Moses.

## Canon

But which books belong in the Bible? That is the question of canon. On one level, it is a difficult question. Some books, like 2 Peter and Jude, waited a long time before they were accepted by all Christians as part of the Bible. Other books, like the Shepherd of Hermias, were read along with the Scriptures

by many Christians for years, but the church eventually said that these were not part of the Bible.

On another level, the question should not be too difficult. We know that it is God's intention to rule the church by a written document, as in the Old Testament. So, as in the Old Testament, we should assume that God's providence has made that book easy to find. Remember that the church did not "canonize" the Bible; it did not make the Bible authoritative. Rather, it read these books and discovered that God had already made them authoritative. Basically, God illumined these writings so that the church could recognize God's voice in them. As Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice" (John 10:27).

Our Old Testament is basically the Bible used by the Jews in the time of Christ, which Jesus himself declared to be authoritative. The Roman Catholics added some other books to their Old Testaments in the mid 1500s, but there is no reason to assume that those books have divine authority.

As to the New Testament books, there was some uncertainty, as I said earlier. Generally, the church accepted books they thought came from apostles, such as the gospel of Matthew and Paul's epistle to the Romans, as well as books from other writers certified by the apostles: Luke was thought to be certified by Paul and Mark by Peter. But that criterion doesn't always work; for example, we don't know the authorship of Hebrews. Another criterion was consistency with other Scriptures. Hence, I believe, the Shepherd of Hermas was rejected. In the end, Jesus' sheep heard his voice. It is a remarkable fact that although the early church argued about

many things, the extent of the canon never became a divisive issue. In the fourth century, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in his Easter letter listed the books accepted as Scripture in his church, and nobody dissented.

My overall conclusion is that our written Bible is the Word of God and that it is just as authoritative as God's divine voice.

## The Transmission of the Word

Now I'd like to take up the question of transmission; that is, how does the written Word of God get from his lips to our hearts? First, as I mentioned, God inspires it. Inspiration is the "breathing out" (as we saw in 2 Tim. 3:16). God speaks the words of the Bible. People sometimes ask if this means that God dictated the words to the human writers. The answer is sometimes but usually not. We don't have any record of God telling Luke to sit down and take dictation, though the risen Christ does ask John to do that in Revelation 2:1 and following. Luke went about the work of writing his gospel as any ancient historian would, but the result of his work was the Word of God. God used Luke to breathe out his own words, so that the text of Luke is both wholly Luke's and wholly God's.

The next step in transmission is copying. We use the term auto-grapha, or autographs, to refer to the original, authoritative manuscripts of Bible books. Now, there is no promise in Scripture that when people make copies of these books, they will be perfect copies. Try it yourself: write out a copy of, say, Leviticus. Chances are, you'll make some mistakes. This is why we say that only the autographs are

perfectly authoritative.

Some critics of our position say that this destroys our whole view of biblical authority; for if only the autographs are fully authoritative, and we don't have the autographs, then for all practical purposes we don't have an infallible, authoritative Bible. But take the following points into account:

- Though we don't have the actual autographs, we have access to the original text through the science of textual criticism, which compares various manuscript readings to determine the original. The important thing is to have the text, not to have the manuscript.
- Some textual problems remain unsolved; but these are very minor for the most part, and they never affect any doctrine.
- Scripture is very redundant (repetitious in a good way!). If there is a problem in one place, we can find a clear statement of the same teaching somewhere else.

People sometimes say it doesn't make sense for God to inspire a book and then require us to determine its original content by textual criticism, by human means. When you think of transmission as a process carrying the word from God's lips to our hearts, eventually there will have to be a role for human thought, reason, even science. God might have made it so that whenever he spoke a word, we would all understand it instantly. Clearly that didn't happen. God evidently intended some human teaching and thought to go on before his people

would be able to appropriate the Word completely. He wanted this to be a communal process, so that we would depend on one another. The business of figuring out the original text is part of that. Since God has not promised to preserve these processes from error, we will sometimes make mistakes. So, although the autographic text of Scripture is infallible, the transmission of that text to our hearts is not.

In understanding and applying the Word, we can see that it involves both a divine teacher, the Holy Spirit, and human teachers: your pastor, your library, your friendly seminary professor. Of course, the work of these human teachers will accomplish nothing unless the Holy Spirit is working in them and through them. The works of the Spirit are (1) illumination, enabling us to understand the Word (John 3:5-6; 1 Cor. 2:12-16; 2 Cor. 3:15-18); (2) persuasion, demonstrating to us that the Word is true (1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Cor. 2:4), and (3) writing the Word on the heart, that existential revelation by which loving and obeying the Word become second nature to us.

## Inerrancy

Let us now discuss the inerrancy of Scripture, a fiercely debated topic in contemporary theology. The term simply means "no errors," that is, "truth" in the common, garden-variety sense.<sup>1</sup> What Scripture says, is true, never false. Therefore, you can rely on it. There are no errors in it. By the way, error is not the same thing as imprecision. We often express ourselves imprecisely, as when we use round numbers. But to do so is neither to lie nor to make a mistake. Often we must use some round numbers to express ourselves clearly. If I

tell you my age down to the minute and second, that is too much precision, precision that interferes with communication. The Bible never claims to be perfectly precise. It only claims to be true.

It is true because it is God's Word, and God always speaks truly. Error comes from deceit (telling lies) or from ignorance (making mistakes). But God never tells lies (Titus 1:2), and he never makes mistakes (Heb. 4:13).

Many people today, a lot of them theologians, think that there are errors in the Bible. Basically, they use two arguments. The first one is that there are "obvious mistakes" in the Bible, such as Jesus' statement that the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds. Actually, examples such as this are not so obvious. With most of them, the solution is just to read the text more carefully. When Jesus speaks of seeds in Mark 4:31, he is speaking not about all the seeds that a modern botanist would know but about the seeds that were normally sown in the ground by farmers of his day. To discuss all the other species would be, surely, excess precision.

Now, some so-called obvious errors don't have obvious solutions, though for every problem of this sort there are usually two or three solutions proposed in the literature. The problem here is that people who find supposed errors in Scripture actually have a misunderstanding of Christian faith. When God spoke to Abraham and told him that he would have many descendants and they would own the land of Canaan, Abraham had a lot of problems in believing that word of God. He owned no land in Canaan, and both he and his wife were

too old to have children. But, Paul says in Romans 4, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (vv. 20-21). Abraham believed in God's word even though there were problems, and Paul presents that as the nature of Christian faith. How can we believe that God would forgive our sins through Christ? Think how many problems there are in believing that! But if we waited until all the problems were solved, we wouldn't believe in Christ at all.

The second argument against biblical inerrancy is that the purpose of the Bible is not to give inerrant teaching on matters other than the basic plan of salvation. But where does the Bible itself distinguish between matters of salvation and other matters? It's all about Christ, all about salvation. That includes the history and geography; biblical redemption, as opposed to Buddhist or Hindu, Marxist or secularist, depends very much on events that happened in particular times and places. Furthermore, biblical redemption deals with all of life, including our eating and drinking (1 Cor. 10:31). Nothing is irrelevant to God's Word.

### Clarity

I want briefly to mention four more important things about the Bible. The first is its clarity.' At the time of the Reformation, some Roman Catholics were saying that lay people should not read the Bible, since only people in the church hierarchy could properly understand it. The Reformers did not say that everything in the Bible is perfectly clear. But they did say that

the basic message of salvation is sufficiently clear that anyone can understand it, either by reading it himself or by using ordinary means of grace, such as talking to a pastor. By the way, the power, authority, and clarity of the Word form a triad that corresponds to the lordship attributes; for in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 and Romans 10:6-8 the clarity of the Word is based on the nearness of God to his people, the presence of God among his people.

### Necessity

Necessity simply means that without God's Word we have no relationship with him. Without his commands he is not our Lord, for the Lord is by definition one who gives authoritative commands to his people. Without his Word we have no authoritative promises either, so he cannot be our Savior.

### Sufficiency

Sufficiency means simply that in Scripture we have all the words of God we need. We should not try to add to them, and we dare not subtract from them, since we live by every word that comes from God.

Scripture itself tells us not to add or subtract (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). It tells us clearly not to add human tradition to the Word; that is, don't put human tradition on the same level as God's Word, as the Pharisees did (Deut. 18:15-22; Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:1-9; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Thess. 2:2). Human tradition is not a bad thing, but it is not God's Word. When we try to put it on the same level as God's Word, we are saying

that God's Word is not enough, that it is insufficient.

This sufficiency is true of all Scripture, both Old and New Testament. But there is also a special sense in which the New Testament gospel is sufficient. Just as Jesus' death and resurrection are sufficient to save us, so the apostles' message about Jesus is sufficient to give us all the blessings of Jesus' salvation (Heb. 1:1-3; 2:1-4; 2 Peter 1:2-11). We should not expect God to give us further revelation of the same authority as the Bible.

People sometimes say that Scripture is sufficient for theology but not for other areas of life, such as science, history, politics, and car repairs. But that idea misunderstands the sufficiency of Scripture. Remember always: Scripture is sufficient as the Word of God. It gives us all the words of God we will ever need. So, Scripture contains all the Word of God we need for theology-and also for ethics, politics, the arts, and car repairs.

Certainly, for all these disciplines we need knowledge from outside Scripture, too. That's even true of theology. Theologians need, for example, to know the rules of Hebrew grammar, but Scripture doesn't give these to us. They need to know the history of the ancient world, but Scripture only gives us part of that history. So, in order to use the Bible, we need to know things outside the Bible.

The same is true in ethics. For example, the Bible doesn't mention abortion. We have to learn what abortion is from extrabiblical sources. Scripture does say some things about

murder and about unborn human life. When we bring the biblical principles together with our extrabiblical knowledge of what abortion is, it becomes obvious that "thou shalt not murder" implies "thou shalt not abort."

The basic point to be remembered here is that no kind of knowledge from outside the Bible is worthy to be added to Scripture. That includes the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, claims of contemporary prophets (see chap. 12), and even the confessions and traditions of the Protestant denominations.

## Chapter 6

# WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

To know God is to know him as Lord and therefore to pursue knowledge of him in a godly way. As we come to know God, we recognize that he initiates our knowledge, that his Word is the ultimate authority for our knowledge, and that in knowing God we come into a personal relationship with him. Theology is the application of Scripture to all areas of human life. Exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology look at the whole Bible from various perspectives.

N

ow we are going to spend one chapter exploring the nature of theology. You are probably surprised that we are doing this so late in the book. Most theologies deal with this subject right at the beginning, and we can understand why. It seems that you need to have a definition of theology before you can do theology. But that's not necessarily true. You can usually walk before you can define walking, talk

before you can define talking. The work of defining is a fairly sophisticated human activity. Most people don't learn how to define terms until they are in school, and most of us never learn how to do that well. In general, activity precedes definitions.

In our case, I think it has been helpful to wait a few chapters before defining theology, for two reasons. In the first place, it is just good in principle for you to have some experience doing theology before you try to define it. Second, if you are going to understand my definition of theology, you need to know something about God's covenant lordship.

By the way, definitions are not something to live or die over. The Bible doesn't tell us how to define English words. The word theology isn't even in the Bible, so we are faced with a number of choices as to how to use it, if we want to use it at all. Any definition is okay if it enables us to communicate clearly with one another and doesn't prevent us from saying something that needs saying.

I would like to suggest here two ways of looking at theology. I know, it is odd to have two ways instead of three. Maybe one of you can write to me and suggest a third. But for now we have two: theology is knowing God, and theology is a disciplined study of God.

## Theology Is Knowing God

First, theology is knowing God. This definition was given by Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch Christian philosopher, theologian, journalist, politician, and founder of the Free

University of Amsterdam.' Kuyper was one of the giants of Reformed theology in the last two centuries. He was prime minister of the Netherlands from 1901 to 1905. He wrote thousands and thousands of pages, but I'd urge you to read first his *Lectures on Calvinism*.' In that book, he shows that Calvinism is not just a system of theology but has implications for philosophy, the arts, politics, all of culture. His most famous saying was that there is not one square inch of territory in the universe of which Jesus Christ does not say, "This is mine."

Well, Kuyper said that theology is knowing God. When you take apart the word theology, you get *theo* from the Greek word for God and *logy* from the Greek word *logos*. *Logos* can mean a lot of things: word, reason, account, or knowledge. "Knowing God" is not what we usually think of when we hear the word theology, but it is one of the generally accepted definitions of the term.

If you say that theology is knowing God, you make it a personal activity rather than a merely academic one. Knowing God is something more than knowing about God. It is a personal relationship, like knowing a friend-or knowing an enemy. I have been emphasizing in this book the importance of seeing God as an absolute person. Recall that biblical religion is unique in teaching that the Supreme Being is personal. To think of theology as knowing God underscores this emphasis.

In John 17:3, in his prayer to the Father, Jesus says, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Eternal life, in the final analysis, is nothing more or less than knowing God. Eternal life

is entering into a friendship with God, one that deepens and grows through all eternity.

People will sometimes say, "How can people like me actually know God, the great Lord of the universe?" Some think we are arrogant to even claim that we know God. It is true that God is greater than we are, even incomprehensible. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God says that his thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are his ways our ways. Paul in Romans 11:33-36 says that God's judgments are unsearchable, and his ways past finding out.

But though God is incomprehensible, he is also knowable. He is knowable, because he reveals himself to us, as we have seen in the last two chapters. We couldn't figure out on our own who he is, but he has come into our world and has told us who he is. So, we know him who is incomprehensible. Incomprehensibility means not that God is unknowable but that we cannot know him exhaustively, completely, as God knows himself.

Indeed, even unbelievers know God in a sense. Romans 1 tells us that everyone knows God because he has revealed himself clearly in the created world. Through that revelation, people not only know about God, but they know him (Rom. 1:21).

However, only believers have a saving knowledge of God, the knowledge that is eternal life (1 Cor. 2:9-15; 1 John 5:20). Unbelievers know God, but as an enemy, not a friend. The believer's knowledge of God is that which comes from the Father through the Son (Matt. 11:27). That's the kind of

knowledge we'll be looking at through the rest of the first section of the chapter.

To know God is to know him as Lord. Over and over, God says that he will do something so that they "shall know that I am the LORD" (Ex. 14:18; cf. 33:11-34:9; 1 Kings 8:43; 1 Chron. 28:6-9). That is a summary of what God wants us to know about him, to know that he is Lord. That means, as we've seen in previous chapters, knowing his control, authority, and presence.

You grow in knowledge of God as you know him more and more as Lord, as King. First, he is the one who controls all things. You will grow in your knowledge of God as you see more and more things as under his control: the present, the future, your own life, your sin, your salvation. Perhaps you think now that there is some part of your life where you are in control. You will grow in your knowledge of God when you come to see that ultimately there is no part of your life that is controlled by anyone other than God, even that little part of your life.

Second, you come to know God as the one who speaks with such authority that you must obey—in every area of your life: your social life, your moral life, even your intellectual life. You will grow in your knowledge of God when you come to bring every thought captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

Third, you come to know God as you sense more and more his presence in your life. You can't ever escape from him. You can't do anything that he doesn't see. And nothing shall ever

separate you from his love.

Our knowledge of God, as we've seen, is a knowledge about God's lordship. It is also a knowledge under his lordship, subject to his lordship. That is to say, we achieve knowledge about God in God's way. Knowing is one of many things we do in life, and like everything else it should be done to God's glory. What kind of knowing brings glory to God?

First, it is knowledge under God's control. God is the one who decides whether we will know him or not. We cannot know him unless he takes the initiative to reveal himself. God is sovereign in the area of knowledge as in everything else (Matt. 11:25-27).

Second, it is knowledge under God's authority. Scripture describes a very close relationship between knowing God and obedience, in several ways. (1) Knowledge of God produces obedience (John 14:15, 21; 17:26). If we know Christ, indeed, if we love him, we will keep his commandments. (2) Obedience leads to the knowledge of God. Jesus says in John 7:17, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority" (cf. Eph. 3:17-19; 2 Tim. 2:25-26; 1 John 3:16). You see? A desire to obey leads to the knowledge that Jesus' words come from God. The obedient heart comes first, the knowledge second. And then, certainly, the new knowledge will lead to new obedience, the new obedience to still more knowledge, and so on. There is a spiral relationship between knowledge and obedience: more of the one leads to more of the other. If I drew an arrow (meaning "leads to") between knowledge and

obedience, that arrow would have to point in both directions: knowledge producing obedience and obedience producing knowledge. That second part is hard to understand. We're used to hearing people say that knowledge comes first, then ethics; knowledge first, then obedience. But the Bible, remarkably, teaches also that obedience leads to knowledge.

(3) Scripture sometimes equates knowledge and obedience. In Jeremiah 22:16, God speaks of a good king this way: "He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the LORD." Good King Josiah supported the poor against their oppressors. That was his knowledge of God. Godliness is knowledge. So, there is no knowledge without godliness. (Cf. Hos. 6:6.)

This is why (4) obedience is a criterion of knowledge in Scripture. If you want to know whether someone knows God, look at his or her life. First John 2:3-4 reads: "And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (cf. Matt. 7:21-29; Luke 8:21; John 8:47; 14:15, 21, 23-24; 15:7, 10, 14; 17:6, 17; 1 John 2:3-5; 4:7; 5:2-3; 2 John 6). Obedience and knowledge are so very close.

So (5) if we are going to seek knowledge, we must do it in an obedient way. We must not seek knowledge the way the world does. God calls that foolishness. We must seek it not so we can show how smart we are but with love for people (1 Cor. 8:1-3). The wisdom of God, as James says (3:17), is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good

fruits, impartial and sincere" (cf. 1 Cor. 1-2; 3:18-23).

I've mentioned that our knowledge of God is under his control and under his authority; that means that we have to seek knowledge in God's way. The third lordship attribute, God's presence, is also relevant to our knowledge of God. As we seek knowledge of God, remember always that we are seeking a deep relationship with him, one very much like marriage (Hos. 1-3; Eph. 5:22-33), sonship (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17), or friendship (John 15:13-15).

The same principles apply to knowing God's world. After all, the world is God's creation. So, knowing the world is knowing God. To know the world is to know God's intentions, his tastes, his desires, and in some cases his sense of humor (think of the camel and the okapi).

John Calvin wrote on the first page of his Institutes that knowing God and knowing the self are interrelated. You can't know God without knowing yourself, and you can't know yourself without knowing God. And Calvin added that he didn't know which is first. I think Calvin would say the same thing about knowing the world: to know the world you must know God, and vice versa. So, we have three terms here: God, the world, and the self, and we can't understand one of these without the others. We know God through his Word, so let's replace God with his Word in this scheme: the Word of God, the world, and the self.

This triad ties in with the lordship attributes. The world is the course of nature and history under God's control. The Word

is the authoritative revelation of God. And the self is where God dwells with us in his temple-presence. You can't know God without knowing these three things, and you can't know any one of them without the others.

Let me define three perspectives, which I think are very important to theology. When you ask directly what God's revelation says, you are using the normative perspective. Of course, you can't understand God's revelation apart from the world and the self. The world and the self are revelation, as we saw in chapter 4. As I said there, you cannot fully understand special revelation, general revelation, and existential revelation apart from the others. So, the normative perspective focuses on God's revelation, applying it to the world and to the self.

When you ask about God's world, trying to understand the situations we get into, I call that the situational perspective. Of course, you can't understand your situation without understanding God's revelation or without understanding yourself.

Then when you ask about yourself, when you seek to know yourself, you are seeking to know from what I will call the existential perspective. In this perspective, you focus on yourself. Of course, you can't understand yourself apart from the Word and the world. You can't understand yourself apart from God's revelation, and you can't understand yourself apart from the situation, your environment.

I call these perspectives because each of them covers the whole field of knowledge from a particular angle, a perspective.

It's not that the normative covers some things, the situational others, and the existential still others; rather, each perspective covers everything. The normative focuses on God's revelation, but it looks both at the world and the self, for everything is revelation. The situational focuses on the world, but it also looks at the Word and the self, which are parts of the world. The same is true for the existential. It focuses on the self, but it is through the self (our thoughts and perceptions) that we know everything else. Each of the three perspectives deals with the whole world but does so from its peculiar, well, perspective.

The situational correlates with the lordship attribute of control, for in studying the world we are studying God's mighty works of creation and providence. The normative correlates with the lordship attribute of authority, for his revelation is authoritative. And the existential correlates with the lordship attribute of presence, as God can always be found in and with the individual self.

We have looked at theology as knowing God: knowing him as Lord; knowing him at his initiative, in obedient response to his Word, as the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Theology also is knowing our world and knowing ourselves in relation to him, through his revelation, and therefore knowing him under the situational, normative, and existential perspectives.

## Theology Is a Disciplined Study of God

Now let us take a second approach to theology, certainly

not inconsistent with the first: theology is a disciplined study of God. This is what most people have in mind when they use the term theology. But what kind of study are we talking about here?

Friedrich Schleiermacher is sometimes called "the father of modern theology"-modern liberal theology, that is. Liberal theology is theology that does not recognize the supreme authority of Scripture. Liberal theologians, therefore, need to find some standard other than the Bible to use in developing their theology. So, Schleiermacher defined theology this way: "Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech."<sup>3</sup>

You see what Schleiermacher is doing. He does not believe that the Bible is the absolute Word of God, so he prefers to say that theology is the outworking of our religious affections or feelings. You encounter God, you feel a certain way, and then you try to put that feeling into words. That's theology in Schleiermacher's view. It is usually called a subjectivist view, because it sees theology as something that goes on inside ourselves.

Very different is the definition of Charles Hodge, the great Reformed theologian who taught at Princeton Seminary for many years in the nineteenth century. He had a high view of biblical authority and saw Scripture as the ultimate authority for theological statements. He said that theology is "the exhibition of the facts of Scripture in their proper order and relation .... 114

Hodge's definition is much better than Schleiermacher's, because it bases theology squarely on the Word of God. It is an objective view, because it sees theology as based on something outside ourselves. But as we look at this definition carefully, we should ask what Hodge means by "proper order." Proper as opposed to what? The Scriptures? It sounds as if Hodge is saying that in the Bible the facts are in disorder or that their order is less than proper, so that it is the theologian's job to put them in proper order. But then Hodge would be criticizing Scripture, not in its content but in its form.

My guess is that Hodge would want to deny that he is criticizing Scripture in any way at all. So, the words "proper order" probably don't reflect very well what was in Hodge's mind. The problem here is that Hodge didn't have a very clear idea of why we need theology. If Scripture is already in a proper order, then we don't need theology to put it in such an order. Then why do we need theology?

Here is my suggestion: we need theology for the sake of people. Theology is the application of the Word by persons to the world and to all areas of human life. We need theology not because there is something wrong with the Bible, an improper form perhaps, but because there is something wrong with us. The Bible is fine, just as it is. The problem is that we are slow to grasp it, both because of our weakness and because of our sin. So the theologian, like a good preacher, takes the biblical text and explains it to us. Usually that will involve putting it into a different form rather than just reading the words to us. That is not because the Bible's own form is somewhat "improper" but because other forms are sometimes useful in getting the biblical

content through our thick heads.

Why didn't Hodge think to put it this way? What kept him from thinking of "theology as application"? I'm not sure, but I suspect that Hodge would have found my definition too close to Schleiermacher, too subjective; for on my definition theologians have to talk about human needs and questions, not only about the objective Word of God. Reformed theologians generally have been averse to talking about inner subjectivity, about feelings and inner thought processes. But I think Reformed theology needs to give more attention to the subjective side of theology. Theology, after all, is an inward process, a process of thinking. It isn't just feelings, as Schleiermacher thought, but it takes account of feelings, for thoughts and feelings influence one another all the time.

The Bible itself tells us that we should apply its truth to our own experience, our questions, our feelings, our thought processes. The Pharisees thought they were experts in the Bible, but they made one huge mistake. Although they thought they understood the biblical text, they did not apply it to their own lives and to their experience of the very Son of God living in their midst (Matt. 16:1-4; 22:29; John 5:39-40). So, they missed out on the whole meaning of Scripture. You can't understand the Bible unless you can use it, apply it, and the Pharisees couldn't do this. They thought they understood the normative perspective without the situational, but that is impossible. Even disciples of Jesus could make the same mistake (Luke 24:25).

Paul says in Romans 15:4 that the Bible—even the oldest

portions of it was written for our comfort, to meet our needs in the present. Second Timothy 3:16-17 says that the purpose of the Old Testament is to make us thoroughly furnished for every good work. So, the purpose of Scripture is partly subjective. It is to help us deal with situations and problems in the present time. Theology is application.

The second concept of theology is very close to the first. Theology as disciplined study is part of theology as knowledge of God. It is part of our discipleship, our servanthood. Theology, even as disciplined study, seeks knowledge not as something to boast of but as a means of spiritual growth for the theologian and those to whom he ministers.

### Traditional Theological Programs

There are several narrow disciplines within the larger discipline of theology, which I call traditional theological programs. These include exegetical, biblical, systematic, historical, and practical theology. Exegetical theology focuses on individual passages of Scripture: verses, bits of verses, but also chapters and books. You could even write an exegetical theology that covers the whole Bible, as a set of commentaries. Exegetical theology does its work by careful readings of each sentence, each word, in the Bible. But if exegetical theology is theology, it must be application. So we can define exegetical theology as the application of particular passages of Scripture.

Biblical theology studies the history of redemption. The Bible tells us about a series of events that constitute our

redemption. After the fall, God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus Christ, which bring about our salvation. He fulfills the terms of those covenants by great deliverances given to his people in history: the exodus, the return from exile, and preeminently Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, and return. So, biblical theology centers on the events the Bible narrates. If it is properly theology, biblical theology will apply those events to our lives.

Then there is systematic theology, what we're doing now. Systematics answers questions like, What does the whole Bible teach about God, or man, or Christ, or salvation? For example, we learn some things about salvation from Genesis, others from Exodus, the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and so on. Systematics asks: Where does it all lead? What does it add up to? These are questions of application, because they are seeking to ascertain what we should believe today based on these biblical materials and, of course, how we should behave based on our study of God's Word. So, systematics, like the others, is theology: the application of God's Word to all areas of life.

What about historical and practical theology? If historical theology is really theology, then it aims at helping us today; it is a kind of application of Scripture. I call it the study of how Scripture has been applied to the past to help us do better in the future. It helps us to avoid the mistakes of our forefathers, and, more positively, it helps us to build on their foundation rather than trying to re-invent the wheel in every generation. This is a kind of question we ask of the whole Bible: How has the whole Bible been used? So, historical theology is a

department of systematics.

Practical theology asks how we should communicate the Word of God-through preaching, teaching, counseling, worship, evangelism, missions, church planting, and so on. If practical theology is really theology, it goes to the Bible, in part, for answers to those questions. As such, practical theology is a division of systematics.'

Exegetical, biblical, and systematic theology-each covers the whole Bible from a different angle, a different perspective. You have to be a good exegete to be a good biblical and systematic theologian, but the opposite is also the case: you must be a good systematic theologian to be a good exegete or biblical theologian. Yes, these three are perspectively related.

Finally, I would note that all three of these labels are misnomers. Biblical theology is no more biblical than exegesis or systematics. Exegetical is not more exegetical than the others, nor is systematics more systematic than the others. All three of these disciplines should be biblical, exegetical, and orderly.

## Method in Systematic Theology

Since this is a study of systematic theology, we should give some consideration to the methods of systematics. Systematics, as I said, answers questions of the form, What does the whole Bible teach about x, where x can be any topic? It can be a topic within Scripture or a topic not mentioned in Scripture. Examples of the former would be the attributes of

God, or the atonement, or justification, or sanctification. Examples of the latter would be the Trinity (remember, the word Trinity is not found in Scripture), or abortion, or nuclear war. In all these cases, we are seeking to answer questions that people (including ourselves) ask about the Bible. So, in all these cases we are doing the work of application. Like all forms of theology, systematic theology is application.

To apply Scripture to all these areas, we need many tools. The Bible itself is our chief tool, and it has the final say about everything. Indeed, it is our sufficient source of truth about God. But to understand the Bible most thoroughly we often need to understand things outside the Bible. We need to understand Greek and Hebrew, ancient history, principles of literary interpretation, and so on. Not every believer is trained in these areas, but most believers have access to people who are trained in these areas-such as pastors, Bible teachers, authors. Each of us needs to use the tools God has given.

Using such tools does not violate the sufficiency of Scripture, as we discussed it in chapter 5. The sufficiency of Scripture does not forbid us to make use of extrabiblical information, even in the work of theology. Rather, it teaches us that Scripture contains all the words of God we will ever need. But to understand those sufficient divine words, we may need to make use of extrabiblical information.

Furthermore, we need to understand the questions we are asking of Scripture. Often this will require an understanding of the people who ask those questions. For example, to understand the traditional questions about the Lord's Supper,

we need to know where the medieval and Reformation theologians were coming from. To answer questions coming from modern people, we need to know something about modern languages, history, and culture. This should not surprise us, because, of course, the three perspectives are interrelated and mutually dependent.

We should not lose sight of the goal, however, which is to understand what the Bible says. Here let me criticize a habit that many liberal theologians have gotten into as well as some evangelical theologians. They will write books of theology that consist mainly of history: history of past theology and contemporary theology. Their references to the Bible are rare and almost incidental. They seek to do the work of theology simply by giving their reactions to what other theologians say.

What usually happens in this approach is that a theologian will argue his case by quoting people who agree with him and by denigrating people who disagree. Often I find these references, both positive and negative, unpersuasive. In fact, it almost seems as though the writer is not trying to be persuasive. Rather, he is just trying to state what he believes in comparison and contrast with other thinkers.

Over against this approach, it seems to me that the important thing in systematic theology is making a case, and, ultimately, making a case means going back to the Scriptures. It may or may not be interesting what Schleiermacher or Barth or Hodge thinks about a theological question. They may be right or wrong, but in the end it doesn't matter much. To decide what we must believe, we must go back to God's Word. If reference

to Schleiermacher or Barth, by way of comparison or contrast, helps us to understand the Scriptures, then by all means let us quote him. But the Bible is the final authority. That is why, in the final analysis, systematic theology should be exegetical. Whatever else it does, it must set forth the teaching of the Scriptures first and foremost.

My own mentor in this respect is John Murray, under whom I studied at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. His article on the nature of systematics is well worth reading,<sup>6</sup> and his method of teaching is a model for us all. When I was in college, Christian friends warned me against studying Reformed theology, because they thought it was too focused on philosophy and not sufficiently focused on Scripture. Well, that concern was a caricature, and John Murray shattered it. Whenever he taught a doctrine in his systematics courses, he would spend almost the whole time going meticulously through the biblical data. That convinced me that the Reformed faith is true.

When I read books of other theologians, often I am not convinced. In those writers (G. C. Berkouwer is an example) there is so much space devoted to history and contemporary thought that the biblical witness is overshadowed.?

So, I urge you to use all the tools available to you: languages, ancient history, history of theology and culture, traditional and modern theology. But remember that your ultimate purpose as a theologian is to expound Scripture, Scripture alone, *sola scriptura*.

# Chapter 7

## MAN, THE IMAGE OF GOD

In this chapter we shall ask what it means to be human. In short, we are God's image. It is also helpful to describe ourselves as his sons and daughters, his friends, even his bride. We are God's special creations, not children of animal ancestors. He made us man and woman, soul and body, responsible and free. And he sets forth our task, to be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it, so that his glory fills the earth.

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o far we have considered God our covenant Lord, his word to us, especially the Bible, and the nature of theology as our own appropriation of the word. Now we will consider what the Bible says about ourselves, something we ought to be very interested in. In this chapter and others in this book, I will often use the word man generically and will use masculine pronouns to include both genders. I know that is unpopular today in some circles, but those expressions are still part of the English language and most people understand them. In using these expressions, I do not mean for a moment to

disparage women. We shall see in this chapter that Scripture exalts women in many ways. But I do intend to reflect a biblical pattern. In Genesis 5:2 God names the human race "Man." Elsewhere in Scripture, men serve as "heads" in the church and in the home. "Head" means rule and representation, so that the husband is the authority over his wife and represents the rest of his family. The male elders have a similar relationship to their churches. To use he as a generic pronoun is to use the masculine to represent both male and female persons, so it fits in with that broad scriptural understanding.

### Creatures, with Dignity

The first thing we should know about ourselves is that we are created beings. In the biblical worldview there are fundamentally two kinds of being: the Creator and the creatures. God alone is the Creator; everyone and everything else is creature. So, we must come to understand both theoretically and practically that we are not God. We depend on him, not he on us. We are made to serve him, not the reverse. He is Lord; we are by nature his servants.

That should cut down our pride a notch or two. But we should also recognize that we have a great dignity in God's sight. God has made us to be higher than any other creatures. So, in Genesis 1:26 God declares that he is about to make a being to bear his own image. There is no such divine speech before any other of God's creative acts. This special creature is not only to be God's image but to have dominion, that is, to be lord over all the rest of the earth. And God makes us in a special way-by forming us from the dust and breathing into our

nostrils his own breath of life and by making a female from the rib of the male. That doesn't happen with any plant, any bird or fish, or any animal.

Clearly, God expects great things from us. In its famous opening question, the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks "What is the chief end of man?" and answers "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him for ever" (cf. Isa. 43:7; 1 Cor. 10:31; Eph. 1:11-12). To glorify God is to reflect back to him his own glory, his own love, knowledge, and power, so that he rejoices in us (Isa. 62:5; Zeph. 3:17-18; Rev. 4:11). To glorify God is to image him clearly so that the world may see his glory in us.

And don't forget the other half of the Catechism's answer: God made us to enjoy him forever. This is not self-centered pleasure but God-centered pleasure. We are to enjoy God, to enjoy his power, authority, and presence. He is to be our delight. Hear the psalmist in Psalm 73:25-26:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Other passages, too, emphasize the importance of human enjoyment of God (such as Pss. 16:11; 27:4; 84:1-2, 10; John 10:10; Rom. 5:2-3; Phil. 4:4; 1 Peter 1:8).'

Creation and Evolution

Now, as we've seen, God created us directly by a special act. That implies that we are not the descendants of animals; we are not "evolved." God made the man Adam from dirt, and the dirt did not come alive until God breathed in the breath that made him man. Genesis 2:7 does not say that God made an animal out of the dirt and later turned the animal into a man, but that God made a man right there on the spot, out of the dirt. Even more obviously, God made the woman by a miraculous act in Genesis 2:21-22.

Science is not a field of my expertise, but I am not convinced of the evidence offered for the theory of evolution. I agree with Phillip Johnson<sup>2</sup> and others that people overestimate that evidence, not because of science but for religious reasons; that is, they believe in evolution because it seems to them to be the only alternative to biblical theism. There are, of course, changes from generation to generation within a species, known as microevolution, as those species adjust to changing environments by what is called natural selection. But there is no evidence to show that natural selection explains the total diversity of life forms.

The Bible indicates that there are limits to the changes brought about by natural reproduction. It says that creatures reproduce according to their "kinds" (Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25). I don't know how broad that expression is or how it compares with more modern biological categories like species and family. But it is clear from Scripture that the diversity of life on earth cannot be explained entirely by natural selection.

Man, the Image of God

Our next topic is "the image of God." What does it mean to say that God made us in his image? First of all, we should not try to identify the image with something in us, maybe intellect, emotions, or will. The Bible doesn't say that there is an image of God in man; rather, it says that man is the image of God. We ourselves all that we are are the image of God. Everything in us—intellect, emotions, will, even body—reflects God in some way. Think of standing in front of a mirror. The image reflects everything you present to the mirror, and everything in the image represents something in you. Of course, the mirror only reflects part of you, the front part and the outside, not the inside. But we image God far more profoundly: we reflect everything in God, and everything in us reflects God in some way.

Does that mean that there is no difference between ourselves and God? No, because a reflection is both similar to and different from its source. When you stand in front of a mirror, the image is like you, but it isn't you. You are a real person; the image is not. Now, the image of God is much closer to reality than a mirror image. God is a person and you are, too. But as we've seen, you are not God. You are a creature, a being on a different level from God.

Meredith Kline has shown us that the Bible presents three aspects of the image, which correspond to the lordship attributes and to the three perspectives we talked about in chapter 6. First, the image of God is physical, bodily. The human eye is an image of God's power to see, as the psalmist says, "He who formed the eye, does he not see?" (Ps. 94:9). God doesn't have literal eyes, but our eyes reflect his power of

sight. Similarly, Scripture speaks of God's "arm" and "hand," indicating his power to act, and showing that our arms and hand are also images of him. People sometimes object to saying that the image of God is physical, because God doesn't have a body. But that is short-sighted. God doesn't have a body, but our bodies certainly reflect his power. This aspect of the image of God reflects his lordship attribute of control, or what we called in chapter 6 the situational perspective.

A second aspect of the image is what Kline calls the official. As God holds the office of King, so he makes us his assistant kings, his vicegerents or regents, to have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26, 28). This reflects God's lordship attribute of authority, or the normative perspective.

The third element is the ethical element. The New Testament especially tells us that we reflect God in our knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3: 10). Throughout Scripture God tells us to "be holy, for I the LoRD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2) or, as Jesus says in Matthew 5:48, "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So, the image of God extends to our inmost character. It corresponds to God's lordship attribute of presence, or the existential perspective.

The image of God belongs to every child of Adam, every human being. The Bible will not permit us to divide the human race into some who bear God's image and some who don't. The image of God belongs to all races, all nationalities; it belongs to rich and poor, male and female, bond and free; it belongs to those who are disabled, even those so disabled that they

cannot care for themselves; and it belongs to the unborn and those near death. Scripture never excludes anyone from the dignity that goes with being in the image of God, and we may not exclude them either. Each human being is wonderfully precious in God's sight. That fact has enormous implications for the way we treat other people (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9-10).

Does that include our enemies, even enemies of God? As we shall see, we are fallen creatures, sinful creatures. What does sin do to the image? Some Christians, such as Lutherans, believe that we lost God's image when we fell into sin; but the Bible says that even fallen, sinful human beings are still in the image of God. Genesis 9:6, speaking of fallen human beings, reads, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (cf. James 3:9).

Nevertheless, after the fall it is not the same. Even the worst sinners image God's power and authority, but ethically they have marred and distorted the image, as Calvin put it. In a strange way, nevertheless, their very sin reflects God. For sin is trying to be God, trying to put oneself on the throne. So, even the distortion of the image reflects God in an ironic way. Only a very special kind of creature can sin. That is the great tragedy of the fall. But even as fallen creatures we continue to bear God's image. We can never escape the image in which God made us, for we cannot escape our own skin.

When God saves us from sin through the blood of Jesus, he remakes us in the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Christ himself is the image of

God in a preeminent way (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), replacing Adam as the head of the human race (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22), and through grace the redeemed share his image. We can learn much from Christ about what God intended for Adam to be. He withstood Satan's temptation, for example, though Adam succumbed (Matt. 4). So, biblical ethics is an imitation not only of God (Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:48) but specifically of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-12).

So, if you want a definition of man, you can't do any better than to say that he is the image of God. But you shouldn't forget that there are also other ways in which Scripture describes us. For example, we are servants of God, as we follow his commands and carry out the tasks he has assigned to us. This is the correlative of God's covenant lordship. He is Lord, we are his servants.

As we come to know his salvation, he also calls us his friends. Abraham was a friend of God (James 2:23); and Jesus called his disciples friends rather than mere servants, for he revealed to them everything he heard from his Father (John 15:15).

A very important title we bear is that of sons of God. Adam was the son of God (Luke 3:38), and we are all sons and daughters of God through Jesus, the onlybegotten Son (Rom. 8:16-17, 21). Through Jesus we have the right to call on God as our Father, as in the Lord's Prayer, even to call him Daddy, as in the Aramaic word Abba, which Jesus used.

Still another image is that of the bride. Israel was God's wife,

though she was unfaithful, according to Hosea 1-3 and Ezekiel 16. But Jesus died to make the church his glorious bride, without spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:25-27). We look forward to the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9) as the consummation of our heavenly blessing. The figures of friend, son, and bride help us especially to see the deep intimacy of our relation to God.

## Male and Female

Genesis 1:27, which tells us that God created us in his image, also tells us that he made us male and female. Evidently sexual differentiation is something important, something vital to who we are. We see that importance also in the narrative of the special creation of woman from man's side (Gen. 2:18-25), the emphasis on marriage ("Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife . . .," v. 24), and the importance of filling the earth with children as part of our task (Gen. 1:28).

Genesis 1:27 clearly teaches that both men and women are the images of God. The Bible regards men and women as equal before God, and it honors women far above the other cultures of biblical times (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Peter 3:7). Women not only tend the home, but according to Proverbs 31 an ideal wife contributes to the family income. Women have prominent roles in the ministry of Jesus; they serve as prophets in the early church and possibly as deacons as well (Rom. 16:1). God gives them many gifts for service in the church (Joel 2:28-29; Matt. 27:55; Acts 1:4; 2:17-18; Rom. 16:1, 3, 6, 12; Phil. 4:3; Titus 2:3-4). Nothing in Scripture suggests that women are less competent

than men, even in ruling or teaching.

But there is a hierarchy of authority in Scripture, which is partly based on gender. The husband is the head of the wife, so that the wife is to be subject to her own husband (Eph. 5:22-33; Col. 3:18-19; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1-7). Similarly, women are not to fill the ruling office in the church but to be subject to the male elders (1 Cor. 14:34; 1 Tim. 2:11-15). We should expect this, because the church is a kind of extended family, our brothers and sisters. So, the church reflects the relationships of hierarchy in the home.

Scripture does not teach, however, that all women are to be submissive to all men or that women should not take positions of authority in industry or government. Submission is a family thing, to maintain order and to provide the best division of labor for the sake of the children. Perhaps God is saying here that women are too valuable to be caught up in matters of administration; they should be set free to minister to children, who are very important to God, and later to younger women (Titus 2).

Is submission to authority something degrading to women? Some people have said so, but we are all subject to authority: to God's, first of all, but also to that of government, employers, the church, and so on. Being subject to authority, indeed, is part of the image of God. For Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, came not to be served but to serve both his Father and his disciples; and he calls us to be like him (Matt. 20:28).

The Human Constitution

Turning now to the human constitution, we may ask, what are the elements, the aspects, of human persons? Scripture uses terms like body, soul, spirit, intellect, emotions, will, mind, heart, and so on. How do these figure in the makeup of a human being?

As we have seen, we are dust, but we are also more than dust because of God's breath of life (Gen. 2:7). So we are body, but more. Many religions and philosophies, such as Gnosticism and Platonism, have despised the body, as they have despised material things generally. But the Bible honors the body as an aspect of God's image. The body is something good. Certainly, some temptations come through the body, but these come through the mind and spirit as well (1 Cor. 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1).

Significantly, Jesus came to earth not as a ghost, not as an immaterial being, but as a man with a body. Similarly, his resurrection was physical, and his coming again will be physical, so that every eye will see him (Acts 1:11; Rev. 1:7). Then the dead in Christ will be raised from their graves and enter into a new bodily existence (1 Thess. 4:16). With the new heavens will come a new earth, a physical reality in which we will lead a material existence (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13). Don't picture eternal life as a ghostly, immaterial existence. In the new age we will eat and drink (Rev. 19:9), praise God with our resurrected voices, and serve him with our resurrected hands and feet.

Yes, we are bodies, material, dust, but we are also more. Our material bodies are not like rocks or mud. They move, act, think,

communicate. In other words, we are alive. All these movements, thoughts, functions, come from the breath of life that God breathed into Adam's body, so that he became a living person (Gen. 2:7). Some translations read in Genesis 2:7 that Adam became a "living soul," but in that passage the expression translated "living soul" simply means "living creature."

The word soul can also refer to a person's existence apart from the body, as also the word spirit (Matt. 26:41; 27:50; Luke 24:39; John 19:30; 1 Cor. 2:11; 7:34; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 12:23; James 2:26; 1 Peter 3:19; Rev. 6:9-10; 20:4). Some people, called tri-chotomists, believe that the words spirit, soul, and body refer to very distinct elements of our nature, but in Scripture spirit and soul are usually interchangeable.

Theologians have argued about where the soul comes from. Creationists hold that God creates a new soul each time a person is conceived in the womb; traducianists believe that our soul is inherited from our parents as our body is. Creationists appeal to Psalm 139:13, Isaiah 42:5, Zechariah 12:1, and Hebrews 12:9; traducianists to Genesis 1:24-27 and Hebrews 7:10. Creationists claim to do more justice to individual responsibility, while traducianists claim to do more justice to our solidarity in Adam. Myself, I don't think that Scripture clearly supports one view or the other.

There has also been controversy over what we might call the elements of the mind, usually listed as intellect, will, and emotions. The intellect, or reason, is our capacity to think. The will is our ability to choose and act. The emotions are our

feelings. Greek philosophers taught that the will and emotions should be subject to the intellect, and Reformed theologians have also sometimes advocated the "primacy of the intellect."<sup>4</sup> But the Bible does not teach that, nor does it exalt the will or the emotions over the others. In Scripture there is no inequality among these. All are fallen, all are equally in need of redemption, and all, as redeemed, are essential to a godly human life. The important thing is not to make them all subordinate to the intellect or another faculty but to make intellect, will, and emotions all subject to the Word of God.

The three capacities are mutually dependent. For example, our intellect, our thinking, depends on our choices, our will. We can choose to suppress God's truth or to embrace it (Rom. 1). If we willfully repress the truth, our thinking will be distorted. Reasoning also depends on emotions, for we would not choose to believe any conclusion if that conclusion did not appear attractive in some way. Similarly, will and emotions depend on intellect and on one another.

To look at the issue more deeply, Scripture does not ascribe human thought and action to three "faculties" bouncing around in our heads, jostling for supremacy. Rather, it is the whole person who thinks, wills, and feels. Intellect, will, and emotion are just words that we use to analyze these activities of the person, but they are not independent of one another. They are three perspectives on a whole person, as he thinks, acts, and feels. These correspond to the three perspectives I discussed in chapter 6: thinking is normative, acting situational, and feeling existential.

Different theological traditions tend to focus on one of these more than the others. In the Reformed tradition, the intellect seems often to be valued above the will and the emotions. Although I am part of the Reformed tradition, that emphasis, in my judgment, is not scriptural. Scripture emphasizes joy, peace, delight in God's presence, not being anxious, and so on. These emotions, the "religious affections" as Jonathan Edwards called them, are essential to a healthy spiritual life.

Scripture emphasizes the unity of human nature in its use of the term heart. Proverbs 4:23 reads, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." The heart is the center of our personality, the orientation for good or evil that drives all our thoughts, decisions, and feelings. The heart is who we are when all the masks are off. Your heart is who you really and truly are, as God sees you.

## Human Freedom and Responsibility

In earlier chapters, especially 1 and 2, I emphasized God's lordship attribute of control, his sovereign power over all things. I mentioned that God's sovereign control raises a problem in many minds concerning human freedom and moral responsibility. If God makes everything happen, how can we be free? And if we are not free, if God controls all our thoughts and decisions, how can we be responsible for what we do? I promised to discuss this problem at a later point, and this seems to be the best time to look at it.

First of all, the Bible makes it very clear that we are morally

responsible agents. God rewards and punishes our actions according to whether they please or displease him. There is really no tension or paradox between moral responsibility and divine sovereignty. God's sovereignty, God's lordship, includes not only the lordship attribute of control but also the lordship attribute of authority. For us to be under his lordship means that we are subject to his authority, answerable to him, and therefore responsible to him.

But human freedom does exist and is important for ethical responsibility. As God judges human deeds, he sometimes takes into account what we are able or not able to do. In Luke 12:47-48 we read:

And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

The idea here is that ignorance is a mitigating factor in God's judgment. He judges more severely those who have more knowledge, more resources to make the right decision. In other words, he judges more severely those who have more ability to do right. He judges less severely those who have less ability. Or we can say that he judges more severely those who have more freedom to do what is right.

But what is freedom, anyway? And how can we have any

freedom at all if God controls everything? There are three concepts of freedom that are discussed in the theological literature. The first concept is often called libertarianism. It teaches that free human acts are not caused by anything at all. They are not caused by God. They are not caused by our character. They are not even caused by our desires; for if our action can be completely explained by our desire, it is not free on the libertarian theory. If you do something simply because you want to do it, the libertarian would tell you that it is not a free choice. A free choice, on this view, is completely independent of your desires; if your strongest desire is to take a walk in the garden, your free will could contradict that desire and you could stay in the house. Desires may influence your final decision, on this view; but if they compel it, then that decision is not free.

I don't believe in this kind of freedom. In my view, Scripture doesn't teach it, and it makes a hash of our experience. First, Scripture neither commends this kind of freedom nor even mentions it. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 1, Scripture contradicts this view of freedom by teaching that God controls what we do by controlling our character, thoughts, desires, and acts. Remember that Scripture teaches not only that God is in control of what we do but also that human action comes out of our hearts, our character. If our heart is good, our actions will be good, and if our heart is bad, our actions will be bad. Libertarianism doesn't allow for that.

Furthermore, if a human action were completely uncaused, divorced from our character and desires, it would be a random accident, not a responsible choice. If you desire to walk in the

garden but stay inside, contrary to your desire, you have done what you don't want to do. Why would you do what you have no desire to do? Why would you act contrary to your own character, nature, and desire? I don't know. It can only be an odd, random happening, out of character, a kind of accident. It would be like something you did in your sleep or on drugs-the very opposite of a morally responsible action. So, in my judgment libertarian freedom is not the ground of moral responsibility; indeed, it destroys moral responsibility.

Another concept of freedom that theologians discuss is called compatibilist freedom. In this view a human action can be both free and caused. Your actions can be free even if you want to do them, even if they are motivated by your character, even if they are foreordained by God.

What is this strange kind of freedom called compatibilist? It is not really so strange at all. It is simply the ability to do what we want to do. That's the way we usually use the term freedom in everyday speech. I am free when I can do whatever I want to do. If I want to walk in the garden, and I do it, then I do it freely. This is almost the exact opposite of libertarianism; for the libertarian would say that if you do something because you desire it, you are not free.

The Bible teaches that we are free in the compatibilist sense. The wicked do their wickedness voluntarily, according to their own desires; similarly, the righteous. As we've seen in Luke 12:47-48, sometimes God takes this kind of freedom into account in measuring out his judgments.

In this sense, human freedom is not inconsistent with divine sovereignty, with God's control over our choices and decisions. On this view we can see why the Bible ascribes importance to our choices and actions. When we do wrong, we do it because we want to, because we freely choose to do it; and God is right to judge us for that. Yes, his eternal plan lies behind our free choices. But as the potter who has made us from dirt, he has the right to judge whether we measure up to the standards of his will.

There is still a third concept of freedom that is important to theology and to Scripture. That is our freedom to sin or to do good, what we might call moral freedom. As we have seen, the Bible does not teach libertarian freedom. It presupposes compatibilist freedom without defining it or teaching us about it directly. But it does speak very explicitly about moral freedom. We are slaves to sin. Jesus liberates us so that in him we are "free indeed" (John 8:36). Paul in Romans 6-8 also tells us how Christ has set us free from the bondage of sin into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

Augustine and others have traced the process of this liberation in four stages. First is the state of innocence before the fall, in which Adam and Eve were good but able to fall (in Augustine's Latin, *posse peccare*). Second is the bondage created by the fall, by which we became bad and unable to do anything good, not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Third, the work of the Spirit's regeneration on the basis of Christ's work makes it possible for us not to sin (*posse non peccare*). Last is our existence in glory, in which we will be good and not able to sin (*non posse peccare*).

## The Human Task

The last topic in this chapter concerns the task God has given us. The doctrine of man includes what we are and what we are to do, our nature and our task (a common division in theology). In chapter 2, I distinguished between God's acts and his attributes. When we discuss Christ in chapters 10-11, we shall look first at who he is, then at what he does. We will do the same for the Holy Spirit in chapter 12 and for the church in chapters 18-19.

God set forth our basic task to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28: "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' "This command is sometimes called the cultural mandate, for it calls on the family of man to bring its influence to bear on the whole earth. Creation is what God makes; culture is what man does with creation. First, Adam and Eve were to have children. Second, those children were to spread out over the whole earth. Third, they were to bring out the potential of the earth to meet their own needs and, of course, to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31 tells us to do all things to the glory of God). This mandate includes science, the arts, agriculture, politics-everything we associate with culture.

We should compare the cultural mandate with Jesus' final command to his disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 (the Great Commission): "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, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you."We shall discuss the Great Commission further in chapter 19. For now, notice that the two commands have a worldwide focus: both call on God's people to fill the earth with godly people. The cultural mandate focuses on procreation; the Great Commission, following the fall into sin and Jesus' great work of redemption, focuses on evangelism. The evangelism here is very broad; not just a simple gospel message intended to save people from hell but a comprehensive message: all that Jesus has commanded us. That is a message that will both save sinners and transform cultures, so that the Great Commission fulfills the cultural mandate.

Notice the threefold emphasis. Filling the earth with believers creates a new situation in the world (situational perspective). Making disciples under Jesus' authority places people under his commands (normative perspective). And as we obey him, he promises to be with us (existential perspective). These correspond to the offices of Christ himself, as I suggested earlier that Christ is the true man, God's image in the highest sense. The situational perspective is kingly, the normative prophetic, and the existential priestly. These also correspond to the three aspects of the image in our earlier discussion of Kline: the physical is kingly, the official is normative, and the ethical is existential.

So, every covenant God makes-with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus-involves the elements of seed, land, and the promise of prosperity. God said to Abraham that he would have many descendants, that they would possess the Promised Land, and that as they obeyed God they would live

long and prosper. That promise is fulfilled in Christ. He promises that his people will cover the earth as believers of all nations come to know him. Jesus will have a people, a land (the whole earth), and they will prosper as they obey their Lord.

## *Chapter 8*

# SIN AND EVIL

Sin is violation of God's law. Our first parents sinned in the garden and thus corrupted all their descendants. Though God is sovereign over history, he chose not to prevent the fall, for his own good purposes. We are guilty of Adam's sin, inherit from him a sinful nature, and also commit actual sins. These corrupt every aspect of our being. This does not mean that every person is as bad as he could possibly be, for God restrains sin by his "common grace." But common grace does not save. To escape God's just punishment, we need Jesus.



e have seen that the Bible speaks of us very highly, in that it describes us as God's very image, his servants, friends, sons, and bride. But something terrible happened in the lives of Adam and Eve that has brought disaster on the whole human race. We call that event the fall of man. What happened, in brief, is that Adam and Eve sinned against God.

## Definition of Sin

What is sin? John tells us that sin is lawlessness (1 John 3:4), and the Westminster Shorter Catechism explains that sin is "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (SC 14). The law of God is our ultimate moral standard, the transcript of God's own authority. To sin is to violate his law. Scripture teaches that we can violate God's law by our acts, by our attitudes, or just by being sinful persons, having a sinful nature.

People sometimes define sin as selfishness, and sin is usually selfseeking. But, as Wayne Grudem points out, we should not define sin as selfishness. Some self-interest is good-to desire God's salvation, for instance. And some selflessness is bad, as when people commit suicide for a false ideology. So, we ought to define sin as a violation of God's law, not more or less.

Sin is irrational. Consider Satan himself, who knows more about God than most any of us but, nevertheless, seeks to replace God on the throne; an intelligent being, yet from one perspective incredibly stupid. So, Paul says in Romans 1:32 that even though the wicked know that they who sin are worthy of death, they go on sinning anyway. You can see that sin affects not only our behavior but our intellect as well. As I said in chapter 7, intellect, will, and emotions are one in human nature. Now we see that they are also one in our sinful nature.

Sin attaches itself to the heart, the very unity of human personality. Sin begins in the heart, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 12:34-35. We sin because we have a sinful character; that is, we are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners.

### Are Some Sins Worse Than Others?

Any sin deserves eternal condemnation. In that sense, all sins are equal before God (Gen. 2:17; Deut. 27:26; Ezek. 18:4; 33:8; Rom. 5:16; 6:23; Gal. 3:10; James 2:10-11). But some sins have more harmful consequences than others in this life, and some even offend God more deeply than others. So, Scripture distinguishes greater and lesser sins (Ezek. 8:6, 13, 15; Matt. 5:19; 23:23; John 19:11), unwitting and high-handed sins (Lev. 4:2, 13, 22; 5:17; Num. 15:27-30), weightier and less weighty sins. Some sins and errors deserve excommunication, as the incestuous man in Corinth (1 Cor. 6); others do not, as the vegetarians in Rome (Rom. 14). James (3:1, cf. Luke 12:48) says that teachers will be judged with greater strictness. The sins of teachers are often worse than the sins of others, because

teachers can lead others astray by their errors and their poor example. Remember that fact as you plan to minister in the church. To whom much is given, much is required.

One sin is so bad that it is unpardonable (Matt. 12:31-32; cf. Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-27; 1 John 5:16-17). It is difficult to understand precisely what this means, but I think the best definition of the unpardonable sin is Grudem's: "a malicious, willful rejection and slander against the Holy Spirit's work attesting to Christ, and attributing that work to Satan."<sup>2</sup> This does not refer to a one-time thoughtless remark but a general pattern of opposition to the Spirit's work. Eventually, the enemies of Christ reach a point in their unbelief where they are so hardened that they can no longer repent. I cannot define precisely what that point is in any specific case. I will say, though, that if your conscience is troubled by the thought that you might have committed the unpardonable sin, then you haven't. People who have committed that sin have hardened consciences, and they are no longer troubled by such concerns.

## The Results of Sin

Theologians have distinguished three results of sin: guilt, pollution, and punishment. These correspond to normative, existential, and situational perspectives, respectively. When you sin, the law, God's norm, declares you guilty. That sin renders you unfit for fellowship with God; it pollutes you; and it leads to the punishments of God's judgment.

## The Origin of Sin

As I indicated in chapters 1 and 2, everything begins in God's eternal plan. Hard as it is to understand, that must also be the case with sin. Sin is one of the "all things" that God works "according to the counsel of his will," as Paul says in Ephesians 1:11. This raises questions that we will discuss later in this chapter under "Mysteries of the Fall." But this fact also reassures us: sin did not take God by surprise. God planned it, and if he planned it, he certainly planned it for a holy and good purpose. In foreordaining sin, he does not commit sin or recommend it. It is part of his decretive will (chap. 2) but not his preceptive will. He condemns sin, hates it, and will destroy it. So, theologians sometimes say that God is not the author of sin. The author of a book not only writes it but he recommends what is in it. A publisher distributes a book but does not necessarily agree with it. We may say that in relation to sin, God is like a publisher, not like an author.

The first sin was evidently not man's but Satan's. Since God made everything good (Gen. 1:31), there must have been a fall of Satan and his angels before the fall of man. Scripture says little about this, though 2 Peter 2:4 and Jude 6 may refer to it. Isaiah 14:12-15 and Ezekiel 28 may allude to the fall of Satan, comparing it to the attitudes and sure destruction of ungodly human kings, but the passages do not say that explicitly.

The fall of man was disobedience to a specific word of God, recorded in Genesis 2:16-17. God told Adam not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is important to note that Adam and Eve had no independent means to test whether that fruit would bring them harm. All they had was the bare word of God, and the test was simple:

Would they obey it or not?

Some have trouble believing that God should take this one act of disobedience so seriously, in what might appear to be a minor matter. But God's law is interconnected. If you disobey one statute, says James (2:10), you have violated the whole law. Why? Because sin is of the heart. If you have the kind of heart that would disobey one word of God, you have the kind of heart that would disobey any other word of God. Either you are wholly devoted to serve God or you aren't. And God wants only wholehearted servants.

God tells Adam that "in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). Sin leads to death in three senses, corresponding to our previous distinction between guilt, pollution, and punishment. First, it is judicial, the guilt by which we deserve God's condemnation. Second, it is spiritual, the pollution that infects us, motivating us toward more sin. Third, it is physical, the death of the body and its return to the dust (though in that death the personality continues to exist). These forms of death, again, correspond to our three perspectives: judicial is normative, spiritual existential, and physical situational.

Would there have been a reward if Adam had obeyed God? Genesis doesn't say. But in Scripture God's covenants with people always have both curses for disobedience and blessings for obedience. Whether or not Genesis 2 and 3 describe a covenant in a technical sense, Scripture always teaches that blessing follows obedience to God. What would the reward have been? If the penalty was death, the reward

evidently was life, also in judicial, spiritual, and physical senses. Remember that there were two trees in the garden: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. The latter tree certainly symbolized or pointed the way to blessing for Adam and Eve.

The first sin came in response to a temptation, and the temptation, like God's command in Genesis 2:16-17, focuses on the authority of God's word. Satan begins by questioning whether God has spoken (Gen. 3:1). Then he directly contradicts God and says, "You will not surely die" (v. 4). So, the issue is the word of God. Eve hears two words, the word of God and the word of the talking snake. She must make a decision between two sources of authority; she has no authority higher than these to appeal to. She must choose to obey one authority or the other; it is a question of loyalty, a question of who is her Lord.

Satan seeks to overturn the chain of authority. That chain reads, from top to bottom, God, man, woman, animals. Satan comes as an animal and appeals to the woman to reject her husband's authority (for he told her that the fruit was forbidden); the man then puts himself above God, blaming God for the whole situation. Again, we see an emphasis on authority, expressed through authoritative words. Satan wants Eve to think she can transcend her finite position under authority: he tells her that she can be like God (v. 5).

Satan tempted Eve, but he did not make her disobey. Our Lord Jesus was tempted in a far stronger way, but he remained faithful to his Father. By quoting Scripture, he showed that he

intended to obey God's Word, not the devil's. Eve, however, made the wrong choice. Verse 6 says that she made the judgment based on what her stomach, her eyes, and her mind told her. She chose Satan's word above God's; but, ultimately, she followed her own judgment. She thought she could reason by herself, autonomously, without a higher authority.

Eve's sin began in the heart. Her sin was not first in her eating but in her thinking. She thought she could make the right decision by herself, disregarding God's word. Then, committed to Satan's position, she took on herself Satan's role of tempter and led her husband astray.

Adam, then, was also faced with two contradictory words: the word of God and the word of his wife. He chose the latter. As head of the race, it is his sin, not Eve's, that Scripture says infects us all. Adam was our representative, so that when he sinned, we all sinned (Rom. 5:12).

## The Results of the Fall

Satan promised that if Adam and Eve would eat the fruit, they would have a knowledge of good and evil like God's. What they get is a personal, deep knowledge of what it is like to commit sin against God and to feel the terrible guilt of it. For the first time they experience shame (3:7), a fear of God's presence (vv. 8-10), and a breakdown in the marriage relationship (vv. 11-13). The man blames his wife for what he has done and, ultimately, blames God for giving her to him. So, with the breakdown of the husband-wife relationship comes a breakdown of the God-man relationship.

God imposes curses, the first on the Serpent. A descendant of the woman will crush him (v. 15). This is the first promise concerning Christ, and it stands not only as a curse on Satan but also as an unlikely blessing for man, mixed among the curses. Even after man's disobedience, God was preparing to show his most wonderful mercy.

Second, the woman is cursed in childbearing, the man in labor. Remember, childbearing and subduing the earth, labor, were two elements in the cultural mandate. Implied is a curse on the ground itself, so that as Paul says in Romans 8, the creation groans, waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. And, of course, there is the curse of physical death itself (3:19) and man's expulsion from the garden (vv. 21-24). Now that they have eaten from the forbidden tree, God keeps them from eating of the Tree of Life. Now they will live in a realm of death. But the Tree of Life remains a future blessing for those whom God redeems (Rev. 22:14).

Certainly, it could be worse. God had the right to destroy his creatures immediately after they disobeyed, just as he had threatened (Gen. 2:17). But see how he weaves the curses and blessings together. He postpones the death penalty, and although there are curses on labor and childbearing, these activities will continue, giving life and continuity to the human race until the Messiah comes to crush the Serpent's head.

I believe that Adam and Eve trusted God's promise of redemption, and I expect to see them in heaven one day. Adam might have named his wife Death, but instead he named her Eve, "Life," believing God's promise that she would bring new

life into the world (3:20). Eve does bear a son, and she calls him Cain, saying that she has "gotten" a man by the help of the Lord (4:1). She, too, trusts that God is bringing life in the midst of death. Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to God, though God accepts only one of them (4:1-16). And in the time of Seth, the third son, and Enosh, the grandson, people begin to call on the name of the Lord (4:26). So, God's grace is at work, inciting people to true faith in his promises.

### Importance of the Historicity of the Fall

Many theologians have said that the story of the fall never really happened. In their view sin did not enter the world by a historical event; rather, sin is just a part of human nature. On this view Genesis 2-3 is a parable intended to show us that sin is basic to our human makeup. So, Karl Barth says that creation and fall are simultaneous. In saying this he agrees with many non-Christian religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and many secular philosophies that teach that sin is just an aspect of who we are.

On that view sin is inevitable, necessary. But how can we be guilty for sin if sin is just what we are? How can we be responsible for being what we are, for being what we can't help being? How can God eliminate sin without eliminating human beings?

The biblical teaching is very different. God created Adam fully human but not sinful. God's design for man did not include sin, and it still does not necessarily include sin. Sin is not part of the definition of a human being. Jesus was fully

human, though he did not sin. We are still human, even when Jesus takes our sins away. And when we stand sinless in glory, we will still be fully human.

Where did sin come from, if it is not part of human nature? As I said, it came about through a historical event, through human choices to disobey God. That is the only possible explanation. And if the fall was a historical event, then we may hope that it can be undone through historical events. Scripture, in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, draws a close parallel between Adam and Christ. As Adam's free act brought sin and its consequences upon the human race, so the free act of Jesus Christ brings forgiveness of sin and reconstituted righteousness among human beings. Adam is not Everyman. He is one historical person who brought sin into the world.

If we deny that sin can enter the world by a historical person, we must deny that righteousness can come into the world by a historical person. If we deny the historical Adam, we must deny the historical Jesus.

## Mysteries of the Fall

The fall is one of many biblical doctrines that are hard for us to understand. One major difficulty is that of understanding how good persons like Adam and Eve developed the evil desires that led them to disobey God. Some theologians have tried to describe Adam and Eve as not fully good but ethically neutral, or perhaps immature, or basically good with some tendency to evil. Scripture won't allow us to use such rationalizations. It says that Adam was good, with the rest of

creation (Gen. 1:31). As I argued above, sin was not part of Adam's created nature. It came about by a historical event. Here we just need to be willing to admit our ignorance, our lack of understanding. Sometimes in theology you just have to do that. It is, in the end, a good exercise. It is good to be humbled from time to time.

The other great mystery is the problem of evil itself: How could a good, righteous, and holy God create a universe in which evil exists? Theologians and philosophers distinguish between natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil includes anything that brings pain or suffering; disease, natural disasters, and death itself are natural evil. Sin is moral evil. In the Bible we do find a clear answer to the question of natural evil. Natural evil is the curse God has placed on the ground because of sin. So, natural evil exists because of moral evil.

The real problem is, where did moral evil come from? If we say, as I have, that sin is part of God's plan, then the problem becomes severe: How could a holy God include sin in his plan for the world?

I don't know of any fully satisfactory answer to this question, but several biblical considerations do bear on the problem. First, good and evil are meaningless expressions unless God exists. So, if someone renounces belief in God because of the problem of evil, he renounces the only basis we have for distinguishing good from evil. What can these terms mean if there is no absolute personal God? If the universe is fundamentally impersonal, it has no authority to tell me what to do and what not to do. Only a personal being can justify

ethical obligations.

Another biblical principle is that through history we see how God uses evil to bring about wonderfully good things. The greatest example is the cross of Christ, what John Murray called the "arch-crime of history." Those who crucified Jesus were wicked (Acts 2:23), but they did what they did by God's "definite plan and foreknowledge." And through this horrible event, God sent his wonderful saving grace upon all who believe. If God can bring the best out of the worst, we should believe that even the other horrible events of history, such as the Holocaust, 9/11, and the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda, will somehow lead to good in God's plan. Romans 8:28 says as much. We don't know how these evils will lead to good, so our faith is tried. But because of what he has done through the cross, we can trust God. We walk by faith, not by sight.

We have his promise that there will be no tears in heaven (Rev. 7:14; 21:4). Then everyone will recognize God's goodness and justice (Rev. 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-2). No one will complain to God that God has not been good or has done things out of accord with his holiness and righteousness. In glory there will be no problem of evil.

And that is the rule even today. Because of who God is, we have no right to charge him with evil (Rom. 9:19-21), even when his ways trouble us. In the Bible God often rebukes people who accuse him of wrong, even righteous job (Job 38-42). He is the Lord, and the judge of all the earth must do right (Gen. 18:25).

## Inherited Sin

We must now think about the relation of Adam's sin to his descendants, that is, the relation of his sin to us. This topic is sometimes called original sin, but I agree with Grudem that this phrase is ambiguous and misleading.' Like him, I prefer to talk of inherited sin.

The Bible teaches that we inherit Adam's sin, in Romans 5:12-19 and 1 Corinthians 15:22. Read those passages carefully as you follow my discussion.' Romans 5:12 says that all sinned, and then Paul breaks off the sentence. But it is clear from the rest of the passage that in Paul's view we sinned, somehow, in Adam. People died between Adam and Moses, though there was no written law (vv. 13-14), because they sinned in Adam. In verse 15 the many died for the trespass of the one man, Adam. In verse 16 they are condemned for the sin of the one man. In verse 17 death comes through the sin of the one man. In 18 we are condemned for the trespass of the one man. In 19 we are made sinners through the disobedience of the one man. Through the whole passage Paul draws a parallel between our sin through Adam and our righteousness through Christ.

The passage doesn't tell us how we inherit Adam's sin or, for that matter, how we inherit Christ's righteousness. Some theologians have taught a realistic union between ourselves and Adam, that we somehow existed in him before we were even born. Rather than discuss the arguments for this position, I'll just say that it is rather speculative, and in my view it doesn't solve the problem, since it does not relieve the apparent injustice. On this view one might still complain about

the justice of God's incorporating us realistically into Adam.

If we need to have any mechanism for the transference of sin, I think we should adopt the representative view. The texts we've looked at, along with 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 and Romans 15:14, suggest that God appointed Adam to represent the human race as a whole, so that his decisions are "imputed" to us; that is, God declares that Adam's decisions are ours. That view doesn't answer very many questions, but at least it fits pretty well into the biblical contexts.

The main question here is whether God is fair to hold us guilty for Adam's sin. This is a subdivision of the problem of evil: How can God be justified in punishing us for the sins of our representative? As with the larger problem of evil, I don't believe that a complete answer is possible, but some considerations may help. First, if God had not held us guilty of Adam's sin, he would certainly condemn us anyway, for we have committed enough sins of our own to deserve his judgment. So, if there were no inherited sin, that wouldn't get us off the hook. And probably, if we had been in Adam's place, we would have sinned as he did. For there is nothing in us that wasn't also in Adam. He had all the resources we have and more: a good character, a perfect environment, an intimate relation with God. He encountered only one single source of temptation. So, Adam was, humanly speaking, more likely to succeed in obeying God than we are today. If anything, we are better off to be judged in Adam than to be judged as individuals.

Furthermore, human life always has a corporate dimension.

Inevitably, what one person does has consequences for others. We don't exist as isolated individuals, but we are dependent on one another. This is especially true in families, where the sins of the father easily get passed down to the next generations, so that the children commit the same sins their parents commit. It is also true in nations. If the king takes his people into an unwise war, all citizens must bear the consequences of his wrong decision. This happens in all spheres of authority, like churches, businesses, schools. So, it is fitting for God to judge the human race as a whole, under its head, its representative.

If we object to this in the case of Adam, how do we accept it in the case of Christ? The good news, the gospel, is that God imputes the righteousness of Jesus to us apart from our works. Salvation is through Jesus alone, not because of anything we have done; so sin is through Adam, not primarily through the sins we have personally committed.

### Inherited Corruption

We inherit not only the guilt or blame of Adam's sin but also a corrupt nature that cannot keep itself from sinning. We are born with it. David said that his sin went back to his conception in his mother's womb (Ps. 51:5; cf. 58:3; Eph. 2:3). We are born sinful in the root of our being, the heart, and it is from that sinful heart that come all our thoughts, words, and deeds (Matt. 7:17-20; Mark 7:14-23; Luke 6:43-45). So, apart from God's grace, we can never please him (Rom. 8:8).

You might think that some unbelievers are better than that.

They often do things that are good for society and good so far as any human being can tell. But remember that a good work requires a right goal, standard, and motive. If our goal is not to seek the glory of God, or if we are not acting according to the standard of God's law, or if we are not motivated by godly faith and love, then even our best works are sinful. We may try to hide our sin, even from ourselves; but it is there constantly (Prov. 30:20; Rom. 1:18-32 1 Tim. 4:2).

This is sometimes called the doctrine of total depravity. That phrase is a bit misleading, because it suggests that everybody is as bad as he could be. That's not true. As we have seen, some sins are worse than others, and not everybody chooses the worst sins. God keeps people from doing that. But it is important to recognize that depravity, sinfulness, extends to all areas of our lives. It includes our best deeds, even those that seem to conform to the law. It extends to our thinking, our understanding, so that we don't even understand the things of God correctly. So, it extends to every thought, word, and deed (Ps. 51:5; Matt. 15:16-20; John 3:6; Rom. 8:5-8). As Paul says, apart from Christ we are "dead" in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-2). We are slaves to sin (John 8:34).

It is important to recognize the deep sinfulness of sin. According to Genesis 6:5, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." That was, of course, before the flood, at a peak of man's wickedness. But were human beings any better after the flood? Was the family of righteous Noah any better than the evil civilizations they

replaced? In Genesis 8:21 God says, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth." The flood did not wash sin away. Indeed, it stands as God's witness that sin is so bad that even the most righteous are not exempt from it. Something much greater, and much worse than a universal flood, must deal with it—nothing less than the blood of the Son of God.

Sin is very deep, and it is also extensive: all have sinned. There is none righteous, no, not one (Rom. 3:10-23; cf. Pss. 14:3; 143:2; 1 Kings 8:46; Prov. 20:9; 1 John 1:8-10). The first three chapters of Romans show, first, the depravity of the Gentiles, then the depravity of the Jews, then the universality of sin.

So, we can never come to God out of our own resources. We are helpless to do anything to save ourselves. This condition is sometimes called total inability. Romans 8:7-8 read, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." That "cannot" is total inability. Apart from grace, we can do nothing good (Jer. 7:9; Matt. 7:17-18; 12:33-35; John 6:35-37, 44-45, 64-65; 15:5; Rom. 7:18; 8:7-8)-1 Cor. 2:14; 12:3; Eph. 4:18; Titus 1:15).

Some might try to use total inability as an excuse, saying "I won't believe in Jesus, because I cannot." But Scripture does not warrant that excuse. Total inability is not physical or psychological. We are physically and mentally able to believe in Christ. The inability is moral, an inability to do the right thing. That is an inability for which we are responsible. It

cannot be used as an excuse.

Even after we believe in Christ, we fight a battle with sin within ourselves. Nevertheless, God's grace transforms us into something new, a new creation, a new life, by means of a new birth, regeneration. For believers, Paul says, "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14; see also Ezek. 36:25-27; Rom. 6:1-23; 8:5-17; 1 John 3:9; 5:18).

### Common Grace

I mentioned earlier that unregenerate people are totally depraved but not necessarily as bad as they could be. What keeps them from the worst sins is God's common grace. Common grace is any blessing of God that does not save a person from sin. Theologians distinguish common grace from special grace, or saving grace. I don't know of any place in English translations of Scripture where grace is used this way; that word almost always refers to redemptive blessing. So, I would prefer that this concept be called common love or common favor to avoid confusion. But common grace is the standard terminology at the moment.

God does restrain sinners, keeping them from doing all the evil that they would like to do (as in Gen. 4:15; 11:6; 20:6; 2 Kings 19:27-28; Job 1:12; 2:6). The result is that unbelievers, unregenerate people, often do things that are good in a sense (2 Kings 10:29, 31; 12:2; Luke 6:33; 11:13). This goodness is a relative goodness, compared with other things that these people might be doing. It is not good in the fullest sense,

which involves the right goal, standard, and motive, but it is good in that the deed externally conforms to Scripture and is somehow helpful to society rather than harmful (hence the term civic righteousness). Scripture even speaks of gifts of the Holy Spirit given to people who are ultimately lost (Heb. 6:4-8). Judas preached Christ and worked miracles in his name (Matt. 10:1-42).

So, total depravity does not mean that unbelievers can do no good in any sense. What it does mean is that apart from grace they cannot please God (Rom. 8:8).

### Actual Sins

We have talked about inherited sin and inherited corruption, or depravity. But let's not forget that God is concerned as well about the sins we commit day by day. Those, too, are sufficient to land us in hell, for they are offensive to one who is infinitely holy, just, and kind (Ezek. 18:4; Rom. 6:23).

Believers, too, commit sin, though they have been transformed by God's saving grace. We should remember three things about these sins, as Grudem suggests.<sup>1</sup> First, they do not affect our legal standing with God (Rom. 6:23; 8:1; 1 Cor. 15:3). Once God unites us to Christ in a saving way, nothing can separate us from him, not even our sin. We remain children of God (1 John 3:2), despite the fact that we sin (1 John 1:8). In Christ, all our sin is forgiven, past, present, and future. Second, our sin nevertheless disrupts our fellowship with God. We grieve his Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30), and we incur his fatherly

punishments (Heb. 12:6, 9-10; Rev. 3:19; cf. Isa. 59:1-2; 1 John 3:21). So, our fruitfulness is hindered (John 15:4), we find ourselves in an inner conflict (1 Peter 2:11), and we may even lose some portion of our heavenly reward (1 Cor. 3:12, 15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Third, as we sin and repent, however, those sins become an occasion for growth, as we recognize our own helplessness and are driven to the resources found only in God, as we embrace Jesus afresh through the gospel.

## Chapter 9

# GOD'S COVENANTS

As Lord, God deals with human beings through *covenants*. A covenant is like a treaty between a great king and a lesser king, in which the great king describes the relationship, imposes law, and promises blessing to those who obey the law and curses to those who don't. In the Bible, God makes covenants with Adam, Noah, Israel under Moses, David, and with Christ.

# T

he main theme of this book is the lordship of God. In chapter 1, I indicated that Lord is a name that presents God to us as head of a covenant. It is a relational term: the lord is always lord of someone. Where there is a lord, there is a servant, a vassal. So, lordship is a relationship, one that we call covenant.

The word covenant has been defined in different ways, but I think the following definition contains all the basic elements of biblical covenants between God and man: Covenant is a relation between the Lord and a people whom he has sovereignly consecrated to himself. He rules over them by the sanctions of his law and fulfills in and through them the purposes of his grace.

The heart of the covenant is the promise "I will be your God, and you will be my people" (see Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; Rev. 21:22). This implies that God will be with us as he was with Abraham, Jacob, and many others (Gen. 26:3; 28:15; 31:3; Ex. 3:12; etc.). He is committed to us, and in response he calls for our trust and obedience.

As we have seen, God's covenant lordship can be spelled out in his lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence. By his control he establishes the covenant. The covenant is not the result of a negotiation; God imposes it

unilaterally. It is his free gift, his grace, his unmerited favor. Then by his power he continues to maintain the covenant and brings to bear his sanctions: blessings for obedience, curses for disobedience. By his lordship attribute of authority he declares the covenant law and holds us responsible for keeping it, imposing rewards and punishments as appropriate. And by his lordship attribute of covenant presence he is with us, entering into our life, loving, guiding, disciplining. The covenant is law (normative), grace (situational), and God's presence (existential).

## The Covenant Document

In chapter 5 we learned that covenant is also the name for a particular kind of document. When a great king would make a covenant with a lesser king, there would regularly be a document setting forth its terms, as with modern treaties. Archaeologists have discovered a number of these treaties, or covenants, from the Hittite culture and other cultures in the ancient Near East. Particularly in the second millennium BC, these treaties, called suzerainty treaties, followed a particular literary pattern:

1. The name of the great king
2. The historical prologue
3. The law
  - a. General (a command of exclusive covenant loyalty, sometimes called love)

- b. Specific commands, showing the outworkings of that loyalty (including both general and specific laws, the general command of exclusive covenant loyalty)

#### 4. Sanctions

- a. Blessings for obedience
- b. Curses for disobedience

#### 5. Future administration of the covenant

In the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 we have a reflection of that literary form. First, God announces his name, "I am the LORD your God." Then, the historical prologue: "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Then, the laws: first, the general command of exclusive covenant loyalty, "You shall have no other gods before me," and then nine other commands intended to show specifically how this general command should be carried out.

In the Ten Commandments there is no special section for sanctions, but the sanctions are inserted with the commandments at different places. So, after the second commandment we read, "for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." There is no section on administration in the Decalogue, but there is in Deuteronomy 31-34. Kline suggests that the book of Deuteronomy is also in

its form a suzerainty treaty.'

This literary form is interesting because it helps us to see the relationships between various elements of God's covenants with us. First, God's covenant is a personal relationship, for he begins by giving us his name. His name is Lord, and he is the Lord our God. We can almost say that he belongs to us as we belong to him.

Then the historical prologue tells us that the covenant begins in grace. Israel did not earn the right to be delivered from Egypt. That was God's free gift. He saved them, rescued them, because they were his people and he loved them.

Law follows grace. We don't obey God in order to earn our salvation. Rather, we keep the law out of thankfulness to him for saving us. Since he has redeemed us, we want to know how to serve him.

The first element of the law is love, exclusive covenant loyalty. As Deuteronomy 6:5 puts it, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Notice that love and law are not opposed to one another, as some would like us to believe. Love is a command, a law, the fundamental law.

This law of love motivates us to keep other laws: don't make graven images to bow down to them; don't take my name in vain; remember the Sabbath; honor your parents; and so on.

Then, keeping the law brings blessing; disobeying it brings misery. Notice that God's blessings come in two places within

the covenant structure: under the historical prologue and among the sanctions. God gives us blessings before we have done anything to please him; he gives us more as we live lives of obedience.

The treaty pattern corresponds to the lordship attributes. The historical prologue represents God's control, because it shows God's power to redeem his people. The laws represent God's authority, and the sanctions represent God's constant presence with his people.

That presence is a great blessing, but sometimes it can lead to severe punishments. God was with Israel in a more profound way than he was with any other people. When they rebelled against him, they received more severe punishments: to whom much is given, much is required. In Amos 3:2 God says to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Covenant intimacy gives greater responsibility, and it can lead to greater judgment.

## The Covenant of Works

Let us now look at covenant more specifically. God's relationship with Adam and Eve before the fall is sometimes called a covenant. In the Westminster Confession of Faith it is called a "covenant of works": "... wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience" (7.2). In the Shorter Catechism it is called a "covenant of life": "When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of

perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death" (SC 12).

The Bible, however, does not call this arrangement a covenant, with the possible exception of Hosea 6:7. So, theologians debate about whether we should call that arrangement a covenant. Those who think we should call it that differ among themselves about what kind of covenant it is. I do believe that Genesis 1-2 indicates that some elements of a covenant are present, and I do not object to calling this administration a covenant.

As with all covenants, there are two parties: God as the Lord and Adam representing the human race. The historical prologue is Genesis 1, in which God brings Adam from the dust, giving him life. The law is that Adam with Eve and all his descendants should obey God perfectly. God focuses this obedience in one particular command: man must not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The sanction is found in threat and promise. The threat is death: "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The promise, though inexplicit, is evidently life (as we saw in chap. 8), symbolized by the presence in the garden of the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9; 3:22).

Why is this covenant of works important for us today? First, we should see ourselves as covenant breakers in Adam (Isa. 24:5). In him we have failed the test of works, and we have no hope of ever saving ourselves by our works. But where we failed, in Adam, Christ gloriously succeeded. He obeyed God perfectly and laid down his life as a sacrifice to make up for our

disobedience. In ourselves we are covenant breakers, but in Christ covenant keepers.

By thinking about the covenant of works, we can learn today that God demands a perfection we cannot attain, that Jesus achieved that perfection, and that in him our salvation is complete. Jesus did everything the Father asked on our behalf. So, nothing can separate us from him or from the Father.

### The Covenant of Grace

Just as the Bible presents the pre-fall era in covenantal terms, so it presents the post-fall era. As God judged the human race in Adam by covenant sanctions, so he redeems us by covenant grace. Scripture mentions covenants that God made with Noah, Abraham, and others. Theologians have gathered these covenants together under a master title that includes all of them: the covenant of grace. Here are some descriptions of this covenant from the Westminster Confession and Larger Catechism:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe. (WCF 7.3)

The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in

that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation. (LC 32)

The Bible itself does not use the expression covenant of grace, and some theologians have argued that there is no such thing. While I am not willing to live or die for this expression, I do think it is helpful as a theological generalization, describing what is common to all these covenants as God uses them to bring about our salvation from sin. So, let me treat covenant of grace as a summary of the biblical covenants, and then we'll look at those covenants specifically.

### The Parties

In this covenant the parties are not just God and man, but Jesus Christ plays a vital role as the Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 9:15; 12:24). The covenant is ratified by his blood (Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 5:21).

Indeed, the divine-human covenants presuppose another covenant, one that precedes all of them. That is the covenant before the foundation of the world between God the Father and God the Son in the eternal life of the Trinity. Before the world was even made, the Father gave a people to the Son, chosen "in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). It was

then that "he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (v. 5). Some people have called this arrangement between the Father and the Son a covenant; but, of course, it is very unlike the other covenants we are studying because it is a covenant between equals. Sometimes this arrangement between the Father and the Son is called the *pactum salutis*, the pact of salvation or agreement of salvation (cf. John 10:29; 17:6).

The covenant of grace itself, however, is a covenant made between God and his chosen people, with Christ as the Mediator. Christ is the one who pays the penalty for our sin and, thus, provides the basis on which God forgives our sins. Because of Jesus' redemptive work, God sees us "in Christ," as Paul says so often; so that although we are covenant breakers in Adam, we are covenant keepers in Christ. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22).

### Blessings and Condition

The covenant blessing, therefore, is life in Christ. As he said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). This life is not merely the absence of death but a rich fellowship with God that begins now and extends through all eternity. It includes all the fruits of the Spirit (love, joy, peace) and all the gifts of the Spirit, as well as the rewards of heaven.

God grants this blessing to us as a free gift; but there is one condition, that of faith (Rom. 1:17; 5:1; 10:9-13). God gives eternal life to those who trust Jesus for eternal life. It is not that

faith is the one work that we do that is good enough to merit eternal life. Our merit has nothing to do with it. Faith is the empty hand that reaches out to receive God's unmerited favor, his grace. Nevertheless, that faith is a living faith, an active faith, as James emphasizes (James 2:17, 20, 26). As Paul expresses it, faith works by love (Gal. 5:6).

Those who trust Christ for salvation can never lose their salvation. But only God knows our hearts. We do sometimes see people who seem to embrace Jesus but later fall away. These people have never embraced Jesus with a true faith. So, as with the covenant of works, Scripture declares blessings to those who by faith obey God's commands (John 15:10; Rev. 22:2) and curses to those who do not (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-31). It warns us to examine ourselves, lest on the last day God finds us to be hypocrites (1 Cor. 11:28; 2 Cor. 13:5).

## Historical Covenants

### Adam

We now turn briefly to the specific historical covenants that theologians have gathered together under the title covenant of grace. First, God promised redemption to Adam after the fall. Remember, God made two covenants with Adam: the covenant of works before the fall and a covenant of grace afterward. As we saw in chapter 8, God pronounced curses upon the Serpent, the woman, the man, and the earth. But among these curses were promises of blessing. God does not put Adam and Eve to death immediately, as we might expect, but he gives them years of life. So, God shows grace to Adam

before he even sets forth the covenant. That is typical of all the redemptive covenants: grace precedes law.

God's grace continues. During their lives and those of their descendants, they will be nourished by their work in the land. And even though Adam's work is to be hindered by thorns and thistles, it will be successful. He will harvest fruits, grains, and oil to provide for himself and his family.

And there will be children. God not only gives life, graciously, to Adam and Eve but also enables them to have children, and he gives life to those children and to children's children. They, too, will live from the land and pass on God's gift of life to their children.

One of those children will be very special, the one who is to crush the Serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). He not only will live, but will defeat death at its source. This is the promise of Jesus, the Mediator, the Redeemer.

So, God promises blessings of seed, land, and redemption. These are the blessings given in all administrations of the covenant of grace. With these blessings go obligations. The cultural mandate that God gave to Adam before the fall continues. With the blessing of land goes the command to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. With the blessing of seed goes the command to marry and fill the earth with people to the glory of God. And with the blessing of redemption goes the command to believe God's promise of salvation. Land requires work (situational). Seed requires marriage and family (existential). And redemption requires faith

(normative).

## Noah

In Genesis 6 we read that mankind became very wicked, but Noah finds favor in the eyes of the Lord. God chooses Noah from all the families of the earth to receive his blessing. This is true of all the covenants of grace after Adam: they are selective, elective. Not everyone receives them.

Noah obeys God, building an ark to save his family from the waters. Afterward, God makes a covenant with Noah. Like all the covenants, this one comes after a great deliverance. God's grace comes first, then the covenant with its obligations.

The great promise of the Noachic covenant is that God will never again destroy the earth with a flood. God seals that promise with the sign of the rainbow.

The law of the covenant is a renewal of the cultural mandate. Noah's family is to take dominion over all lower forms of life: the beasts, birds, and fish. Now God is explicit in giving human beings meat as well as plants for their food. Man's diet will require the shedding of animal blood. But anybody who sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image (Gen. 9:5). God repeats the command to be fruitful and multiply, (v. 7). As with the other covenants of grace, God sets forth the elements of land, seed, and redemption. Man is to make his living from the land, fill the earth with his seed, and trust God not to bring another terrible flood on the earth but, rather, to save mankind from sin and its consequences.

## Abraham

The flood did not do away with sin. Man is still sinful from his youth (Gen. 8:21). And even the descendants of righteous Noah rebel against God and set up a tower in Babel to make a name for themselves rather than for God. God stops their project by confusing their languages and spreading them across the earth, contrary to their will but in line with God's.

Then he calls a man named Abram, later called Abraham. Again, God elects a family from among the other families of the earth. God calls Abraham to wander through a land he did not know, and he delivers him from potential disasters.

God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:12-21; 17:7), again, includes promises of seed, land, and redemption. Abraham's descendants are to inherit the land of Canaan, and those descendants are to be like the sand of the sea and the stars of the sky. Abraham must receive these promises by faith, for during his life he owns not one square inch of land in Canaan, and for many years he awaits the promise of a son. God does not give him the promised son until he is over a hundred years old and his wife, Sarah, is past the age of childbearing. Even after Isaac is born, God tests Abraham again in Genesis 22, asking him to offer Isaac in sacrifice. God provides a substitute for Isaac, proving Abraham's faith and providing a foretaste of Christ, who stands in our place as our sacrifice for sin.

So, we see the promises of God to Abraham: seed, land, and redemption. And the redemption carries us far beyond Abraham's family. At God's first meeting with Abraham, he tells

him that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

As with Adam and Noah, however, the covenant also contains obligations, laws. God requires Abraham to leave his home country. In Genesis 17:1 he commands Abraham to "walk before me, and be blameless." In verse 9 he commands Abraham to keep his covenant through all his generations. This includes the covenant sign of circumcision. Unless Abraham obeys, the covenant blessing will not come (Gen. 18:19). God's covenant with Abraham, like all the covenants, are conditional. They contain both promises and commands.

## Moses

The same is true of God's covenant with the nation of Israel, with Moses as the mediator. Again there is election. Not all of Abraham's children are included, only the children of Isaac and Jacob. Again, the covenant begins with God's grace in a great deliverance. God rescues Israel from slavery in Egypt by mighty works and a strong arm. But following this grace come commandments that Israel must obey.

The Decalogue, what we call the Ten Commandments, is the governing document of the Mosaic covenant. In it, God begins by announcing his name, Yahweh, the Lord. Then he proclaims his great deliverance, "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). Then he proclaims his commands, showing Israel how God's people should behave. The first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (v. 3) tells them that their loyalty to him

must be exclusive. That loyalty is called love in other ancient covenants, and in Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." So, God is to have no competition. Israel is not to worship other gods. Then the other commandments show how Israel, the people who belong to God exclusively, are to live. They are not to worship by the use of idols, take God's name in vain, forget his Sabbaths, and so on.

Again, there is land, seed, and redemption. God gives to Israel the land of Canaan, this time for conquest and ownership. He gives them the land throughout their generations, to children and to children's children. And he presents Christ, the Savior, to them under the ceremonial pictures of animal sacrifices, feasts, priests, prophets, and kings.

In the New Testament period some Jews thought that the apostle Paul was trying to do away with the law of Moses. In reply, Paul draws attention to the covenant of Abraham, in which God promised to bless not only Israel but all nations. Then he argues that the law of Moses did not abrogate the promise made to Abraham, that it was not opposed to these promises, and that it was indeed one of the covenants of promise.

The Mosaic covenant incorporates the Abrahamic. As with the Abrahamic, it begins in God's grace. Our obedience is based on grace; we obey God because he has redeemed us. God's purpose in choosing Israel is not just to bless Israel but to bless all nations. The covenant with Moses is God's way of

fulfilling the covenant with Abraham. Only when Jesus comes do we see that clearly. God gave the land of Canaan to Israel so that Jesus could be born there and so that Jesus' people could reach out from the land of Canaan to teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to do all things Jesus has taught them.

So, the law of Moses does not abrogate the covenant God made with Abraham (Gal. 3:17), nor is it opposed to the promises (v. 21). Indeed, the Mosaic covenant is itself a covenant of promise (Eph. 3:12), and it is based on God's grace, his gracious deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 20:2).

## David

After God establishes Israel in the Promised Land, he gives them kings. The greatest human king of Israel was David, and God made a special covenant with him. This covenant, too, begins in grace. God took David from being a shepherd boy and enabled him to achieve great victories in war. David becomes king by God's grace.

Then God promises to David seed, land, and redemption. He will be the ancestor of a line of children who will also be kings. They will rule over the land. The Davidic covenant also points to the Redeemer Jesus, for God says that David's throne will be established forever (2 Sam. 7:16). Like other covenants, this covenant is conditional. It includes both promises and commands. The sons of David are to be faithful to God (2 Sam. 7:14; cf. Ps. 89:30-37). If they disobey, God will discipline, though he will not remove his love as he did from Saul.

We know that the earthly line of Davidic kings ended when Judah was exiled to Babylon in 586 BC. So, after David, Israel awaited a greater King, the Anointed One, the Messiah, this Son of David. Many thought that he would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to political power. But when the Son of David actually comes, he does something far better; he saves us from our sins. And now he rules in heaven for all time, fulfilling the promise that David's throne will last forever. To Jesus all power is given in heaven and on earth.

### New Covenant

Jesus is so much greater than Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David that Scripture speaks of a "new" covenant in Christ that goes beyond any of the others, though it fulfills them to the nth degree. In the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer. 31:31-33; 33:21-22; Ezek. 34:23-31; 36:24-28), God promises a new order that will come into being after Israel returns from exile. At that time, God will write his law not only on tablets of stone but on the hearts of his people. When Israel returns from exile, however, they are still hard, unbelieving, and disobedient. But when Jesus comes, something really new emerges. He fulfills all the Old Testament patterns: the tabernacle, the temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood. And he is the great Son of David, the Messiah, the eternal King. His blood is the blood of the new covenant, shed for us (Luke 22:20), so that no other blood will ever need to be shed.

Jesus affirms the Old Testament as God's Word (Matt. 5:17-20) and all its promises. He is the seed of the promise. He sends his people not only to the land of Canaan but to the whole

earth. And he accomplishes our final redemption from sin. Seed, land, redemption.

But since Jesus is the reality to which the Old Testament pointed, everything in the Old Testament that is merely type and shadow must fade away in his light. So, there will be no more animal sacrifices. Jesus alone is High Priest, and all of us, his people, are priests under him.

### Unity

All these forms of the covenant of grace have similarities and differences with one another. The differences are obvious; for example, the rainbow is the sign of God's covenant with Noah, circumcision with Abraham, baptism with Jesus. Jesus is vastly greater than any earthly king, even greater than Moses, the great covenant mediator.

In some respects, however, these covenants are the same. They all have the same principle: God's desire to be our God and for us to be his people. They all speak of seed, land, and redemption. They all include law and grace. They all point to Jesus.

As we saw earlier, there was controversy even in New Testament times over the relation between the Mosaic and new covenants, which Paul resolves by bringing in the Abrahamic covenant, which preceded both. The promise to bless all nations in Abraham is fulfilled in the new covenant. The Mosaic comes between these in time, but it is not fundamentally different in character. We sometimes call the Mosaic covenant the law and the Abrahamic covenant the

promise. But, Paul says, law and promise are not contrary to one another. The Abrahamic covenant included commands, as we have seen, and the Mosaic covenant included promises of grace. The Mosaic covenant was "added," Paul says in Galatians 3:19, to increase the grace of the Abrahamic. The laws given by Moses do not save us; they increase our guilt. So, the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of death, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:6-15 (cf. Heb. 7-10). But God saves by his promise of grace, which both Abraham and Moses trusted. Hebrews 11 tells us that all these great saints looked forward to Christ. They were saved by faith in him. Such passages as Romans 3:21 and 4:1-25, 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, and Galatians 3:8 indicate how everything in the Old Testament points ahead to Christ. So, Christ is the consistent message of all the covenants and, indeed, of the whole Bible.

## *Chapter 10*

# WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, is both perfect God and perfect man. He is one person with two natures, divine and human. Those natures exist "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" (The Chalcedon Declaration).



e have seen that all of God's gracious covenants focus on Christ. It is Christ who is our Lord and our only Savior from sin. So, it is tremendously important that we now focus on Jesus Christ—who he is and what he has done for us. When we talk about who he is, we are talking about the person of Christ. When we talk about what he has done for us, we are talking about his work. Therefore many theological books and articles speak of the person and work of Christ. In this chapter we will discuss primarily his person, and in chapter 11, his work.

## The Chalcedonian Declaration

The church set forth its official position on the person of Christ in a statement made by the Council of Chalcedon of 451. The basic message of this statement is that Jesus Christ has two natures, a divine nature and a human nature, in one person. Your nature is what you really and truly are, your essence, your substance. Your nature can be described as a set of attributes that make you what you are. The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that the essence of a man is to be a rational animal. As we saw in chapter 7, the Bible says that the nature of man is the image of God.

The Chalcedonian Formula says that Jesus Christ is

essentially God, God by nature, the second person of the Trinity. That's what he really and truly is. But Jesus Christ is also man. That, too, is his nature, his essence, what he really and truly is. He is fully and completely God and fully and completely man. Everything that is true of God's nature is true of Jesus, and everything true of human nature is true of Jesus.'

It is hard to understand how those two statements fit together. How can somebody be both truly God and truly man? It seems that God is immaterial, man material; God can't suffer, man can suffer. How can anybody be both? But, as we shall see, that is what Scripture teaches; Jesus Christ is both God by nature and man by nature. Perhaps it will help to put it this way: God, who has no body, has taken to himself a body in the person of Jesus Christ. God, who cannot suffer, has taken to himself a human nature, in which he can suffer, in Christ.

The idea here is not that God and man become mingled together into a third reality or that divinity changes into humanity or vice versa. The Chalcedonian Formula denies this by saying that the two natures exist together without confusion and without change. Here it preserves the distinction between God and man. God is the Creator, mankind is his creature. Even in Jesus Christ, where God and man are most intimately united, God does not become man, nor does man become God (as some cultists claim), nor do they merge into a third thing. Jesus' two natures are distinct from one another.

On the other hand, we should not think of Jesus as two persons walking around in the same body, one divine, one

human. For the Chalcedonian Formula, reflecting the biblical teaching, says that although Jesus has two natures, he is one person. As we saw, the natures are without confusion and without change. But they are also without division or separation. Jesus acts and speaks as one person.

So, remember that formula: two natures, one person. When we considered the Trinity in chapter 3, we learned that in the Trinity there are three persons, one nature or substance. Here we have a similar formula but different, somewhat reversed. In Jesus Christ there are two natures but one person. In the rest of this chapter we shall consider Jesus' divine nature, then his human nature, and then the union of these in his one person.

### The Deity of Christ

The Bible teaches that Jesus is really and truly God, the second person of the Trinity. And it teaches that amazing fact over and over again, in a vast number of ways. People sometimes think that the doctrine of the deity of Christ, that Jesus is God, is based on only a few passages that are controversial. But I want you to see (even though I must summarize the argument very concisely) that this doctrine is found over and over again in Scripture. It is pervasive. It is found on nearly every page of the New Testament in one way or other.

Just imagine: Jesus grows up as a carpenter in Galilee. Then, when he is thirty or so years old, he begins to teach as a Jewish rabbi. His disciples are all Jews, and they have been taught from childhood that there is only one God and they

should worship God alone. They should never worship idols, certainly never worship a mere man. Somehow, during the next three years or so, all these Jewish disciples, and many more people besides, are convinced that Jesus is God and deserves to be worshiped as God. They have known him intimately as a man, have walked and talked and eaten with him; yet, they have come to worship him. That is quite an amazing thing.

Perhaps most amazing of all is that Jesus' disciples who wrote the New Testament rarely argue the deity of Christ. They didn't need to, because the whole Christian community agreed that Jesus was God. The early Christians were often a contentious bunch. They fought and battled over a number of things, some of them central to the gospel as we will see. But, so far as we can tell from the New Testament, they never argued with one another about the deity of Christ.

So, it is interesting to see how often the New Testament assumes the deity of Christ, even in passages that don't teach that doctrine or argue for it. Consider, for example, how egocentric Jesus' teaching is. Unlike any other religious teacher, Jesus calls attention to himself as the way of salvation: "The word that I have spoken will judge [you] on the last day" (John 12:48); "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25); "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6; cf. Matt. 5:11-12, 17; 7:21-29; 11:25-27; 13:41; 16:27-28; 24:31; 25:31-46). When the rich young ruler asks Jesus how to be saved, Jesus says, "Follow me" (Matt. 19:21; cf. 4:19; 8:22; 16:24; John 10:27; 12:26; etc.). He says that honor to himself transcends even the honor to one's own parents commanded in the Decalogue (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26), though he strongly endorses the fifth

commandment (Mark 7:11). This teaching doesn't sound humble at all, unless we suppose that Jesus is far more than a mere man. And, clearly, that is what the New Testament writers do suppose.

Negatively speaking, Jesus never withdraws or modifies a statement, apologizes, repents of sin, seeks advice, or asks prayer for himself.

The apostle Paul, defending his apostolic calling, says that he is called to be an apostle not by man but by God and by Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:1, 10, 12). He might have said that he was called not by just any man but by that remarkable man Jesus Christ (as in 1 Tim. 2:5), and his statement would have been true, for Jesus is a real man. Instead, Paul puts Jesus on the side of God: not by a man but by God and by Jesus Christ. He and the other apostles command us to do all things in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:16; Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 12:10; 3 John 7). The apostles speak this way not as part of a conscious effort to teach the deity of Christ but incidentally, as it were, while teaching other things. The deity of Christ was itself, evidently, not controversial in the church. So, the salutations (as Rom. 1:7) and benedictions (as 2 Cor. 13:14) of the New Testament regularly refer to Christ as the source of all spiritual blessing, ascribing to Jesus the benefits that come only from God.

Christ, the Lord

The strongest evidence for the deity of Christ is this: Christ is the Lord. Remember that God's lordship is the main theme of this book. The Bible's main teaching about God is that God is

Lord. Lord is the covenant name of God. It tells us that God is in control of all things, that he speaks with absolute authority, and that he takes us in love to be his people.

Now, we should note that Lord is also the name of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most fundamental confession of the New Testament is "Jesus is Lord." Romans 10:9 says, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." First Corinthians 12:3 says, "No one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit." In Philippians 2:10-11 Paul alludes to Isaiah 45:23, which speaks of every knee bowing to God as Lord, and he paraphrases it this way: "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

The Greek word for Lord (kyrios) can sometimes be used of ordinary human beings; but it is clear that Jesus is Lord in a very special sense, a sense that belongs only to God. The Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament of Jesus' time, regularly used this word to refer to Yahweh, God. In several passages, the Old Testament looks forward to the coming of a deliverer, a Savior, who bears the title Lord, as in Psalm 110:1 and Jeremiah 23:5-6. And the New Testament often refers to Old Testament passages calling God the Lord and refers them to Jesus (cf. Isa. 40:3 and Matt. 3:3; Ps. 8:2 and Matt. 21:16; Isa. 6:1-10 and Matt. 13:14-15; Mal. 3:1 and Luke 1:76; etc.)

Jesus is Lord, even as an infant. Elizabeth refers to Mary as

"the mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43). Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28), a remarkable title in the Jewish world. The Sabbath was the Sabbath of the Lord our God (Ex. 20:9-10; Isa. 58:13). But Jesus says that he, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath, an amazing claim. The disciple we call Doubting Thomas, faced with the risen glory of Jesus Christ, exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Jesus is "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36; cf. reference to God in Rom. 10:12).

Paul regularly uses the word Lord to refer to the second person of the Trinity (1 Cor. 8:6; 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6) and also to refer to the increasing phases of Jesus' exaltation: his resurrection, exaltation, ascension, and final glory (Rom. 1:4; 14:9; cf. 1 Cor. 15:25-28; Heb. 10:12-13). In the gospel of John, Jesus invokes the root idea of lordship from Exodus 3: the Lord is the "I AM." So he says, "I am" the bread of life (John 6:35, 48, 51), the resurrection and the life (11:24-25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); compare John 8:12, 10:7-11, 15:1. Most pointedly, in John 8:56-58, he tells the Jews that "before Abraham was, I am." Not "before Abraham was, I was." That would itself be a strong statement, saying that Jesus pre-existed, that he lived before his earthly birth, even before Abraham's time. But he says more: before Abraham was, "I am," taking on himself the mysterious, sacred name of God from Exodus 3:14. The Jews understood well what he was saying, and they took up stones to kill him.

## The Son of God

The title Lord is, I think, the most important New Testament indication of the deity of Christ. But there are many more. One

other important title applied to Jesus in the New Testament is Son of God. This title, like Lord, can be used of finite beings: angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; Pss. 29:1; 89:6), kings (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26-27), priests (Mal. 1:6), Israel (Deut. 14:1), Adam (Luke 3:38), all people (Acts 17:28), and us believers: we are sons of God in Jesus (Matt. 5:9; John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-16; etc.). But Jesus is the unique Son; he is Son of God in a way that nobody else is. Scripture refers to him as The Son of God (Luke 1:31-32; John 1:34; 1 John 5:20), as God's own Son (Rom. 8:3, 32; cf. John 5:18), the onlybegotten Son (John 3:16). As the Son, he is above the angels (Heb. 1:5). Our sonship depends on his: it is through Jesus the Son that we ourselves are able to become sons and daughters of God. As John 1:12 says, "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

Son is a royal title. God is the great King, and his Son shares his rule. So, its meaning overlaps the title Lord. Lord emphasizes Christ's relation to his people as the head of the covenant; Son emphasizes his relationship to his Father. Jesus does everything the Father does, sharing his knowledge, love, powers, and prerogatives (John 5:18-23).

## The Christ

Another important title is the word Christ itself. Christ is from the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah, which, in turn, means "Anointed One." In the Old Testament, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil, a symbol of the gifts of the Spirit for their ministries.

The Jews expected God to send a messiah who would be a great king like David, who would liberate Israel from the Romans and reestablish Israel as a great power. The Old Testament rarely uses the term Messiah (Ps. 2:2; Dan. 9:25-26), but it does teach that God would send a king of David's line but greater than David (Pss. 45:6; 59:15-17; Mic. 5:2; Zech. 2:8-11; 9:9-17). And it teaches that the coming of the Messiah would also be the coming of God himself. In Psalm 110:1-2 we read:

The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand,  
until I make your enemies your footstool.”

The LORD sends forth from Zion  
your mighty scepter.

Rule in the midst of your enemies!

In Isaiah 9:6 we read:

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

So, the title Christ also identifies Jesus as God.

God

There are also passages that use the word God itself of Jesus Christ. The most famous is John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." We know from verse 14 that the term Word here refers to Jesus, for verse 14 says that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." So, John 1:1 teaches that Jesus was with God in the very beginning, and that he himself was God.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like the ancient Arians, argue that "the Word was God" here should be translated "the Word was a god," meaning that Jesus Christ was something less than the true God himself. They advocate that reduced meaning for "god" because, they point out, the term has no definite article in the Greek. But that argument shows a great ignorance of Greek grammar. The word God is often found in the New Testament, referring to God in the fullest sense, without a definite article (Mark 12:27; Luke 20:38; John 8:54; Rom. 8:33; Phil. 2:13; Heb. 11:16). There are three cases of this in John 1 itself: verses 6, 13, and 18. In those verses God is used without the definite article, and nobody claims that the word is used in a reduced sense.

There are other places in the New Testament that directly call Jesus "God." In John 1: 18 he is called "the only begotten God" (KJv). In John 20:28, as we mentioned earlier, Thomas sees the resurrected Christ and says, "My Lord and my God!" Compare also Psalm 45:6, Isaiah 7:14 and 9:6, Acts 20:28,

Romans 9:5, 1 Timothy 3:15-16, 2 Thessalonians 1:12, Titus 2:13, and 2 Peter 1:1, in which the word God refers to Jesus. Colossians 2:9 makes it even stronger: in Christ dwells "the whole fullness of deity." I would urge you to look up these references and let yourself be amazed. Remember, these writers are Jewish monotheists who have come to believe that a man is God, worthy of worship.

Among the above references are twelve passages in which the word God is applied to Christ. People sometimes wonder why there aren't more. But remember that although Jesus is rarely called God in the New Testament, he is called Lord many, many times. And Lord is, if anything, a stronger term for deity than God. Lord is the sacred name of Yahweh, the name revealed to Moses in the burning bush. God is also an important term, but in the Bible it is a more generic word. It applies to false gods as well as the true God. Lord, when it refers to Yahweh, refers only to the one true God. Furthermore, Lord is the precious covenant name of God, the name of the one who comes to be with his people in an intimate covenant relationship. To the Jews in the first century, that was the greatest, most wonderful fact: that the Lord of the covenant came to dwell in the man Jesus, to die for his people and to rise again.

## Other Titles

There are other titles of Christ that indicate or suggest his deity. For example, we tend to think of the title Son of Man as indicating Jesus' humanity, which it does to some extent. But you get a rather different impression from Daniel 7, in which the

Son of Man is a glorious heavenly figure, representing the saints before God, ruling as Lord over human beings in God's behalf. The New Testament writers develop those ideas. The Son of Man has power to forgive sins (Mark 2:5-10). He suffers and dies for his people (Matt. 8:20; Mark 8:31), is buried (Matt. 12:40), rises from the dead (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:34), returns in glory (Matt. 16:27). So, the Son of Man is human but also has divine powers and prerogatives, and he rules as Lord over all human beings.

Jesus is also the Word of God (John 1:1-14; Col. 1:15-18; Heb. 1:2-4; Rev. 19:13). As we saw in chapter 4, the Word of God is divine, an object of worship in the Psalms. Jesus is also the Image of God in a sense far higher than the sense in which we are all God's image (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:3). He is the Savior, and we recall from Isaiah that only God is the Savior; so, Savior is a divine title (Isa. 43:11; 45:15, 21; 47:4; 49:26; cf. Luke 2:11; John 4:42; Acts 5:3 1; 13:23; Eph. 5:23). He is the Holy One (2 Kings 19:22; Pss. 71:22; 89:18-19; Isa. 1:4 and often in Isaiah; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; Acts 2:27; 13:35), the Alpha and Omega (Isa. 44:6; Rev. 1:8, 17-18; 2:8; 21:6; 22:13). He bears the same images associated with God in Scripture: the Shepherd, the Rock, the King, the Judge, the Bridegroom, the Lion, the Light.

## Divine Attributes

Furthermore, Jesus has the attributes of God. Every attribute we studied in chapters 1 and 2 belongs to Jesus, and Scripture takes pains to show that these attributes are unique in Jesus. Even though human beings are called to love one

another, for example, Jesus' love is the very definition of what love is. His atonement uniquely defines the love of God (John 15:13-14; Eph. 5:2, 25; 1 John 3:16; Rev. 1:5). The same holds true for compassion (Matt. 9:6; 14:14), peace (Isa. 9:6), righteousness (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14; James 5:6), and holiness (Mark 1:24). One of the more amazing attributes of Jesus is his sinlessness. Imagine having a close friendship with somebody for three years and, at the end, not being able to say that they did anything wrong. But Jesus' disciples said that Jesus was absolutely sinless, and his enemies could not contradict them (John 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:5).

Jesus is omniscient (John 4:16-19, 29). He knows the hearts of people (Matt. 9:4; 12:25; John 1:47; 2:24-25; 21:17; Rev. 2:23). He knows the future (Matt. 8:11; 16:21; 26:24; Mark 8:3 1; Luke 9:22; John 13:38; 21:18-19). He knows the Father just as the Father knows him (Matt. 11:25-27; Luke 10:22; John 10:15). So, he is the truth, indeed the very definition of truth (John 1:14; 14:6; 1 John 5:20).

Jesus is wise; Paul even says that Jesus is made to us wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Col. 2:3). He is eternal (John 1:1; 3:13; 8:58; Rev. 1:8; 11, 18); unchangeable (Heb. 1:8, 10, 12; as Yahweh in Ps. 102; cf. 13:8); glorious (Isa. 4:2; Luke 13:17; John 1:14; 2:11; 12:41; 14:19; 17:24); the very Lord of Glory, certainly another divine title (1 Cor. 2:8; cf. James 2:1).

## Divine Acts

Jesus performs divine acts, things only God can do. John 5:19 tells us, in fact, that he does everything the Father does.

That includes creation (John 1:3; Heb. 1:2-3; Col. 1:15-16),<sup>3</sup> providence (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3),<sup>4</sup> and miracles. Amazingly, it also includes the forgiveness of sins, as we saw earlier. Jesus forgives not only sins committed against him but sins committed against third parties and God (Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:21; Acts 5:31; 7:60; 13:38; Col. 3:13). The Jews marveled: who can forgive such sins but God alone? And Jesus, as God, is to be the final judge of the living and the dead (Matt. 7:21-23; John 5:22; Acts 17:31; 1 Cor. 4:4; 11:32; 1 Thess. 4:6; 2 Thess. 1:8-9; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 2:23; 19:11).

## Object of Worship

One of the most amazing things about the biblical picture of Jesus is that he receives, and deserves, worship from men (see Matt. 28:9, 17; John 5:23; 9:35-38; Phil. 2:10) and even angels (Heb. 1:6). Remember, the first commandment says that only God is to be worshiped. But the New Testament contains hymns to Jesus, such as "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (Rev. 5:12; cf. 7:10). As the family of Seth in Genesis 4:26 called on the name of the Lord, so Christians are people who call on the name of the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 1:2; Col. 3:17). They pray to Jesus (Acts 7:59-60; Rom. 10:12; 2 Cor. 12:8), and they pray to the Father in Jesus' name (John 14:13-14). That is to say, Jesus is our object of worship, our object of faith (John 3:15-16; 6:29; 8:24; 16:9; etc.). As we believe in God, we believe in him (John 12:44; 14:1). There is no other name by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

In a broader sense of worship (Rom. 12:1-2), Jesus demands a total commitment from his followers (Matt. 10:35-37; 16:24-26).

Only God may demand that of human beings.

We could go on and on with biblical evidence for Jesus' deity. David Wells mentions thirty passages that identify Christ with the attributes, works, and titles of God.' We have here only begun to scratch the surface of this theme.

### Problem Passages

Nevertheless, the deity of Christ has been a controversial doctrine once you get past the New Testament period. As we mentioned, Arians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others have tried to distort the meanings of passages such as John 1:1, which bear clear witness to the deity of Christ. Some have also tried to find passages that contradict the deity of Christ. They cite very few passages, and even if we could not explain those verses, we would not be wise to give them much weight in view of the huge number of passages on the other side. But we should at least be prepared for some arguments about some biblical passages.

One is Proverbs 8:22, in which God's wisdom declares that "the LORD possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old." Those who doubt the deity of Christ say that "wisdom" (v. 12) is a title of Christ and that *qanah* (the word translated "possessed" in the *ESV*) can mean "made" or "created," which would make Jesus Christ a created being. Well, you can see that this is a stretch. Proverbs 8 is a poetic statement, not a theological treatise. In such a passage, the relationship of wisdom to Christ should not be pressed in detail. But if we must press the issue, let's note that God cannot

have literally created his own wisdom. If he did, he must have created it without wisdom, unwisely, and that makes no sense at all. Furthermore, in this context, qanah most naturally means "get" or "possess" rather than "create." One frequent exhortation in the book of Proverbs (4:5, 7; 16:16; 17:16) is that we should "get wisdom"; this passage presents God as one who "got wisdom."

Another "problem passage" is Mark 10:18, in which the rich man calls Jesus good, and Jesus tells him that only God is good. Is Jesus here denying his own goodness and his own deity? No. He is challenging the rich man to think more seriously about goodness than he has, to quit throwing the word around so loosely. Ultimately, Jesus wants to show him that he, the rich man, is a sinner and that Jesus' goodness is more than merely human.

Many have quoted John 14:28 and other passages that indicate that in some sense the Father is "greater than" Jesus. But there are a number of ways in which the Father is greater that don't detract from Jesus' deity. The Father is greater than Jesus during Jesus' time of humiliation. During that time, Jesus is the Father's servant, and he does only the Father's will, seeking by prayer the Father's resources. Here Jesus shows what it is like to be a true man, to be subordinate to God. His ascension to heaven brings him a greater fullness of power and authority. Furthermore, although the three persons of the Trinity are equally God, equally full of power and glory, there is some mysterious sense in which the Father is the "first" person, in which he is the one who appropriately sends the Son and Spirit to carry out their tasks in the world. Recall our

discussion of eternal generation in chapter 3.

In John 17:3 Jesus identifies the Father as "the only true God." Does he thereby deny that he is also the true God, as some have said? Certainly not. This kind of language in Scripture regularly contrasts Yahweh with the false gods of the nations, not with his onlybegotten Son.

In 1 Corinthians 8:6 Paul distinguishes Jesus as "Lord" from the "one God," who is the Father. Does he here deny that Jesus is God as well? Not at all. For Paul, as we have seen, both God and Lord are divine titles. Paul usually uses these terms to distinguish the first and second persons of the Trinity. And note that in this passage both God and Lord are objects of worship, agents of creation, and authors of the redeemed life.

In Colossians 1:15 and 18 Jesus is called "firstborn of all creation" and "firstborn of the dead." Does "firstborn of all creation" indicate that he, too, is a created being? No, for several reasons. First, in this passage Jesus is the Creator, not one of the creatures. Second, "firstborn" in Scripture regularly refers to status and authority rather than time of birth. David was "firstborn," though he was one of the younger members of his family (Ps. 89:27). Third, "firstborn" seems to have been a regular title of Christ among the early Christians (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 12:23) based on his resurrection (Col. 1:18). As in the second reason, it suggests primacy and authority rather than any kind of subordination.

Why the Deity of Christ Is Important

It is important that the mediator of our salvation be God.' Unless our savior is God, we are without hope. It is the deity of Christ that sustains his human nature through terrible suffering, that gives worth and power to his sufferings, that makes his salvation sure. As God said through Isaiah (43:11), only the Lord can save us from our worst predicament. Only the Lord can be the Savior. And as Jonah said, salvation is of the Lord (2:9).

### The Humanity of Christ

It is equally important that the Redeemer be man.' Hebrews 2 emphasizes that. Jesus fulfills the glory of man in Psalm 8. Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers (v. 11) and children (v. 13). He shares our flesh and blood so that he can defeat death. The writer says, "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted" (vv. 17-18). Later he says that because Jesus is man he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, for he "in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15).

In the earliest church, the humanity of Jesus was actually more controversial than his deity. The Docetists, perhaps influenced by Gnosticism, taught that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body. (Docetist comes from the Greek word "to seem.") Evidently, it seemed to them that matter was evil; so, if God took on a body, he would defile himself. But Scripture teaches that God made the material world and that everything

in that material world was good, though the fall of man has brought a curse on that world. Indeed, the human body is good. It bears God's image. So, not only did Jesus take on a true human body, but his resurrection was a physical resurrection, a resurrection of the body. And his return will also be physical; every eye shall see him (Rev. 1:7). And he will raise our bodies from the grave. Remember: our ultimate hope is not to live after death outside the body. Our ultimate hope is reunion with our bodies in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1). So, the apostle John strongly condemns Docetism: "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. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already" (1 John 4:2-3).

Jesus became a true man when he was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:34-35; cf. Isa. 7:14). Nine months later he underwent a very physical birth. As a man he hungered (Matt. 4:2), thirsted (John 19:28), was weary (John 4:6), and, of course, suffered and died. He also had a fully human mind. He increased in wisdom (Luke 2:52), even was ignorant about the time of his return (Mark 13:32). Emotionally, he was troubled (John 12:27; 13:21), sorrowful (Matt. 26:38; John 11:35; Heb. 5:7). He sometimes marveled (Matt. 8:10). He was really tempted (Matt. 4; Heb. 4:15), even though God himself cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

Those statements pose large problems for us. How, we ask, could the God-man be ignorant of anything? Or how can he

grow in wisdom, when as God he is already perfect wisdom? But that is the paradox of the two natures. At every point he is both man and God. As man he grows in wisdom; as God he has all wisdom. That's hard to understand, but no harder than the fact that as man he grew in strength but as God he has all power. He hungered, thirsted, suffered but had the power to command God's angels to do anything he wanted. Hard to understand, but that's because it is impossible, psychologically, for us to understand what it would be like to have both a divine nature and a human nature.

Could Jesus really be tempted? Not as God, for God cannot be tempted (James 1:13). But as man he saw the allurements of sin and experienced the weakness of his own human flesh. As Adam was originally sinless but "able to sin," so was Jesus' human nature. As Eve looked at the forbidden fruit and saw that it was delightful, so Jesus saw the attractions of sin. He struggled, but he did not give in. Some think that you cannot really be tempted unless you give in to the temptation at least sometimes. But Wayne Grudem is wiser to point out that you don't really feel the full force of a temptation until you reject it. Some people surrender to temptation after only a little bit of time; others hold out longer. But Jesus took all Satan had to give and finally said no. So, he felt the temptation as much as (perhaps more than) any man, but without sin.

## The Hypostatic Union

The union of Jesus' divine and human natures in his one person is called the hypostatic union. Hypostatic comes from the Greek word often translated "person." So, the hypostatic

union is the personal union of Jesus' two natures.

As we saw earlier, the Chalcedonian Declaration says that Jesus has two complete natures in one person. It uses four adverbs translated "without": without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. One group of heretics taught that Jesus had only one nature, because his divinity and humanity were mingled together, confused, or changed into one another. They were called monophysites, from a word that means "one nature."

Another group of heretics thought that Jesus was really like two persons walking around in one body. They were called Nestorians, though the actual Nestorius probably didn't believe this heresy. Now, certainly, there are some actions of Jesus that reflect more his divine nature (like doing miracles) and others that reflect more his human nature (like hungering and thirsting). But remember that his actions are not actions of a nature but of a person. Natures don't do anything; persons do. When Jesus works a miracle, it is his person who works the miracle. When he suffers, it is his person who suffers. That person is the second person of the Trinity, who has taken on a human nature. So, in a real sense, it is God, a divine and human person, who hungers and thirsts, who suffers and dies for us.

Another controversy about the hypostatic union concerns the communication idiomatum, or "communication of attributes." This has to do also with the relation of Jesus' natures to one another and to his person. Jesus' divine nature includes divine attributes, such as omniscience and omnipotence. His human nature includes human attributes,

such as weakness and temporality. It is hard to understand how these fit together in one person, as we've seen. Lutherans say that they fit together in a unified way, because the divine attributes modify the human attributes and vice versa; in other words, his two natures change one another. So, Jesus' body is omnipresent, for example. His body is human, but because he also has the divine attribute of omnipresence, his body cannot be an ordinary human body. It must be a body with a divine attribute. That fits in well with the Lutheran view that Jesus' literal body exists in, with, and under the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.

Reformed theologians reply that this Lutheran view confuses the two natures of Christ, contrary to the Chalcedonian Declaration. They think that on the Lutheran view there is no clear Creator-creature distinction. Body becomes divine.

The Reformed try a different way of showing how the two natures fit together. They say that the divine nature doesn't change the human nature or vice versa but that the person of Jesus has all the attributes of both. It is not that his body is omnipresent, but he is omnipresent, in his own divine way. Jesus' actions reflect sometimes mainly his humanity and sometimes mainly his deity, but his person is both omniscient and ignorant, both omnipotent and weak, and so on. His body is not omnipresent but is located in a place called heaven; so, it is not physically present in the sacrament.

Lutherans think that this view separates the two natures too much. So, Lutherans sometimes charge the Reformed with

Nestorianism, and the Reformed charge the Lutherans with being monophysites on this specific point.

But the hypostatic union is surely one of the great mysteries of the faith, one that none of us is likely ever to understand very well. To understand it, we would have to be Jesus, and we are not. But we can be thankful that God the Son took on a truly human nature in order to bear our sins and take them as far from us as the east is from the west.

## *Chapter 11*

# WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Jesus, the Lord, holds the offices of Prophet, Priest, and King. As King, he is the mighty Creator, who rules heaven and earth and ensures the redemption of his people. As Prophet, he is God's very Word, who teaches us God's truth. As Priest, he offers his perfect life as a sacrifice for the sins of his people and ever lives in resurrection glory to make intercession for them.



In chapter 10 we asked about the person of Christ: what kind of person is Jesus? We saw that he is both true God and true man, two distinct natures in one person. In this chapter we will ask about the work of Christ: what does Jesus do for us?

Before we think of his work specifically, it will be helpful for us to talk briefly about his offices. Just as some people are presidents or mayors, CEOs or certified public accountants, so Jesus holds certain offices; and what he does, his actions, carry out the duties of those offices. What are those offices? Well, as we've seen, Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One. That idea sends us back to the Old Testament, where three offices of people were anointed with oil: prophets, priests, and kings. When the Messiah comes, the Anointed One par excellence, he holds all three of these offices. He is the ultimate Prophet, the ultimate Priest, and the ultimate King.

You may recall the threefold concept of lordship that I shared with you in chapter 1. These three offices fit right in with that triad. As Prophet, Jesus displays especially the lordship attribute of authority; as Priest, the lordship attribute of presence; as King, the lordship attribute of control. In terms of our distinctions of chapter 6, the prophet represents the normative perspective, the priest the existential, and the king the situational.

These offices help us to understand Jesus' work. As a Prophet, he brings us the true word of God. As Priest, he brings sacrifice (ultimately, the sacrifice is himself) and makes intercession. And as King, he rules all things in his mighty power. Let us consider each of these in turn.

## Prophet

First, Jesus is the greatest of the prophets, indeed more than a prophet. As we saw in chapter 4, a prophet is someone who has the very word of God on his lips. Deuteronomy 18:15-22 and Jeremiah 1:9-10, as well as other passages, show that the prophet's words are God's words, and so they are just as authoritative as the divine voice uttered from heaven.

But Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the very Word of God himself. John 1:1 reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And we see from verse 14 that that Word was Jesus.

So, when Jesus begins his teaching ministry, people are amazed at the authority with which he speaks, not at all like the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 7:28-29). He declares God's word truly (John 1:18; 15:15), cutting through all the distortions and compromises of the Jewish traditions.

Furthermore, he teaches that his word is to be the foundation of all of life (Matt. 7:21-27). Peter recognizes this when he says, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). It is the word of his grace that builds us up (Acts 20:32). And Jesus' word will judge us all in

the last day (John 12:48).

Jesus spoke his word not only during his earthly ministry. The whole Old Testament is his word: "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10). He taught his disciples that everything in the law, the prophets, and the writings of the Old Testament was about him. So, the whole Bible is not only the Word of God but the word of Jesus as well. He is both the author and the chief theme of Scripture. It is his gospel, his promise, and by that word we are saved.

### Priest

Second, Jesus is our great High Priest. We can summarize the duties of a priest in two categories: sacrifice and intercession.

Jesus' sacrifice is what we usually think of first when we think of the work of Christ. The theological name for that sacrifice is atonement. That word comes from an Old English expression referring to reconciliation, bringing people to oneness, at-one-ment. Certainly reconciliation is part of the meaning of atonement. But there is much more as well.

Jesus' atoning sacrifice fulfills the Old Testament sacrifices of bulls, goats, lambs, doves, flour, wine, and oil. In the Old Testament, God used those sacrifices to teach the people what Jesus was later going to do. So, we can learn from those sacrifices about the meaning of Jesus' atonement.

First, the sacrificial animal had to be perfect, spotless, without blemish (Ex. 12:5; 29:1; Lev. 1:3; etc.). The Israelite was

not to bring an offering to God that was cheap or worthless. He had to bring something really valuable, something perfect, something that otherwise he would treasure for himself. Similarly, Jesus offered himself as the sinless Lamb of God. As we saw in chapter 10, Jesus committed no sin. Neither his friends nor his enemies were able to find any fault in him. He loved as no one had ever loved (John 15:3-4; 1 John 3:16). Even the demons recognized him as the Holy One of God (Luke 1:35; 4:34; Acts 3:14; 7:52).

Theologians call Jesus' perfect life his active obedience. When we believe in Christ, God counts us as righteous in Christ. That is to say, God imputes to us the active obedience of Christ; so, he sees us, regards us, counts us, declares us as righteous and holy, as Jesus is. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that "for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God imputes our sin to Christ and his righteousness to us. God judges our sin in Christ, and he regards us as righteous in Christ. That is sometimes called double imputation: our sin to Christ, his righteousness to us. So, God not only forgives our sins, he gives to us the very righteousness of Christ. We are not only acquitted but we are positively good.'

Jesus' death on the cross is called his passive obedience. The word passive may not be the best, because Jesus is very active in sacrificing himself. He is the Priest who offers the sacrifice. He lays down his life, and he says in John 10:18, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." But the

word passive is related to the Greek and Latin terms for "suffering," so we can accept the term passive obedience in that sense.

Jesus' passive obedience is an atoning sacrifice. That sacrifice accomplishes a number of things. First, expiation. This means that Jesus bore our sins, took them on himself, and therefore did away with them (Isa. 53:6, 12; John 1:29; Heb. 9:28; 1 Peter 2:24). As we saw earlier in 2 Corinthians 5:21, he was "made sin" for us. He became our substitute. As such, he took the full penalty that we owed God, the penalty of death. By expiation, Jesus wiped our slate clean. We have nothing to fear from God. God forgives our sins fully and completely, taking them as far from us as the east is from the west.

Second, propitiation. This means that he bore the wrath and anger of God that was due to sin (Rom. 3:35; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). In some mysterious way, he was even estranged from his Father on the cross, as the Father regarded him bearing our sins. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he cried, quoting Psalm 22 (Matt. 27:46). Some scholars have tried to eliminate the theme of propitiation from the Bible, trying to make it a synonym for expiation. These scholars don't like the idea of God being angry with people because of sin. But that attempt has failed. Our God cares about right and wrong. "God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day," Psalm 7:11 tells us. God is angry with the wicked, and Jesus on the cross turned his anger away from his people.

Third, the atonement is reconciliation, as the English word implies. Since we are now righteous in God's sight (expiation)

and he is no longer angry with us (propitiation), we are reconciled, no longer enemies (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Again, some scholars have tried to soften this idea by saying that the atonement purges our enmity against God, not God's against us. They think, again, that God has no enmity toward sinners. But that is biblically wrong. In sin, man is the enemy of God and vice versa. In Christ, Jesus brings us together, so that we will live together with God in blessed fellowship forever and ever. We anticipate that fellowship in the Lord's Supper, in which we have table fellowship with God.

Finally, the atonement is redemption. Redemption means, literally, "buying back something." In the Old Testament when someone sold his property or even got so far into debt that he sold himself into slavery, a relative could buy back the property or buy the man's freedom. This relative is called the kinsman redeemer, and Leviticus 25 describes him. In the book of Ruth, Boaz redeems Ruth and her mother-in-law from poverty by marrying her. In Mark 10:45 Jesus says that he has come to give his life a "ransom for many," buying us back as God's lost property. His sacrifice on the cross was an act of great value, and it purchased for him a people of his own possession. So, we belong to God both by creation and by redemption.

Those four terms summarize what the atonement is, according to Scripture. But I should also warn you against some false ways of looking at the atonement. Some theologians have not liked the idea of Jesus dying in our place, so they have tried to make the atonement an easier concept. First, some, such as the third-century writer Origen, have picked up

on the ransom passage in Mark 10:45 and suggested that Jesus paid the ransom to Satan. That idea has no biblical basis. Satan has no rights over us. It is to God alone that Jesus pays our ransom.

Second, some, such as the medieval thinker Abelard, together with many modern liberals, have argued that the atonement is not a sacrifice but only a moral example. On this view Jesus dies on the cross to show us how to behave. This position does have some biblical basis, in that 1 Peter 2:21 says, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." The atonement is an example to us. The question is, is the atonement only an example? If it is only an example, then, as Roger Nicole has pointed out, it is a very poor example. For if Jesus died merely to encourage us to do the same thing, he is encouraging suicide, something Scripture never honors. But if Jesus laid down his life to bring life to others, then there is something here we can imitate. We should be cautious at this point: in one sense, we can never do what Jesus did. He took away the punishment of our sins; I cannot do that for anyone else. Yet his self-sacrifice is an excellent model for us, in that it tells us to give ourselves in love for the benefit of others. First John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

The third wrong view of the atonement is the governmental view of Grotius and others. It teaches that God forgives our sins without any need of sacrifice. But to impress us of the seriousness and solemnity of God's law, God put his Son to

death. This view is unbiblical in a number of ways. First, Scripture teaches that sacrifice is required to receive God's forgiveness: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). Second, on this view God demonstrates the severity of his law by putting to death an innocent man. But unless Jesus is a substitute for us, his death is a demonstration of injustice, not justice.

### For Whom Did Christ Die?

Many theologians have devoted a lot of attention to the question, for whom did Christ die? There are basically two views on the subject. One view, called unlimited atonement, says that Christ died for every human being. The other view, called limited atonement, definite atonement, or particular redemption, says that Christ died only for the elect, only for those who in God's plan will be ultimately saved.

The unlimited view seems fairly obvious from a number of Scriptures that say Christ died for "the world" (John 1:29; 3:16; 6:51; 2 Cor. 5:19; 1 John 2:2), "for all" (1 Cor. 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:15; 1 Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9), or even, apparently, for people who ultimately reject him, as in 2 Peter 2:1, where Peter speaks of some who are "even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." This sounds very much as though Jesus died on the cross to buy, to redeem, some people who nevertheless will be lost in the end.

In Hebrews 10:29 we read, "How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by

which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?" Again, it sounds as though some people are sanctified, made holy, by the blood of Christ, who nevertheless spurn and profane that blood and receive eternal punishment.

Although this view sounds obvious from the verses I have quoted, there are some real problems with it. If the atonement is unlimited, universal, then it would seem to bring salvation to everybody; for, as we have seen, the atonement is a substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus' atonement takes our sins away, bringing us full forgiveness. So, if the atonement is universal, it guarantees salvation for everybody. But we know from Scripture, indeed from 2 Peter 2:1 and Hebrews 10:29, which I just quoted, that not everyone in the world is saved. Some people spurn Jesus' blood. They trample it down. So they receive swift destruction.

If you believe in a universal atonement, you must hold a weaker view of what the atonement is. It must be something less than a substitutionary sacrifice that brings full forgiveness. What could that be? Some theologians have suggested that the atonement does not actually save anybody, but it takes away the barrier of original sin, so that we are now free to choose Christ or reject him. So, the atonement does not actually save, but it only makes salvation possible for those who freely decide to come to faith. In the end, it is our free decision that saves us; the atonement only prepares the way, so that we can make a free decision. This idea of free decision, by the way, is the idea of libertarian freedom, which I rejected in chapter 7.

The trouble is, however, that Scripture never hints any such meaning for the atonement. In Scripture the atonement does not merely make salvation possible. The atonement actually saves. It is not merely a prelude to our free decision. It brings to us all the benefits of God's forgiveness and eternal life. Those who say the atonement has an unlimited extent believe that it has a limited efficacy, a limited power to save. Those who believe the atonement is limited to the elect, however, believe that it has an unlimited efficacy. So everyone believes in some kind of limitation. Either the atonement is limited in its extent, or it is limited in its efficacy. I think the Bible teaches it is limited in its extent, unlimited in its efficacy.

So, mainly because I believe Scripture teaches the efficacy of the atonement, I hold to the view that the atonement is limited in its extent. It doesn't save everybody, but it fully saves everybody that it does save. The fundamental point here is not the limited extent of the atonement, though that is a biblical teaching. The fundamental point is the efficacy of the atonement.

Let's now look at the particular redemption view, namely, Christ died only for the elect, his people, those whom God chose to save before the foundation of the world. On this view the atonement does not just make salvation possible, it actually saves. Many biblical texts indicate that the atonement is limited to Jesus' own people. In John 10:11 and 15 Jesus says that he lays down his life for his sheep, but in the context not everybody is one of Jesus' sheep.

Furthermore, as we've seen, many texts about the

atonement indicate that it fully saves. Romans 8:32-39 says:

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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.

You see, Paul says that God gave his Son for "us all." The consequence is salvation in the fullest sense, a salvation that can never be lost or taken away. If Christ died for you, no one can ever bring a charge against you before God, not even Satan. If Christ died for you, nothing can separate you from the love of Christ.

There are, to be sure, passages that say that Christ died for "the world." Some of these passages emphasize the cosmic

dimension of Jesus' work, as in John 3:16. In Colossians 1:20 Paul says that Jesus in his atonement intends "through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Other "world" passages use "world" in an ethical sense, as when 1 John 2:15 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." That may have been in the mind of John the Baptist when he said in John 1:29, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

And there are passages that say Christ died for "all." But the extent of the word "all" is notoriously flexible. Mark 1:5 says that "all" Judea and Jerusalem went out to hear John the Baptist. Clearly, we should not take that "all" literally. In some of the "all" texts, it is plain that the writer is referring to "all Christians" or "all the elect."

Note 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Taken literally, this means that everybody will be saved. But it does not mean that. Rather, what it means is that everyone who dies, dies in Adam; and everyone who lives, lives in Christ.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5:15: "And he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." Here Paul says that Jesus died for all. But he also says that the "all" receive new hearts so that they no longer live to themselves but for Christ. Even in this "all" text, the atonement is efficacious: when Christ dies for someone, that person is fully saved. He receives a new heart

and a new life. Clearly, not everyone in the world receives a new heart and a new life; so, not everyone in the world is included under that term "all."

In still other "all" texts, the reference may be to what we call ethnic universalism, namely, Jesus died for people of all nations, tongues, races, and tribes. That may be the meaning in 1 Timothy 2:6, which mentions the nations in the first two verses of the chapter. But I prefer to take this verse as meaning that the death of Christ warrants a free offer of the gospel to everybody, for he is the only Savior. That is to say, when in 1 John 2:2, for example, the writer says that Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world," he is saying that Jesus is the only Savior. There is none other in the whole wide world. If anyone, anywhere-say, in Thailand or Sri Lanka-is seeking a propitiation with God, he will find no other except in the blood of Jesus.

What about the texts like Hebrews 10:29 and 2 Peter 2:1, which describe some people as denying the Lord who bought them, in some sense? I take these texts to describe members of the visible church who have confessed Christ at their baptism. These have claimed that Jesus died for them. On the basis of that profession, they have entered a solemn covenant relationship with God and with the church, a relationship made solemn by the blood of Christ. But now they blaspheme the blood of Christ. They were never united to Christ in a saving way. But having professed Christ, they are subject to the curses of the covenant, as covenant breakers.

## Intercession

I said earlier that the two main duties of the priest were sacrifice and intercession. We have spent far more time on the first, mainly because the ideas are harder to understand and much more controversial. But intercession is just as important, and the truth of Jesus' intercession is just as precious.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Then 7:25 tells us, also speaking of Jesus' priesthood, "Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." Romans 8:34 is also an important verse: "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us."

You see from the Hebrews verses that Jesus' humanity is important for intercession. His human nature enables him to sympathize or empathize, to feel our feelings, to actually suffer our sufferings. He has also undergone all our temptations. Among all the members of the Trinity he is able to be a Priest—to make sacrifice and also to intercede.

What is the resurrected Christ doing—right now? He is interceding at the Father's right hand. Even now he is thinking of us, bringing our needs to the Father's attention. Of course, Scripture also speaks of the Holy Spirit interceding (Rom. 8:26-27). The two persons act in unity to bring the believer's needs

before God's great throne of grace. The Father willingly hears the intercession of his Son and his Spirit. The bottom line is that we can be sure that the Father will withhold no good thing from us. The whole Trinity is on our side. God is of one mind on our behalf, and if God is for us, who can be against us?

## King

Jesus is not only Prophet and Priest. He is also King of Kings and Lord of Lords. King is very closely related to Lord in the Bible, and we have seen in chapter 10 that Jesus is Lord, the head of the covenant, Yahweh the Lord himself.

We see his kingship over the whole earth in his great works of power. Again, everything God the Father does, the Son does as well. That includes creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), providence (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3), miracle.

More specifically, Jesus is of the royal family of David: great David's greater Son, both David's Son and David's Lord (Matt. 22:42; Ps. 110) . Although he was always the King, he demonstrated his kingship especially in his resurrection. Paul tells us that Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 1:4) .

In connection with his priesthood, we focused especially on his atoning death. In connection with his kingship, we focus on his resurrection. The resurrection, like the atonement, is part of our salvation from sin. It is his great triumph over death and sin: death could not hold him. It is also the Father's

witness that Jesus' claims are true and that his atonement accomplished its purpose. And consider this as well: Romans 6:4 tells us that when Jesus died, we died with him to sin. And when he rose from the dead, we rose with him to new life. Somehow, when Jesus rose from the dead, we were there. The basis of our new life is Jesus' resurrection. So, Paul says in Colossians 3:1-3, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." I don't know exactly what that means, but at least it is this: Christ's glorious resurrection life is now ours in some sense. This is the beginning of the new life we shall enjoy fully when Jesus also raises our bodies on the last day.

Paul tells us that the resurrection of Christ is the very basis of our faith (1 Cor. 15). If Jesus is not raised from the dead, we are still dead in our sins; we are of all people the most miserable (v. 19).

The risen Christ has all authority and power throughout the created universe (Matt. 28:18-20). When he returns, every eye will see him and bow before him as the rightful King over all the earth (1 Thess. 4:16-17; Rev. 1:7). On that day, his royal word will judge all the living and the dead (John 12:48). So, he is the object of all our worship and praise (John 5:23; Rev. 5:12).

Never forget that the gospel is good news about the coming of a King. This is plain in Isaiah, where the prophet gives us important background for understanding "gospel":

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns' " (Isa. 52:7). In Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus quotes in the synagogue at Capernaum, we hear a similar gospel:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.

Isaiah goes on to mention other things. But here, too, the gospel is about the coming of the Anointed One, the Messiah, the King, and all the things the King will do: bind up the brokenhearted, set captives free (who but a king can do that?), proclaim both God's favor and his vengeance.

At the beginning of their ministries, both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed as gospel, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Again, the gospel is the coming of a great King. The gospel is not just about us. It is not limited to justification by faith. It is focused on God and his coming. It is almost political in its force. To the Romans, the "gospel," or good news, was that a new emperor had come into power. They proclaimed *kyrios* Caesar, "Caesar is Lord." The Christians proclaimed *kyrios* Iesous, "Jesus is Lord." You can understand why the Roman rulers became nervous. Of course, they misunderstood to some degree what kind of King Jesus

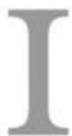
was. But they were not wrong to feel threatened. King Jesus claims sovereignty over them. (Think of Ps. 2, where God calls the rulers of the world to kiss the anointed Son.)

Never forget that Jesus is Lord and King of all, and he will not accept any lesser position. He demands that we do all things to his glory, everything in accord with his will. His gospel contains law, we may say. But service to this King is wonderful freedom. To trust this King is to trust a Priest who gives us full forgiveness from God and constant intercession. And to trust this King is to trust a Prophet whose word is completely true and trustworthy.

## *Chapter 12*

# THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is God, and he is a person of the Trinity, distinct from the Father and Son. He is a person, not an impersonal force. We shall also consider how the Spirit works: in creation, providence, redemption, the church, and the lives of believers.



n chapters 1-3 we focused on the doctrine of God, particularly God the Father. We studied his person, that is, his nature and attributes; and we studied his work, what he does, as miracle, providence, creation, and decree. In chapters 10-11 we focused on God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, looking first at his person, then at his work. His person is a fully divine nature and a fully human nature, united in one God-man. His work is the work of a Prophet, a Priest, and a King.

In this chapter we will look at the third person of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit. As before, we will look first at his person, then at his work: first at who he is, then at what he does.

### Who Is the Spirit?

Who is the Holy Spirit? First, the Spirit is God, like the Father and the Son. He stands alongside them as an object of worship. We baptize people in the threefold divine name, which includes the Spirit (Matt. 28:19). And the apostolic blessing, too, places the threefold name of God on the people: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14).

Biblical writers coordinate the Spirit with the Father and Son when they write about the source of spiritual blessing. Paul in Ephesians 2:21-22 coordinates the three persons when he speaks of Christ, "in whom the whole structure, being joined

together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." (Cf. also Rom. 15:19; Eph. 4:4-6; Phil. 3:3; Rev. 1:4-5; 2:7.)

We saw in chapter 10 how New Testament writers often cite Old Testament texts that contain the name of God and replace that name with the name of Jesus. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. In Jeremiah 31:33-34 the Lord is the speaker. But when the author of Hebrews cites this text (Heb. 10:15-17), the speaker is the Holy Spirit. (Note also Exodus 25:1 and Hebrews 9:8.)

In one New Testament text, the Spirit is called God. When Ananias lies to the Spirit (Acts 5:3) about his gift to the church, Peter tells him that he has lied to God (v. 4).

Just as Jesus has divine attributes, so does the Spirit: eternity (Heb. 9:14), omniscience (Isa. 40:13; 1 Cor. 2:10-11), wisdom (Isa. 11:2), omnipresence (Ps. 139:7-10; Acts 1:8), and incomprehensibility (Isa. 40:13). He is called holy nearly one hundred times. Clearly, his holiness is not a merely creaturely holiness. He is perfectly holy by his very nature, the very definition of holiness for us. His holiness is a divine holiness, a divine attribute.

Just as Jesus performs all the acts of God, all the things that God alone can do, so does the Spirit: creation (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30), judgment (John 16:8-11), giving of life (both physical and spiritual: Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30; John 3:5-8; 6:63; Rom. 8:11). Like the Father and the Son, he participates in our salvation.

Through him we are washed, sanctified, and justified (1 Cor. 6:11). And he is the teacher of the church (Num. 11:25; Matt. 10:20; 2Tim. 3:16; 1 John 2:27).

So, the Spirit is God. He is equal to the Father and the Son, worthy of honor equal to theirs.

The next thing to keep in mind is that the Spirit is a divine person, not an impersonal force. This is obvious to most of us as we read the Bible, but some cultists have actually wanted to deny that the Spirit is personal. They believe that the Spirit is an it, not a he: a kind of force or power from God but not a person.

But in my judgment the Bible is very clear on this. It is true that the Greek word for Spirit, *pneuma*, is neuter (the Old Testament *ruach* is feminine), but the New Testament writers regularly use masculine pronouns to refer to the Spirit. He is "he," which emphasizes his personality (John 14:17, 26; 16:14; 1 Cor. 12:11).

He is, to be sure, the power of God (Acts 1:8), which might suggest an impersonal force. But he is also God's wisdom (Isa. 11:2; Acts 6:10; 1 Cor. 2:4), and wisdom cannot be impersonal. The Spirit also has a mind (Rom. 8:27), and he speaks. He speaks in the first person (Acts 10:19-20; 13:2) and performs personal actions like creating, judging, and so on.

### What Does the Spirit Do?

For the rest of the chapter, then, let's think about what the Spirit does, his work. I've already mentioned that he is involved

in all the works of God, for he is God. As we've seen, Scripture often presents him as the power of God exerted in the world. This power is the control of God, the first of the lordship attributes. He is the Creator and the Provider, as we have seen. He also empowers and strengthens angels (Ezek. 1:12, 20) and human beings. Remember how the Spirit fell upon Samson, and he tore a lion in pieces (Judg. 13:25; 14:6)? Remember how later the Spirit came upon him and he killed thirty Philistines by himself (Judg. 14:19; cf. 15:14)? Well, then you have a way of understanding how the Spirit in the New Testament empowers preaching. In 1 Corinthians 2:4 Paul says that "my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (cf. Luke 4:14; Acts 2:1-4; Rom. 15:19; 1 Thess. 1:5). When you present the gospel to others, think of Samson tearing that lion in pieces. The same Spirit is present in you.

As the Spirit speaks the word powerfully, he also speaks it authoritatively: prophets speak their word by the authority of the Spirit (Gen. 41:38; Num. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:6; Isa. 61:1; Luke 1:17; 1 Peter 1:11); so do Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 10:20; Luke 4:14; John 3:34; 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 2:4; 1 Cor. 2:4; 12:3). So, the Spirit gives wisdom: both in the sense of practical skills, such as when Bezalel and Oholiab had to build the tabernacle (Ex. 28:3; 31:3; Deut. 34:9), and in the sense of ethical understanding (James 3:13-18). As we shall see, the Spirit's authority also comes with the gifts he gives to the church (1 Cor. 12:1-11).

Power, authority, and now the third lordship attribute, presence. The Spirit is God's presence on earth. David asks,

"Where shall I go from your Spirit?" (Ps. 139:7). It is the Spirit who dwells in Christians as his temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 4:6; 5:16-26)- 1 Peter 1:2), so that we worship God "in Spirit" (John 4:24).

The Spirit is God's control, authority, and presence in the world. That is to say, he is the Lord. As Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King, the Spirit is God's authoritative word, his abiding and mediating presence, and his powerful control over all things.

### The Spirit in the Lives of Believers

Now let's focus in on ourselves more narrowly and ask what the Spirit does in the lives of believers. There are a great many things the Spirit does for us and in us. We shall look through a long list of things, and every item on that list could be treated at much greater length. To make the long story short, the Spirit does everything for us that we need in our life with God. The atoning work of Jesus occurred in the past, objectively, definitively. The work of the Spirit is present, ongoing, often subjective. This is not to separate the work of the Spirit from the work of Christ. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. Christ is in him and he in Christ. As we said earlier, everything that any person of the Trinity does, he does along with the other two. But the main emphasis of the Bible in the Spirit's work is that he gives us what we need for our present, continuing walk with God.

Indeed, he did the same for Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. Remember how the Spirit descended on him like a

dove at his baptism (Matt. 3:16). The Spirit filled him with power for preaching and for working miracles (cf. Isa. 11:2-3; 42:1; 61:1; Luke 4:1, 14, 18; John 1:32; 3:34). Well, if Jesus needed the Spirit's ministry to him, we certainly need the Spirit as well. He is the one who equips us to serve God (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9; Judg. 3:10), to preach (Acts 1:8; Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:4), to pray effectively (Rom. 8:26; Eph. 2:18). He regenerates us (John 3:5), gives us the new birth. He sanctifies us (Rom. 8:4, 15-16; 1 Cor. 6:11; 2Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2), makes us holy in thought and deed, putting to death the sins of the body (Rom. 8:13; 7:6; Phil. 1:19). He is grieved when we sin (Eph. 4:30).

The Bible seems to put a special emphasis on the work of the Spirit to create unity and peace in the body (2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 5:18-20; Eph. 2:18; 4:3; Phil. 2:1-2; Col. 3:14). He is the one, after all, who enables us to cry "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) and thereby establishes the church as God's sons and daughters together in a family.

Of course, the Spirit is the great teacher of the church. The writers of Scripture, both testaments, were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write God's truth (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). The prophets and apostles spoke God's truth because the Spirit came upon them and enabled them to do it (Matt. 22:43; Acts 1:16; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). And the Spirit comes not only upon speakers and authors but also upon hearers and readers. The Spirit illumines us, enabling us to understand the Scriptures (Ps. 119:18; 1 Cor. 2:12-15; Eph. 1:17-19) and persuading us that the Word is true (1 Thess. 1:5).

## Baptism in the Spirit

How do people receive the Spirit? First, the Spirit regenerates, giving us a new birth (which we'll talk more about in chap. 13). In the new birth, the Spirit is like the wind, which goes anywhere it wants (John 3:8). So, in the first instance, it is not we who receive the Spirit but the Spirit who receives us.

This initial regeneration is sometimes called in Scripture the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Paul describes it this way in 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (cf. Matt. 3:11; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16). You see that the baptism of the Spirit includes all believers. In fact, the baptism of the Spirit is what makes us one body. Without that baptism we are not part of the body of Christ. So, everyone in the body has been baptized in the Spirit.

Some people think that the baptism of the Spirit is an experience that comes after conversion. But 1 Corinthians 12:13 and other texts show that that is not so. Everybody who is converted, everyone who is a Christian, is baptized in the Spirit. There are not two groups in the church, one baptized in the Spirit and the other not. If that were true, it would be a basis for disunity rather than, as Paul says, a basis for unity.

Nor is this a repeated experience. It happens at regeneration, at the new birth. And as we shall see, the new birth happens only once.

In the baptism of the Spirit, the Spirit comes on us with

power to serve Jesus as his covenant people. He unites us to all the other people in his body, so that together with them we may do God's work in the world.

## Filling of the Spirit

Now, although the baptism of the Spirit occurs only once, there are other experiences of the Spirit that occur repeatedly. Ephesians 5:18 says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." Paul addresses this command to Christians, and so to people who are already baptized in the Spirit. The filling is something more. We see it also in passages like Acts 4:31, where the disciples are filled with the Spirit and go on to "speak the word of God with boldness." The filling of the Spirit gives fresh power for ministry.

Here, too, the Spirit is sovereign. Interestingly, however, Ephesians 5:18 is a command addressed to us: we are to "be filled with the Spirit." There is both divine sovereignty and human responsibility here. Evidently, our behavior has some bearing on the degree to which and frequency with which we are filled with the Spirit. In the context of Ephesians 5:18, if you are a drunkard, don't expect the Spirit to fill you. You have filled yourself with drink, abusing a good creation of God, and in doing so you have said that you don't want the Spirit to fill you. Conversely, I would think, those who fill their hearts with Scripture and prayer open themselves to a greater fullness of the Spirit.

## Fruit of the Spirit

I should also mention the fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." The picture of a "filling" of the Spirit is the picture of a discrete event, repeated on a number of occasions. The picture of the "fruit" of the Spirit is the picture of a slow process that is always going on. The Spirit not only grabs us at various moments but also works inside us moment by moment, changing us to conform to the image of Christ. This is the doctrine of sanctification, and we shall discuss that in chapter 16.

## Gifts of the Spirit

Besides the baptism of the Spirit, the filling of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit, there are also gifts of the Spirit, according to Scripture (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 7:7; 12:4-11, 27-31; Eph. 4:7-16; 1 Peter 4:11). Wayne Grudem defines a spiritual gift as "any ability that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and used in any ministry of the church." He points out that some of these are related to our natural abilities, like teaching, showing mercy, and administration. Others are more "supernatural," such as tongues, prophecy, healing, and distinguishing spirits.

The biblical lists of gifts are not exhaustive. Notice that they differ from passage to passage. Any divinely given ability that edifies the church should be considered a spiritual gift. I wouldn't hesitate to say that the ability to sing in worship is a spiritual gift; or the ability to cook meals for church gatherings or mercy ministry; or the ability to manage finances for the church body.

Now, if you are a believer in Christ, God has given you one or more gifts that the church needs for its ministry. If you are a pastor or other church leader, one of your chief responsibilities is to help your people identify their spiritual gifts and then to stir up those gifts so that they can flourish in the body.

How do you discover your spiritual gifts? Pray that God will make them evident to you. Then test out your abilities in different areas until you find out in what ways you can make the best contribution. Ask other believers to help you. Their perspective will add much to your own.

## Miracles

There have been many controversies about spiritual gifts, and we must look at them here. In our own time, the main controversies have to do with the more miraculous gifts, such as prophecy, tongues, and healing. I say "more miraculous" because I don't believe we can draw a sharp line between miraculous and nonmiraculous events. Recall our discussion on that subject in chapter 2.

Does God give miraculous gifts to the church today? We should recall that miracles are actually pretty rare in biblical history. Hundreds of years pass by in the history of the Bible without any reference to miracles. Evidently, God did not intend to make miracles a regular part of his people's lives.

Miracles do appear at special times, when God is doing some great deed of mercy or judgment. We read of many miracles in the time of Moses, in the time of Elisha and Elijah,

and in the earthly ministries of Jesus and the apostles. In the time of the apostles, the miracles had a special connection with the apostles' witness to Jesus. They are called "signs of a true apostle" in 2 Corinthians 12:12. In that text Paul appeals to his miracles to show that he was a true apostle. His argument wouldn't be very strong if everyone worked miracles. Rather, he implies that miracles are a special gift given to the apostles to identify them as God's messengers all around the world where they preached Christ. Hebrews 2:4 also shows God using "signs and wonders" (miracles) to bear witness to the message of the apostles.

So, it looks as though the more miraculous kinds of gifts were given mainly to apostles in the New Testament period and to prophets like Moses, Elijah, and Elisha in the Old Testament. But the point is probably not that they were the only ones in the world who could work miracles. Rather, the Lord enabled the prophets and apostles to work many, many miracles to show everyone that God had appointed them.

For us the point is that we should not expect God to work miracles for us. They are not a regular part of the Christian life. They may happen, certainly, at God's pleasure, and we should be thankful when they do. Indeed, as I indicated in chapter 2, there is a sense in which even God's general providence is miraculous. But we must not demand miracles or become angry at God when he chooses not to work them for us. Even Paul could not work miracles all the time, for the Lord refused his own prayer for healing (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

Prophecy

What about that special kind of miracle called prophecy? In prophecy, as we saw in chapter 4, God enables a human being to speak God's very word (Deut. 18:18-22). Does God still inspire prophets today?

Grudem believes that the people called prophets in the New Testament were rather different from those called prophets in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> In the Old Testament the prophets spoke God's very word, and so what they said was absolutely true, reliable, infallible, and inerrant. But in the New Testament, according to Grudem, the gift of prophecy was a lesser gift. It was simply the ability to put into human but fallible words a message from God. In other words, in the New Testament God revealed his thoughts to the prophets but their actual words were not identical with his.

Grudem believes that there are today no prophets in the Old Testament sense but there are prophets in the New Testament sense. He recognizes that if there were prophets in the Old Testament sense in the church today, then they would be adding to Scripture. Scripture would not then be sufficient, since there would be other words of God of the same authority. But Grudem does believe that there are prophets in the New Testament sense in the church today. Since their words are fallible, those words don't challenge the sufficiency of Scripture.

I am not convinced of Grudem's thesis. If it is true, then there may well be in the church today prophets in the New Testament sense. But I think it is not and that therefore there are no prophets, defined biblically, in the church today.

There is nobody in the church today who can give us a message of the same authority as Scripture. So, as I indicated in chapter 5, only Scripture serves as our ultimate authority. We live by Scripture alone, *sola scriptura*.

Of course, the word prophecy can be used more loosely. People sometimes speak of preaching as prophecy, since it conveys the teaching of Scripture and often receives special power from the Holy Spirit. People sometimes refer to the church as having the offices of prophet as well as priest and king. Nothing I've said in this chapter should keep us from using the term prophet in that general way. All I want to emphasize is that there are in the church today no prophets who have the authority described in Deuteronomy 18.

Nor do I want to say that God cannot reveal himself in unusual, surprising ways. I've heard of believers dreaming of some great disaster coming just in time to warn others to avoid a real disaster. Could that be of God? Certainly. He is sovereign over our dreams and subconscious, just as he is sovereign over the workings of our eyes, ears, and noses. Every event in some way reveals him, as we saw in chapter 4. All I am saying is that the only place we can go to find supremely authoritative words of God is to the Bible.

## Tongues

What about tongues? Grudem says that "speaking in tongues is prayer or praise spoken in syllables not understood by the speaker."<sup>3</sup> In Acts 2, Jews from many nations, who spoke many languages, were gathered in Jerusalem for the

feast of Pentecost, and they heard Peter's sermon in their own languages. Certainly, this was a great miracle given by God. Elsewhere, the New Testament speaks of the gift of tongues as a gift used in worship, both public and private. Apparently, people were praying or teaching in languages that they themselves did not know and that other people listening did not know. It is hard for us to imagine the purpose of this, but apparently it had some devotional value (1 Cor. 14:14). Evidently, in many cases at least, God himself spoke to the people through the unknown language.

When someone used a tongue in public worship, there would often be an interpreter present, who would tell the congregation what the first speaker meant. Since God was speaking through the tongue-speaker, the interpretation of that tongue was also God's speech. So, the interpretation of the tongue was equivalent to prophecy. Indeed, since it was a Godgiven interpretation of a Godgiven message, it was equivalent to prophecy in the Old Testament sense. Both in the unknown tongue and in the interpreted tongue the message was the very word of God.

Now, in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul is very concerned that the worship of the church not only honor God but also edify the people. It is not enough in worship to speak to God; we must also teach one another, encourage one another (Heb. 10:25), edify one another, lead one another toward spiritual growth. Someone who speaks in tongues, Paul says, communes with God, but he does not edify the congregation unless there is an interpretation. So, Paul says, Christians should not speak in tongues in worship unless someone present has the gift of

interpretation, unless someone is able to translate the tongue-speech into a known language.

By the way, it is obvious from 1 Corinthians 14 (and 12:30) that not every Christian spoke in tongues. Some people think that every genuine Christian speaks in tongues or, at least, everyone who is baptized in the Spirit. But as we have seen, every Christian is baptized in the Spirit, and not every Christian speaks in tongues.

Does God give the gift of tongues today, or are tongues, like prophecy, a temporary gift that God gave to the church, not needed now that we have a completed Bible? Well, since interpreted tongues are the same as prophecy, our previous argument implies that there are no interpreted tongues today. Therefore, 1 Corinthians 14 would tell us that we should not practice the use of tongues in public worship services.

Paul does not, however, condemn the use of tongues in private devotions. Indeed, he says, in 1 Corinthians 14:2, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit." Does God still give this ability to some Christians, to speak to him privately in an unknown language? It is hard to imagine why God would give such a remarkable gift to be used only privately. The general teaching of Scripture about the gifts of the Spirit is that they are not for our private use but are to be used for the whole body. Still, there may be something about the private use of tongues that might enable a person to minister to others more effectively. It is also hard to imagine why God would withdraw from the church the gifts of

prophecy and interpretation while leaving intact the gift of the private use of tongues. Nevertheless, I think it is best to leave that question open, for now.

## Healings

In the New Testament, God gave miraculous healings as a witness to Jesus and the apostles (Matt. 9:18; Mark 6:13; Luke 4:40; Acts 28:8). Jesus could heal at his mere word or by using materials like mud and saliva. He was Lord over all the forces of nature, and he could reverse the curse on the ground at will.

The apostles also healed the sick frequently, but with them the healing was not automatic. In Mark 9:28 the disciples are not able to cast a demon out of a boy, and Jesus teaches that this kind of exorcism requires prayer. Paul, too, was unable to heal at one point, namely, to heal himself from what he calls a "thorn" (2 Cor. 12:7). He pleaded with God three times about this (v. 8), but God replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9; cf. 2 Tim. 4:20). We note also that all the apostles died, in God's time. They were not able, through the gift of healing, to prevent death forever. The death rate continued as something close to one per person.<sup>4</sup>

We also read in the Psalms (as 119:67, 71) and elsewhere that God uses affliction, certainly including sickness and injury, for his good purposes.

Does the gift of miraculous healing exist today? I would say that God gave special ability to heal to the apostles and to

some others during the apostolic age (1 Cor. 12:9). Though that ability was limited, it was sufficient to bear witness to the watching world that the new Christian sect had the blessing of God. Like other miraculous gifts, this ability was not given to all Christians, nor was it given throughout biblical history. Rather, it was given for a special purpose in a special time. So, we should not expect to find people with this gift of healing in the church today. But this is not to say that God will never, ever, give that gift to anybody. We just don't know the purposes of God well enough to make such a generalization.

It is certain, however, that the church does have some access to divine healing. There may be no people today with the New Testament gift of healing. But we certainly do continue to have access to God's throne by prayer. And the New Testament encourages us to pray for healing. James 5:14-15 says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven." Here we read not only about prayer for healing but also about such prayer as a special ministry of the church. The passage is difficult in some ways, for there is a connection here between healing and forgiveness that is hard to understand. I take it that the passage promises that when a person is sick because of some sin, he may confess that sin to the elders of the church and that their prayer of faith, with the anointing of oil, will raise him up.

Certainly, though, even when there is no clear connection

between sickness and sin, we have the privilege of bringing that up before our heavenly Father. As with the apostles, such prayer is limited; there is nothing automatic about it. God may say no for any number of reasons, among them the reason he gave to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9. But the power of prayer has not been lessened since the time of the apostles. We are to come boldly before the throne of grace, confident that in God's way and in his time, we shall receive his mercy (Heb. 4:16).

## PART TWO

### *Chapter 13*

## ELECTION, CALLING, AND REGENERATION

Now we begin consideration of the events by which God unites believers to Christ. *Election* is God's eternal decision to give them salvation. Then we consider the *ordo salutis*, a series of events in time by which God applies to us the benefits of Jesus' atonement. Effectual *calling* is God's summoning his people into his fellowship, out of the darkness of sin. *Regeneration* is the work of the Spirit giving them new life out of spiritual death.

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his book divides rather neatly into two parts, and we are now ready to begin the second. In the first part, the emphasis was on the objective and the unrepeatable. The first part dealt especially with objective truths: the nature of God, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the person and work of the Holy Spirit. The nature of God never changes, nor will the person of the Son and the Spirit. The work of the Son, the atonement, is once-for-all; it will never be repeated. These truths are objective in that they happen outside us rather than within us.

We did discuss in the first part some events that are subjective and repeatable, like the filling and gifts of the Spirit. These are subjective in the sense that they occur within us, and the Spirit performs these actions many times. But that emphasis was rare in the first twelve chapters.

But in part two we will be focusing much more on those events that are subjective and repeatable. These are the events in which God deals with each individual Christian. The atonement, of course, is something God does for the church as a whole. But regeneration, conversion, justification, and so on are actions that God performs for each individual he has called to himself. These are, therefore, repeatable events, though they happen only once to each person; and they are subjective, in the sense that they occur within us rather than outside us.

We will be thinking later on about some more external, or objective, events, among them the return of Christ and the final judgment. As we return to the external, the objective, and the unrepeatable, we will draw to the end of our study.

With this chapter we begin our study of soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Of course, Jesus accomplishes salvation in the atonement; so we could use the word soteriology to refer to our discussion in chapters 11 and 12, as well as what we will discuss in the next few chapters. But theological tradition has usually described the atonement as the work of Christ, an aspect of Christology, and it has used the term soteriology to refer to the content of the next few chapters (13-17). Following John Murray, it may be helpful to think of the atonement as redemption accomplished. The next few chapters may be called, following Murray, redemption applied. Murray's very helpful book on these subjects is called *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.'

Our question in the next few chapters is, how does the atonement apply to us? How does it change us? How does it

change our relationship to God? Theologians often discuss these application questions under the heading of something called the *ordo salutis* ("order of salvation"). This order lists a number of events that occur in every believer's life. The list differs from one theologian to another, but we will be using this list: effectual calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, glorification. And before we look at this traditional list, we will be thinking about another doctrine, the doctrine of election, which comes before all of them.

The events of the *ordo* occur in history, in the experience of the believer's life. Election happens before time, in God's timeless eternity. So, salvation has three main locations with regard to time: (1) election, before time, before the foundation of the world, in eternity; (2) the atonement, occurring at one time and place in history; (3) calling, regeneration, and so on, which occur in every believer's experience. You can see these three stages in a passage like Ephesians 1. There, Paul speaks of election in verse 4: "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." Then in verse 7 he speaks of the atonement: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." Then in verse 13 he speaks of the events of our experience that lead us to Christ: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit."

These three concepts fit in with the three perspectives I discussed in chapter 6. I think of election as normative,

because it is the plan of God that governs everything. The atonement is the situational, for it is the objective fact by which we are saved. And the *ordo salutis* is existential, for it happens within the experience of each of us; for that reason it is sometimes called subjective soteriology.

We will look first at election, salvation before time. Then, remembering the atonement, salvation in history, from chapter 11, we will consider the *ordo salutis*, salvation in our experience.

## Election

Election simply means "choice." The doctrine of election is that, ultimately, it is God's choice that determines whether someone will be saved or lost. To understand this, recall from chapter 1 the biblical emphasis on God's comprehensive control over the world. Nothing happens in the world unless God wants it to happen. Recall also from chapter 2 that God's decree is comprehensive; it covers absolutely everything. Whatever happens, happens according to the good pleasure of his will (Eph. 1:11). If God's control is so profound, then certainly God also has ultimate and absolute control over human salvation. Ultimately, your salvation depends on whether or not God has chosen you in Christ, before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4).

But before we look at this eternal choice, let's look at another type of election that is more historical in its focus. I call it historical election, although even historical election is part of God's eternal plan. Historical election is God's choice of people

not necessarily for eternal salvation but for various tasks in history. God chose Saul, for example, to serve as Israel's king for a time (1 Sam. 9:17); but he later rejected Saul. God chose Jeremiah to be a prophet (Jer. 1:5). Jesus chose the Twelve to be his disciples, including Judas (Luke 6:13). He chose, or elected, Judas, even though he knew Judas would betray him. From the examples of Saul and Judas, you can understand that historical election is not election to eternal salvation (Mark 14:21; John 6:70-71). It is merely the choice of someone to serve a temporary purpose in God's program.

The most important form of historical election is God's choice of the nation Israel. God chose Israel from all the nations of the earth to be his special people (Deut. 4:37; 7:6). Scripture emphasizes that this choice was by grace, not Israel's merit (Deut. 7:7-8; 9:4, 6). Israel wasn't larger or better than the other nations. Yet, not all Israelites obtained eternal salvation. Many of them turned away from God, and he sent his prophets to draw up indictments against them (called covenant lawsuits, as Isa. 1:1-17). Only Jesus himself is the true Israel, the one who fully obeys God and who receives all the blessings of the covenant (Rom. 11:1-21).

We may also say that the visible church today is historically elect. That is to say, church members belong to Christ in a special way, as Israel belonged to God. That gives them great privileges. Hebrews 6:4-6 says that church members "have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come." Nevertheless, some of them rebel against the Lord, and

the writer says that it is impossible to restore these to repentance. Like Saul, Judas, and unfaithful Israel, they will be lost. In this historical sense, then, some people who are elect, chosen, may be finally lost.

That is one kind of election, historical election. But there is also another kind of election mentioned in Scripture that we may call eternal election. This is God's choice in eternity of who will be finally saved. We saw that already in Ephesians 1:4. Second Timothy 1:9 speaks of God "who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13).

As Israel's election comes about through God's covenant with Moses, so eternal election in Jesus comes through the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8:

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:33-34)

Here, God chooses a people and promises to give them all the benefits of salvation. They will not be like Judas or like unfaithful Israel, for God will forgive their sins and write the

word of God on their heart.

So, eternal election is unconditional, unconditional election, as Reformed theologians like to say. God chooses us for salvation, a choice not based on anything in us, not based on any conditions we have fulfilled. And eternal election is an election of individuals, not just nations or groups. How precious it is to know that God chose me and you before he even made the world. We were in his mind, on his heart. With the doctrine of election, we know that salvation is all of God. It is his free gift. It really is grace, not something we must work for.

## Reprobation

Now the question comes up, If God chooses us eternally for salvation, does he also choose who will be lost? God's choice of who will be lost is called reprobation. So, we know God elects; does he also reprobate? It seems logical to say that if God chooses some to be saved, he automatically chooses the rest not to be saved. This doctrine is sometimes called double predestination.

But this is a hard pill to swallow. It is hard to believe that a loving God would choose, before the beginning of time, to send some to eternal punishment, choosing them before they could do anything about it.

This is a particularly difficult form of the problem of evil. So, I'd urge you to review what we said earlier, in chapter 2, on the love of God and, in chapter 8, on sin and evil. Although

reprobation is a particularly hard problem, I believe the best answers are the answers I gave earlier: God brings good out of evil even when we can't imagine how he could possibly do it; and he reserves to himself the right to do that, to his own honor and glory. Remember, too, that if God does not reprobate, he does not elect to salvation either. So, the alternative to election and reprobation is for us to try to save ourselves by our own resources. I would not want to try to do that.

What settles the matter is that the doctrine of reprobation is biblical, and not just as an implication from the doctrine of election. We read, for example, that sometimes God acts to conceal the truth from some people so that they will not believe. In other words, he uses his sovereignty negatively rather than positively. God said to Isaiah:

Go, and say to this people:

“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”

Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed. (Isa. 6:9–10)

The prophetic word can be powerful in bringing people to faith. But in this case it is powerful to harden their hearts. Following Isaiah, Jesus said that he spoke in parables to enlighten some but actually harden others, to prevent them from believing (Matt. 13:11-14; cf. 11:25-27). Jude 4 speaks about certain men "whose condemnation was written about long ago" (NIV).

But Romans 9 is the chief text about reprobation. There, Paul begins by expressing anguish for his fellow Israelites who have not believed in Christ. Why haven't they believed? Paul says, ultimately, because God has not chosen them to believe. Why was Pharaoh so persistent in his wickedness that he hardened his heart so that he would not let Israel go? Paul answers in verse 17, "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the

earth.' " God hardened his heart, as Exodus also says. Then, at verses 18-24:

So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory-even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

So, why is it that so many Israelites have not believed? Paul's answer, ultimately, is reprobation. Many Israelites have not believed because God sovereignly determined to prepare them for destruction, as he has prepared others for glory.

We should recognize, as do the Canons of Dordt (one of the Reformed confessions), that election and reprobation are not simple parallels to one another. When God elects people to salvation, he decrees that they will be saved apart from their works. But when God reprobates, he decrees that they will be punished because of their works. Works, then, play a role in

the outworking of reprobation that they do not play in the outworking of election.

With the Westminster Confession (3.8), I would urge you to discuss this doctrine with "great prudence and care." It is a hard doctrine, a difficult doctrine, and it has led some people to turn against the truth, even to ridicule it. But it is a teaching of Scripture, and in the end it is a comforting one. For the greatest comfort we can have is to know that all people are in the hands of a sovereign God, the God of perfect justice and wonderful mercy.

### The Order of the Decrees

There is one more doctrine I would like to touch on before we get to the *ordo salutis*. I will only touch on it because I consider it something of an unbiblical speculation. But since you are now a student of theology, you ought to know what it's about. That doctrine is called the order of the decrees. Some theologians have developed a theory that God's eternal decrees have a certain order to them. It is not a temporal order, because the decrees we're talking about are all eternal, above time. Theologians sometimes call it a logical order, but I confess I don't entirely understand what that means. What seems to be meant, in part, is that one decree serves the interests of another.

The main views in Reformed theology of the order of the decrees are supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism. The first order, the supralapsarian order, reads as follows: first, election, then creation, then the fall, then redemption. By this order, the

supralapsarian wants especially to make the point that election directs everything else in God's plan. They want to say that God's fundamental purpose for creation is to have fellowship with his elect people. Everything else works toward that. So, in order to have fellowship with these people, he obviously must first create them. Then he must allow them to fall and redeem them.

The other view, infralapsarianism, puts the decrees in this order: creation, fall, election, redemption. By this order, the infralapsarian means to say that in election God chooses people who are already created and fallen.

Although some biblical arguments have been used to substantiate both these views, I don't think Scripture really addresses the issue of an order of God's decrees. The supralapsarian point, that everything God does is for the sake of his elect, has a certain amount of truth to it, though we must point out that an even higher goal of God is to glorify himself. The infralapsarian point, that when God elects people, he conceives them as fallen, is also legitimate. God elects people out of the fallen multitude. But if we grant both the supralapsarian point in some measure and the infralapsarian point, it seems obvious that we can acknowledge those points without signing on to the concept of an order in the divine decrees.

## The Ordo Salutis

Now let's look at the ordo salutis, redemption applied, sometimes called subjective soteriology. In the threefold structure of Ephesians 1, we have talked about election, and in

chapter 11 we have talked about the atonement. Now we consider those events of our own experience in which God applies to us the benefits of the atonement.

We should be flexible as to what goes into the ordo and what does not. The Bible itself doesn't use the phrase ordo salutis any more than it speaks of an order of the decrees. And Scripture does not include anywhere a list of all the events theologians typically include under that label. Myself, I think that the ordo is mainly a pedagogical device. As you go through the various items on the list, there is no consistent principle of ordering. Some items precede other items because the first comes earlier in time, the other later. That is the case with effectual calling and glorification. Other items on the list precede others because one is a cause, the other an effect, as with regeneration and faith. Still others come before others not because of temporal priority or causal priority but because of what theologians call instrumental priority, as in the relation of faith to justification. And still other pairs of events are simply concurrent or simultaneous blessings, like justification and adoption. So, the "order" means different things: sometimes cause and effect, sometimes earlier and later, sometimes instrument and object, sometimes mere concurrence. Nevertheless, the order does bring out important relationships between these events, relationships that the Bible does set forth.

### Effectual Calling

First on the ordo list, the doctrine of effectual calling. The Bible often talks about God's calling people, in various senses.

Sometimes, God's calling is your vocation, the position in which he has placed you (1 Cor. 7:17, 20). He may call you to marriage or to singleness, to be a CEO or a hockey player, to live in Orlando or Chicago. That's an important concept, but it is not what we mean by effectual calling.

Sometimes calling refers to the universal proclamation of the gospel, in which God calls or invites everyone to believe in Christ and be saved (Matt. 20:16; 22:14). That is sometimes called the gospel call or the external call. That is also an important biblical teaching. But it is not the meaning of effectual calling.

Effectual calling, sometimes called the internal call, is this: God sovereignly, efficaciously summons (John Murray's word) the elect into fellowship with Christ. That word summons brings out God's sovereignty. You might be able to refuse an invitation, but you can't refuse a summons. A summons is an offer you cannot refuse.

That is how calling is used in Romans 1:6-7, where Paul speaks of "you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, [t]o all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (cf. Rom. 8:30; 11:29; 1 Cor. 1:2, 9, 24, 26; 7:18; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Heb. 3:1-2; 2 Peter 1:10).

You see, a lot of people in the world are elect but not saved. Before you believed in Jesus, you were in that situation. You were elect, chosen of God before the foundation of the world, but you lived as an unbeliever, without any faith in Christ. How

did God change you? The first phase, the first event, is effectual calling.

Note the characteristics of effectual calling: it is the work of God the Father, summoning you into the fellowship of his Son. As we saw, effectual calling is different from the gospel call, but it often comes through the gospel call. For many, effectual calling occurs when they are hearing the gospel. It is then that God opens their hearts to receive the truth. When Paul preached by the riverside at Philippi, a woman named Lydia was there. And we read, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). The Reformers put it this way: As the preacher speaks the Word to the mind, the Lord speaks it to the heart.

Furthermore, effectual calling calls us into all the blessings of salvation: the kingdom (1 Thess. 2:12), holiness (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 4:7), peace (1 Cor. 7:15), freedom (Gal. 5:13), hope (Eph. 1:18), patient endurance (1 Peter 2:20-21), eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12). Ultimately, calling is into fellowship with Christ, union with Christ; 1 Corinthians 1:9 reads, "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." It is in Christ that we have all the blessings of salvation. Indeed, we can summarize the blessings this way. The blessing of salvation is Christ himself, with everything he is and does. So, Paul says in Philippians 3:7-8, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ."

So, in effectual calling, God acts on us first, before we offer him any response. He acts sovereignly, calling us into fellowship with his Son. This calling is the ultimate source in time of all the blessings of salvation.

## Regeneration

The first of those blessings, and the second event in the *ordo salutis*, is regeneration, or the new birth. When God calls us into fellowship with Christ, he gives us a new life, a new heart. Regeneration is the first effect of effectual calling. And regeneration is the first item on the list that occurs inside of us.

The presupposition of Scripture is that apart from God's grace we are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3), as we saw in chapter 8. That means that in and of ourselves, we can do nothing to please God. Just as conception and birth bring new physical life, so the work of regeneration brings new spiritual life. Through the new birth we gain new desire and new ability to serve God. So, my definition of regeneration is this: a sovereign act of God, beginning a new spiritual life in us.

The language of new birth comes from the writings of John. In John 3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. In 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 4, and 18, John speaks about a seed that God plants in believers that grows into a holy life that resists temptation.

Paul uses the language of new creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15; Eph. 2:10; cf. James 1:18) or being "made ... alive together with Christ" (Eph. 2:5) to express the same idea. We can find

this idea of resurrection also in passages like Romans 6, which speak of us as dying and rising with Christ: we die with him unto sin, and we are raised with him unto righteousness. As effectual calling calls us into union with Christ, so regeneration is our union with him in his resurrection life. New birth, new creation, life from the dead are alternate ways of speaking of the ways God gives us new life.

All these expressions emphasize God's sovereignty. New birth is obviously an act of God (note Ezek. 36:26-27; John 3:8). You didn't give birth to yourself; you didn't have anything to do with your own birth. Others gave birth to you. Your birth was a gift of grace. So your new birth was a gift of God, in this case God the Holy Spirit. (As effectual calling is an act of the Father, so regeneration is an act of the Holy Spirit, as Scripture usually represents it.)

Similarly with new creation. Creation is "out of nothing," as we saw. Before creation, there was nothing. Nothing can't produce anything. Reality all comes by the creative act of God. The same is true of resurrection. Before resurrection there is death. Death can't produce life. Only God can. So, in the new birth we are passive.

Furthermore, without the new birth not only are we unable to please God but we can't even understand the things of God. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Regeneration changes the will, and it also changes the mind. Remember when we looked at Romans 1 and saw that the sinner represses the truth? Regeneration is the act of God that enables us to quit

repressing the truth and to see God as he really is.

So, the new birth comes before our faith, bringing it about. People sometimes say, "Believe in Jesus, and you will be born again." This expression is biblically inaccurate. It is true that believing in Jesus is the path to blessing. But the new birth is the cause of faith rather than the other way around. Again, you cannot give birth to yourself, even by faith. Rather, God gives new birth to you and enables you to have faith. It is always God's sovereignty, isn't it?

As regeneration is the cause of faith, so it is also the cause of our good works. Recall the passages I listed earlier from 1 John. Here is 1 John 2:29: "If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him." Everyone who practices righteousness must have been born again, because you cannot do righteousness without being born again.

Like effectual calling, regeneration usually occurs when we hear the gospel. First Peter 1:23 reads, "... since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (cf. v. 25). The Spirit's great power to give us new birth typically comes through the power of the Word of God. James 1:18 says, "Of his own will he brought us forth [that's the idea of regeneration] by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

How do you know whether someone is born again? It is not a visible event. Jesus says that the regenerating work of the Spirit is like the blowing of the wind: you don't see it, you don't

know where it comes from or where it goes. But as with the wind you can see the results, though you cannot be infallibly sure that regeneration has taken place. Faith and good works are the effects of regeneration, and these show that we have been born of God. First John 3:9 says, "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." And 1 John 4:7 says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God." Love and all the fruits of the Spirit are set forth in Galatians 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." When people's lives are changed from disobeying to obeying God, we can know, though not infallibly, that the Spirit has been at work, giving new birth.

## Chapter 14

# FAITH AND REPENTANCE

Saving faith is a personal trust in Christ as the one who secures full forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. Since faith is turning to Christ, it involves repentance, which is turning away from sin. Repentance is not only feeling sorry for sin but actively renouncing it. It is a heart commitment to seeking righteousness. Without repentance and faith in Christ, there is no salvation; therefore, Christ is the *only* Lord and Savior. Our hope for eternal life cannot be based in anyone else.



We have been studying the *ordo salutis*, that list of doctrines which shows how God applies Jesus' work in the atonement to our present lives. The atonement is redemption accomplished; the *ordo* is redemption applied. In chapter 13 we considered the first items in the *ordo*, effectual calling and regeneration. Now we consider conversion, which theologians define as faith and repentance. Notice that there is

a difference between what we considered in chapter 13 and what we consider here: election, effectual calling, and regeneration are things that God does. Faith and repentance are things that we do. But we aren't losing sight of God's sovereignty. We are able to exercise faith and repentance only because God has acted to call us and to regenerate us.

## Faith

Let's look first at faith. As you study the Bible, notice that faith and belief are closely related. Usually the English translations use the word "faith" for the Greek noun *pistis*, and the word "believe" for the Greek verb *pisteuo*. So, believe is the verb form of faith, and faith is the noun form of believe.

In this chapter we shall focus on saving faith, faith in Christ as Savior and Lord. There are, of course, other kinds of faith—faith in our friends, faith in the regularity of nature, and so on—which are similar to and different from saving faith in various ways. It is useful to know that all our actions in the world and all our knowledge of the world involve some kind of faith. When you get out of bed in the morning, you believe—you have faith—that the floor will be beneath your feet and will stay there. This is sometimes called general faith. But we will, instead, be talking in this chapter about a specifically biblical, theological concept: special faith, or saving faith.

## Definition of Saving Faith

Theologians have traditionally analyzed faith into three elements: knowledge, belief, and trust.

Knowledge. In this context knowledge is simply a knowledge of God's revelation, either special or general (Rom. 1:32; 10:14). It is a knowledge about God, which is neither a personal knowledge or friendship with God nor a knowledge that the revelation is true. Rather, it is simply a knowledge of what the revelation says.

It is good to emphasize that faith is based on knowledge. Some people think that faith is a leap in the dark or believing something without any evidence. But faith is a knowledge of the word of God, and the word provides evidence of its truth. Faith does call us sometimes to go against the evidence of our senses, as Abraham did according to Romans 4:19-21 (cf. 2 Cor. 5:5):

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

So far as Abraham's senses were concerned, God's promise seemed to go against the evidence. God promised a son, but both Abraham and Sarah were too old to have children. But remember that the best evidence is the word of God itself. Abraham knew that if God told him he would have a child, he could rely on that. So, in the most important sense, Abraham's faith was based on evidence, the highest evidence; or, as we are saying at this point, it is based on knowledge.

Belief. The second element of faith in the traditional analysis is believing (John 3:2; Acts 26:27). That is, faith is not only knowing what God's revelation says but also believing that that revelation is true. This is sometimes called assent. Theologians have been known to say that assent is not important; in other words, it doesn't matter what you believe in your head as long as you love God in your heart. Well, that idea is not biblical. Scripturally, assent is necessary for true faith. Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

But is assent sufficient for true faith? James 2:19 says that the devils believe that God is one, and they tremble. It is possible to assent to some of the truths of the Bible and not be saved. But is it possible to assent to all the truths of the Bible and to be lost? That's a hard question to answer. I suspect that Satan believes in all the truths of the Bible in some sense, yet he is not saved.

I think it depends somewhat on the strength of assent. That is, if you assent to the truths of Scripture not feebly or forgetfully but in a way that determines your behavior, thoughts, and feelings, then it seems to me that you have all that is needed for true faith. But then your faith is better described not merely as assent but according to the third component of faith.

Trust. Trust includes knowledge and assent. But it is a richer concept. Satan believes quite a lot of God's revelation, maybe all of it. But he doesn't allow his knowledge of God's

word to govern his thoughts, actions, and behavior. If he did, he would plead for God's mercy and ask forgiveness. But he doesn't do that. In other words, he doesn't trust in God.

Trust (the Latin word is *fiducia*) is trust in Christ as Savior and Lord. We trust him as Savior to save us from sin and to give us eternal life (John 3:16). Many Scripture verses present this trust in other terms, such as receiving Christ (John 1:12), coming to him (Matt. 11:28-30; John 6:37; 7:37), drawing near to God through him (Heb. 7:25). Notice the primary meaning of this is not believing that I am saved but believing in Jesus, trusting him for salvation—not only believing that, but believing in. This is what the devils can never do. They can believe abstractly that Jesus is the Savior of his people, but they cannot trust him for salvation.

The second element of trust is subjection to Christ as Lord, a willingness to obey. As James 2:14-26 says, faith must be living faith, obedient faith, faith that works, or else it is dead. "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11; cf. John 20:28) is, as we've seen, the most fundamental confession of the New Testament people of God. And it is to be not only a confession of the mouth but a commitment that directs all of life.

So, true saving faith involves knowledge, belief, and trust in Christ. I should warn you, however, that Scripture sometimes speaks about believing, about faith, in lesser senses. For example, in John 8:31 Jesus begins a dialogue with some Jews who, says John, "believed in him." But their responses to him indicate anything but true faith. By verse 44 Jesus tells them,

"You are of your father the devil." These Jews are like the devils who give assent to certain Christian teachings but set themselves against the kingdom of God.

## Saving Faith Is a Gift of God

We are ready to look at some more biblical teachings about faith. First, saving faith is a gift of God. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (cf. Phil. 1:29). In John 6:44 Jesus says that nobody can believe in him unless the Father draws him. No one, indeed, has any spiritual understanding without God's grace (John 3:3; Matt. 11:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:14; 1 John 5:20). Apart from grace we repress the truth of God (Rom. 1:18, 21, 23, 25). So, in Scripture when people believe in Christ, they do it because God appointed them to eternal life (Acts 13:48) or because he opens their hearts, as with Lydia in Acts 16:14. We have seen that the gospel is a word of God that has power to save. That power works to make people believe, and it comes from God himself (1 Cor. 2:4-5, 12-16; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14).

## Faith and Good Works

Next, saving faith and good works are closely related. Paul does emphasize that we are saved by faith and not by the works of the law (Gal. 2:16). Salvation, in other words, comes through trusting Jesus, not by trying to earn your salvation through good works. But since saving faith is living, not dead (James 2:14-26), some works will be present. They don't earn

you anything, but they always accompany true faith. Paul, who contrasts faith and works, understood that faith works by love (Gal. 5:6). And those who love Jesus keep his commandments (John 14:15, 21; 15:10; Titus 3:8). So, works are an evidence of faith.

## The Role of Faith in Salvation

We say that we are "saved by faith" or "justified by faith." What does that mean? Faith, after all, is something we do. We are the ones who believe, not God. But isn't salvation entirely of God? Isn't it entirely by God's grace? Or is faith the one thing we do in order to merit God's forgiveness? Certainly not. It's important to be precise about this, to see what faith does and what it doesn't do for us.

First, faith is not the ground of our salvation. The ground is what entitles us to eternal life. The sacrifice of Christ is the only ground of our salvation. His righteousness, not ours, entitles us to fellowship with God. Nothing we do is good enough to gain God's forgiveness and fellowship. Not even our faith is worthy of him.

For the same reason, our faith is never the cause of our salvation. The cause is the power that brings us into relation with Christ. As we've seen, this power does not come from ourselves; it comes from the power of the Spirit, making us believe the Word and trust in Christ. We cannot do anything to save ourselves, to bring about our own salvation.

So, what is the role of faith? Theologians struggle for words

here, but the word that Reformed theology has settled on is instrument. By this we mean to say that faith, even though imperfect and unworthy, is the means ("instrument" = "means") by which we reach out and receive God's grace. Some have compared it to an empty hand reaching out to be filled. As the hymn "Rock of Ages" puts it, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

Rather than tying yourself in knots trying to understand these technical expressions, it is better just to remember that faith is trust. Jesus has died for you; that is your only hope, the only means by which you can be saved. Your faith is simply trust in him. Your trust is not going to earn you anything, but it connects you with Christ, who has earned everything for you.

### Faith in the Christian Life

We've been speaking so far mainly of faith at the beginning of the Christian life. That is quite important: faith as that first moment of trust in Christ that brings us into eternal fellowship with God. But faith doesn't stop after that first moment. It persists throughout the Christian life and is important in our day-to-day relationship with God. Paul says that faith, hope, and love "abide," they remain throughout life (1 Cor. 13:13).

We see in Hebrews 11 how the great saints of the Old Testament acted again and again "by faith." In this passage and elsewhere, there is a contrast between faith and sight (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7). Don't take this the wrong way; walking by faith is not walking in the dark. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 had a

good understanding of where they were going. God's Word had promised them the blessings of the covenant, and they knew they could trust those promises. As we have seen, faith is based on knowledge. But it is the knowledge of God's Word, not the knowledge of the eyes. God told Abraham that he would have a son, but that didn't appear possible, since Abraham and Sarah were far too old. Yet Abraham believed (Rom. 4:19-21). His faith was based on knowledge of God's promise. But until Isaac was born, he didn't see the fulfillment of the promise. Similarly, the saints of Hebrews 11 didn't see the city God had promised his people. They didn't see the fulfillment. But they continued believing, because they knew that God's promise was sure, more sure even than the evidence of their eyes.

So, the Lord calls all believers to walk by faith. As Paul says, "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

New Testament writers frequently combine faith with two other virtues, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 4:1-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; cf. Rom. 5:2; Gal. 5:5; Eph. 1:15; 3:17; 6:23; Col. 1:4, 23; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; 1 Tim. 1:14; 6:10-11; 2Tim. 1:13; Titus 3:15; Philem. 1:5; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:21). Hope is not something radically different from faith, but it is a kind of faith: faith directed toward the future fulfillment of the promises of God. Since it is based on God's promises, it is not something tentative, uncertain, the way we usually use the word hope in modern life. Rather, it is firm and certain. The words faith and hope differ only in that hope has more of a futuristic emphasis. We can think of it in terms of the lordship attributes: faith is

directed toward God's authority, because it focuses on the Word. Hope focuses on God's control, which will bring his words to pass in the future. But, of course, you can't have faith without hope or hope without faith.

The third and highest of the three central virtues is love. Love focuses on the third lordship attribute, his personal presence. We can think of love as faith and hope dwelling in the heart to produce the deepest personal commitment. Love is a commitment of the whole person. God calls us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

So, love is commitment, loyalty, allegiance. In marriage, when we pledge our love, we at the same time pledge an exclusive loyalty to that person over against all others. Covenant love to God is the same. It is exclusive. We are to worship God alone-not in competition with other gods-with our money, ambition, pride, and so on.

Love is also action. It is doing something to show your loyalty. In marriage, if you love your wife, you will do things like take out the trash. With Jesus, if you love him, you will keep his commandments.

Third, love is affection. When you love someone, you have feelings of love. You rejoice in her presence, her beauty, all that she is. That's true in marriage, and it is also true with God. As John Piper has often told us, God wants us to delight in him, to desire him, to find him sweet and lovely.'

So, love is allegiance, action, and affection. I line these up

as normative, situational, and existential, respectively.

## The Necessity of Faith

Many people today don't think that we must have faith in Jesus in order to be saved. Some of these are pluralists, who think that one can be saved through any number of religions. Others are universalists, who believe that all people will be saved, whether or not they believe in Jesus. Others believe that some people who never hear of Jesus will be saved, because they would have believed if they had had a chance. We might say that these hold to the salvation of all potential believers.

But Scripture is clear that nobody is saved apart from Jesus Christ. He is "the way, and the truth, and the life," such that he can say, "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Peter said, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12; cf. John 1:12; 3:16, 18, 36). On the last day everyone in heaven will confess that he was saved by Jesus Christ and him alone. He is the exclusive Lord and the exclusive Savior.

Does this mean that no one can be saved unless he makes a verbal confession of Christ in this life? Well, that is a different question, and it is more difficult. Reformed Christians believe, for example, that children who die in the womb or before being able to talk may nevertheless be saved by God's grace. The Westminster Confession (10.3) says this: "Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated, and saved by Christ, through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth:

so also are all other elect persons who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word." Is this statement biblical? I believe so. Luke 1:15 says that John the Baptist would be "filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb," and John, then in his mother's womb, leaped for joy in the presence of Mary, the mother of Jesus (v. 41). I believe also that in Luke 18:15, when Jesus laid his hands on the infants, he meant to place God's name on them and identify them with the kingdom of God.

If God saves children who are too young to make a public profession of faith, says the Westminster Confession (10.3), he may save others, too, who are unable for some other reason to make a confession. We can't be dogmatic about what classes of people fall into that category. We naturally think about people who are handicapped so as to be unable to think or speak normally.

But it is certain that however wide the divine net may be, it never reaches outside the grace of Christ. When the Spirit regenerates a person, that person eventually will come to faith in Christ. And if and when he is able to profess faith in Christ, he will do so. The Westminster Confession's statement should not encourage anybody to think that he can be saved without trusting in Christ. There is no other name given among men by which we must be saved, says Peter in Acts 4:12.

So, Christ alone is the name by which we may be saved. It is vitally important to proclaim the name of Christ throughout the world, so that people of all nations may believe in him.

## Repentance

In the theological tradition, both repentance and faith are part of conversion. Salvation comes through faith, but also through repentance. That may sound strange, since we are accustomed to thinking of faith alone as the instrument of salvation. Where does repentance fit in?

Grudem defines repentance as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."<sup>2</sup> As with faith, this definition has three elements. First, as faith is based on knowledge, so repentance is based on an understanding that we have sinned and our sins are hateful to God. So, the first element of repentance is sorrow. In Scripture, there is a difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:9-10; Heb. 12:17). Worldly sorrow is like the sorrow of Judas, who had no hope. Godly sorrow recognizes how terrible I must look to God and confesses that honestly. But it is hopeful. It recognizes sin in its true light, because it knows that God is able and ready to forgive.

Then, just as faith involves assent, belief, so repentance involves renunciation. In assent, I say that I believe; I agree with what God says. So, renunciation goes beyond sorrow. It is agreeing with God's evaluation of my sin.

Finally, repentance is actually turning away from sin, just as faith is turning to Christ. As faith makes a personal commitment to Christ, repentance makes a personal commitment against sin.

You can see, then, that repentance and faith are

inseparable. They are two sides of a coin. You cannot turn from sin without turning to Christ or vice versa. Turning from sin points you in the direction of Christ. You don't need to turn twice, only once. Faith and repentance are the same thing, viewed positively and negatively. Neither exists before the other, and neither exists without the other. The two are simultaneous and perspectival.

This means, in turn, that you cannot accept Christ as Savior without accepting him as Lord. Jesus says that if we love him, we must keep his commandments (John 14:15; many other texts cited earlier). To receive Jesus as Lord is to make a commitment to keeping his commandments. This is to say that to trust Jesus for forgiveness is to repent of sin. So, it is unbiblical to say, as some people do, that you can accept Christ as Savior without accepting him as Lord. The Bible teaches what is called lordship salvation. To be saved, we call upon the Lord (Rom. 10:13); Paul said, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). So, our salvation begins with the confession "Jesus is Lord."

Some have said that lordship salvation means that you must be sinlessly perfect, obedient to the Lord, from the first moment of your Christian life. That is not the case. It does mean that from the beginning of our life with God we must be committed to Jesus' lordship (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).

## Repentance and Salvation

Does this mean that repentance, as well as faith, is necessary for salvation? In a word, yes. But it's not as if there are two different things that are necessary. Faith and repentance are two names for the same heart attitude. The gospel of the New Testament includes a demand for repentance, as many texts indicate. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; cf. Mark 1:15; Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:37-38; 3:19; 5:31; 17:30; 20:21; 2 Cor. 7:10; Heb. 6:1). To believe the gospel is to repent. The Westminster Confession (15.3) also teaches that repentance is necessary for salvation: "Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it." This is the same thing the Westminster Confession says about faith. Repentance is not the ground or cause of salvation. It does not make satisfaction for our sins; only Jesus does. It does not cause us to receive pardon; only God's grace does. But it is necessary for us, so much so that we will not receive pardon without it. Scripture cannot imagine anyone believing in Christ who wants at the same time to cling to his sin.

## Repentance and the Christian Life

I explained earlier that the Christian life does not just begin with faith, but it continues by faith. It is a life of faith. Similarly, the Christian life is a life of repentance. When Jesus saves us, we do not instantly become sinlessly perfect, and indeed we will not become perfect until the consummation. Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our

debtors" (Matt. 6:12; cf. 2 Cor. 7: 10; Rev. 3:19). Jesus tells those whom he loves to "be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19).

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, Peter resisted at first but then asked Jesus to wash everything, his head, his whole body. Jesus replied that "the one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean" (John 13:10). By his death for us, Jesus has cleansed us completely from sin. But as one's feet accumulate dust on the paths of Palestine, so we accumulate sin in the Christian life, and we need to ask God's forgiveness on a regular basis. This sin does not affect our eternal salvation. You needn't worry that if you die with sin you haven't repented of, you will go to hell. But if you love Jesus, your daily sin will grieve you, as it grieves him, and you will run to him, saying that you are sorry, you renounce it, and you intend to act differently. Of course, Scripture also says that when you sin against another human being, you should also go to him, express your sorrow, renounce your sin, and promise to do better. You may also need to make restitution, to make up for the wrong that you did to the other person.

The other person may or may not forgive you. But God will. We have his promise that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He is faithful and also just. He is just to forgive our daily sins, because Jesus has borne the penalty for all our sin-past, present, and future.

We need more Christians who will lead lives of repentance, for repentance always challenges pride. If you're coming to

God daily to confess to him how much you have sinned, you will find it hard to pretend that you are holier than everybody else. You'll find it hard to put on airs, to pose as the perfect Christian. When others accuse you of sin, you won't immediately jump to defend yourself, as if of course you could never do wrong and any accusation must be a misunderstanding. Rather, when someone accuses you of sin, you'll respond by thinking there is a high probability that the accusation is true, and you won't be embarrassed to say, "Oh, yes, I did do that. And I am terribly sorry. Will you forgive me?" If we are able to humble ourselves before God, we will be humble before men as well. And the church will be far better if there are more of us who are like that.

## *Chapter 15*

### JUSTIFICATION AND ADOPTION

Justification is God's legal declaration that our sins are forgiven and that Christ's righteousness is ours. Through adoption, God makes us members of his family.

# I

n our study of the ordo salutis we have so far discussed election, effectual calling, regeneration, faith, and repentance. In this chapter we will look at justification and adoption, then in chapter 16, sanctification. Justification, adoption, and sanctification form one of those triads, those threefold distinctions, that I have derived from the three lordship attributes. So, before we look at justification specifically, let us see briefly how the three doctrines are related to one another.

As fallen human beings, we have three great needs: a new legal status, a new family, and a new life. Justification addresses the first need, adoption the second, and sanctification the third. In justification, God declares us righteous, which removes our guilt and gives us a new legal status. This is an authoritative legal declaration, and so I relate justification to God's lordship attribute of authority, or, in terms of chapter 6, the normative perspective. In adoption, God removes us from the family of Satan to make us his own sons and daughters. So, he creates for us a new environment, a new situation. I relate this to God's lordship attribute of control, or the situational perspective. In regeneration and sanctification, God takes away our sinful, disobedient hearts and gives us new hearts, new dispositions, new lives, new desires to obey him. Regeneration is the beginning of this; sanctification continues it. I relate this action to God's lordship attribute of

covenant presence, or the existential perspective, since in regeneration and sanctification God's Spirit works directly in and with our hearts.

## Justification

Now let us focus on the doctrine of justification. Note the definition from the Westminster Larger Catechism.

Justification is an act of God's free grace unto sinners, in which he pardoneth all their sins, accepteth and accounteth their persons righteous in his sight; not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but only for the perfect obedience and full satisfaction of Christ, by God imputed to them, and received by faith alone. (LC 70)

Note first that justification is a legal declaration. Theologians often call it forensic, a synonym for legal. This is a courtroom transaction. Think of yourself as a condemned criminal with God sitting as judge. You expect the death penalty for what you have done. But Jesus has taken that penalty in your place. So, the divine judge turns to you and pronounces you not guilty. Indeed, he even goes beyond that, as a secular judge would never do, and says that you are positively righteous because of Christ. That is your justification.

It is important to distinguish between justification and sanctification, though Roman Catholic theology makes them overlap. In justification, God declares us righteous; in sanctification, he makes us righteous. Justification is forensic.

It is about our legal status, not our inner character; for the important thing is that in justification God justifies the ungodly, those who by their inner character are wicked. Contrary to Roman Catholicism, God does not justify us because he likes our inner character, or even because he likes what he himself has done within us. He justifies us only because of Christ.

In Scripture many passages indicate the forensic nature of justification. In Deuteronomy 25:1 judges are to justify the righteous and condemn the wicked. Clearly, this means that judges are to declare the innocence of the righteous and the wickedness of the wicked. It cannot mean that the judges are to make people righteous or wicked. In Luke 7:29 we read that some people "declared God just" (literally, "justified God," as in the King James Version) because of Jesus' words. Clearly, that passage cannot mean that the people made God just; "declared God just" is the correct translation.

In Romans 4:5 God "justifies the ungodly" apart from works. Since it is apart from works, justify cannot mean to make righteous, only to declare righteous. In Romans 8:33-34 and other passages the word justify is the opposite of condemn. But condemn means to declare someone guilty, not to make them guilty. Thus, it makes sense to take justify to mean "to declare righteous."

This is the consistent meaning of justify throughout Paul's writings whenever he is talking about the justification of sinners unto salvation (see Rom. 3:20, 26, 28; 5: 1; 8:30; 10:4, 10; and Gal. 2:15; 3:24).

Someone might object that a mere declaration is not enough. Obviously, if a judge were to declare a defendant innocent when he was really guilty, that would not be just. We saw earlier the admonition to judges in Deuteronomy 25:1: a judge is to justify those who are really righteous and condemn those who are really wicked. Some have objected that the Protestant doctrine of justification violates this principle: God looks at wicked people and falsely declares them to be righteous.

But this is to forget the work of Christ. Because Christ died in our place, God's declaration is true. It is not a legal fiction or a false judgment. Jesus really did pay the complete penalty for sin. So, in him we really are innocent and righteous, because he is innocent and righteous. John Murray argued that justification is not a mere declaration but a declaration that "constitutes" a new legal status, a "constitutive declaration," as he put it. He took the phrase "made righteous" in Romans 5:19 to mean "constituted righteous."

That is fine, but the word constitute might confuse some people; it is very close to the word make. We're not talking about making righteous here, in the sense of sanctification. Even when we talk about God's constituting us righteous, we're still in the legal, or forensic, sphere. To be "constituted righteous" means that God is constituting a new legal status for us. So, remember that this constitutive declaration is still forensic, still in the legal, courtroom sphere. It is not the same thing as sanctification. It does not renew us from within. It rather provides us a new legal position, righteous in Christ.

The elements of this declaration of justification are the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. Because of Christ, God takes our sins away from us, so that they may never again rise to condemn us (Rom. 4:6-8; 8:1, 33-34). God removes our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, as Psalm 103:12 puts it.

He also imputes Christ's righteousness (Isa. 61:10; Rom. 3:21-22; 4:3; 5:19; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). That means that he does not just remove our sins but positively adds to us the perfect righteousness of Christ. So, our legal status is not just not guilty, not just neutral, but righteous. If you think of your legal status numerically, sin had plunged you deep into negative numbers. God's forgiveness brought you back up to zero. But the righteousness of Christ took you far above zero in the eyes of God.

Theologians have often distinguished between Christ's active and passive obedience. His passive obedience is his suffering and death for us. His active obedience is his perfect life. So often when theologians talk about justification, they say that Christ's passive obedience brings us the forgiveness of sins; his active obedience is the basis for God's declaring us positively righteous, for God "imputes" Christ's righteousness to us, making us righteous in him.

There is some controversy in Protestant circles now about the imputation of Christ's active obedience to us. We don't have time to enter this controversy here. I do believe that God imputes Christ's active obedience to the believer. Above, I listed some verses that have been used to show the imputation

of Christ's active obedience. But I would invite you also to consider the explanation that follows.

As we saw in our discussion of the atonement, chapter 11, Jesus is our substitute. He died in our place, fulfilling the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament. Recall that the animal sacrifices had to be perfect, without spot or blemish. In Hebrews 9:14 and 1 Peter 1:19 Jesus is called a lamb "without spot," referring to his sinless life. When Jesus died for us, he gave his spotless life on our behalf. He died in our place, because he was spotless and pure-in our place. So God does not impute to us the righteousness of Jesus' death without at the same time imputing to us the righteousness of his spotless life.

What is the basis of God's declaration? Why does he declare us to be righteous? Please be very clear on this. It is not because of our works or even our faith. There is nothing in us that deserves justification. So, justification is a free gift of God. It is entirely and absolutely by grace. That grace is the work of Christ imputed to us, both his active and passive obedience.

This is the main difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic views of justification. For Roman Catholicism justification is primarily God's making us righteous, not declaring us righteous. It is not a consistently forensic concept but overlaps sanctification. So, on the Roman view God makes us righteous within and declares us to be righteous on the basis of this "infused righteousness." That infused righteousness, to some degree, merits eternal life. This means,

then, that salvation is based partly upon our works. We cannot be assured of our salvation in this life, because we are never sure whether our works have been sufficient.

This kind of anxiety over salvation led to the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, first of the Protestant Reformers, was in agony over whether he had enough good works to stand before God's throne on the judgment day. When he read Romans 1:16-17, he wondered how the righteousness of God could be gospel, good news. Paul says there that the gospel, the good news, reveals the righteousness of God. But how, Luther asked, can that be good news, since God's righteousness is precisely what condemns us?

As he thought more about this passage, it occurred to Luther that the "righteousness" here is not the righteousness that condemns but the righteousness that God offers to us in Christ as a free gift. Understood that way, the righteousness of God really is good news. For by counting us righteous in Christ, God forgives our sins and brings us irrevocably into fellowship with him.

One more important point: justification is by faith apart from works. We touched on this in the previous chapter when we discussed saving faith, but the point cannot be left out of the discussion of justification here. Even though saving faith is a faith that works, Paul regularly contrasts faith with works in justification. Justification is by faith apart from works, apart from works of the law, without works (Rom. 3:27-28; 4:5-6; 9:32; Gal. 2:16; 3:2; 3:5).

How can Paul draw such a contrast, when faith and works elsewhere appear inseparable? We saw in James 2 that faith without works is dead. Paul says the same thing in Galatians 5:6, where he speaks of faith working through love. Yes, justification is by a living faith, not a dead faith, a faith that works rather than a mere profession. But faith does not justify because of its connection with works. It justifies because its nature is to trust, in this case to trust the grace of God in Christ. That trust motivates us to please God and therefore to do good works. Since God has saved us from sin, this is the only appropriate response. But salvation is not through the works but through the trust that motivates them. The point is that salvation is a free gift (Eph. 2:8). We cannot work for it but can only trust the one who gives it. Faith is central because faith is trust. Of course, after we receive that gift, it is important for us to show our gratefulness by our actions, and that is what we want to do.

James 2:24, which speaks of justification by works, tells us that a faith without works is not saving faith, not true faith. So, works are evidence of a true, saving faith.

## Adoption

Now let us consider the doctrine of adoption. The Westminster Larger Catechism defines it thus:

Adoption is an act of the free grace of God, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, whereby all those that are justified are received into the number of his children, have his name put upon them, the Spirit of his Son given to them,

are under his fatherly care and dispensations, admitted to all the liberties and privileges of the sons of God, made heirs of all the promises, and fellow heirs with Christ in glory. (LC 74)

Adoption is God's remedy for our second great need. Justification meets our need for a new legal status. Adoption meets our need for a new family. The Bible teaches that because of sin we are originally children of the devil (John 8:41-44; cf. Eph. 2:2-3; 5:6). By faith Jesus gives us authority to become sons (and daughters) of God (John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:23-26; 4:28, 31; 1 Peter 3:6; 1 John 3:1-2). In Christ, God loves us so much that we become his people, his nation, his family (1 John 3:1). So, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven." He also taught them to speak intimately with God, using the Aramaic term *Abba*, a child's name for his father, like our word *Daddy* (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:4-7). We would not dare speak to God with such familiarity, except that Jesus has given us permission.

Jesus himself is the Son of God, as we saw in chapter 10. He has a unique sonship, a relation to God that we cannot attain. His sonship is higher than ours, and it is the source of ours, for it is only those who receive Christ (John 1:12) who gain the authority to be sons of God. In John 20:17 Jesus distinguishes his sonship from ours when he says to Mary, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Jesus never describes God as "our" Father in a way that equalizes the relationship between Jesus' sonship and ours. Nevertheless, we are sons of

God because God sees us in Christ, in his beloved Son. So, we share the blessings that the Father gives to his unique Son, Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is also important to our adoption. He witnesses in our hearts that we are the sons of God (Rom. 8:15-16).

Our sonship is both present and future. We are God's sons here and now (1 John 3:2), but the creation awaits the full manifestation of that sonship (Rom. 8:23). We have only grasped the beginning of what it means to be a son or daughter of God.

Like saving faith and justification, adoption is demonstrated by good works. It is through our good works that we glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16; cf. Phil. 2:15; 1 John 3:10).

Adoption relates us not only to God but also to one another. We are sons and daughters of God and therefore brothers and sisters of one another. Even Jesus is our brother, according to Hebrews 2:17. We are to love our brothers and sisters as Jesus loved us.

## Relation of Adoption to Other Doctrines

Regeneration. We may have questions about the relation of adoption to regeneration, for they both refer to family. Regeneration is about birth, and in the Bible birth happens in a family. Adoption, too, tells how we enter God's family. But the two doctrines are not the same. Regeneration describes natural descent, while adoption describes admission to a family we

were not born into. So, we have two different metaphors here, each making a somewhat different point. Regeneration tells us that our spiritual life comes from God. Adoption emphasizes that God admits us into a family that we did not originally belong to. Both metaphors are biblical, though at first glance they might seem to point in opposite directions.

The two doctrines also differ in this way: in regeneration God grants new life; in adoption God grants new privileges, a new inheritance.

Faith. Adoption, like justification, is through faith (John 1:12; Gal. 3:23-26). We are not entitled to the privileges of sonship, but we receive them as a gift, reaching out with the empty hands of faith.

justification. Justification gives us a new legal standing. Adoption gives us the additional privileges of inheritance. So, adoption carries us beyond justification. Justification is amazing and wonderful, but adoption is the apex, the high point in our relationship with God. So, the doctrine of adoption deserves far more emphasis in our preaching and theological work than it has usually received.

### Privileges of Adoption

The privileges of adoption can be summed up in the word inheritance. First, there is sonship itself, as distinguished from slavery (Gal. 4:7). We are not merely slaves in God's household, though we are slaves, servants, from one point of view. We are bound to serve the Lord. But we are not mere slaves. We are

sons of God.

Sonship also describes a kind of maturity in our relation to God. Even a son, when he is a child, is very much like a slave, for he knows very little and must be taught, often through harsh discipline. Paul describes in that way the old covenant of the Jewish people under Moses. It was a time when they were sons, but children. Jesus' coming brings us to maturity and freedom.

Mature sonship gives us new freedom and confidence in prayer (Matt. 6:9). The Jews of the old covenant also prayed to God, but they feared coming into the most intimate sphere of God's presence; and, indeed, they were barred from it by temple curtains and many regulations. But when Christ died, the veil of the temple was torn in two. Now there is no barrier between us and the greatest intimacy with God a human being can enjoy. Now we enter boldly into the holiest place, praising our Father and asking him for what we need. We can count on his compassion and care. Just as a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him (Ps. 103:13; Matt. 6:32).

There is still discipline in our family. The writer to the Hebrews says that any father chastens his children (12:5-10). He adds that our Father's discipline is one proof that we are real sons and daughters, not illegitimate children.

And just as adoption gives us a new vertical relationship to God, it also gives us new horizontal relationships to one another, to the brothers and sisters in the family (1 Tim. 5:1-2).

Among other things, our brothers and sisters are God's gifts to us, and we receive God's gifts to build them up. That includes the great gift of the Holy Spirit himself, and the gifts that the Spirit gives to each of us (Matt. 7:1; Luke 11:13; Rom. 8:14).

Adoption also gives us a forward-looking vision. In this world we look forward to the privilege of suffering with Jesus, which according to Paul is part of our sonship (Rom. 8:17). But then, of course, comes the fullness of privilege, the final inheritance (Gal. 4:7; 1 Peter 1:4), the privilege of reigning with Christ over the entire world (Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21). All things are ours, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:21. We shall judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3). That fullness of inheritance is so great that Paul in Romans 8:17 refers to it as another adoption, one that we await in the future.

That there is a future adoption shouldn't surprise you. The New Testament teaches often that salvation is complete in Christ, and yet the full unfolding of it is yet to come. That is sometimes called the paradox of the already but not yet. Jesus' atonement has taken away the guilt of our sin, but it is now taking away the power of sin, and one day it will take away the very presence of sin. So, our salvation is already but not yet. Justification is ours already, but one day we will be pronounced righteous before the Father's throne. So, there is a past justification and a future justification, as there is a future adoption. When we believe in Christ, we become members of his family. But the fullness of our privileges as sons and daughters remains for the future. Adoption, too, is past and future.

Christian believers are usually not highly regarded in this world. But our ultimate destiny is a life of such great dignity and authority that we can hardly imagine it now. So, even the creation groans, awaiting the manifestation of the sons of God: you and me. In Romans 8 Paul says this about our adoption past and future, with some references also to justification.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed

to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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. 8:19-39)

That is the way our God treats his sons and daughters.

Adoption is really a wonderful teaching of God's Word, but it is neglected in our preaching and teaching. We tend to focus on justification because of the importance of that doctrine in the Reformation and on sanctification because it describes the progress of salvation in our hearts in a practical way, day by day. But adoption, belonging to God's family, is the height of our privilege as God's people and the beginning of our heavenly reward. It is the foundation of all our relationships with God and one another. God's name is our family name, the name by which we will be known, through all eternity.

## *Chapter 16*

# SANCTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE

In sanctification God actually *makes* us holy. He sanctifies us *definitively* by transferring us from Satan's kingdom to the kingdom of Christ, and he sanctifies us *progressively* by re-making us in the image of Christ. Progressive sanctification, unlike justification and adoption, is not only a work of God but also a responsibility of ours. Our assurance of salvation is based on the promises of God (justification), the fruits of righteousness in our lives (sanctification), and the testimony of the Spirit that we are God's sons and daughters (adoption).



We continue to discuss the implications of the atonement for our salvation using the traditional list of topics in the *ordo salutis*. So far, beginning in chapter 13, we have considered election, calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, and adoption. In this chapter we will consider sanctification, and then we will see how our justification, adoption, and sanctification combine to give us assurance of salvation.

## Sanctification

To sanctify is to make holy. Holiness, of course, includes righteousness. When we studied justification, I emphasized that justification is God's declaring us righteous, not making

us righteous. But, of course, God does also make us righteous. This making righteous is called, not justification, but sanctification.

Let us first look at holiness, the root meaning of sanctification. Holiness is first of all an attribute of God, as I emphasized in chapter 1. God's holiness is his capacity and right to arouse our reverent awe and wonder. Think of what it would be like to meet God directly. When Moses met God in Exodus 3:5-6, God told him to remove his shoes, for the place of this meeting was holy ground (cf. Ex. 19:12-13, 23). When God came to be there, the very space around him became sacred, holy. When Isaiah met God, the seraphim-angels-flew around, crying "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" (Isa. 6:3). God's holiness is his radical difference (literally, "separation") from human beings, which arouses our amazement. It puts us in contact with a being vastly different from anyone or anything in the universe.

God is different and separate from us because he is our Creator, because of his lordship, his attributes of control, authority, presence. After the fall, he is separate from us also in another way: he is perfectly righteous and good, but we are wicked and sinful. So, when God met with Isaiah, the result was not only Isaiah's amazement at God's greatness but also Isaiah's profound conviction of sin. "Woe is me!" he cried, "for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (v. 5). Isaiah knew that God was pure and would judge all wickedness. He knew he had no right to stand in the presence of such intense purity. He may well have

expected to be destroyed then and there.

But God showed kindness to Isaiah. One of the angels took a live coal from the temple altar and placed it on Isaiah's lips, symbolically taking away Isaiah's sin in anticipation of the work of Christ (vv. 6-7). So with all believers. Amazingly, God promises that we shall be holy, even as God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15-16).

Remarkably, God's attribute of holiness, which creates such a distance between God and human beings, also joins us to him in the most intimate fellowship. God makes us holy, which means that he associates us with his holiness. He brings us into his holy ground. So, we become his holy people, his saints.

As we have seen, God comes to us in his covenant presence, and he takes us to be his people, saying "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." In the case of Israel, that meant that they were a holy people, a people separate from all the other nations of the world (Ex. 19:6). For Israel, holiness was both a fact and a norm, both a reality and a command. They were in fact the holy people of God, distinct from all the nations. But God also commanded them to be holy (Lev. 20:7). God made them holy, but they were to make themselves holy. Here divine sovereignty and human responsibility come together. This is not true in justification. God does not command us to be justified, for justification is entirely his work, not ours. But he does command us to be sanctified, to be holy, for sanctification is both a work of God and a work of the believer.

The same language can be found in the New Testament. God has made us his holy people (1 Peter 2:9), his saints (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2), but he also commands us to be holy as he is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16).

## Definitive Sanctification

The Bible distinguishes two aspects of sanctification that theologians have called definitive sanctification and progressive sanctification. The first is a single act of God that happens at a single point in time. The second is a continuing work of God with which he calls us to cooperate. This distinction reflects something that we have noted: for the believer holiness is both a fact and a command. Let us first look at definitive sanctification.

Definitive sanctification is a once-for-all event, simultaneous with effectual calling and regeneration, that transfers us from the sphere of sin to the sphere of God's holiness, from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God (Heb. 9:13-14; 10:10; 13:12). It is at this point that each of us joins God's holy people. It is at this point that we enter his very presence and find his welcoming smile rather than his condemnation. So, the New Testament says that all Christians are saints, that is, holy (Acts 20:32; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11). Sainthood does not belong to just a few special Christians, as on the Roman Catholic view. It belongs to all believers.

Definitive sanctification is based on the fact that we belong to Christ. We have said that also about justification and adoption. These are all aspects of our union with Christ.

Remember from our discussion of effectual calling that God calls us into union with Christ. Paul expresses this often by the phrase "in Christ." We are justified in Christ, adopted in Christ, sanctified in Christ. We are set apart from all other people, holy, because we are in Christ. So, in him we have been sanctified (past tense).

Paul is able to say that when Christ died, we died with him. When he died for sin, we died to sin. So, definitive sanctification involves a clean break with sin (Rom. 6:11; Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3). And as we have died to sin in Christ, we are raised to new life in his resurrection. This does not mean that believers are sinlessly perfect. John tells us plainly that if we say that we do not sin, we deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8, 10). But in Christ, God breaks our bondage, our slavery to sin (Rom. 6:14-23), so that it has no more dominion over us (Rom. 8:14). So, now we can say no to Satan's temptations. Definitive sanctification (overlapping regeneration, of course) has given us a new basic reorientation of the mind, will, and affections, so that we have a new desire to do God's will.

### Progressive Sanctification

But sanctification is not only that initial reorientation. It is also our gradual growth in holiness and righteousness, our progress in God's way, the way of good works. This is what we usually think of when we hear the word sanctification.

Definitive sanctification is a break with our sinful past. But, as we've seen, it does not make us sinlessly perfect. We are not perfectly free from sin until our deaths or the last judgment

(Phil. 3:12; 1 John 1:8, 10). Some have thought that 1 John 3:6 teaches sinless perfection, but it does not. It may seem that way from the King James translation, which reads, "Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him." But this verse only teaches that believers will not sin continuously, that is, they will not carry on a sinful lifestyle. The ESV translation reads, "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him," which is a better rendering of the Greek original. John knows that we sin daily, as he writes in 1 John 1:8 and 10, and Jesus tells us in the Lord's Prayer to ask for forgiveness of our sins (Matt. 6:11-12; cf. 1 Kings 8:46; Prov. 20:9; Eccl. 7:20).

But we should not be complacent about the presence of sin in our lives. Rather, there is a battle to be fought, with God's help (2 Cor. 3:18).

So, sanctification is not only a past event but also an ongoing process. It begins in regeneration, and we can think of sanctification as the outworking of the new life given in regeneration. In that ongoing process God works in us (1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 13:20-21), but he also calls us to work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12-13). It is all of God, for all things are of God. Sanctification is a work of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18, 22-23; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2) on the basis of Christ, who is our sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30). Notice again how the elements of the *ordo salutis* are aspects of our union with Christ.

The good works and attitudes that arise through sanctification are called "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22-23.

So, as we see ourselves growing in grace, we should thank and praise God. It is by his grace that we are able to grow at all.

Nevertheless, we should not wait passively for God to sanctify us. Some have taught that the way to holiness is to "let go and let God." But that is not biblical. In the first place, we don't need to "let God," for God is sovereign and does not need to wait for us to let go before he can work. And we should not let go, for God commands us to fight in the spiritual battle. So, there's the paradox: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b-13). God does it all, but he does it (as I emphasized in chaps. 1 and 7 that he often does) by the use of human effort (cf. 2 Peter 1:5-11).

Just as God told Israel in Exodus 19 that they were already his holy people but also commanded them in Leviticus 18 to be holy as he is holy, so in definitive sanctification he tells us that we are his holy people, and then he commands us in progressive sanctification to become holy as he is holy.

Scripture commands us to yield our lives to God (Rom. 6:19; Phil. 3:13-14; Col. 3:10; Heb. 12:1), to strive for holiness (Rom. 8:13; 2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 4:3; Heb. 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15; 2 Peter 1:5; 1 John 3:3), and to don the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:10-20) to fight against Satan and his angels. We can win this battle not by the sword but by truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation. Our only offensive weapons are the Word of God and prayer. This may seem a puny arsenal to the rulers of this world, but God tells us it has more power than any of those rulers. People sometimes say mockingly, "Well, we

can always try prayer." But God's weapons are more powerful than anything in the mockers' arsenal. A gun will subdue a man, but only the sword of God's Word, wielded in prayer, will subdue Satan. We shall discuss our arsenal further in chapter 20, "The Means of Grace."

## Assurance of Salvation

Somewhere in our survey of systematic theology we need to discuss the assurance of salvation. How do we know that we're saved? I've decided to discuss that here, in a fairly unusual and unlikely spot, in the middle of the *ordo salutis*. I might try to argue that assurance is part of the *ordo*, one of the blessings that comes to us through the atonement. Certainly assurance has as much right to be in the *ordo* as faith; indeed, some have taught that assurance is really part of faith.

But I don't care much whether assurance is an element of the *ordo*. The *ordo*, as I said before, is only a pedagogical device. I am discussing assurance here because it naturally follows the discussion of justification, adoption, and sanctification; for our assurance is based on the reality of these three divine blessings in our lives.

The Westminster Confession (18.1-2) tells us this about assurance:

1. Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet

such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

On the one hand, let us note that God intends us to have assurance. He calls us to draw near to him "in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22). Scripture says that we know God, not merely that we hope or suppose that he exists. God's promises are absolutely sure, for they are based on his own oath, which cannot lie (Heb. 6:13, 18). This is "a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul" (v. 19). Similarly, Paul (in 2Tim. 3:16-17) and Peter (in 2 Peter 1:19-21) speak of Scripture as God's own words, which provide sure guidance in a world where false teaching abounds. God's special revelation is certain, and we ought to be certain about it.

On the other hand, the Bible presents doubt largely in negative terms. It is a spiritual impediment, an obstacle to

doing God's work (Matt. 14:31; 21:21; 28:17; Acts 10:20; 11:12; Rom. 14:23; 1 Tim. 2:8; James 1:6). In Matthew 14:31 and Romans 14:23 it is the opposite of faith and therefore a sin. Of course, this sin, like other sins, may remain with us through our earthly life. But we should not be complacent about it. Just as the ideal for the Christian life is perfect holiness, the ideal for the Christian mind is absolute certainty about God's revelation.

We should not conclude, however, that doubt is always sinful. Matthew 14:31 and Romans 14:23 (and indeed the other texts I have listed) speak of doubt in the face of clear special revelation. To doubt what God has clearly spoken to us is wrong. But in other situations, it is not wrong to doubt. In many cases, in fact, it is wrong for us to claim knowledge, much less certainty. Indeed, often the best course is to admit our ignorance (Deut. 29:29; Rom. 11:33-36). Paul is not wrong to express uncertainty about the number of people he baptized (1 Cor. 1:16). Indeed, James tells us, we are always ignorant of the future to some extent and we should not pretend to know more about it than we do (James 4:13-16). Job's friends were wrong to think that they knew the reasons for his torment, and Job himself had to be humbled, as God reminded him of his ignorance (Job 38-42).

But as to our salvation, God wants us to know that we know him (1 John 5:13). In the Roman Catholic view you cannot be fully assured of your salvation, because salvation is partly based on works, and your works can always pull you down. But in Protestant theology, as in Scripture, salvation is the work of God. Nobody can destroy it, not even the believer's sins. Those who are justified by faith in Christ have the right to

believe that they belong to God forever.

## Grounds of Assurance

But how can we be assured that we are saved? We generally hold that only the Bible teaches absolutely certain truths. However, your name is not in the Bible, nor is mine. So on what basis can we have what the Westminster Confession calls the "infallible" assurance that our faith is true and that we belong to God?

The Confession lists three realities that our infallible assurance is founded on. These correspond to justification, sanctification, and adoption, respectively-putting these in a little different order from the order in which we studied them.

First, the Westminster Confession speaks of "the divine truth of the promises of salvation." Clearly, God promises eternal life to all who receive Christ (John 1:12; 3:15-18, 36; 5:24; 6:35, 40, 47; etc.). His promises are absolutely infallible. How can we doubt them? To be sure, the promises don't explicitly contain your name or mine. But they contain our names implicitly; that is, they apply to us.

Let me give you a similar example. When the eighth commandment says, "Thou shalt not steal," it doesn't mention my name. It doesn't say that John Frame should not steal. Does that mean that I am free to take your wallet? Well, of course not. Because "Thou shalt not steal" means "Everybody should not steal" or "Nobody should steal." That includes John Frame. So, although my name is not in the text explicitly, the

text applies to me, which is to say that my name is there implicitly. The same is true with the promises of salvation. God promises salvation to everybody who believes. If you believe, then that promise is yours. God promises to save you. And that promise is infallible, certain. You dare not doubt it.

Justification comes from faith, from trusting God's promise, just as Abraham did when he believed what God said, even when God's promise seemed impossible. If you believe God's promise, you are justified, and you also have a right to assurance. Believing God's promise is the instrument of justification, as I put it in chapter 15, the essence of justifying faith (Rom. 4:3, 20-21; Gal. 3:7-9). And continuing in faith brings assurance (Col. 1:23; Heb. 3:14; 6:12). This does not mean, of course, that anyone who raises his hand at an evangelistic meeting is saved. People sometimes do that hypocritically. Faith is an inward reality. But if it is there, you have a right to be assured. If you can honestly say, "I am trusting Jesus for my salvation, not my own works, not my family, not my church, but Jesus," then you can say without doubt that you are saved. And as we shall indicate in the next chapter, you cannot lose that salvation.

The second basis of assurance the Westminster Confession mentions is "the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made." This ground corresponds to the doctrine of sanctification. When we introspect in this way, we are asking if indeed the Lord is sanctifying us.

Under the first basis of assurance I mentioned God's

promises. God's promises include a promise of new life, of regeneration and sanctification. God has promised to make his people holy (1 Peter 1:15-16; 2 Peter 1:4). So, as we observe what God is doing within us, as we observe our own progress in sanctification, we "make [our] calling and election sure," as Peter says (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Now, I know that selfexamination can be a discouraging business. When we look at ourselves, we see continuing sin, as well as the effects of grace. So, we wonder how we can ever gain assurance by selfexamination. Many say that we should not look at ourselves but that we should look beyond ourselves, outward, at the work of Christ, at his word of promise. That was what we advised under the first ground of assurance, and certainly we should not look inward without looking outward at the same time. But it is important not only to look at God's promises but also to see how God is fulfilling those promises within us. The continuing presence of sin should not discourage us, because God does not promise to make us sinlessly perfect in this life. But he does promise growth in grace, growth in holiness. When we see that, it increases our confidence that God's promises apply to us. And if we don't see that, it is a danger signal. In that case we should seriously ask ourselves if we have understood the promises of God. If we see ourselves dominated by sinful patterns, we should ask whether we have really trusted Christ as Lord and Savior.

The third ground of assurance, corresponding to the doctrine of adoption, is "the testimony of the Spirit to our adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are children of

God." This confessional statement comes right out of Romans 8:16-17. This is to say that, in the end, our assurance is supernatural. Note in Romans 8 that it is not only the witness of our own Spirit but something over and above that, a witness of God's Spirit with our spirit that we are the children of God. Our scrutiny of God's promises and our own sanctification, in the end, is fallible. We make mistakes in our judgments. But the Spirit never makes a mistake. So, he persuades us that what we observe in God's Word and in our own lives is really true, really evidence of grace.

In chapters 4 and 12, I spoke of the Spirit's work in illuminating God's Word to us. I called that work existential revelation. His work in giving us assurance is no different from that. He is not whispering in our ears some new truths that are not found in the Bible. Rather, he is helping us to understand the promises of God in the Bible, to believe those promises, and to see that they apply to us.

Note the triadic structure of these three aspects of assurance, corresponding to justification, sanctification, and adoption, and therefore to God's authority, presence, and control. This suggests that these three grounds of assurance are not independent of one another but that they work together, that each requires the others. And that is indeed the way we should look at it. The Spirit's witness enables us to be sure of the promises of God and the fruits of our sanctification. The promises of the Word are the promises of the Spirit, who inspired the Word, and he continues to speak through the Word. Our sanctification helps us better to appreciate and apply the promises of God to ourselves.

Given these powerful resources, how can a Christian ever lack assurance? Yet we sometimes do seem to fluctuate between assurance and doubt. The Reformed confessions look at this problem from two perspectives. The Heidelberg Catechism (21) says that assurance is of the essence of faith: you can't really have faith without having assurance. And that is true in a way. If you believe in Jesus, as I said earlier, you cannot doubt that his promises are true. And if you believe in him, you cannot doubt that those promises apply to you, because they apply to everyone who believes.

The Westminster Confession differs somewhat from the Heidelberg Catechism. It says, "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it" (18.3). The Confession adds:

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair. (18.4)

Note the difference from the Heidelberg: the Westminster statement says that assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith as to preclude periods of doubt. The bigger picture is that if we believe in Christ, we have assurance in our heart; but that assurance can be weakened by sin of various kinds, so that our psychological feeling of assurance has its ups and downs. Assurance is logically implied in faith, but sin sometimes weakens our confidence that our faith is genuine. But God has given us adequate resources to return to a state of full assurance. He has given us his promises, his sanctifying work, and the Spirit's testimony. We have a right to assurance if we believe God's promises. When we are in doubt, we should keep coming back to those resources and to the means of grace, which we shall discuss in chapter 20: the Word, worship, prayer, and Christian fellowship.

## *Chapter 17*

# PERSEVERANCE AND GLORIFICATION

When God regenerates a person's heart, that person will never lose his or her salvation. God will change his people from glory to glory, into the perfect glory of the eternal state.

# T

his is the last chapter on the *ordo salutis*, that list of doctrines that describes the blessings of our union with Christ. We have considered election, God's grace to us before time. That is not usually considered part of the *ordo* but is at least an important presupposition of the *ordo*. Then we considered effectual calling and regeneration. These represent the beginning of our experience of salvation in space and time. Effectual calling is God's act to bring us into fellowship with Christ, and regeneration describes the change God works in us to become like Christ. Faith and repentance, sometimes together called conversion, describe our regenerate response to God's calling, as we turn to Christ as Lord and Savior (faith) and turn away from sin (repentance). Then comes the triad of justification, adoption, and sanctification. In justification God gives us a new legal standing before him. In adoption he brings us into the family of God as his sons and daughters. In sanctification he makes us saints, holy people, working out our regenerate nature to renew us in the image of Jesus.

In this chapter we shall consider perseverance, the doctrine that this new life continues to the end, indeed to eternity; and glorification, which refers to the consummation of human nature in God's image. That consummation begins with effectual calling and continues through eternity.

## Perseverance

Let us first consider the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, sometimes called the doctrine of eternal security. I use these two phrases as synonyms, though as we shall see they do carry somewhat different nuances with different people. Perseverance simply means that those who are truly regenerate, in saving union with Christ, can't lose their salvation. As the Westminster Confession (17.1) puts it, "They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

In Matthew 10:21-22 Jesus describes a period of persecution for the church. He says, "Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved." As we shall see, people do fall away under temptation, trial, and persecution. Salvation is for those who endure, who persevere. But Scripture teaches that everyone who is effectually called, regenerated, converted, justified, adopted, and sanctified by God will surely persevere to the end.

We can see this is true from a number of statements in Scripture. In John 6:39-40 Jesus says, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." So everyone who believes in Jesus, not hypocritically

but sincerely, will have eternal life. Jesus will raise him up on the last day. So, if you have believed in Jesus now, you cannot lose your salvation. Be confident that Jesus will raise you up on the last day.

Notice also John 10:27-29: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." Nobody can snatch a believer out of God's hand.

These verses speak of eternal life in the future for those who believe today. But there are other passages that put the point even more strongly: we have eternal life here and now, not only in the future. John 3:36 says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." John 5:24 reads, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." First John 5:13 says, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life."

So, Paul is able to say that there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). When we believe in Jesus, immediately our sins are forgiven—past, present, and future. At that point every barrier is removed to eternal fellowship with God. So we will certainly persevere.

But remember that our salvation goes back even before the beginning of our faith, into eternity past. Salvation begins in election. This is an even more ultimate reason why we will persevere. In chapter 15, I quoted Romans 8 at some length. Note there how the apostle Paul connects election and perseverance.

Paul sees a golden chain from God's foreknowledge and predestination in eternity past, to calling and justification, to glorification. Those who are predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ cannot fail to be glorified. So, we hear the language of perseverance. No one can accuse us; no one can separate us from the love of Christ. When Paul writes about death, life, angels, rulers, the present and future, powers, height, and depth, he knew what he was talking about. Many times he was beaten, left for dead, shipwrecked, persecuted. But he knew nothing could separate him from Christ, because he was predestined, called, and justified. Do you see how the doctrine of perseverance adds something important to the doctrine of assurance?

We should also note what Paul calls the "seal" of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14): "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." We receive the Holy Spirit at the beginning of our regenerate lives, and anyone who has the Holy Spirit has a guarantee of final perseverance.

All of this is to say, simply, that God completes the work he

begins (Phil. 1:6). He guards every believer to the end. "By God's power [we] are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

With all this biblical evidence before us, how can anybody doubt the doctrine of perseverance? There is one major problem in this: people sometimes do turn away from Christ after professing him. You probably know people who have fallen away after seeming like faithful Christians for years. Such defections, called apostasy, occurred during the New Testament period as well. There were false professions, people who said, "Lord, Lord" to Christ but were "workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:21-23). There were false brothers (2 Cor. 11:15, 26; Gal. 2:4), false branches on the vine of Christ (John 15:1-2, 6), wolves in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15). There was, as in Jesus' parable, seed sown on rocky soil, which sprang up and looked healthy for a time but eventually withered away (Mark 4:5-6; 16-17).

It can be difficult to tell whether a professing believer is true or false. Listen to Hebrews 6:4-8:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated,

receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

The writer is speaking about false believers. But he describes them much as one might describe a true believer: repentant (v. 4), enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift (possibly some supernatural gift tongues, prophecy, healing), sharing the Spirit, tasting the goodness of the Word and the powers of the age to come (again, probably referring to miraculous events). Some Christians think that this passage describes true believers and that these true believers do not persevere but fall away. That position, in my view, however, contradicts that great number of Bible texts we discussed earlier.

Can we regard the people in this passage as false believers? I think we can. Think of Judas Iscariot, chosen by Jesus to be one of the twelve apostles. By joining Jesus' band of followers, he turned away from the sinful world, a kind of repentance. Doubtless he received the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins either from Jesus or from John. He was enlightened by hearing Jesus' teaching. He tasted the heavenly gift as he watched Jesus heal and prophesy. He shared the Spirit, at least as much as Saul did when he prophesied and people asked, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" Judas also tasted the good word of Christ and Jesus' miraculous powers, the powers of the age to come, the powers of the coming kingdom. Judas himself preached Christ and worked miracles in his name (Matt. 10: 1-42). But he proved to be reprobate, unbelieving. He betrayed Jesus, who said of him that it would have been better if he had not been born. Externally, he seemed

to be a believer; and, indeed, he had many advantages that believers have, hearing Jesus' words and watching his miracles.

Perhaps even more to the focus of the letter to the Hebrews was Old Testament Israel. Though enlightened in comparison with the other nations and experiencing all sorts of heavenly gifts, powers, and words, many of them were wicked and turned against God.

Hebrews 10:26-31 also speaks of apostasy. Here the writer says that the apostate "has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace" (v. 29). The most difficult point here is the clause that says the apostates once were sanctified by the blood of Christ. How can that be said of someone who falls short of final salvation?

The language of sanctification means a setting apart. It can refer to moral cleansing, as we saw in the doctrine of sanctification (previous chapter), but it can also refer to other kinds of setting apart. God said Israel was his holy people, because he had set it apart from all the nations of the world; yet, Israel was not always sanctified in the sense of being obedient to God. In 1 Corinthians 7:14 Paul says that children of believers are holy, even though they may not be old enough to perform good works. I believe that the people described in Hebrews 10 are those who became part of God's holy people, separated from all others. As Israel was set apart by sacrifices, those in Hebrews 10 were set apart by the blood of Christ, which separates the visible church from everyone else in the world. But God did not change their hearts, and they came to

despise the blood of Christ, as Judas Iscariot certainly did.

So, people can have all these blessings without being saved and yet without the ability to persevere. The apostates of Hebrews 6 did not have regenerate hearts or true faith. So, in Hebrews 6:9 the writer says, "Yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things-things that belong to salvation." The writer believes that his readers have regenerate hearts and true faith, and so they are saved and will be saved in the end. He knows that the apostates he has spoken of do not have gifts of God sufficient for salvation.

In our own time this passage applies to many who make a minimal commitment to Christ. How many nominal church members there are in our time! How many "come forward" at an evangelistic meeting or even receive baptism and join a church only to lose interest shortly afterward. And there are some today who, like Judas or the Pharisees, even become very active in the Lord's work and may be pillars of the church over a period of years, yet whose hearts are not right with God, who have never experienced the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

Some people have taught that anyone who makes a minimal commitment to Christianity-for example, by coming forward, professing faith, and being baptized-will certainly be saved in the end, even if they renounce Christ and live sinful lives. That, of course, is not biblical teaching. In Scripture those who persevere are those who are regenerate by God's Spirit and who grow in grace. We cannot read the hearts of people, so we sometimes fail to discern that growth or the lack of it. But God

sees, and in the end it is God who will judge.

The view that those who make a minimal commitment will certainly be saved is sometimes called eternal security, though not every one who uses this phrase teaches this error. Perseverance is not guaranteed to everyone who professes faith, only to those who really trust Christ. Indeed, some who make initial professions of faith get involved in such serious sins that they should be cast out of the church, excommunicated (1 Cor. 5). Excommunication means that someone whom the church originally considered to be a believer will no longer be considered such.

However, this teaching is not intended to frighten believers into morbid selfexamination. Christians sometimes get into periods of doubt over whether they have "truly believed." In fact, Hebrews 6 and 10 are not about immature believers who are trying to serve Christ but who struggle with sins in their lives. The apostates of Hebrews 6 and 10 were wolves in sheep's clothing. Their profession was playacting. You remember how the apostles trusted Judas with the treasury, and he used it for his personal wants. He put on a show of caring for the poor when all he cared about was himself. The Hebrews 6 apostates never confessed their sins and trusted Jesus for forgiveness. To those who are not playacting but have faith, even as a grain of mustard seed, God promises to preserve them to the very end and into all eternity. If you are concerned about your faithfulness and devotion to Christ, your concern is a mark of true faith. Wolves in sheep's clothing are not concerned about such things.

## Glorification

Since believers persevere to the end, their inevitable final blessing is glory. So, we discuss glorification, appropriately, at the end of the *ordo salutis*. But there is also a sense in which glorification occurs here and now, as we shall see.

First, let's review what we know about the glory of God. Glory is God's visible presence among people. Glory is an adornment; for example, a woman's hair is her crowning glory, and woman is the glory of man. God always has the adornment of a great light, light that people often see when they meet God. His glory was in the cloud that led Israel through the wilderness (Ex. 16:6-10). It shone on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:16), and then it came and dwelled in the midst of Israel in the tabernacle and later in the temple (Ex. 29:43; 40:34). This in dwelling presence of God was called the *shekinah*, the Hebrew word meaning "settle down, abide, dwell." So, in the glory God dwelled as Lord among his people. You remember God's lordship attribute of covenantal presence. His glory is a form of that presence. In the New Testament Jesus is God tabernacling with his people (John 1:14). He is our *shekinah*.

Now God wants human beings to glorify him. "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do," says Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "do all to the glory of God" (cf. Matt. 5:16). That sounds as though we are to increase God's glory by what we do. But is that possible? Isn't God's glory infinite? How can we add anything to the glory of God?

That is mysterious. Cornelius Van Til called that mystery

the "full bucket problem." We can put it this way: given the vast importance of God, how can human actions have any importance at all? But as we have seen, God's greatness doesn't exclude a subordinate greatness for human beings. God's sovereignty doesn't exclude human responsibility.

It is hard to understand literally what it means for us to glorify God, but on the level of the metaphor, we can think of it this way: we are God's image, and so he wants us to reflect back the glory shining out of him. When that reflected glory shines from us back to him, we become more like God: both God and we have glory shining out of us. And God receives more light, because we reflect it back to him. So, we can be said to glorify God.

Returning to a more literal description of this process, remember that glory refers to all of God's perfections, such as his love, grace, and goodness. For us to glorify God is to be holy as he is holy, good as he is good, loving as he is loving. To glorify God is to image him. Remember that the image of God is both a fact and a norm. It is a fact, what we are, how God made us. But it is also a norm, a duty, a responsibility. God wants us to be like him, for he says, "Be holy as I am holy."

Glory is also one of the blessings of salvation, the *ordo salutis*. For God not only asks us to glorify him, he ordains that we will. Hard as it is to imagine that we will reflect God's glory and thereby glorify him, Scripture says it will happen to everyone who is joined to Christ by faith.

Present Glorification

As with many doctrines in the ordo salutis, this one has a present and a future aspect. Let's look first at our present glorification. Psalm 8 speaks of God's creation of human beings in glorious terms. The writer to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2:7 as follows, "You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." In one sense that is true of all human beings. God has made us in his image and to have dominion over the whole earth. So we are like God, and we play a divine role. As God has dominion over the whole creation, so Adam was to take dominion of all the earth in God's name.

But, as we know, Adam failed to take dominion as God commanded. He sought to glorify himself rather than his Creator. So, redemption must restore to us the glory that we forfeited by sin. Jesus glorified his disciples. In John 17:22 he prayed to his Father, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one." In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." In John 17:22 glorification is in the past; in 2 Corinthians 3:18 it is in the present (cf. 1 Peter 1:8; 2 Peter 1:3).

This is one way the Bible talks about the benefits of salvation as a great light reflected from God, more and more reflected back to him. Scripture also uses this image of glory in regard to the ministry of the gospel. Paul's ministry glorifies the church (Eph. 3:9), and the church glorifies him in return (1

Thess. 2:20). So, the ministry of the new covenant exceeds the glory of the old (2 Cor. 3:9).

Through that ministry of the gospel, we even now partake of that glory that shall be revealed: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1).

### Future Glorification

Most biblical references to glorification place it in the future. Like most of God's blessings, there is a beginning in this life and a consummation at the end, an "already" but a "not yet," as the theologians say. Present glorification is usually presented as a moral conformity to God's will; future glorification is often the glorification of the body. Note the large number of passages on this subject (Rom. 8:11, 18-19, 22-23; 1 Cor. 15:42-44; 2 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 3:21). Scripture is not ashamed of the human body, as some philosophers and religions have been. It recognizes that the human body is weak, weary, and sick because of the fall. But it also recognizes that because of Christ, our bodies, not just our souls, will be raised in glory-never again to experience suffering, sickness, or death. The resurrection body will be imperishable, without corruption, powerful. It will be spiritual but not in the sense of being immaterial, for it will be quite material; it will be spiritual, rather, in being fully dominated by the Spirit of God, like Jesus (1 John 3:2).

More generally, our glorification will be a consummation of

human nature in God's image, humanity as God intended for it to be (Rom. 2:10; 5:2; 9:23; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:18; Col. 1:27; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2Tim. 2:10; Heb. 2:10; 1 Peter 1:7; 5:10). We cannot now imagine how wonderful it will be, how wonderful we will be, and, indeed, how wonderful even those we consider lowliest will be in their glorified bodies.

He rewards us with a crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4). That image might be cause for pride as we look forward to it. But look at how the apostle Peter deals with this promise:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

For Peter the coming glory should motivate elders to be examples to the people in their churches. They should not seek their own gain or to dominate their brothers and sisters but to serve them, as Jesus taught in Matthew 20. We can humbly serve one another in this life, knowing that our crown will come with Jesus. This is the time for us to be willing to suffer, knowing that the glory is coming later (Rom. 8:18-39; 1 Peter 1:11).

But there is a glory even now, as we've seen, the glory of

serving Jesus and one another, the glory of being willing to suffer for his sake.

## *Chapter 18*

### THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Christ shed his blood not just for individuals but for a body of people, the church. The church is all of God's elect, the one, holy, universal, and apostolic people of God, gathered together in a visible organization.

**I**n our study of the ordo salutis we have considered mainly the salvation of individuals. Election, calling, regeneration, and so on are events that happen to each individual. But in the Bible salvation is more than that. In Acts 20:28 Paul tells the Ephesian elders, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Hear that? It is the church that Jesus obtained with his own blood. Jesus did not die just for

individuals; he died for a people, a body, a bride, consisting of many people united in the bonds of a larger whole.

So, throughout the Bible we read of God's bringing to himself not only individuals but also families: the families of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Eventually, Jacob's family becomes a nation, and God calls that nation to be his, his holy people. In the New Testament that nation is the church of Jesus Christ.

## Old Testament Background

Let's look first at the Old Testament background of the church. As a community of people worshiping God, the church certainly goes back to the garden of Eden. After the fall Cain and Abel brought sacrifices to the Lord, so that there was again the existence of a worshiping community. Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, had a son named Enosh. Scripture tells us that "at that time [the time of Seth and Enosh] people began to call upon the name of the LORD" (Gen. 4:26).

So, there has always been a community of people on the earth worshiping the true God. But something special happened when God led Israel out of Egypt to meet with him on Mount Sinai. As the people camped around the mountain, they did not see the form of the Lord, but the mountain was full of his presence. There were thunder, lightning, trumpet blasts, a thick cloud, smoke; the mountain itself trembled. The people had to wash themselves, to be ceremonially clean in God's presence. Then God spoke words to them. This was the only time in history that the whole people of God were assembled in

one place to hear words directly from God's own mouth.

These words were the covenant that I described in chapter 5. In that covenant, God gave his name, Yahweh, the Lord, then declared his previous mercies to Israel: he brought them out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery. Then he set forth the Ten Commandments, the fundamental law of the covenant. When the people heard these words, they were terribly afraid. They did not want to hear God speak to them anymore. They called Moses and essentially said, "You go up the mountain and talk with God, and then tell us what he said; but we cannot bear to hear God's voice anymore."

In Deuteronomy, written sometime afterward, this wonderful and terrible meeting between God and Israel is called "the day of the assembly" (see 4:10; 9:10; 10:4; 18:16). The word assembly is *qahal* in Hebrew, sometimes translated congregation. In an important sense, this is the beginning of the church. It was on this day that the nation of Israel became, by covenant, God's holy nation, distinguished from all the other nations of the world. God has redeemed them from Egypt; they are his treasured possession among all peoples (Ex 19:4-5). They are "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (v. 6). Their constitution is the covenant-treaty called the Ten Commandments.

We hear these titles of Israel, kingdom of priests and holy nation, again in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 2:9 the apostle says, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, people for his own possession." So, the New Testament church, like Old Testament Israel, is God's own special people,

the continuation of Israel. Significantly, the Greek translation of Deuteronomy uses the term *ecclesia* ("church") to represent the "gathering" of the people into God's presence. Israel was the church of the old covenant; the Testament church is the Israel of the new covenant, what Paul calls "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

There are some Christians, called dispensationalists, who believe that Israel and the church are two distinct peoples of God, given different sets of promises. I believe Scripture teaches, on the contrary, that God's people are one body, the same in the Old and New Testaments. There is only one set of promises, all of which are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We can see that by the fact that the New Testament church bears the same titles God gave to Israel in Exodus 19:5-6. In Romans 11:11-24 Paul speaks of the people of God as one olive tree. Some branches, unbelieving Jews, are broken off, and believing Gentiles are grafted in. But there is one tree, not two.

Paul also teaches that there is to be no dividing wall in the church between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-22; 3:6; cf. Acts 10; 11:1-18). Gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to be saved (Gal. 3:29). They do not need circumcision. Rather, they are Abraham's children by faith, the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), part of one body in Christ (Rom. 12:13). There is one family.

So, the Old Testament belongs to the Christian church. Jesus is the theme of the Old Testament (Luke 24:13-35). Old Testament saints, like Abraham, are examples of the same faith the New Testament speaks of (Rom. 4; Heb. 11), and they stand as witnesses to the life of faith. It is even the case that Old

Testament prophecies about Israel are fulfilled in the church. In Joel 2:28-32 the prophet says that God will pour out his Spirit on Israel. In Acts 2:17-21 Peter says that God has fulfilled this prophecy by sending his Spirit to bring the first large number of converts into the Christian church. Similarly, compare Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:16-17, and Jeremiah 31:31-34 with Hebrews 8:8-10. Here and elsewhere, Scripture applies Old Testament promises to the New Testament church.

## The Nature of the Church

We will first look systematically at the nature of the church, then discuss briefly the government of the church. In the next chapter we will consider the church's task, and in chapters 20-21 the means of grace and the sacraments. Remember that when we discussed Christ (chaps. 10-11) and the Spirit (chap. 12), I presented first their persons, then their work. We will do the same with the church.

What is the church? Essentially, the church is the people of God in all ages. Notice that the church is people, not buildings, although it is right that the people have buildings in which to meet. In one church I have attended, the worship leader typically welcomes the people at the beginning of the service and thanks them "for bringing the church into this room." That greeting epitomizes the biblical emphasis.

The church is not, however, just any people. It is the people in covenant with God, through Jesus Christ. In one sense, the church is the elect, those joined to Christ in eternity past and through eternity future. In another sense, it is the people who

sincerely or insincerely have identified themselves with God's people by profession and baptism. Don't forget the discussion of the last chapter, that the visible church contains both elect and nonelect. The nonelect are covenant breakers, not covenant keepers; but they, too, are in the covenant. They are branches in the vine of Christ that one day will be broken off.

## Visible and Invisible

That leads us to the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. This language is from tradition, not the Bible (as in the Westminster Confession 25.1-2). But it does give us language to express the presence of both believers and unbelievers in the church. We should not take this to mean that there are two churches. Visible and invisible are just two different ways of looking at the same church, two perspectives. The invisible church is, to use Wayne Grudem's definition, "the church as God sees it."<sup>1</sup> God knows for sure who is truly joined to Christ by faith, for he can see people's hearts. We cannot, for the heart is invisible to us.

The visible church is the church as man sees it, though, of course, God sees the visible as well as the invisible. The visible church consists of all who credibly profess faith in Christ, with their children (more on the children later). When someone applies for church membership, usually some elders examine the person to see if he understands the gospel and trusts Jesus as Lord and Savior. If the person is living in some sin that flagrantly contradicts the gospel, like worshiping idols in his home or living in a homosexual relationship, the elders should decline to admit the person to church membership. But, as we

know, there are many sins that are hard for us to evaluate: greed, resentment, bitterness, and so on. People with sins like those usually find it easy to hide from human scrutiny. The elders should do the best they can to determine, not if the person is sinlessly perfect, for none of us is, but whether the person has made a sincere commitment to Christ. But they cannot see a person's heart. So, visible churches will include some unbelievers, even some nonelect.

Are those unbelievers "in" the church? In one sense, no, for they are not united to Christ in a saving way. So, we say that they are not part of the invisible church. But in another sense, yes, because they have taken vows. They have become part of the covenant relation with God. God will hold them accountable, even those who take the vows fraudulently. They are members of the covenant but covenant breakers, not covenant keepers.

### Local, Regional, Universal

Another important distinction concerns the geographical extent of the church. The word church in the New Testament refers to local, regional, and universal bodies. Locally, the early Christians met mostly in homes, in house churches (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15).

Regionally, there was the city church, like the church of Rome, of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), of Antioch. We know that the church of Jerusalem, for example, had three thousand members following the events of Acts 2, and later even more thousands were added. But it is unlikely that those thousands worshiped

together in the same place. So, the city church is divided into house churches; yet, there is a unity in the city church, possibly a common government.

Then there is the universal church, the whole body of believers throughout the world (Matt. 16:18; Acts 15:22; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 1:22). On at least one occasion, in Acts 15, the leaders met in Jerusalem to make decisions binding on the entire church throughout the world.

## Images

Another way to get an idea of the nature of the church is to look at the images of the church in Scripture. We have already looked at the idea of covenant from which we learn that the church is the covenant people of God. In the covenant God is Lord and we are servants.

Another important image we have already looked at is the family of God. This figure stresses the intimacy of life in the church. We saw in our study of the doctrine of adoption that God is our Father and the members of the church are brothers and sisters. Jesus is our older brother (Heb. 2:11-12).

But there is even greater intimacy in the metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ, a wonderful picture, which we see in both testaments. In the Old Testament, Israel is the unfaithful wife of the Lord. In the New Testament, the church is the bride, who will be presented spotless to Jesus at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 21:2, 9; cf. Isa. 61:10; 62:5; Ezek. 16; Hos. 1-3; John 3:29; Eph. 5:22-33).

Then there is the figure of the body of Christ. This metaphor stresses the unity of the church with Christ and the unity of each Christian with all the others. One part of our physical body is dependent on the others; so every member of the body of Christ, each believer, depends on the others, and the others depend on him. So, we should work together, as the arms, legs, and head work together in a rightly functioning physical body. We are one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16), and therefore all the gifts God gives to each of these he wants us to use for the benefit of the whole body. In a somewhat different use of the image, Christ is the head, distinguished from the rest of the body (Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19). This image encourages us to be subject to him, to accept his direction.

Then there is the temple metaphor. We are corporately the temple of the living God (1 Cor. 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:5), living stones held together by Jesus the chief cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-8). Scripture also speaks of each Christian as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19; Rev. 3:12), and we should not allow that temple to be defiled by sin. In a related figure, believers are priests (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6), serving under Jesus the High Priest (Heb. 7-8). This is the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

The church is also the branches of the vine, which is Christ (John 15:5). It is the olive tree from which some branches have been broken off and others grafted in (Rom. 11:17-24). It is God's field (1 Cor. 3:6-9), and it is the harvest brought forth from that field (Matt. 13: 1-10; John 4:35).

## Attributes

We should also look at the traditional attributes of the church. In the Nicene Creed we confess to believing in "one holy, catholic, and apostolic" church. The Roman Catholic Church interprets these adjectives in a somewhat self-serving way, emphasizing its oneness against the many churches of Protestantism; its holiness as seen in its masses and ceremonies; its catholicity, for it is the Roman Catholic Church; and its apostolicity, for it claims to have a priesthood in direct succession from the apostles by the laying on of hands from generation to generation.

But the Nicene Creed was written centuries before the Catholic/Protestant division, so we should not assume that these adjectives were written with future Roman polemics in mind. We should rather ask what these words mean in the context of a biblical doctrine of the church.

The church is one. Paul teaches that the church is one body in Christ, with one Lord, one faith, one baptism. But Jesus prayed for the unity of the church (John 17). Both Paul and Jesus, indeed, anticipated disunity as a problem in the church. They knew that disunity was something we should pray about and try to eliminate. So, as some other concepts we've discussed in this book, the unity of the church is both a fact and a norm. God has made it one, but he commands us to seek oneness.

The unity of the church is spiritual but also organizational. Jesus (John 17) and Paul do not distinguish between spiritual

and organizational. They call us to seek unity in all these respects: to agree with one another, to love one another, to serve one another, and to glorify one another, as Jesus says in John 17:4 that he glorified the Father. The unity of the church is also organizational, for Jesus founded one church, not many denominations. He founded a church to be ruled by apostles (Eph. 2:20), elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7), and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13); and his word tells us to "obey your leaders" (Heb. 13:17). When there are disputes within the church, Jesus gives us in Matthew 18 directions for resolving them. But he never gives us the option of leaving one church and starting another. That is what has happened in the history of denominationalism. I believe that denominationalism is an offense against God and that it has weakened the church's witness. The rise of denominations is caused by sin, either sin of those who left the original church or sin of those who forced them to leave or, most likely, both. For more on that, see my book *Evangelical Reunion*.<sup>2</sup>

The church is holy. As I indicated in chapter 16 on sanctification, we are God's "saints," his "holy ones." Paul regularly addresses the churches as "the saints." This does not imply that every member of the visible church is elect or that any of them is sinlessly perfect. But we are God's people. He has bought us to be his, to be associated with him as his servants, sons, and daughters. Since God is holy, anyone associated with him in those ways is also holy. We are the temple of the Spirit. Those who persecute Christians persecute the Lord (Acts 9:4).

The church is catholic. The word catholic simply means

"universal," though the Roman Church has tried to steal it from the rest of us. It means that the church does not belong only to one nation or race. In the Old Testament period the church was closely associated with one nation, Israel. But in the New Testament the church is scattered throughout the nations, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

The church is apostolic. This does not mean, as Roman Catholics think, that every elder must be in a historical succession going back to the apostles. The New Testament knows of no such succession, nor does it suggest that the office of the apostle continues in the church. It does tell us, however, that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, and to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The church must always be in fellowship with the apostles, believing the apostles' teaching, following the apostles' example (1 Cor. 11:1).

## Marks

Another tradition is to describe the church by certain marks. A mark of the church distinguishes the true church from everything else that is not the church, especially from false churches, churches that only pretend to be churches of Jesus Christ. The discussion of marks arose especially during the Reformation period, when the church became very divided and questions arose as to which churches were true churches and which were not.

The Reformers generally acknowledged three marks: the

true preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. We will look more carefully at these in later chapters. The first two of these marks come from Acts 2:42, which I quoted earlier. Acts 2:42 doesn't say that these are marks of the church; but certainly as we look at the New Testament teaching as a whole, it would be hard to conceive of any genuine church without these. Discipline was the third mark, for it seemed that the first two marks were in jeopardy unless there was sufficient discipline to guard the true preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments.

I think these marks are important, but it is not always easy to apply them. Protestants differ, for example, as to whether baptism should be given to covenant children. Should Baptists judge that Presbyterians do not rightly administer the sacraments and that, therefore, their churches are not true churches? Or vice versa? Most Protestant denominations have not taken the principle that far, but how far should it be taken? As for the true preaching of the Word: how much must I disagree with the preaching in a church before I consider it a false church? These questions are difficult. So, we should not pretend that these criteria solve the problems of distinguishing true churches from false.

We should also ask, are these the only marks of the church? Scripture does not say that any of the previous three are marks, but it does say that love is a mark. Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Strange that love has been ignored in the discussion of marks. Perhaps if love, and not

only true doctrine, were recognized as a mark, the church would be less characterized by theological battling.

A good case could also be made for worship as a mark. The church gets its very name from the worshipping community gathered around Mount Sinai. If it is not a body that gathers to praise God, it certainly is not the church. And worship is certainly more than the sacraments, as we shall see. Worship, like the other marks, clearly distinguishes the true church from false churches, for false churches do not worship God in Spirit and truth (John 4:24).

And what of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20)? This is the central task of the church, to evangelize, nurture, and promote worship. How can the church possibly be the church if it is not doing this? And who else does this except the church? So, I think a good biblical case can be made for worship (normative perspective), love (existential perspective), and the Great Commission (situational perspective) as marks of the church. The Great Commission, of course, includes the preaching of the Word, and worship includes the sacraments. Discipline is a form of love. So, my triad of marks is broader than the older triad and includes them. It seems to me important that we recognize these marks in their broader form.

## Church Government

Jesus gave certain powers to the church. He did not give the church the right to use physical force to accomplish its tasks. As theologians say, he did not give the church the power of the sword (John 18:36; 2 Cor. 10:4). Only the civil

government has that power. But he did give to the church the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). No matter how much people despise that Word, it is the most powerful force on the face of the earth (Rom. 1:16). Jesus also gave to the church the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19; cf. 18:17-18). That is, the church has the authority to say who belongs to the covenant and who does not. It has the power to admit people to the fellowship and to cast them out.

We usually refer to the power of the keys as the power of church discipline. Scripture takes discipline in the church very seriously. In 1 Corinthians 5 the apostle Paul says five times that a church member guilty of serious sin should be cast out of the church, excommunicated. We rarely hear of excommunication today, except in the Roman Catholic Church. People usually think that excommunication is an ancient, outmoded practice and very cruel. If the church represents the love of Christ, people ask, how can the church ever throw anybody out?

But discipline is biblical. It can be more or less serious, from excommunication at one extreme to admonition or rebuke for lesser sins. But every church ought to practice it. There are at least three purposes of discipline. The first is to restore a sinning believer (Matt. 18:15; 1 Cor. 5:5; Gal. 6:1; 1 Tim. 1:20; James 5:20). That is, discipline aims not merely to punish but to turn the offender away from his sins, to bring about repentance. It is for his sake. So, church discipline is not a cruel thing but a loving thing. Second, discipline exists to deter such sins by others, to instruct the congregation as to what is and is not acceptable (Heb. 12:15; 1 Cor. 5:2, 6-7; 1 Tim. 5:20). Third,

discipline exists to protect the honor of Christ and his church (Rom. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6:6; Eph. 5:27). When churches ignore sin, the world despises them and the reputation of Jesus Christ himself is dragged through the mud. Instructing, honoring Christ, and helping the offender: normative, situational, existential.

Discipline takes several forms. The first is teaching. The church must make clear what behavior is acceptable to God. And it must present the gospel in such a way as to motivate obedience. Remember that people aren't motivated by denunciations and scolding nearly as well as they are motivated by the love of Jesus for them and the joy of living a godly life.

Matthew 18:15-20 lists the steps of discipline in cases where the teaching of the church has not had its desired effect. If someone sins against you, sometimes you should ignore it, for love covers a multitude of sins (Prov. 10:12; 1 Peter 4:8). But sometimes you can't. So, Matthew 18:15 tells you to go to the person who has sinned against you. Don't gossip, but go. If that doesn't lead to reconciliation, go again and take a witness with you (v. 16). If that doesn't work, go to the church, the ruling body (v. 17). They are authorized to make a decision whether the person is guilty or innocent and, if guilty, whether the person should be admonished, rebuked, removed from office, or excommunicated.

Not all sins should be the subject of formal discipline. Indeed, we sin so often that most of them cannot be. Romans 14 talks about some disagreements in the church that are not to

be resolved by formal discipline but, rather, by Christians of different views living together in love. The sins to be disciplined formally are sins against individual brothers in the church, as in Matthew 18, and the outward, scandalous sins, like the man who was sleeping with his father's wife in 1 Corinthians 5.

We should note a few basic things about the formal structure of church government. There were three kinds of officers in the New Testament church. The highest office was the apostle, those who had seen the risen Christ and were appointed by him to be the official witnesses to his resurrection. Scripture doesn't suggest that that office continues past the original generation of apostles. Certainly, as time passes it would eventually have been impossible to find people who had seen the risen Christ and who had been appointed as official witnesses.

The next office has various names in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:2-5). I believe that the words elder, pastor, and bishop are interchangeable titles of the same office. This is the ruling office. It is the elder who is charged with setting and administering the rules of the church, subject to the Word of God. Among the elders, some are official teachers, those who "labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17).

Then there are the deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). Little is said about their role in the church, but traditionally they have been associated with the seven men in Acts 6 who were appointed to the ministry of mercy. They are not called deacons in Acts 6,

but the qualifications for deacons are described extensively in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The qualifications of deacons are largely spiritual and moral, and they are identical to those of elders with the exception that elders are required to be "able to teach" and deacons are not.

These three offices fit in with the threefold analysis we've discussed in previous chapters. The apostle is normative, for his teaching governs all the teaching in the church for all generations. The elder is situational, the one who applies the apostles' teaching to all the situations and problems of each church. The deacon is existential, the one who ministers Jesus' love to those in need.

There have been three main theories of how these offices are to function: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. In the Episcopal system—found in the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the worldwide Anglican communion, and the various other churches called Episcopal—the churches in a region are under the authority of one man, called a bishop. (The word episcopal comes from the Greek word for bishop.) The bishop has power to consecrate and appoint other officers, following the model of the apostles (Acts 14:23) and Titus (Titus 1:5).

In the Presbyterian system, common in churches called Reformed as well as Presbyterian, there is a plurality of elders in every church. (Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder.) These are elected by the people. The elders meet as the ruling body of each particular church, and the elders of a region meet together as a broader court, called a presbytery or

classis, dealing with the ministry of the whole area. Usually once a year all the elders of the denomination, or a representative group of them, meet as a general assembly, or synod, to resolve questions of importance to the whole church, as did the apostles and other leaders in Acts 15.

In the Congregational, or Independent, system, found often in Baptist churches as well as Congregational and Independent churches, there is no church government beyond the individual congregation. The local governing body may be called elders or deacons, or there may be both elders and deacons. There may be voluntary organizations of churches, involving meetings of elders similar to a presbytery. Those organizations may give advice and mutual assistance, but they have no authority to compel a local congregation to do other than it wishes.

In my judgment Scripture doesn't teach us clearly that one of these is right, or what other alternatives there may be. Evidently, there was some flexibility of government in the New Testament period, with Titus acting as an episcopal bishop (Titus 1:5) and Timothy being gifted by God through the hands of a number of elders (1 Tim. 4:14). I personally believe that the Presbyterian system offers the best balance of authority and freedom. Episcopal churches face the dangers implicit in one-man rule, and Congregational churches give the local church no court of appeal when things go wrong locally. The Presbyterian system avoids those dangers. In Presbyterianism leadership is always multiple, avoiding one-man rule, and churches are connected with other churches so that broader assemblies of churches can adjudicate appeals

from local bodies. Since Scripture speaks of the church as regional and universal as well as local, these assemblies are biblically appropriate.

But the well-being of the church has more to do with the work of the Spirit than with the form of government. That should seem obvious, but that is a point we need to keep making. No form of government has shown itself adequate in itself to keep churches on track doctrinally and practically. We need to be much in prayer for our churches, that its leaders especially will have a double portion of the Spirit—the Spirit's wisdom, grace, and peace.

## *Chapter 19*

### THE TASK OF THE CHURCH

The church is the headquarters of God's kingdom. So, her task is to take the gospel to all nations, to evangelize, nurture, and celebrate the presence of Christ.

I

n the previous chapter we talked about the nature of

the church. In this one we shall discuss its task. Chapter 18 discusses what the church is; chapter 19, what the church does. It is actually hard, however, to separate these two things. If a church isn't doing what it's supposed to do, we may well question whether it is a church. So, I argued in the last chapter that carrying out the Great Commission is one of the marks of the church. On the other hand, if a so-called church does not fit the biblical definition of what a church is, the people of God, the body of Christ, and so on, it surely cannot carry out the task God has assigned to the church. So, the nature and task of the church are very closely related; you can't have the one without the other.

I don't agree, however, with theologians who say that the task of the church is its nature. When people say that, they usually intend to emphasize the ministries of the church and de-emphasize qualities like body of Christ and bride of Christ. Sometimes they put this by saying that the church is "service, not status." But Scripture teaches that God has given both status and tasks to the church. We saw that was the case with the individual Christian. God gives us the status of being his sons and daughters, but he also calls us to serve him and to serve one another. Certainly, the same is true of the church as a corporate body.

When we think of the task of the church, we think of the dynamic pictures in Scripture about the kingdom of God coming into the world, overwhelming God's enemies, and filling the earth with God's glory. So, we should ask first how the church is related to the kingdom and what role the church plays in the coming of the kingdom of God.

## The Church and the Kingdom

In chapter 11, in connection with the kingly office of Christ, I emphasized that the gospel, the good news, is originally the message about the coming of the kingdom of God. Recall from that discussion that Isaiah 52:7, 61:1-2, and Matthew 3:2, 4:17 all present the gospel as the news that a King is coming. The gospel, then, is the coming of the kingdom; that is, the coming of the King to make things right. Incidentally, there is no dichotomy here between gospel and law. The coming of the King means that he will enforce his law in the world, that he will bring righteousness. That is the gospel, the good news. It is important for us to distinguish between salvation by grace and salvation by works, but I don't think Scripture justifies a sharp distinction between law and gospel.

What is the kingdom? Geerhardus Vos defined it this way: "To him [Jesus] the kingdom exists there, where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings men to the willing recognition of the same."<sup>1</sup> Kingdom of God is not merely a synonym for God's sovereignty; rather, it is a specific historical program. God is always sovereign, always King in a general way. But since the fall, he must, as King, put down opposition and bring human beings to acknowledge his kingship. The kingdom of God in the New Testament is that historical program, the series of events, by which God drives his kingship home to sinful human beings. Of course, he does this by sending his Son as a sacrifice for sin and raising him up in victory over Satan and all the forces of evil. But even after

the resurrection of Christ, the kingdom will make further advances, as the people of God spread all over the earth to subdue men's hearts to the rule of the King.

Where does the church fit into this kingdom program? The church consists of those who have been conquered by God's saving power, who are now enlisted in the warfare of God's kingdom against the kingdom of Satan. Those who do not voluntarily give allegiance to God's kingdom will be conquered by God's judgment and, eventually, destroyed by his power.

The church, then, is to maintain the military metaphor-the headquarters of the kingdom of God, the base from which God's dominion extends and expands.

### God's Mandates for the Church

The church is a dynamic body in action. It is through the church that God's kingdom comes to all the ends of the earth. The church is not the church unless it is in action; in other words, unless it is in mission. But what is our mission? If we are an army, what are our marching orders? Essentially, our task is to keep all of God's commandments. But there are two of these that stand out as fundamental. The first is called the cultural mandate, the second the Great Commission.

#### The Cultural Mandate

The cultural mandate is found in Genesis 1:28, after the story of Adam's and Eve's creation. "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea

and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' "This is especially important, because God addresses it to the entire human race, which at the time consisted only of two people. This is the task of the whole human race.

The cultural mandate has three parts. The first is the divine blessing. The cultural mandate is not a burdensome rule but an expression of God's good will to us. The second and third parts are commands. One is to have children, grandchildren, and so on, so as to fill the entire earth with people. Of course, those people were to glorify God. The cultural mandate does not anticipate the fall. So, Adam and Eve would fill the earth with people who are eager to do the will of God, and who would therefore live in God's presence, under his blessing.

The third command is to "subdue" the earth, to have "dominion" over it. This means to bring out the potential of everything in the earth so that it will be of service to human beings as they bring glory to God. It doesn't mean to exploit the earth. Some secular environmentalists blame the cultural mandate for pollution, for they think "subdue" means to exploit, to take anything in creation for our selfish gain. But, of course, subduing includes preserving, nurturing, as we see, for example, in Genesis 2:15. Human beings cannot live on God's earth if it is utterly polluted. So, God expected them as part of their stewardship to keep that from happening.

Thus we have three elements: a divine blessing, a commandment to fill, and a commandment to subdue. I think of the first as normative, the second as existential, the third as

situational. God's blessing comes first, and his commands set our direction. Filling the earth is the personal, existential commandment, and subduing it focuses on what we do in and with our environment.

These three elements recur over and over again in the Bible. In every covenant God makes-with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus-there are these three elements: a divine blessing, a seed, and a land. God blesses his people by giving them descendants to live in a land, subduing that land to bring glory to God.

### The Great Commission

Then comes the second major divine mandate, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). After his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

People sometimes argue whether the Great Commission or the cultural mandate is more fundamental. I believe they are essentially the same. The Great Commission is the application of the cultural mandate to a fallen human race. As I said, the cultural mandate does not anticipate the fall. But what happens after the fall? People still try to subdue the earth. In Genesis 4 we find the development of civilization among the descendants of wicked Cain. But they are not filling and subduing the earth

to God's glory. So, the result is wars, pollution, sickness, and so on. If human beings are to fulfill the cultural mandate, their hearts must be subdued to God before the earth can be subdued to them. That's what the Great Commission does. It brings about a transformation of people, so that they can go and fill the earth, subduing it to the glory of God.

So, the Great Commission has the same three elements. Just as God blessed his people after his great work of creation, so the Lord Jesus blesses his people after the new creation, his resurrection from the dead. All authority is his, and he will be with his people to the end. That "I will be with you," remember, is the heart of the covenant. The first element here, as in Genesis, is blessing.

The second element is filling the earth with disciples, which means baptism in the name of the Trinity. The sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, brings fallen human beings under the lordship of Christ. So the Word, the preaching, is to be evangelistic. It is to bring conversions. But beyond that, the Word is to teach these new Christians to obey all the commands of Christ. So, as in the cultural mandate, we have both filling and subduing. The preaching of the Word fills the whole world with disciples and subdues their hearts to obey God's commands. This teaching qualifies them to subdue the earth, to have dominion over it, to the glory of God.

The Old Testament church also had a missional focus. Through the covenant made with Abraham, God intended to bless all the nations (Gen. 12:3). Often in the Old Testament we read of people from other nations coming to worship the God

of Israel. This has sometimes been called a centripetal concept of missions. But in the New Testament God reverses this motion. Now God's people go to the other nations to bring them the gospel, a centrifugal view of missions.

The task of the church, then, is to carry out the Great Commission. When it does this, it will also be enabling people to carry out the cultural mandate. But the Great Commission must be the focus of everything the church does. Indeed, it must be the focus of the life of every believer. All that we do must be done so that the world may be filled with believers and that these believers may be subdued to obey all God's commands.

What is the goal of your life today? Paul says that he became all things to all men so that "by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). Of course, only God can save, but Paul (unlike some Calvinists today) did not hesitate to acknowledge his own role in the salvation of people. There is both divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the work of bringing the gospel to the world. It has pleased God to save men through human preaching and teaching. So, a chapter later Paul says, "I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved" (10:33). Notice that the goal of everything Paul does with his life is to bring salvation to people.

You might say, "Well, Paul was an apostle, so of course he is primarily concerned with the salvation of men. I'm not an apostle, not even a preacher, so I don't need to have the same goal as Paul." But Paul follows with this sentence in 1

Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." Paul says that the whole Corinthian church should have the same goal as he does. He wants them, too, to have as their supreme goal in life the bringing of salvation to other people.

In Philippians 3 Paul speaks of his pattern of self-denial, counting everything as garbage that he might gain Christ. Of course, he is referring to his ministry of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. In this, he is willing to give everything up to do the will of Christ, and in verse 17 he tells the Christians to "join in imitating me." Note also Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." This, too, is a statement of the supreme goal of the believer's life. And here our ultimate concern is to further the kingdom of God, that program of redemption by which God establishes his kingship on earth as it is in heaven.

So, our goal should be the advance of the kingdom of God against all opposing powers, bringing man to a willing recognition of it, either through conversion or through judgment. Our goal should be that of Paul, bringing the gospel to people.

That doesn't mean that all of us have to quit our jobs and be full-time personal evangelists. Some of us should be. Some should be missionaries and pastors. Others are differently gifted by God, and they should be geared toward supporting the advance of the gospel, paying to send people into the harvest fields. I believe it was John Piper who said that we must all be either radical goers or radical senders; the only

alternative is disobedience.

Our churches should have that goal as well. It is nice for churches to hold bake sales and take kids to the beach. Those sorts of activities promote fellowship in the body, and that is good. But the overall goal has to be mission. Everything we do in the church has to be planned with the gospel as the center. If you have a bake sale, invite nonChristians to bake and to come. If you take kids to the beach, teach your kids how to witness to other surfers and swimmers and invite nonChristians to come along. This concept is sometimes called the missional church, where missions and evangelism are not just activities of the church or departments of the church but everything is focused on the advance of the gospel.

### Specific Tasks

More specifically, what goes on in the missional church? Basically three things (there's that number again!): worship, nurture, and witness. Each of these finds its justification in the Great Commission.

#### Worship

In worship we acknowledge the greatness of our covenant Lord. This is the goal of mission. Why do we want to save people? Ultimately, the answer is so that they will glorify God, so that they will worship him. Jesus says that throughout history God has been seeking worshipers (John 4:23). That is what missions is, God seeking worshipers.

The Bible speaks of worship in broad and narrow senses.

The narrow sense is public, corporate worship, what the Jews did in the temple and what Christians do in their weekly gathering to celebrate the resurrection. The broad sense is the sense of Romans 12:1-2: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Notice here the language of sacrifice, holiness, worship. But the worship here is not the weekly worship of the Lord's Day. Rather, it is a worship we perform all the time, as we seek to live godly lives. When we glorify God, it is a living sacrifice; it is true worship.

In regard to worship in the narrow sense, Old Testament worship was primarily a worship of sacrifice. The sacrifices of animals, grain, oil, and wine pictured Christ's sacrifice, taught the people the ways of God, and brought God and the believer together for fellowship. New Testament worship, I think, is rather different, since our sacrifice for sin is complete in Christ. New Testament worship moves from the seventh day to the first day and, appropriately, is essentially a celebration of the resurrection.

Three principles are especially important in the biblical teaching about worship. First, worship must be biblical. Jesus upbraided the Pharisees for following their own traditions rather than the Word of God (Isa. 29:13; Matt. 15:8-9). Worship is for God's pleasure, not our own, and so everything we do in worship must have a biblical basis. In Reformed theology that

idea is sometimes called the regulative principle.

Second, worship should be God-centered and therefore Christ-centered. Look at how the Psalms constantly dwell on God's nature and actions. In the New Testament celebration of the resurrection, of course, the theme is "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Rev. 5:12). That does not mean, of course, that we should never think about ourselves in worship. In Psalm 18 the first personal pronouns I, me, and my are found some seventy times. But Psalm 18 is a profoundly God-centered psalm. The psalmist is aware of his own needs, but he knows God is his only hope. He is aware of himself as someone who trusts only in God's mercy.

So, third, worship is edifying (Heb. 10:24-25). This is not opposed to God-centeredness, for God wants people, like the writer of Psalm 18, to grow through worship and thus to be blessed. First Corinthians 14 is the only extended treatment in the Bible of postresurrection Christian worship, and the whole emphasis of the chapter is on edification. Paul tells the Corinthians that they should not speak in tongues in worship without interpretation, because speaking in unintelligible language does not edify. It doesn't help anybody. For that reason the Protestant Reformers declared that worship should be no longer in Latin but in the vernacular languages of the people: German, French, English, and so on. I believe that we need today to take some pains to make our worship clear, understandable to people in our communities. Our language and music should communicate to the mind and the heart. In my judgment, this principle encourages contemporary worship

expressions, both contemporary language and contemporary music.

## Nurture

The second specific task of the missional church is nurture, or edification. Notice how easily this task follows from the first. Nurture is preaching, teaching, counseling, pastoral care, ministries of mercy. Because sin continues in the lives of the regenerate, the church needs to bring us again and again to repentance. It needs to turn us away from pride and self-satisfaction, so we will be humbled, so that we will turn again and again to the all-sufficiency of Christ.

This is not only the work of the clergy; it is the work of all of us. Paul asks those who are "spiritual" (that is, all of us regenerated by the Spirit) to restore people who have fallen into sin (Gal. 6:1). We should do it in a spirit of gentleness and guard ourselves, lest we also be tempted. When you correct a brother or sister, don't do it from a high horse. Correct as one sinner talking to another, in the love of Christ.

The New Testament abounds in one-anothering texts (John 13:34-35; Rom. 12:10; 13:8; 15:4; 16:16; 1 Cor. 12:25; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 4:2, 32; 5:21; Col. 3:13, 16; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9, 18; 5:11; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; James 5:16; 1 Peter 1:22; 3:8; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11). We are to love one another, forgive one another, pray for one another, edify one another, and so on. That is the work of everyone in the church.

How is nurture a missional activity? For one thing, unbelievers should notice how much we love one another. This

is a wonderful testimony to the watching world. Second, when an unbeliever becomes a Christian, he will need immediately a lot of help from his new brothers and sisters to get started in the Christian life. As in the Great Commission, after baptism comes teaching.

## Witness

Finally, the third task of the church is evangelism itself: witness to the world. Because of the Great Commission, the unbeliever must be in view in everything the church does. That is true even in worship. Worship, in the narrow sense, is mainly for believers. But in 1 Corinthians 14:20-26 Paul talks about an unbeliever who visits the worship service. He tells the Corinthians that their service should be clear enough, edifying enough, so that "he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you" (vv. 24-25).

As we've seen, Paul's goal is to "save some," and all the New Testament statements of the goal of the Christian life focus on redemption, on bringing unbelievers into the kingdom.

So, all the work of the church is missional-worship, nurture, and witness. In terms of our threefold scheme of organization, we could say that worship is normative, nurture is existential, and witness is situational. But always remember that each perspective includes the other two.

## Ministries of the Church

What ministries of the church has God given us to carry out the Great Commission? They are the ministry of the Word, the ministry of rule, and the ministry of mercy. When we discussed church government, we saw that there were three offices in the church: apostle, elder, and deacon. The apostolic office does not continue today, but we still have elders and deacons. The deacons are primarily concerned with the ministry of mercy. The elders carry on ministries of both teaching and rule, some emphasizing the one, some the other. So, Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Note that the work of every elder is to rule, but some are also to labor in preaching and teaching. Thus, in many churches there is a distinction between the teaching elder and the ruling elder.

The teaching elder focuses on the ministry of the Word. Note the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9, and Paul's charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2. Remarkably, there are no educational requirements for this office. Churches today tend to focus on educational requirements, but these cannot be found in Scripture. Rather, the requirements are spiritual and moral. An elder is first of all to be a good example to others in the church. A godly life is the body language of sound teaching. A godly life teaches people how sound doctrine should be put into practice. And where godliness is absent, teaching is unpersuasive, even meaningless.

One controversy today is whether the church should ever choose women as elders. Certainly in Scripture men and women are equally valuable in God's sight, equally fallen, equally redeemed by Christ (Gen. 1:27). Paul, who is sometimes accused of male chauvinism, goes out of his way in a number of passages to underscore the equality of women to men in the church (1 Cor. 7:2-4, 11:11-12). Women did pray and prophesy in the church, even, evidently, during public worship services (1 Cor. 11:4). But the New Testament does not assume that men and women are exactly the same, any more than rich and poor or Jew and Greek are exactly the same. Obviously, a rich person should be expected to give more to the church than a poor person. A Jew would usually be more appropriate than a Greek to teach an Aramaic-speaking congregation. Similarly, some activities are more appropriate for men than for women, and vice versa. The husband is the head of the family, the authority over his wife and children. Likewise, I believe, the New Testament teaches that the teaching and ruling office in the church, the eldership, is limited to men. I'll mention a couple of passages on this subject that have been much discussed. My interpretations may not seem obvious, and I can't get into details of my reasons for taking them this way; but I think that in the end these are the best ways of taking them.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 Paul teaches that when the elders of the church meet to judge whether a prophecy is authentic, the women should not participate in this judgment. In 1 Timothy 2:11-15 Paul says that women should neither participate in the official teaching of the church nor exercise church authority over men. I take it from these passages that women should not be elected to the office of elder. I do not

think these passages prohibit women from speaking in worship under the elders' authority; remember that in 1 Corinthians 11 women prayed and prophesied in public worship. And I do not think anything in Scripture prohibits women from being deacons.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to distinguish in Scripture between what is called the general office and the special office. In the case of teaching, there is a sense in which all Christians are called to teach. In Colossians 3:16 we all teach and admonish one another when we sing worship songs. So, we all hold the general office of teacher. This includes women. Priscilla as well as her husband Aquila taught Apollos the Word of God more accurately than he knew it before (Acts 18:26). According to Titus 2, older women are to teach younger women. In Hebrews 5:12 the writer tells his audience that they should all, by the present stage of their Christian lives, be teachers. That is the general office.

But there is also the special office. When we talk about the office of the teaching elder, we are talking about the special office. That is an office that doesn't belong to every Christian. That office has special qualifications. People must be elected or appointed to it by the laying on of hands. That office, I believe, is limited to men and, of course, not to all men but to men specially qualified. How does special-office teaching differ from general-office teaching? They differ chiefly in that special-office teachers are approved and set apart to speak in the name of the church. But this distinction does not prohibit general-office teachers (including women) from addressing the church when the elders of the church think it wise.

I hope you see, though, how important is the ministry of the Word of God. The Word is the sword of the Spirit. It is our means of nurture and evangelism. So, it is important that the church guard the truth of its preaching and teaching through discipline. And it is important that the church be active in preaching the Word-locally and throughout the world. This is essential to the church's mission. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

Not all elders are engaged in special-office teaching, but they do have gifts of rule, a gift referred to in Romans 12:8. The church needs administrators, and the teaching elder is not necessarily the best administrator. So, many churches have what is called ruling elder, distinguished from teaching elder.

And then there is the church's ministry of mercy, which is crucial to the church's mission. The Old Testament made many provisions for poor Israelites: no-interest loans, gleaning, open harvesting in the sabbatical years, and so on. But Israel often lacked compassion for those fallen on hard times, and God sent prophets to rebuke them. Jesus spoke much about the compassionate use of wealth, and he ministered to many more poor than rich. In the early church Christians even sold their property to help one another (Acts 4:34-37), and they collected money from all the churches to help Jerusalem believers who were in need. When the church sent Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel in faraway lands, they gave Paul one admonition, to remember the poor, which, Paul says, he was eager to do in any case.

So, the church established a special office of people to

administer the church's work of mercy. Seven were appointed for this purpose in Acts 6. Later, those assigned this responsibility were called deacons. The qualifications of a deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 are the same as for an elder, except that an elder, not a deacon, must be "able to teach."

The ministry of mercy is also part of the church's mission. When we show love to the poor, both inside and outside the church, we show the love of Christ in a wonderfully eloquent way. When we ignore people's needs, that places a stigma on the work of the gospel.

Teaching, ruling, and showing mercy fit together well. In terms we have used in previous chapters, these are normative, situational, and existential, respectively. The teacher sets forth God's authoritative commands. The ruler applies these to situations requiring administration. And the deacon brings the love of Christ into people's lives. Each of these fails if the other two are not present. All three are essential to the church's mission.

So we should see that everything the church does is, or ought to be, a fulfillment of the Great Commission. We are to go and teach all nations, baptizing them and teaching them everything the Lord taught us. When we do that, the Lord assures us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

## Chapter 20

# THE MEANS OF GRACE

In and through the church God provides means for our spiritual growth: the Word, the sacraments, worship, fellowship, and many forms of these. Fundamental to our growth is prayer, corporate and personal.



We've been talking about the nature of the church (chap. 18) and the task of the church (chap. 19). You recall that God's sovereignty and human responsibility work together to accomplish his purposes in the world. Under "The Task of the Church," we focused on human responsibility, the things that we do to further the gospel. Of course, I also emphasized that in doing these things we rely on the resources God has given us. But we need now to look at those more carefully. In this chapter the question is, how does God equip us for the task of the church? What does God do for us so that we can carry out the mission he has given us, the Great Commission?

These divine resources are sometimes called means of

grace. Some Christians prefer not to use that phrase, and that's okay. We need not live or die over terminology. But we should agree that there are certain channels by which God gives spiritual power to his church. For now, let's just agree to call these the means of grace.

## The Idea of a Means of Grace

What is a means of grace? We all know what grace is: God's unmerited favor, indeed, his unmerited favor when we deserve wrath. Without God's grace, we are lost. And we need God's grace not only at the beginning of the Christian life but throughout. So, naturally we ask, where can we go to find God's continuing grace to us? Where do we go to get the resources for sanctification, for continuing spiritual growth? The short answer is that there are three places: the Word, fellowship, and prayer.

Except for the second, we can find those resources either privately or publicly. The second, fellowship, is by definition public. But we can receive the Word either by individual Bible study or through the public preaching and teaching of the church. And we can pray, of course, either privately or publicly. In our private use of the means of grace, we come to God as members of the church, the body of Christ. Apart from Christ, our Bible study and prayer will not help us. Indeed, we need other members of the church to help us understand the Bible and to teach us how to pray. So, in an important sense, even the private means of grace are within the church.

Let's think a bit more about that triad: the Word, fellowship,

and prayer. I hope you can see already that it ties in with other threefold distinctions I've made in this book. The Word is normative, fellowship is situational (interacting with fellow believers in our environment), and prayer is existential (interacting with God in the depths of our hearts). Some might wonder why I haven't mentioned worship and, especially, the sacraments. But I think these and other means fit as subdivisions of one of my three headings. Sacraments, I believe, are forms of church fellowship, and I will discuss them specifically in chapter 21. Worship is an overarching category that includes all three.

It is not typical in Reformed theology to regard fellowship as a means of grace. But I think it clearly is. Remember all the passages I listed in chapter 19 on one-anothering? Those make it plain that our spiritual health depends on one another—both what other believers do for us and what we do for them. The larger concept that includes all those one-anotherings is the concept of fellowship. More on that in a little bit.

## The Word

First, let's think about the Word of God as a means of grace. Recall our basic teaching on the Word in chapter 4. It is God's powerful, authoritative self-expression. So, it is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). People come to Christ through the Word not just by reading it but also by hearing it in preaching and teaching (Rom. 10:17). Most people, historically, have not come to Christ just by sitting at home and reading the Bible, though some have. Far more have come to Christ through another person's preaching, teaching, witnessing,

answering questions (1 Cor. 1:21). Most people in the ancient world, of course, were not able to read at all. So, it became especially important that believers reached out and told them what God's Word says. Such communication of the Word comes by mission. It is a corporate enterprise, not just an individual experience. It is a means of grace brought through the church.

Of course, God also is involved in the communication of the Word. He never leaves his church alone. He comes with the church to reach and save the lost. So, as we have seen, the Holy Spirit accompanies the Word, enabling people to receive it, "not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thess. 1:5).

Because the Spirit accompanies the Word in saving power, it is a living and active Word (Heb. 4:12). So, when more and more people come to faith, Scripture speaks of the Word increasing (Acts 6:7; 13:49).

As I said earlier, the Word is active not only in our initial salvation but throughout our lives, in our sanctification as well. Psalm 19 says:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the LORD is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the LORD is clean,  
enduring forever;  
the rules of the LORD are true,  
and righteous altogether. (vv. 7–9)

Many Scripture passages, such as Psalm 119:105, Matthew 4:4, Acts 20:32, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12-13, and 2 Peter 1:19, tell us that God's Word changes us, sanctifies us, drives us to repentance for sin, incites us to love of God and one another. It is important, therefore, to read the Word, to study it, indeed to meditate in it. As Psalm 1 has it:

Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.  
He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers. (vv. 1–3)

The word for "meditate" there refers literally to an animal chewing his cud over and over again. That's what we need to do, less literally of course. (Don't chew the pages of your Bible!) We need to run the Bible passages through our minds over and over again, until we take it to heart. Look at the blessing of doing this: "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers" (v. 3). This is the way to fruitfulness and prosperity in the Lord-meditating in his Word.

### Fellowship

The second means of grace is fellowship with God and

other believers. We usually think of fellowship as parties and dinners, but in the New Testament it is much more. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*, which comes from the adjective *koinos*, meaning "common." Fellowship is a commonness; it is sharing something with someone else. In the New Testament it sometimes means sharing goods. In 2 Corinthians 8:4 and Philippians 1:5 it refers to giving gifts to help needy fellow Christians. In that sense, the early church had a truly radical fellowship. In Acts 4:32 we read, "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common." They shared their hearts, they shared their souls, and they shared their property. Some of the Christians sold property and gave the proceeds to the apostles for the needs of fellow Christians. That is a kind of fellowship we rarely see in the church today, but it is simply an expression of the love Jesus taught us. He told us to love one another as he loved us. That means being ready to lay down your life for another Christian.

*Koinonia* in the New Testament also refers to a religious sharing, a religious commonness (1 Cor. 1:9; 10:20; 2 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 2:9; 1 John 1:3). To have fellowship is to worship together—together with God, with Jesus, with other believers in the Lord. Fellowship is a heartfelt sense of brotherhood, of closeness, of belonging to one family in the Lord (Phil. 2:1).

So, fellowship refers to all the kinds of one-anothering discussed in chapter 19: loving one another, encouraging one another, and so on. Let's look at some specific forms of fellowship.

As I mentioned earlier, worship is one of the meanings of fellowship in the New Testament. Fellowship is a religious commonness, a worshipping together. In worship we fellowship with God. We come to be with him, and he comes to be with us (Ps. 22:25; Rom. 15:9; 2 Chron. 5:13-14; 1 Cor. 14:25; James 4:8). But, as we saw in chapter 19, worship is also a fellowship with other believers in which God edifies us, builds us up. In worship we often come to insights that we have not attained any other way. In Psalm 73 the writer says that he despaired in his heart, because he saw the prosperity of the wicked and the oppression of the righteous-"until," he says, "I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end" (v. 17). It was in the sanctuary, in worship, that the psalmist was convinced that the prosperity of the wicked was temporary, that God would bring the wicked into his terrible judgments in his own time.

So, one form of fellowship is worship, and we'll see in the next chapter how the sacraments are a special part of that.

Fellowship is also giving. I mentioned earlier the radical sharing of the church in Acts 4-5. This giving, as Paul says, is first a giving of oneself, then of one's wealth (2 Cor. 8:5). After all, if you have given yourself away to the Lord and to your brothers and sisters, it shouldn't be too much to give your wealth. This may sound masochistic, but the Lord is not Moloch. He doesn't call on us to destroy ourselves. When you give yourself away, you receive back all the rich blessings of the Lord. There is a reward, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:6-12:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap

sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all contentment' in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written,

**“He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”**

He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God.

Here's the language of the means of grace in spades: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all contentment in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (v. 8). Through giving we reap bountifully; we will experience hilarious joy; we will have plenty of seed, plenty of bread. And what we do will lead people to thank God. Giving is a source of the most wonderful blessings!

Scripture tells us, first, to give to our own families: 1 Timothy 5:8 reads, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Strong

language there, some of the strongest condemnation in the whole New Testament.

Then, we should do good to all people and especially to "the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). The household of faith is the church, our extended family. So, God has called us to take care of the poor members of the body of Christ. First John 3:17 says, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" The love of Christ puts us in a special relationship with our poor brothers and sisters, so that God's love constrains us, presses us, to give them help (Gal. 2:10; James 2:16).

Remember, however, that in Galatians 6:10 Paul says to do good "especially to those who are of the household of faith." He doesn't say "only," he says "especially." That means we have a biblical mandate to meet the needs of the poor outside the body of Christ. Galatians 6:10 does state a priority: family first. But it doesn't restrict us from doing good to others. Indeed, it encourages us: "do good to everyone."

Here we may cringe a bit. How can I, you might ask, who can barely afford to feed my kids, have a responsibility to help the poor of the whole world? Well, one example Scripture gives us is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. When the Samaritan sees a man dying by the side of the road, he neither passes by on the other side, as did the priest and the Levite, nor asks questions about the victim's religious allegiance. He simply gives whatever help he can. The Bible doesn't ask us in an abstract way to divide our resources

among all the millions of people throughout the world who are in need. Rather, what Paul has in mind in Galatians 6:10 is being ready to help those whom God brings across our path. When we have resources that can be used to help someone, we should be generous; that's all.

I suspect that if all of God's people tithed (that is, gave a tenth of their income to the work of the Lord), the church would be in a far better position to help the needy within the church and outside as well (see Mal. 3:8-10). Note that "offerings" in Scripture are something above and beyond the tithe. Let that be a word to the wise.

The word fellowship also applies to our relation to the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14) and his gifts, as we saw in chapter 12. The work of evangelism is closely connected with that. Paul speaks of our fellowship with him in the gospel (Phil. 1:5). Scripture connects evangelism with the filling of the Spirit (Acts 2:4, 14-36; 4:8, 31; 9:17, 20; 13:9, 52).

Nurture is obviously part of our fellowship with one another. In Ephesians 4:29 Paul says that the talk that comes out of our mouths must always seek to build up one another. When a brother sins, we seek to reclaim him (Gal. 6:1; James 5:20). When someone is in need, we help. When someone is sick, we pray (James 5:14). The negative side, of course, is that when a fellow Christian will not repent after teaching and admonition, we must sometimes exercise formal discipline against him, even, as we've seen, to the point of excommunication. But even that is for his benefit (1 Cor. 5:5).

So, we can understand fellowship as worship, sharing goods, and that intimacy with one another in the Spirit that nurtures and edifies. In terms of our threefold pattern, we can think of worship as normative, sharing goods as situational, and nurture as existential.

## Prayer

We have talked about the Word and fellowship as means of grace. The third category is prayer. Grudem defines prayer as personal communication with God, corporate or individual.' The four aspects of prayer are: (1) adoration, when we praise God for who he is and what he has done; (2) confession of sin, in which we humble ourselves before him, who sees our hearts as they really are; (3) thanksgiving, in which we acknowledge that everything we have comes from him, and without him we have no good thing; and (4) supplication, or intercession, making requests for ourselves and for others. Over a period of time, our prayer should include all four elements (abbreviated by the acronym ACTS). But we shall focus on supplication here, since most of the theological questions center on that.

Why should we pray? People often ask this question out of a concern for the sovereignty of God. If God is in control of everything, then what difference can our prayers make? God already knows and has planned what he will do; we can't change his eternal plan. So, why should we bother to pray?

First, the normative reason: we pray because God commands it in Scripture. First Thessalonians 5:17 says, succinctly, "Pray without ceasing"; and this is just one of

many biblical commands to pray. Even if we don't understand how prayer and God's sovereignty work together, we should pray simply because our heavenly Father wants us to. But why does he want us to pray if praying is not going to change his eternal plan?

That takes us to the second reason, which I have called the existential: prayer is a means of fellowship with our heavenly Father. We saw earlier the importance of fellowship, and prayer is a form of fellowship as well. In Luke 11:9-13 Jesus says that prayer is like a child going to his earthly father (cf. Matt. 6:9). The child wants something, and the father is eager to give. But the father does not give until the child asks. Anyone who is a father or mother understands the dynamic here. We want to give good things to our children, but even more we want a good relationship with them. Our heavenly Father wants the same. He does not want to be like a machine that dispenses goods, but he wants to really be our Father, a real person. We saw early in the book how important it is that God is a person, not an impersonal or abstract being. How good it is to be able to talk to the ruler of the universe. How good that he delights to have this conversation!

But there's a third reason as well. If our prayers could not change anything, then the relationship would be rather hollow. If a child had no hope that the father could change anything on his behalf, he would not be motivated to ask. So, there is also what I call a situational motive for prayer, and that is that prayer changes things. Or to put it more theologically, God ordains prayer as a means to change history. There are things that happen because of prayer and things that do not happen

because of no prayer. In 2 Chronicles 7:14 God says that if his people will humble themselves and pray, then he will forgive their sin and heal their land. In Luke 11:9-10 Jesus says that he who seeks, finds. And James 4:2 says that if we don't have things we need, it is because we do not ask. Prayer really does work.

Now, of course, prayer doesn't change the eternal plan of God. But within that eternal plan are many plans for means and ends. God ordains that crops will grow, but not without water and sun. He ordains that people will be saved, but (ordinarily) not without the teaching of the Word. And he ordains that we will have everything we truly need, but not without prayer. God's eternal plan has determined that many things will be achieved by prayer and that many things will not be achieved without prayer.

Since prayer is a personal relationship with God, it does not operate mechanically or automatically. We know that prayer sometimes disappoints, and that too is part of the relationship. When we pray, we ought to trust that God, like a loving father, is much wiser than we are and that in the end he does what he knows is best. There is mystery here, as we can well understand. How many four-year-olds understand why their fathers do and do not choose to honor their requests?

The Bible does give us some amount of insight on the question of why some prayers are better than others. Grudem, whose theology has been very helpful to me in this chapter, says that good prayer, effective prayer, prayer that honors God and that God honors, typically occurs in several "spheres."<sup>3</sup>

That is, good prayer is in Jesus' name, in the Spirit, according to his will, and so on. Figuratively speaking, these are the locations of prayer. We'll look at them briefly.

Good prayer, first of all, is in Jesus' name. Jesus' name is not a mechanical expression that we tag on to the end of a prayer. Sometimes that's a good thing to do. Other times, it is a mere form, perhaps a magical expression intended to make the prayer more powerful or to impress other people of how pious we are. Whether we use that formula or not, the important thing is that our prayer really be in Jesus' name, which means recognizing that he is our only Mediator with God (1 Tim. 2:5), our one and only High Priest (Heb. 4:14-15). He is the only person who can give us access to the Father. We come through him, because he has made the final sacrifice. When he died, the veil of the temple was torn in two, so the Lord opened wide our access to him (Heb. 10:22). The New Testament tells us not to be timid and scared, afraid that God will destroy us if we come too close. That actually was the situation in the Old Testament. But he wants us, rather, to be bold in coming before him, bold in prayer, asking big things.

As the High Priest, Jesus is also our intercessor. He is the one who brings our prayers to the Father.

So, when you pray, come with Jesus' authorization. Tell God either verbally or by your attitude of heart that you are coming only because of Jesus. Jesus has said, "In that day you will ask nothing of me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that

your joy may be full" (John 16:23-24; cf. Eph. 5:20).

So, we pray in Jesus' name. We also pray in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26-27). The Spirit dwells in our hearts and knows our inmost thoughts. He bears witness to us that we are, in fact, children of God by faith in Christ. When we don't know what to pray for, he brings his own prayers to the Father, out of his own infinite wisdom. Sometimes a loved one is terribly ill, and we don't know whether to pray for healing or for God to take the person home. We call on God to act according to his love and wisdom. Within us, the Spirit is praying the prayer that needs to be offered.

Good prayer is according to God's will. First John 5:14-15 says, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him" (cf. Matt. 6:10). So, we should not pray anything contrary to the Scriptures. Usually we do not know God's decretive will, his eternal plan. For example, I may pray for God to heal a friend, not knowing if that is what God ultimately wants to do. That is all right if in our hearts we pray at the same time, "Lord, your will be done."

Scripture also tells us to pray in faith (Matt. 21:22; Mark 11:24; James 1:6). These passages refer not only to saving faith in Christ but also to faith that we will receive what we have prayed for. This principle follows from the last. If prayer is in God's will, then of course he will grant it. If we believe that our prayer is in God's will, then we must believe that he will grant it. Of course, we may be wrong in the previous step and therefore

in this one. And if, along with our prayer for what we want, we pray in our hearts, "Thy will be done," then we know that our prayer will always be answered.

Scripture also presents obedience as a condition of answered prayer or, perhaps, as another sphere of prayer. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." First John 3:21-22 likewise says, "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him" (cf. Prov. 15:8, 29; 28:9; 1 Peter 3:7, 12). These verses do not teach that we must be sinlessly perfect for God to answer our prayers. None of us is sinlessly perfect, but God answers the prayers of many of us. Yet sin does sometimes stand in the way. If we are complacent about sin, "cherishing iniquity" as the psalmist says, we had better repent before we do any other business with God. So, confession of sin is a vitally important part of prayer (Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:9; James 5:16).

When we pray, God wants us not only to request forgiveness for ourselves but also to grant forgiveness to those who have sinned against us (Matt. 6:14-15; Mark 11:25). Lack of forgiveness can hinder our petitions to the Lord.

Scripture also describes various attitudes appropriate to prayer. Humility is one (Matt. 6:5; Luke 18:11-13). How inappropriate it is for us to be proud of ourselves when we are standing before almighty God. His greatness should show us how small we are, how trivial our abilities and accomplishments. He should make us aware that everything we

are and everything we have accomplished come from him.

The Pharisee in Jesus' parable is a good example of pride before God. Notice that he put his pride in the form of thanks. Formally, at least, he acknowledged that all his virtues came from God: "I thank you that I am not like other men." But the pride just billowed from his heart: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). Standing before God, like the tax collector in the parable, we should recognize that we have nothing to boast of: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."<sup>4</sup> That is one reason confession of sin is so important. Nobody can be proud who really understands how much he has sinned against God and what a great price God paid to bring forgiveness.

Persistence is another virtue in prayer (Gen. 32:26; Deut. 9:25-26; Mark 14:39; Luke 6:12; 2 Cor. 12:8; Col. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:17). If God does not answer, you should ask again whether your prayer is in the will of God. But if you still believe it is, keep going. God may have his reasons for postponing the answer that he still intends to give. And wait for his answer (Pss. 27:14; 38:15; 130:5-6).

Earnestness is a quality we see in the prayers of many of God's people in Scripture. See how passionate they are in prayer, how urgent: Daniel 9:19 reads, "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive. O Lord, pay attention and act. Delay not, for your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people are called by your name" (cf. Heb. 5:7). People sometimes ask, why do we

need to be passionate in prayer? Does God need to be urged? Does God respond more to emotional appeals than nonemotional ones? Well, think what you will, but remember that our relation to God is personal. He is our Father, not a favor-dispensing machine. Our emotions, our repetitions show our persistence; they show that our hope is only in God. And sometimes the nature of our requests is such that they are falsified by an unemotional approach to God.

After all this, what happens when God doesn't answer our prayers or doesn't answer them right away? He may indeed be planning to answer, but other things have to happen first. Think how many years God's people prayed for God to redeem them from Egypt. Think how many years they prayed for the coming of the Messiah. Think how many years we have been praying for his return, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." But God chose the right times to send Moses and to send Jesus-the "fullness of time," Paul says in Galatians 4:4. And his answers will always come-at the right time.

Our sin may be another reason why God has not answered (James 1:6-8; 4:3) . We may not be in the right sphere when we pray for something; or, as mentioned earlier, we may be complacent with some area of our lives that violates God's standards.

But there is still a third reason for unanswered prayer, and that is God's sovereign purposes. As I said earlier, we do not know God's secret decree, and so when we pray we should always say under our breath or in our hearts, if not openly, "Thy will be done." Jesus qualified his prayer that way in the

garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion (Luke 22:42). Surely, we too must qualify our prayers that way. The apostle Paul prayed to God three times that God would remove the impediment that Paul called his "thorn in the flesh." But God said no: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). Paul could not have known all the ways in which his thorn in the flesh would magnify God's power. But God did, and he did what was best for Paul's ministry, which was also what was best for Paul.

So, prayer is a means of God's grace to us, both individual prayer and public prayer. Public prayer in worship brings all the members of the body together in agreement. In Matthew 18:19 Jesus says, "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." So, when two or three or more agree in prayer, as in public worship, their prayers have a special power. We see in the New Testament how the prayer meeting of Acts 4 led to a powerful witness for the gospel. Verse 31 says, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." Corporate prayer is a fellowship with the Holy Spirit, something we do in him (Eph. 6:18; Jude 20). In the sphere of the Spirit, we draw upon his power, his love, and his wisdom as he intercedes for us.

## *Chapter 21*

# THE SACRAMENTS

Among the means of grace are the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism identifies us with Christ and his people. In the Lord's Supper we eat and drink in Christ's presence, to remember his death, receive present nourishment, and look forward to the great banquet to come.

A

mong the means of grace discussed in the previous chapter, I omitted the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, with their Old Testament counterparts, circumcision and Passover. They are certainly the most theologically controversial of all the means of grace and, therefore, require special treatment.

Scripture has much to say about baptism and the Lord's Supper, but it never groups these two, or the four I listed earlier, in a larger category called sacrament. One wonders if the theological world would have been more peaceful if the church had never developed the concept of sacrament. Nevertheless, there do appear to be significant similarities between baptism and the Lord's Supper that make it useful to discuss them together. Here is the Westminster Confession's definition of sacrament, a definition that certainly pertains to

both institutions:

Sacraments are holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ, and his benefits; and to confirm our interest in him: as also, to put a visible difference between those that belong unto the church, and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word. (27.1)

Gathering these ideas together, we can see three main aspects of a sacrament: signs, divine actions, and means of divine presence, which I assign to the categories normative, situational, and existential, respectively.

First, normatively, the sacraments are signs in that they are authoritative divine communications, revelations to us. They symbolize the gospel and teach us authoritatively what the gospel is. They teach us not by words but by pictures, by actions. In baptism we not only hear about our cleansing but also see and feel it, depicted dramatically. In the Lord's Supper not only do we hear about Jesus' death for us, but we also see his body given for us, and we taste, smell, and touch it. As the Reformers used to say, the sacraments are visible words. They supplement the word of God by divinely authorized dramatic images. So, the fullness of divine teaching is by Word and sacrament.

Second, situationally, the sacraments are God's actions on our behalf. A sacrament is not just our doing something in God's presence; it is his doing something for us. He is really

there, acting. For one thing, the sacraments are not only signs but "seals." When we talk about a seal here, we are talking about something like the government seal on your birth certificate, which makes it official that you are a citizen of the country with all rights and privileges appertaining. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are seals of God's covenant of grace with us in Christ as Abraham's circumcision was a seal of his righteousness of faith (Rom. 4:11). As seals, the sacraments confirm and guarantee the covenant promises. In this respect, as I said earlier, they are visible words. As the Word of God guarantees the promises of God, so do the sacraments.

As such, the Westminster Confession says, the sacraments separate us from the world, locating us in the people of God.

So, third, the sacraments existentially are locations of God's presence. That is implicit in what I have already said. If God is doing something for us in and through the sacrament, then he is, of course, present, and that itself is a wonderful blessing. Paul speaks of the Lord's Supper as a communion of the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16). The word translated communion in the King James Version and participation in the English Standard Version is *koinonia*, fellowship, the word we discussed in the previous chapter. I indicated there that the sacraments fell under the category of fellowship, and here we see that.

In his intimate presence God helps us to grow in faith. Roman Catholics understand this process as something automatic. It happens *ex opera operato*, that is, from the very act of participating in the sacrament. No, Scripture teaches that

our growth comes through the presence of Christ by his Spirit dealing with us personally.' So, the efficacy of the sacrament is by faith alone.

## Baptism

Let us look more closely first at baptism and then at the Lord's Supper. Note the confessional definition of baptism (WCF 28.1):

Baptism is a sacrament of the new testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church; but also, to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in his church until the end of the world.

In this statement we see that baptism is, first, the rite of entrance into the visible church. As a person takes an oath of citizenship to become an American citizen, so also we undergo baptism to become members of the visible Christian church. It is baptism that gives us the right to be recognized as Christians, unless or until we are excommunicated. Thus, it gives us the right to be part of the great work God is doing through his church.

As an administration of the covenant, baptism is a sign and seal, as we indicated earlier. As a sign it represents cleansing,

repentance, and union with Christ. Cleansing (Lev. 8:5-6; 14:8-9, 15), like the Old Testament ceremonial washings, is a requirement for entering God's presence. In this case, it symbolizes cleansing from sin. Not everybody who is baptized is cleansed or forgiven from sin. But that is what baptism symbolizes, pictures. Baptism, as a sacrament, pictures the gospel; and the gospel is about the forgiveness of sins. Scripture doesn't say, as some do, that baptism is the new birth or that our forgiveness comes through baptism. But it pictures forgiveness, so that people who are baptized as well as those who witness the ceremony will know what the gospel says-that God offers cleansing, forgiveness in Christ.

Second, baptism represents repentance, as in the early ministry of John (Matt. 3:6, 11). For we must recognize that we are in need of God's cleansing, that we are sinners. When an adult is baptized, he confesses his own sin, turns from it, and asks God's forgiveness. In churches where infants are baptized, the parents make this confession on behalf of their children.

Third, baptism symbolizes union with Christ. It is "in [literally "into"] the name of" the Trinity (Matt. 28:19). To be baptized into the name of someone is to belong to that person (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13, 15; 10:2). In Romans 6:3-6 (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27-28; Col. 2:11-12) Paul says that we have been baptized with Christ in his death and resurrection, dying with him to sin and rising with him to new life. So, Paul many, many times speaks of Christians as being "in Christ." We are also baptized into the Spirit, as we discussed in chapter 12 (Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13).

All the blessings of the *ordo salutis* are based on our union

with Christ. Effectual calling is calling into union with Christ. Regeneration means being created anew in the image of Christ. Faith and repentance are in, upon, and into Christ. Justification, adoption, and sanctification are all blessings of union with Christ, as being in him.

We have been talking of baptism as a sign. It is also a seal, God's confirmation that we belong to the covenant. Again, baptism is a name-giving ceremony (Matt. 28:19), placing the name of God upon us, as the high priest placed the name of God on Israel in Numbers 6:24-27. On the basis of that seal, we are admitted into the visible church. Again, baptism does not give us eternal salvation. As I indicated in our discussion of assurance in chapter 16, baptized people do sometimes betray the Lord. When they do that, they receive the curses of the covenant rather than the blessings. But baptism does entitle the baptized person to all the blessings of fellowship with God in the church and with God's people.

So, I must disagree with the position ascribed to the early Swiss Reformer Zwingli, that baptism is a mere symbol, a mere sign. Also, we must take issue with the Roman Catholic notion that baptism is the new birth, or with any other idea of baptismal regeneration.

## The Mode of Baptism

Now, having put this off as long as possible, we need to think about the two major controversies concerning baptism, one about the mode and the other about the subjects. The question of mode is whether immersion is the only legitimate

means of baptism, and the question of subjects is whether baptism may be administered to infants. Let me say first that godly people disagree on these matters, even within the Reformed tradition. I would be tempted to describe these as minor issues, except that they are relevant to the important question of who is and is not a member of the church; for some churches will exclude anybody from membership who has not been immersed or who has not been baptized as an adult on profession of faith. That makes this issue more important than one would judge from reading the Scriptures. Actually, the Scriptures say very little explicitly about the mode of baptism or about whether the sacrament should be given to infants.

We look first at the question of mode. There are some who believe that immersion alone has biblical warrant. They argue that the Greek word that gives us baptize means "to immerse," that John chose a place for his ministry, Aenon, where "water was plentiful" (John 3:23). Matthew 3:16 speaks of people going down into water and coming up out of water, which suggests immersion. And the strongest argument, I think, for this position is that immersion is better suited than, say, sprinkling, to fit the apostle's use of baptism to symbolize our death and resurrection with Christ (Rom. 6:2-6; Col. 2:11-12).

But there are others who say, first, that the Greek word baptizo does not necessarily mean immerse. In Luke 11:38, for example, it refers to people washing before dinner, which was almost certainly not by immersion. People who hold this view say that John needed "plentiful" water at Aenon not necessarily to immerse people but simply to have enough water to baptize everybody who came. The phrases "going down

into the water" and "coming up out of the water" do not necessarily refer to immersion, for people may have come into the stream and then received baptism by sprinkling or pouring. Indeed, some locations of baptism make immersion unlikely (Acts 9:11; 10:25; 16:32), and there are no unmistakable examples of immersion in the New Testament.

On the nonimmersionist view, Paul's main argument in Romans 6:2-6 turns on our crucifixion with Christ, not his burial, and that is not particularly relevant to immersion.

Furthermore, there is some biblical evidence for sprinkling and pouring as modes of baptism. In Hebrews 9:10 the "sprinklings" of the Old Testament law (9:13, 19, 21) are called baptismois in Greek. Christians are said to be "sprinkled" with Jesus' blood in Hebrews 10:22, 12:24, and 1 Peter 1:2. Acts 2:17 and other passages (Acts 2:33; Rom. 5:5) present baptism in the Spirit as a "pouring." The Spirit "has come upon" us (Acts 1:8) or "fell on" us (Acts 10:44).

My own view is inconclusive. I think that immersion, sprinkling, and pouring are all legitimate means of baptism and that none should be excluded.

## Infant Baptism

The second controversy over baptism is whether the rite should ever be administered to infant children. People who say that it should be are called paedobaptists, which means "child baptizers." People who say that infants are excluded from baptism are called Baptists, or anti-paedobaptists. But the real

point the Baptists want to make is that baptism should be given only to people who make a profession of faith in Christ, and that is impossible for infants. So, it has been common lately to call them credobaptists, those who baptize on the basis of a credo, or profession.

The question is difficult, because, like the mode question, the Bible does not discuss it explicitly. There is no command in the New Testament either to baptize infants or not to baptize them. Baptists say that since there is no command to baptize infants, we should not do it. Paedobaptists say that the total biblical evidence requires us to baptize the children of believers, unless there is a New Testament command forbidding it. Since there is no such command, we must baptize the children of believers. So, it is a question of the burden of proof. Baptists say that the burden of proof is on those who would argue infant baptism, and since explicit proof is lacking, we shouldn't do it. Paedobaptists say the reverse: the burden of proof is on those who would forbid infant baptism. Since that proof is lacking, we must do it.

Here are the specific arguments. The Baptist argues, first, that there is no New Testament command to baptize the children of believers. Second, he says that in the New Testament baptism is always linked to professions of faith, and, of course, there are many examples of that connection (Acts 2:41; 8:12)- 10:44-48; 16:14-15; 16:32-33).

The Reformed paedobaptist holds a different view. I use the phrase "Reformed paedobaptist" not because I believe that credobaptists are not Reformed-indeed, many of them are-but

to distinguish the Reformed argument for infant baptism from the Roman Catholic argument and that of other groups not part of the Reformed tradition.

So, I will not argue that we should baptize infants in order to get them into heaven or in order to give them new birth. Rather, my argument is this: In the Old Testament circumcision was the rite of entrance into Israel, as baptism is now the rite of entrance into the visible church. Clearly, God commanded the Israelites to circumcise their male children on the eighth day of their lives. The rite of circumcision sealed the promises of God to the people as baptism seals those promises to Christian believers. Paul says in Romans 4:11 that Abraham "received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised." Circumcision sealed the righteousness of faith-the same thing that baptism seals for us today. So, any argument against the appropriateness of baptism to infants would apply also to infant circumcision. It is true that infants cannot profess their faith and thus appropriate the righteousness of faith, but neither could infants do this in the time of Abraham.

It is clear that in both testaments God's covenant is for us and for our children (Gen. 26:3-4; 28:13-14; Deut. 29:9-13; Josh. 5:2-9). In the Old Testament the words of the covenant were read to Israelites of all ages (Josh. 8:35; 2 Chron. 20:13; Joel 2:15-16). The flood (1 Peter 3:20-21) and the exodus through the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:1-2), which are used in the New Testament as pictures of baptism, sprinkled equally people of all ages.

In the New Testament Jesus pronounced the blessing of God upon infants (Luke 18:15-17). Jesus wasn't just showing affection for the babies. Blessing is a very serious matter in Scripture. In blessing, God places his name on his people, as the high priest did in Numbers 6:27. In blessing the children, Jesus put his name upon them. Significantly, baptism in the New Testament is baptism into the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5; cf. 22:16).

Furthermore, in Acts 2:39 Peter proclaims that the promise of the new covenant is "for you and for your children." That is Old Testament covenantal language. To a first-century Jew that language would indicate that, just as God included Abraham's children in covenant with him, so God includes the children of believers in the new covenant.

We should also notice that baptisms in the New Testament after Jesus' resurrection tend to be baptisms of households (Acts 16:15, 31-34; 11:14; 1 Cor. 1:16), just as in the Old Testament God brought households to himself. Most likely there were children in these households. But even if there were not, the principle is that God is gathering families, not just individuals, into his kingdom. As families come into the kingdom, children come too, represented by their parents, as in the Old Testament.

The Baptist reply to this argument is that the new covenant is very different from the old: the old based on physical birth, family, and nation; the new based on spiritual realities, such as faith. But it is hard to find that sort of distinction in the Bible itself. Abraham circumcised his sons as a seal of the

righteousness of faith. God's covenant with him was as spiritual as his covenant with us in Christ. Yet his children were part of that covenant, as on the paedobaptist view our children are part of our covenant relation to Christ.

Note also that in 1 Corinthians 7:14 children, even in a marriage where only one parent is a believer, are "holy," that is, they belong to God. And Paul addresses children, along with adults, in his letters, as saints, holy people (cf. Eph. 1:1 with 6:1). That is why my personal belief is that children of believers are members of the covenant of grace and so ought to be baptized. I don't believe that Christians should break fellowship over this issue. Indeed, I wish there were a way that believers holding different positions on this matter could belong to the same church. But that doesn't seem to be a widely held position in the evangelical church today.

### The Lord's Supper

We now turn to the Lord's Supper. If baptism is the sacrament of initiation given only once, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of continuing fellowship with God to be received over and over again. The Westminster Confession (29.1) defines it as follows:

Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in his church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment

and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.

Like baptism, this ordinance is instituted by Christ for us to observe perpetually until the last day. It has past, present, and future references: we look to the past, remembering his death; to the present as we receive nourishment; and to the future as we anticipate his coming, "proclaim[ing] the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26; cf. Rev. 19:19). Our present nourishment comes by feeding on Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-18; cf. John 6:53-58) and by a closer relationship with others in the body (1 Cor. 11:18-22; notice the confession's reference to "communion with him and with each other, as members of his mystical body"). So, the Lord's Supper is a means of grace, a way in which God equips us better to serve him.

One major theological controversy concerns the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. The Roman Catholic view is called transubstantiation. That means that after the priest consecrates the bread and the wine, they actually become the physical body and blood of Christ, though they still appear to be bread and wine. So, the Supper is a continual sacrifice of Christ's body and blood. But Scripture never suggests anything like this. When Jesus said to his disciples, "This is my body," he cannot have meant that the bread and wine on the table were his literal body, for his literal body was behind the table, not on it. Rather, what he plainly meant was that the bread and wine represent his body and blood. It is like a professor pointing to a map and saying, "This is France." He

doesn't mean that the map is literally France but that the picture represents France.

The most serious error in this view, however, is that it represents the Lord's Supper as a continuing sacrifice. Scripture is clear that there is no continuing sacrifice and cannot be. Jesus' atonement is final and complete. There is no other sacrifice for sins. It needs no continuation, repetition, or supplementation.

The Lutheran view is midway between the Roman Catholic and the Reformed. Lutherans teach that in the sacrament Jesus' physical body is "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine. That is, the elements are still bread and wine, but Jesus' body and blood are there, too. They do deny the Roman Catholic idea of the sacrament as a continuing sacrifice, and that is good. But I do think that their emphasis on a literal physical presence of Christ dilutes the biblical emphasis on receiving Christ by faith alone.

The view attributed to Zwingli, the early Swiss Reformer, is that the sacrament is only a sign, only a memorial. The mainstream Swiss Reformers, following Calvin, believe, however, that the Lord's Supper is not a mere memorial but a means of grace. Calvin said that when we take the Lord's Supper, Christ is present in the Spirit. So we have "participation" in his body and blood, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16-18. The Christian "feeds on" Christ, as Jesus teaches in John 6:53-58. These benefits come by faith alone. The physical body of Christ is in heaven, not on earth. I think that this mainstream Reformed view is best: it incorporates more of

the riches of Scripture than the others, and it avoids superstitions that are not based on Scripture.

### Table Fellowship with God

I would rather not end this discussion on a controversial note. It is unfortunate that these wonderful sacraments have become so much a source of battles in the church. It seems sometimes that they are more a cause for warfare than a blessing to God's people. So, as we close this subject, let's think of the richness of the blessings God has given us in the Lord's Supper.

In our church we have the Lord's Supper every Sunday, and I am usually asked to lead it once a month. Every month I have to come up with a new devotional message focusing on the Lord's Supper. I worried about this at first, because the sacraments are not a specialty of mine, and I wondered how I could possibly come up with twelve communion messages per year. But as I studied the Scriptures, God showed me how rich was the background and symbolism of the Lord's Supper. We usually say that the Supper symbolizes Jesus' death for us, and it certainly does. But there is much more that comes with this.

In Scripture, even in the Old Testament, table fellowship with God is an important element of the covenant blessing. When two people are at odds with one another, they need to be reconciled. Reconciliation can, of course, be rather superficial. But when it is deep and profound, when it is complete reconciliation, you not only become friends again with your former enemy; you have him to dinner. That was

often the case in the ancient Near East (see Gen. 31:52-54; 2 Sam. 9:7-13; 19:28; 1 Kings 2:7).

The fall has made us enemies of God. God provided food for Adam and Eve before the fall (Gen. 1:29), but they abused that privilege by taking the one fruit that he kept from them. But through Christ God seeks reconciliation with us. That reconciliation is so deep, so complete, that he invites us to share meals with him. So, after the great flood, God provided food for Noah and his family, inviting them to eat the flesh of animals as well as the fruits of the garden (Gen. 9:3). When God redeemed Israel from Egypt, he gave them a sacramental meal, the Passover, as a memorial of their salvation and their covenant with God (Ex. 12). When Israel met with God around Mount Sinai on the "day of the assembly," God made a covenant with them as his people and called the seventy elders up to the mountain to eat and drink with him (Ex. 24:9-11). For all the people God provided manna, supernatural food, to eat on their long journey to the Promised Land (Ex. 16:1-35; cf. Ps. 78:19-20).

The tabernacle offerings were also offerings of food. Bread and flagons of wine were kept on a table in the tabernacle and again in the temple (Ex. 25:30; 37:16; Lev. 24:5-9; Num. 4:7). This food ("the bread of the presence") was an offering to the Lord (Lev. 24:7), and it represented a covenant relation between God and Israel (Lev. 24:8). The animal sacrifices, the whole burnt offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering focused on the idea of atonement. Another of the tabernacle offerings, the peace offering, reckoned on that atonement already being completed. It focused on the reconciliation between God and

the Israelites following atonement. The peace offering was a meal-of which a part was burned up for God, a part eaten by the priests, and a part eaten by the worshipers-celebrating reconciliation (Lev. 7:11-18; 19:5-8; Deut. 27:7).

So, a first-century Jew would not have been surprised to hear that the Lord's Supper was the new covenant in Jesus' blood (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Whenever we take the Lord's Supper, as when Israel took the Passover and the other meals, we renew the covenant relationship between God and ourselves.

Furthermore, meals with God also provide continuing nourishment and fellowship with him. Think of how David in Psalm 23:5 speaks of God's preparing a table for him in the midst of his enemies. Think of how God's wisdom in Proverbs 9:2 invites the young man into her home for a meal. Think of Jesus, who twice miraculously fed great multitudes (Matt. 14:13-21; 15:38). Think of how Jesus after his resurrection invited his disciples to eat and drink with him (Luke 24:30; John 21:9-14; Acts 10:41). This all anticipates the great meal in heaven, the messianic banquet, the wedding supper of the Lamb, in which we celebrate the consummation of redemption (Luke 13:29; 14:15-24; 22:30; Rev. 19:9). So, as we eat and drink now, we look forward to his coming, when we will eat and drink with consummate joy (1 Cor. 11:26).

### The Experience of the Lord's Supper

Whenever we take the Lord's Supper, we should reflect on the past, the present, and the future. We should remember him

in his death, thanking him for his complete salvation. The Lord's Supper is called a thanksgiving (Matt. 26:27; Luke 22:17, 19; 1 Cor. 11:24), hence the word eucharist, from the Greek word meaning "give thanks."

In the present, we know that we can gain spiritual nourishment only from Christ (John 6:35-59; 1 Cor. 10:16). By eating and drinking we participate in his body and blood; we sense a greater union with him. Calvin, who emphasized that Christ is not physically present in the Lord's Supper but lives physically in heaven, thought that Christ's real, spiritual presence in the Supper was not so much his coming to be with us but our being caught up to heaven to be with him, as we join him in the heavenly places.

As we eat and drink, we look forward to the greater banquet to come (1 Cor. 11:26). We eat only little bits of bread and little cups of wine, for we know that our fellowship with Christ in this life cannot begin to compare with the glory that awaits us in him.

## *Chapter 22*

# HEAVEN AND HELL

In this chapter we deal with *personal eschatology*, what happens when we die. Believers go to be with God, awaiting the future resurrection of their bodies. Unbelievers go to a place of punishment, awaiting the final verdict against them at the last judgment. Both the righteous and the wicked will be raised physically to stand before God in the final judgment. Then the wicked will be punished eternally, while those in Christ will live with God in the new heavens and new earth.

**A**t the end of the previous chapter, I indicated how the Lord's Supper points us to the future, toward the great marriage supper of the Lamb. So, it is appropriate that in these last few chapters we move to the subject of eschatology, or "the last things." Eschatology deals with the end of things. It includes personal eschatology, what happens to each individual after death, and historical eschatology, the return of Christ to judge the world. Here I will be talking mainly about individual eschatology. In chapter 23, I will discuss the return of Christ.

What happens to us after death? Well, we go on living! Both the righteous and the wicked continue to exist consciously. There are two phases to our life after death.

Theologians call the first the intermediate state and the second the eternal state. We'll look at these in order.

## The Intermediate State

The intermediate state is an interval of time in which the dead await the final judgment and the resurrection of the body. During this time, the experience of the righteous is very different from the experience of the wicked. We look first at the experience of believers in Christ, those who are righteous by faith in him.

The Bible is clear in teaching that after death believers go immediately to be with Christ. Since Christ is at the Father's right hand and the Father's dwelling place is often called "heaven" in Scripture, we can say that when believers die they go to heaven. But the name of the place is less important than the persons who are there: the Father and the Son and, doubtless, the Holy Spirit as well. Paul says in Philippians 1:23 that he desired to die and be with Christ more than to live. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 he says, "Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." We recall that when he was on the cross, our Lord said to the repentant thief, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43; cf. 2 Cor. 5:8; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9-11; 7:9-10).

The word heaven has various meanings in Scripture. It can refer to the sky, to everything above the earth. But the predominant theological meaning is that it is a place where God dwells. It is a real place, in space and time. God, of course, is

immaterial and is not limited to any place, not even to heaven (1 Kings 8:27). But God does choose places to manifest himself in intense ways, such as Mount Sinai, the tabernacle, and the temple. When those manifestations are visible, we call them theophanies.

Heaven seems to be the place where God manifests his presence in the most intense way. According to the book of Hebrews, "We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man" (8:1-2). The writer understands this true tent, or this heavenly tabernacle, to be the model of which the earthly tabernacle is only an image, a picture (v. 5). So, the sacrifices of the earthly tabernacle are only images, pictures, of the sacrifice of Jesus, and the earthly priests are only images of the great High Priest, Jesus, who ministers in the heavenly tabernacle.

Jesus has gone into heaven, Peter tells us (1 Peter 3:22), and has sat down at God's right hand. That the Priest has sat down means that his atoning work is finished. That he sits at the right hand of God's throne means that he reigns as King. But he has said that he goes to prepare a place for us (John 14:2). He wants us to be there too, with him.

This was true also of Old Testament believers. We read of Enoch (Gen. 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11; cf. Matt. 17:3) that they did not die but went immediately into God's presence. It is unlikely that those who did die were any different (cf. Pss. 23:6; 16:10-11; 17:15; Matt. 22:32). Elijah later appeared with Moses, who did die, and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Clearly, both Moses and Elijah continued to live in God's presence, a life without end. Indeed, Jesus tells a story in the Old Testament context about a man, Lazarus, who dies and goes to "Abraham's side" (Luke 16:22-23). His rich oppressor dies and finds himself in a place of torment.

There are two alternatives to the doctrine that believers go immediately into God's presence at death, both in my view unbiblical. One is the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory, the other the cultic doctrine of soul sleep.

Roman Catholics believe that, although some especially great saints go directly to heaven when they die, most of us will not be good enough for heaven. So, we need to undergo some purging (hence the name purgatory) before we enter heaven. That purging includes suffering. The Bible, however, says nothing about a place called purgatory or a time of suffering for believers between death and heaven. There is a text in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees (12:42-45) that suggests some such thing, but Protestants have agreed that this book is not part of the Word of God. More important, the doctrine of purgatory conflicts with the biblical teaching that Jesus has dealt with the sins of believers once for all, that our suffering and good works can add nothing to the atoning work of Christ.

The other erroneous teaching about the intermediate state is the doctrine of soul sleep, held by Seventh-day Adventists and some other groups. This is the view that the dead person is unconscious until the final judgment. According to these groups, just as the body lies dormant until the return of Christ,

so the soul, or the consciousness of the person, is oblivious until the final resurrection.

It is true that Scripture uses sleep as a metaphor for death (Matt. 9:24; 27:52; John 11:11). All cultures are hesitant to speak of death directly, so we today say that someone has "passed away." But Scripture is very explicit in distinguishing literal sleep from death. In John 11:11-14 Jesus says that his friend Lazarus has "fallen asleep." But when the disciples misunderstand and question him further, he tells them plainly, "Lazarus has died." Sleep is enough like death to be used as a metaphor for death, but the Bible clearly does not regard the two as the same.

There are some Old Testament passages that suggest that those who die are unconscious. Psalm 115:17 says, "The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any who go down into silence" (cf. 6:5). This is a description of the dead body as it lies in the grave. Interestingly, the following verse gives a fuller picture: "But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore." The Psalms reflect a period of revelation in which God had not made known many details about life after death. But they do affirm it, as we have seen.

In summary, Scripture does not teach soul sleep, and soul sleep is contrary to the teaching of the passages we saw earlier, which affirm that at death the believer goes directly to be with the Lord.

What is the intermediate state like for believers? That is hard to answer in detail, for Scripture says little about it. The

important thing is that in that state we are with the Lord, and the Lord is with us (Immanuel, "God with us"). This is not the final state. Though we are with the Lord, there is still much for us to look forward to.

Contrary to the way we usually think, the saints in the intermediate state are not perfectly happy and satisfied. They long for the completion of God's plan. Notice Revelation 6:10-11, which says of the martyrs:

They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

In this cry there is a longing, a holy dissatisfaction. The glorified saints are perfected. Their cry is not a sinful one, but like Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, they agonize over the course of the divine will. And God assures them that he will accomplish all his will. He is so sovereign that he knows some others are destined to die for the testimony of Jesus, and he will not bring vengeance until their number is complete.

Are the saints in heaven immaterial or somehow material? We tend to think they are disembodied, immaterial, because, of course, their material bodies are in the grave. Given the biblical understanding of human beings as physical as well as spiritual (chap. 7), however, it is hard to conceive of human beings

living in a disembodied state. Certainly, if they do, that is an imperfection, not a perfection. We tend to think of disembodiment as a pleasurable kind of existence; our bodies often seem to weigh us down. But in Scripture the body is a good thing. What we look forward to, according to Scripture, is the resurrection of the body, not a disembodied life. I don't think Scripture rules out the possibility that God may give us some temporary embodiment in the intermediate state. Some have taken 1 Corinthians 5:1-10 to teach that the tent of the body will be replaced in heaven by heavenly clothing (described in the metaphor of a house or dwelling).

Where are the wicked in the intermediate state? In torment, awaiting judgment. Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus is not just a story, as I understand it. It pictures Jesus' own view of what the afterlife is really like. The poor man is in Abraham's side. The rich man is in torment, receiving no mercy. No one can cross from the one place to the other.

This fact tells us that although the final judgment remains future, our eternal destinies are set at death. After death, no one can change from righteousness to wickedness, nor can any wicked person repent of sin and be accepted by God.

## The Eternal State

What does the Bible teach about the eternal state? When Jesus returns to earth, he will bring all his saints with him (1 Thess. 3:13; Jude 14). Their bodies will rise from the ground, and believers living on earth will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:16-17). This rising up to meet Christ in the

air is called the rapture, and though there is a lot of debate among theologians as to when it happens, there can be no doubt that it will take place.

After that comes God's final judgment (Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; Acts 17:30-31; Rev. 20:11-15). It is a judgment of both the righteous and the wicked. Those who do not believe in Christ will be judged according to their works (Rom. 2:5-8; Rev. 20:12-13). Note how thorough the judgment is: every work, indeed every thought, will receive God's judgment (Eccl. 12:14; Matt. 12:36). All secrets will be made known (Luke 12:2-3), and God will judge them (Rom. 2:16). Of course, nobody's works, words, or thoughts are perfectly acceptable to God. So, God's judgment on those outside of Christ is invariably negative, and the punishment is death—in this case, eternal death, eternal punishment, eternal separation from God.

The final judgment includes believers also. Paul says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10; cf. Matt. 25:31-46; Rom. 14:10, 12). Of course, because of Christ, we have no fear of eternal condemnation. For his sake, our sins are forgiven; so, as Paul says in Romans 8:1, there is no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus. Indeed, Jesus says in John 5:24 that those who believe in him, even here in this world, already have everlasting life. That life will not be taken away from us at the final judgment. Rather, God will affirm that life which Jesus has bought for us with his own blood.

This event will be a great event for all of us. It will be

tremendously important also for the physical cosmos. We saw earlier how the creation now groans and travails in pain until the manifestation of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-22). At the return of Christ, the travail is over, and the creation gives birth to something new.

Scripture speaks of this new reality as a "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1). "Heaven and earth" are a Hebrew way of referring to everything there is, the universe. So, we can say that God makes a new universe. It is a physical reality, appropriate to our resurrected bodies (Rom. 8:19-21). Remember, the consummation of human existence does not take us above and beyond the physical. Rather, as with Jesus' resurrection body, our existence in the new heavens and earth will be physical. There will be eating and drinking (Luke 22:18; Rev. 19:9; 22:1-2) and travel through a city with streets (Rev. 21:10-11, 21-26). Doubtless, much of the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation is symbolic, but it does describe some heightened, consummate form of physical existence.

I do expect that, like Jesus, our resurrection bodies may have powers they do not now have. Jesus was able to come through closed doors and so on. The resurrection body will be imperishable, powerful, and spiritual. Paul says, "So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:42-44). The term "spiritual" means directed by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit.

Evidently, there will be no sexual activity in the new creation. Jesus says that in the age to come there will be no marrying or giving in marriage (Matt. 22:30). Our earthly families will be transcended by the worldwide family of God. Nevertheless, the new creation is not a time of lesser intimacy but greater-greater intimacy with God and with other members of his body. I have no doubt that we will share our gifts with one another to a degree unheard of today. We will no longer be suspicious or fearful or envious of one another, so we will share openly what we are, what we think, what we are able to do. I don't know exactly what will replace sexual pleasure, but I know that our intimacy with God and one another will be something greater and better than anything we know and enjoy on this earth-as everything will be.

Much of our time will be spent in worship, as the book of Revelation suggests. Hence, the frequent picture in cartoons and so forth of glorified saints playing harps. But remember that worship in Scripture is both narrow and broad. Narrowly, it includes specific times for gathering to praise God; broadly, worship is making our bodies living sacrifices, which is our spiritual worship (Rom. 12:1-2). There will be no end of things to do in the new creation, new things to discover, to create, to enjoy.

Whether we are gathered around the throne to sing of God or exploring the far reaches of the new creation, the most significant fact will be that God is there in consummate fullness (Rev. 21:3-4; 22:3-4). There is no temple in the new city, for the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are themselves the temple (Rev. 21:22) . That is, we will always be in direct contact with God,

wherever we are.

As our existence in this new creation is physical, so it is also temporal. Only God is above time. Human beings are temporal creatures, in time, and will always be. A physical body implies a spatiotemporal existence. People sometimes interpret Revelation 10:6 ("time shall be no more" in the KJv) to mean that our future existence is above or beyond time, but I think modern translations are more accurate to render the verse "there would be no more delay," that is, no more delay before the fulfillment of God's mystery (v. 7). In the new creation, as now, one event will follow another in time (Rev. 21:24-26; 22:2).

So, our existence in the new heaven and new earth will be spatial and temporal. We do not become divine. But we will be with God in a consummate way. Remember that the heart of the covenant is the promise, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." In Revelation 21:3 and 7, God repeats that word with a consummated meaning. He is now "with us" in a greater way than ever before. He is fully Immanuel, God with us. This is the great hope of the psalmist in Psalms 16:11, 27:4, and 73:25-26. That is the reality of the new creation:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Rev. 21:3-4)

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. (Rev. 22:3-4)

## Eternal Blessing of Believers

The most important blessing of believers in the eternal state is the presence of God himself. For all eternity we live with Jesus, seeing God face to face. Sin is the great barrier to our intimacy with God; and in the eternal state we are forever separated not only from the guilt of sin but also from its power and presence in our lives. There is joy in his presence. We are all invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). There are feasting and good times.

Another blessing or, perhaps, another way in which Scripture describes our consummate blessing is inheritance (Matt. 25:34; Acts 26:18; Eph. 1:11, 14, 18; Col. 1:12; 3:24; Heb. 9:15; 1 Peter 1:4; Rev. 21:7). I mentioned under the doctrine of adoption (chap. 15) that being God's son or daughter means receiving an inheritance.

What is the inheritance? Well, chiefly it is God himself! We keep coming back to that. God was the inheritance of Israel (Ps. 16:5), as they were his. But we can be more specific. One thing God gives as an inheritance to his people is authority (Rev. 20:4; 22:5). We are to reign with Christ. That includes judging angels (1 Cor. 6:3), judging Israel (Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30), ruling cities (Luke 19:11-27). God gave to Adam and Eve authority to have dominion over the earth. Now the saints of

Christ receive the authority Adam forfeited by his sin.

It is not always clear how literally we should take these promises, but there is no doubt that there is a reward for those who belong to Jesus. Some philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, have thought that to do good for the sake of a reward is wrong, immoral. They have thought that we really ought to do our duty for duty's sake without any thought of reward. But that is not scriptural. Over and over again, Scripture motivates our good works with promises of reward. There is, of course, the promise of eternal life itself to everyone who believes (John 3:16; Rom. 2:8). That eternal life is a life of happiness, inheritance, possession, as we have seen. If we serve Christ faithfully, we shall receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:14). Paul says in Colossians 3:23-24, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."

It also appears that there are degrees of reward. In the parable of the minas, or the pounds (Luke 19:11-27), the master gave greater degrees of authority to those servants who had served him most faithfully (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-15). We might imagine that this unequal division might cause unhappiness or jealousy among those who are redeemed, but of course that will not happen. The first thing to remember about the eternal state of the redeemed is that there will be no sin, and that includes no jealousy, no envy, no coveting. If a friend of yours gets a greater reward than you, you will be happy for him, and you will declare that God's allocation is completely just.

## Eternal Punishment of Unbelievers (Hell)

Now I must, with some reticence, look at the other side of the eternal state, the eternal punishment of the wicked, those who are outside of Christ. I am reticent, because it is always unpleasant to think about or talk about eternal punishment. If I were free to invent my own religion, I can assure you that eternal punishment would not be part of it. But I must talk about it now, because I am not free to invent my own religion; I must teach only what the Bible teaches, and the Bible certainly has a lot to say about eternal punishment. Indeed, of all the teachers mentioned in the Bible, Jesus himself has the most to say about eternal punishment, and he put considerable emphasis on it. It is no small detail in his view of human destiny.

First, it is clear from many passages that those who do not believe in Christ stand condemned. John 3:18 says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." John 3:36 continues, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

The wrath of God is something terrible. When God led Israel across the Red Sea on dry land, he destroyed the Egyptian army. Exodus 15:6-7 says,

Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,  
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.  
In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;  
you send out your fury [that is, God's wrath, his anger]; it consumes them like stubble.

The Old Testament contains many terrifying, graphic descriptions of what happens when God's wrath "waxes hot."

Of course, the Old Testament descriptions of God's wrath mainly concern what happens in this life. But many wicked people do not receive full punishment for their wickedness in this life. Indeed, how can anyone who has violated God's law pay for his sins in this life, in a finite period of time? We know as believers that we could never pay out of our own resources the debt we owed to God. Nothing but the death of the Son of God would suffice. Then what remains for people who have refused Christ, who want no part of his ultimate sacrifice? Hebrews 10:26-27 says, "For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries." If we turn from Christ and prefer to sin, all we have to look for is God's furious judgment.

That judgment occurs after this life is done, but it is based on deeds done during this life here on earth. Hebrews 9:27 reads, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." There is no second chance. Those who die as unbelievers rest under this terrible judgment of God.

The punishment is everlasting. At the final judgment, the

sheep, Jesus' people, receive eternal life, while the goats, the wicked, go into eternal punishment (Matt. 25:41, 46). Revelation 14:11 says, "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name" (cf. Mark 9:43, 48; Luke 16:22-24, 28; Rev. 19:3; 20:10).

Some people have tried to say that although the smoke and fire continue forever, the torment of the lost has an end, because eventually they are burned up. This position is called annihilationism: the wicked are not punished forever but at some point are simply put out of existence. Scripture, however, suggests the opposite: not only does the fire continue forever but the torment of the wicked continues forever as well (Rev. 14:11; 20:10). There is language in Scripture that says the wicked will be destroyed. But that does not necessarily mean annihilation. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul urges the church to excommunicate a sinner "for the destruction of his flesh." That doesn't mean that the sinner will be annihilated-only that he will turn from his wicked ways. Of course, in hell nobody will turn from his wicked ways, so the destruction, the punishment, continues without end.

I do believe that there are degrees of punishment in hell, just as there are degrees of reward for believers. In Matthew 11:22 Jesus says, "It will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you [Chorazin and Bethsaida]." In Luke 20:47 he says that the scribes will receive "greater condemnation" than some others. In Luke 12:47-48 Jesus says that servants who sin ignorantly will receive lighter beatings than those who sin with greater knowledge. The chief

variable appears to be knowledge. Those who sin against greater knowledge will be subject to the greatest condemnation. That is a message we theologians especially need to hear.

Nevertheless, even a relatively lighter beating from God, lasting through eternity, is a terrible thing to contemplate. No one should try by some exegetical or theological trick to mitigate the harshness of this doctrine. That harshness is the whole point. To be separate from God, from his inheritance, from his people, and to be under his wrath forever is terrible to contemplate.

We are reluctant to talk about hell today. We would like to motivate people to embrace Jesus out of love, not fear. Certainly, it is not wrong to focus on the love of Christ. Scripture itself does not always bring up hell in an evangelistic context, but sometimes it does. Sometimes it uses threats rather than loving entreaties. When people reported to Jesus some awful tragedies, he said to them, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). Some people won't respond to love, at least not to love alone.

Is it unfair for God to punish people eternally? It may seem that way. How can one sin lead to an eternity of misery? But remember that, as with Adam's first sin, each sin is an affront to the dignity of the eternal God, a violation of his perfect righteousness, a betrayal of his perfect love. Calculations of this sort go beyond our powers, but it shouldn't surprise us to have God tell us that such sins are infinitely offensive and merit an eternal penalty. It is up to him to determine penalties,

and we know from Scripture that his decisions are perfectly just.

We may not see the justice of it now. But that is the problem of evil, which we looked at in chapter 8. When we are gathered around the throne, singing God's praises in the eternal state, we will not be raising objections to God's justice, but we will be praising it without reservation:

Great and amazing are your deeds,  
O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways,  
O King of the nations!  
Who will not fear, O Lord,  
and glorify your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed.  
(Rev. 15:3–4)

## *Chapter 23*

# THE EVENTS OF THE LAST DAYS

In this chapter we look at the events in history to come that will lead to the last judgment and the eternal state. Various views have been held about these events. What is certain is that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead.

**I**n the previous chapter we looked at the Bible's teachings about individual eschatology, what happens to each of us when we die. In this chapter we shall consider the great events of future world history, those events surrounding the return of Jesus. You may remember that the first half of the book, chapters 1-12, focused on the objective what is external to us: the reality of God and the historical events that necessitate and constitute our salvation from sin. Then in chapters 13-22 we discussed mostly the subjective side of this: what the Spirit does within us. Now we return to the earlier emphasis again, considering some events that will take place in the future, events that take place objectively, outside ourselves, but of vital importance to each of us.

The chief event is, of course, the return of Christ, his second coming. In this discussion, theologians have often focused on the relation of Jesus' return to the millennium, the thousand-year period mentioned in Revelation 20. In my judgment, this is somewhat unfortunate. Scripture mentions the millennium specifically only in Revelation 20. And when it speaks about the return of Christ, it is more interested in the impact of that hope upon our lives today than on the scheduling of the events. Nevertheless, since this discussion has been a frequent topic of theological debate, we shall have to spend some time on it here.

Revelation 20:1-8 says:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in

the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years. And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea.

Theologians differ, first, on whether or not the thousand years represent a literal period of time. Since the numbers in Revelation are highly symbolic, it is unlikely that the author expects us to take the number as a literal thousand years. "Thousand" in Scripture is proverbial for a very long time. In Psalm 50:10 the Lord says, "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills." Psalm 84:10 says, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere"; similarly, Psalm 90:4: "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."

The discussion has focused, second, on whether the return of Christ precedes, follows, or divides this period. Premillennialism teaches that Christ will return before the millennium. Postmillennialism means that Christ will return after the millennium. Amillennialists believe that there will be no literal millennium; α is a negative prefix in Greek, so the word amillennial means "no millennium." But that is not to say that amillennialists deny the authority of Revelation 20; rather, they interpret the thousand years there as the period of time between the resurrection of Jesus and his return. I shall also discuss a position called preterism, which states that in some

respects, at least, the return of Christ has already happened. Preterism comes from the Latin word meaning "past," and so a preterist believes that some of the passages referring to the return of Christ have been fulfilled in the past.

## Amillennialism

First, let's look at the amillennial position, which we'll abbreviate as *amil* (and similarly the others). The *amil* person believes that the millennium is now, the whole period from Jesus' ascension to his return. He emphasizes that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus ushered in a new era of world history. Jesus now has achieved a great victory over Satan, sin, and death. Although we don't see all the effects of that victory now, it is certainly real. It is, perhaps, hard for us to imagine that right now Satan is "bound" (Rev. 20:2), sealed in a bottomless pit (v. 3), but it certainly is the case that his power is weakened. The *amil* says that Satan no longer deceives the nations (v. 3) as he did before the coming of Christ. Before Jesus came, believers in the true God existed mainly in Israel. The other nations were deceived by Satan into worshiping idols. But after the resurrection, the Christian church received power to reach people of all nations with the message of the gospel. And God will continue to empower this mission until the last day, until there are believers from every kingdom, tongue, tribe, and nation.

The *amil*, however, emphasizes that this period is also a period of suffering and persecution for the church. God's triumph at this time is spiritual, not material. We should not expect to have wealth or possessions. We should not expect to

dominate the cultures in which we live-in politics, the arts, education, and so on. God will take from various cultures those he chooses to save. But culture itself will not be redeemed. Indeed, some amils believe that the cultures of the world will get worse and worse until Jesus returns.

Amils affirm that toward the end of this era Satan will be released briefly, as Revelation 20:3 indicates (also vv. 7-8). He will then deceive the nations again, presumably achieving some measure of his old power. But he will be frustrated and defeated by the return of Christ and the judgment that will result in his final destruction.

Amils hesitate to draw up timetables of the events preceding Jesus' return, beyond what we have already described. They do confess that when Jesus returns, there will be a general resurrection, a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, both believers and unbelievers. All people, then, will be gathered for the final judgment, and they will pass from what we earlier called the intermediate state into the eternal state. That eternal state is the new heavens and new earth in which dwells righteousness.

The "first resurrection" of Revelation 20:5 is, on the amil view, what we called in the previous chapter the intermediate state. In that state, martyrs and other deceased believers reign with Christ through the thousand years, that is, the present age. The second resurrection is the physical resurrection of all the dead preceding the final judgment. Similarly, the first death is the physical death of human beings; the second death is the condemnation of the wicked, a death that believers do not

experience.

## Postmillennialism

Now let's look at the postmillennial view. Most recent postmils agree with the amils that the millennium is now, the period from Jesus' ascension to his return. Some postmils, however, especially in the older literature, have said that the millennium is a portion of that period, toward the end of it, before the return of Christ. The postmil agrees that this is the time in which the gospel is preached throughout the world. He agrees with the amil as to the meaning of Satan's binding and Satan's brief release before Jesus' return. He also agrees with the amil on the general course of events in the end times: Jesus comes, then the general physical resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, then the final judgment, then the new heavens and new earth.

So, someone will ask, how does the postmil differ from the amil? Well, although the postmil agrees with the amil that our age is a time of persecution for the church, he also thinks that during this time Christians will come to have more and more influence in the general culture. Believers will indeed gain wealth, influence, and even dominance.

## Premillennialism

There are two forms of premillennialism, one usually called classical or historic and the other called dispensational. Both view the millennium as yet future, beginning after the Lord returns to earth.

The classical form of premillennialism is a very ancient view that goes back to some of the earliest church fathers. They taught that at the end of the present age Jesus will come and raise believers to be with him. Then he will reign upon the earth for a thousand years or some other long period of time. During this time (and not until then) Satan is bound in the bottomless pit. At the end of this time, God will release Satan, and at his instigation some on earth will rebel against Jesus (Rev. 20:3, 7, 8). But the Lord will put down the revolt and raise all the dead for final judgment. Then come the new heavens and new earth.

The dispensational form of premillennialism is more recent (nineteenth century) and more complicated. The key to understanding the dispensational view is the idea that Jesus actually returns twice, which makes a total of three times that Jesus comes to earth. His first coming was, of course, his conception in the womb of Mary two thousand years ago. At his second coming, at the end of this age, he comes secretly and raptures believers to be with him. The rapture is described in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, where Paul says, "For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (v. 16). The rapture is the Lord's taking his people to be with him in the air. All Christians believe in the rapture. What is unique to dispensationalism is the view that the rapture is invisible and secret. This is the picture presented in the Left Behind novels and movies: believers mysteriously disappear from offices, streets, airplanes, and so on, with

nobody knowing where they are.'

Then, according to the dispensational premil, comes a sevenyear period of satanic dominance, which gets much worse in the last three and one-half years (these figures come from Dan. 7:25; 9:27; 12:7, Rev. 12:14). The sevenyear period is called the great tribulation. Most dispensationalists believe that Jesus' secret coming to rapture his saints takes place before the great tribulation. So, their view of Jesus' return is not only premillennial but also pretribulational, "pretrib," as we say. There are some dispensationalists, however, who hold that the rapture is midtribulational (that is, three and one-half years into the great tribulation, before the worst part of it) or posttribulational. On the majority pretribulational view, of course, believers do not have to endure the great tribulation at all. Jesus rescues them from it.

After the great tribulation, Jesus returns again-his second, second coming, or his third coming. In the earlier (secret) coming, Jesus comes for his saints; in the visible third coming, he comes with his saints. This coming is public. He then reigns on earth for one thousand years, which may or may not be a literal number. This is the millennium described in Revelation 20:1-6. At the end of this time, there is another apostasy, a period in which Satan is loosed. Then comes the final judgment and the new heavens and new earth.

For the dispensational premil, the millennium is a time in which God fulfills promises he made specifically to the Jews. In the dispensational view, there are two distinct people of God, the Jews and the church of Christ (which contains both Jews

and Gentiles). God has promised that the Jews will rule in an expanded land of Palestine, which will literally take place in the millennium. Nondispensationalists believe that the promise of land to Israel is fulfilled in the promise to all Christian believers of a new heaven and new earth. For the nondispensationalist, there is only one people of God: that olive tree of Romans 11 from which some branches have been removed (unbelieving Jews) and others (believing Gentiles) have been grafted in.

### Arguments for Amillennialism

I have described for you the chief millennial views. Let us now consider the arguments that are offered for each, beginning with amillennialism.

The idea that Satan is bound during the present age is, perhaps, hard to swallow at first. It seems more likely, at first glance at least, that, as Hal Lindsey said, "Satan is alive and well on planet earth." However, we should always ask if the biblical writers saw things in the same perspective. Remarkably, Jesus, even in his earthly ministry, reports that he saw Satan fall from heaven (Luke 10:18). The binding of Satan, to the early church, probably did not mean that Satan has no power at all but that he can no longer prevent the Great Commission from happening. The Great Commission mandate, the worldwide mission of the church, is the most important event of our present age. The important thing, to the early Christians, is that people from all nations are being saved, despite Satan's best efforts. Revelation 20:3 gives us precisely that interpretation. Satan is not yet deprived of all his power, but he is no longer able to deceive the nations.

Over against premillennialism, Scripture never suggests that there is more than one coming of Christ in the future, preceding one general resurrection (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). The return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment all occur together (Matt. 24:29-31).

And it certainly is the case, as the amil says, that the age in which we live, even though it is a time when the nations come to Christ, is also an age of persecution, lawlessness, and evil (Matt. 24:21-30; 2Tim. 3:1-5, 12-13; 4:3-4).

### Arguments for Postmillennialism

The postmil replies that in this age the kingdom of God is going to be triumphant. Not all at once-it is a gradual thing, certainly-but in time it will fill the earth (Matt. 13:31-33). The Great Commission will be entirely successful. Furthermore, it will triumph over all opposition to God's purposes. Postmils understand in this way the great number of Bible passages that speak of God's victory over all his opponents (Pss. 22:27; 37:9-11; 46:8-10; 47:1-3; 66:4; 72:8-11; 86:9; 138:4-5; 149:5-9; Isa. 9:2-7; 11:1-10-32:15-17; 40:4-11; 42:1-12; 49:1-26; 56:3-8; 60:1-22; 61:1-11; 62:1-12; 65:1-25; 66:1-24; cf. 1 John 5:4). Amils and premils will protest that these refer to the new heavens and the new earth, but it is hard to avoid the impression that God's people, even his Old Testament people, looked forward to this kind of victory before the final judgment.

Furthermore, it is not as easy as premils and amils think to distinguish spiritual from cultural success. When people embrace the spiritual benefits of the gospel, it changes their

lives comprehensively. It gives them new values and a new power to emulate God's holiness. God charges them to bring that new holiness into every sphere of life: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). So, Christians throughout history have indeed transformed many spheres of human life: science, the arts, politics, education, the care of the poor and sick. This is almost inevitable: regenerate people renew the institutions and practices of the world. Of course, this process has its ups and downs. On the whole, the gospel had more cultural influence in America three hundred years ago than it does today. But that is because there is a smaller proportion today of people who profess Christ as Savior and Lord.

We see this process in Scripture. Joseph, Esther, and Daniel lived in pagan countries, but they were faithful to the true God. Their faithfulness led them into conflict with the values of the society around them. Nevertheless, God blessed their faithfulness, and that faithfulness brought benefit to the unbelieving societies of which they were part.

In the early centuries of the church, believers patiently endured much persecution for the sake of Christ. But the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church, and it grew despite all Satan could do. By the fourth century the Roman Empire was officially Christian. We may disagree as to whether Constantine's conversion did more harm than good for the church. But we cannot doubt that it gave the church a great deal of cultural power, which lasted through the medieval period and later.

## Arguments for Premillennialism

There is also a case to be made for premillennialism. For one thing, the evidence from the church fathers, one or two generations removed from the apostles, is impressive. Furthermore, there are some Bible passages that describe a reign of God upon the earth, which do not seem to fit either the present age or the eternal state. God reigns visibly on earth, and yet there is continuing sin and rebellion. In Isaiah 65:18-20 we read:

But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create; for behold, I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people to be a gladness. I will rejoice in Jerusalem and be glad in my people; no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed.

This seems to be a prophecy of the last days, in which God reigns on earth. It might seem at first hearing to be a description of the eternal state, the new heavens and new earth. But in this image God has not finally done away with sin and death (cf. Isa. 11:6-11; Ps. 72:8-14; Zech. 14:5-17; Rev. 2:26-27). Furthermore, the most natural reading of Revelation 20 is that it describes future events rather than past ones. The binding of Satan is not normally something we would associate with the age in which we live, even granting the possibility of that meaning. Furthermore, the idea of saints coming to life is

certainly compatible with a future resurrection; and although there is a sense in which we reign with Christ now, and a stronger sense in which the glorified saints and martyrs reign with Christ now, Luke 19:17 does present this as a reward for believers in the last days.

## Preterism

There is another approach to the biblical teaching about the last days that is rather different from any of the positions I have described above. That is preterism, which says that many or all of the prophecies of Jesus' coming were fulfilled by God's judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70. That means that there was a coming of Jesus that is past, from our point of view. As noted earlier, the word preterism comes from a word that means "past."

The arguments for preterism largely hinge on the passages that speak of the nearness of Jesus' coming from a first-century perspective. In Luke 21, for example, where Jesus speaks extensively of the end times, he says in verses 31-32, "So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place." That suggests that the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies is going to be near, perhaps thirty or forty years hence, not thousands of years in the future.

Others counter that passages like Luke 21 and Matthew 24 speak not just of the destruction of Jerusalem but of a cosmic destructionthe end of the world. However, that language can

be figurative. It is used in other prophecies describing war, such as Isaiah 34:1-4 and verses 9-10. And when Jesus speaks in Matthew 24:3 of "the end of the world" (KJv) preterists say that he is speaking of the end of the world of the Jews-of their temple, holy land, and covenant with God.

With regard to the prophecies of the nearness of the last days, there are other possible explanations. The most common one is that the kingdom of God came in power when Jesus rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent the Spirit upon the church. That would explain Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:28, for example, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." But another explanation of that statement might be found in the first verses of the following chapter: the disciples witnessed Jesus' glorification on the Mount of Transfiguration. At least, it is not necessary to explain the nearness of the kingdom by making it refer to the events of AD 70.

As for the use of language suggesting cosmic destruction and the end of the world, while that language can be used figuratively in Scripture, the figurative interpretation is not necessary.

Preterism may turn out to be right with regard to some predicted events. Certainly, the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 and Mark 13 is at least partly about the fall of Jerusalem. But there are a number of predicted events that clearly did not take place in AD 70. Among those are the resurrection of the righteous and the wicked, the final judgment, the visible

appearing of Jesus to every eye, the visible dwelling of God with men in the new heavens and the new earth, and the removal of all sin and sorrow from this world.

It is also significant that the early church fathers of the generation following the apostles never speak of a return of Christ that occurred in AD 70. If this were the momentous event preterists make it out to be, one would think that they would have made that one of the main themes of their writings. But, in fact, they don't even mention it.

Some extreme preterists say that there is no coming of Christ that is future to us; we have no return of Christ to look forward to. On their view, all the prophecies of Jesus' return were fulfilled in AD 70. I believe this view is quite wrong, even heretical. Scripture quite clearly teaches that Jesus will come to judge all the living and the dead. That has not happened yet. Every branch of the Christian church has maintained that and has found that to be a blessed hope, as in Titus 2:13. Extreme preterism takes away that hope.

## The Already but Not Yet

In all of this talk of the return of Christ and the millennium, we have missed one of the most fundamental biblical emphases: that is, we ourselves live in the last days. Hebrews 1:2 says, "In these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world." The "last days" in this passage is the period following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The term "last days" is used in similar ways in Acts 2:17, 2 Timothy

3:1, and 2 Peter 3:3. As the amils, postmils, and preterists emphasize, there is a sense in which the kingdom of God has come.<sup>2</sup> It was established by Christ's atonement, and we all have entered it (Col. 1:13). Yet, in another sense, the kingdom remains future, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come." So, the kingdom is here, but yet to come. The last days are here, but yet to come. The fulfillment of history has occurred already in Christ, but it is also not yet, for there is more to come. This is the tension that theologians refer to as the already but not yet.

In his atonement Jesus destroyed the power of sin, yet sin will cling to us until his return. He has destroyed Satan in principle, but this victory will not be consummated until the Lord's return. Oscar Cullmann compares this to the distinction between D-day and V-day in World War II. On D-day Allied troops entered France, in principle dooming the Third Reich. But it took many months of bitter fighting before the Nazis surrendered on V-day, victory day. The cross was like D-day, and Jesus' return will be like V-day. We live between the times, always in the tension of the already but not yet; and during that time there are many battles to be fought.

Postmils, amils, and preterists emphasize the already, premils the not yet. A balanced eschatology will recognize the importance of both.

## Eschatology and the Christian Life

This discussion suggests that biblical eschatology has important practical consequences. I confess my

disappointment that so much teaching about the last days is focused on the order of events. I suppose I'm more of a postmil than anything else, but I honestly don't believe that the Bible is perfectly clear on the order of events. In my view, when Scripture tells us about the return of Christ, it doesn't give us this information so that we can put it on a chart and watch the events pass by. That would be catering to our intellectual pride, among other things. Why, then, does Scripture have so much to say about the last days? So that we can reorder our lives in the light of Jesus' coming.

As far as I can see, every Bible passage about the return of Christ is written for a practical purpose, not to help us to develop a theory of history but to motivate our obedience. These doctrines motivate our obedience in several ways.

First, the coming of Christ should reorder our priorities. In 2 Peter 3:11-12 the apostle says, "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!" (cf. 1 Cor. 7:26). Since God is going to destroy the present earth and replace it with a new heavens and a new earth, what sort of people should we be? The implicit answer: not people who care a lot about material things or the pleasures of this life, but people who are passionate about the kingdom of God, which will remain for all eternity. That is not to say that there is something evil about material things-only that we should be using them for God's purposes, not just our own.

Second, if we are eager for Christ to return, we should be purifying ourselves (2 Peter 3:12). Every Christian should not only believe in the return of Christ but also be eager for it to come. At the end of the book of Revelation, the church prays, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (KJv). But if we are really so eager for Jesus to return, so eager for the new heaven and earth, we should be seeking to be as pure as we will one day be in God's presence. First John 3:2-3 says, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure."

Another ethical implication of the return of Christ is its encouragement. It shows us that our labors for him today are not in vain. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." That is a great comfort in the midst of difficulty. The things of this world are going to be burned up, but our labor for the Lord will bear fruit for eternity.

Fourth, our very ignorance of the time of Jesus' return has ethical implications; for that ignorance implies that we must be ready at any time for his return (Matt. 24:44; 1 Thess. 5:1-10; 1 Peter 1:7; 2 Peter 3:14). When he comes, we want him to find us busy in our callings, in the work of the Great Commission.

Finally, when Jesus comes, we shall receive a reward, and we should look forward to that reward in our labors here. That reward should motivate us to good works here and now. In

chapter 22, I mentioned that biblical emphasis on rewards, and there are many Scripture texts that emphasize this (Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1-4; 10:41-42; Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:8-15; 9:17-18, 25; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 6:7-8; Col. 3:23-25; 2 Tim. 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; 2 John 8; Rev. 1 1:18). Again, God doesn't expect us to do our duty merely for duty's sake but with full understanding that our Father rewards his children not only in this life (Mark 10:29-30) but in eternity as well.

From the biblical emphasis, I would conclude that the main reason God speaks in Scripture so much about the return of Jesus is that this doctrine purifies the hearts of his people. May he use it to purify you and me, as we continue on our journey to glory.

## *Chapter 24*

# HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

Christian ethics is theology viewed as a means of determining what human persons, acts, and attitudes are acceptable to God and which are not. The Christian life is living under God's lordship. The heart of our obligation is love to him and to our neighbor, which Scripture summarizes in the Ten Commandments.

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people have sometimes thought that ethics and theology are very different disciplines. But many great theology books, such as Calvin's Institutes and Charles Hodge's Systematic Theology, together with church catechisms such as the Heidelberg and the Westminster Larger and Shorter, contain expositions of the Ten Commandments. When you think about it, you can see that ethics is certainly part of theology.

For one thing, texts like 2 Timothy 3:16-17 teach clearly that the purpose of the Bible is to produce good works: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." Redemption itself, the main theme of the Bible, is important not for its own sake but so that the redeemed might glorify God in their actions: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). We are not saved by works, but we are certainly saved for works.

Furthermore, all theology is ethics. Throughout this book

we have been studying what we ought to believe. That ought is an ethical ought. Certainly if it is this important to know what we ought to believe, it is equally important to know what we ought to do. Indeed, doing is a wider category than believing. Belief is one of the things we do. So, perhaps we should consider ethics to be a broader discipline of which theology is a part. But I prefer to look at them as equally extensive, for as I argued in chapter 6, theology is the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life. That definition certainly includes ethics as well as theology. I define ethics, therefore, as theology viewed as a means of determining what human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God's blessing.'

## Lordship and Ethics

Ethics, like theology, is based on God's lordship, in several ways.

### How God Governs Our Ethical Life

God governs our ethical life, first, by his control. God plans and rules nature and history, so that certain human acts are conducive to his glory and others are not.

Second, by his authority he speaks to us clearly, telling us what norms govern our behavior.

Third, by his covenant presence he commits himself to be with us in our ethical walk, blessing our obedience, punishing our disobedience. But his presence also provides us with two important means of ethical guidance. First, because he is

present with us, he is able to serve as a moral example. "You shall be holy, for I the LoIZD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2; cf. Matt. 5:48). Second, he, and he alone, is able to provide for sinners the power to do good, to set us free from the power of sin (John 8:34-36).

### Necessary and Sufficient Criteria of Good Works

What is a good work? Reformed theologians have addressed this question in response to the problem of "the virtuous pagan." Reformed theology teaches that human beings by nature are totally depraved. This means not that we are as bad as we can be but that it is impossible for us to please God in any of our thoughts, words, or deeds (Rom. 8:8). So, apart from grace none of us can do anything good in the sight of God. Yet all around us we see non-Christians who seem, at least, to be doing good works: they love their families, work hard at their jobs, contribute to the needs of the poor, show kindness to their neighbors. It seems that these pagans are virtuous by normal measures.

Reformed theology, however, questions these normal measures. It acknowledges that unbelievers often contribute to the betterment of society. These contributions are called civic righteousness. Their civic righteousness does not please God, however, because it is altogether devoid of three characteristics:

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because

they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God, or make a man meet to receive grace from God: and yet, their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God. (WCF 16.7)

Note the three necessary ingredients: (1) a heart purified by faith, (2) obedience to God's Word, and (3) the right end, which is the glory of God.

The first element of good works is a plainly biblical emphasis. The Westminster Confession cites Hebrews 11:4 and some other texts. Romans 14:23 also comes to mind, which says, "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." In Jesus' arguments with the Pharisees, too, it is evident that our righteousness must not be merely external (see especially Matt. 23:25-26). In describing the necessity of an internal motive of good works, Scripture refers not only to faith but especially to love, as in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 and many other passages. We learn from these passages that love is not only necessary for good works but also sufficient; that is, if our act is motivated by a true love of God and neighbor, then we have fulfilled the law (Matt. 22:40; Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14).

The second element of good works, according to the Westminster Confession, is obedience to God's Word, to his law. Note the references in the previous section to the importance of obeying God's Word. Certainly, obedience to God's Word is a necessary condition of good works, for disobedience to God's law is the very definition of sin (1 John

3:4). It is also a sufficient condition; for if we have obeyed God perfectly, we have done everything necessary to be good in his sight. Of course, among God's commands are his command to love (see previous paragraph) and to seek his glory (see following paragraph).

The third element is the right end, the glory of God. Ethical literature has often discussed the *summum bonum*, or highest good, for human beings. What is it that we are trying to achieve in our ethical actions? Many secular writers have said that this goal is pleasure or human happiness. But Scripture says that in everything we do we should be seeking the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Certainly, any act must glorify God if it is to be good; thus, seeking God's glory is a necessary condition of good works. And if the act does glorify God, then it is good; so, it is a sufficient condition.'

As we have seen, there are three necessary and sufficient conditions of good works: right motive, right standard, and right goal.<sup>3</sup> Right motive corresponds to the lordship attribute of covenant presence, for it is God's Spirit dwelling in us who places faith and love in our hearts. Right standard corresponds, obviously, to God's lordship attribute of authority. And right goal corresponds to the lordship attribute of control, for it is God's creation and providence that determines what acts will and will not lead to God's glory. God determines the consequences of our actions, and he determines which actions lead to our *summum bonum*.

## Biblical Reasons to Do Good Works

Scripture uses basically three means to encourage believers to do good works.

The history of redemption. First, it appeals to the history of redemption. This is the chief motivation in the Decalogue itself: God has redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, therefore they should obey. In the New Testament the writers often urge us to do good works because of what Christ did to redeem us. Jesus himself urges that the disciples "love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). Jesus' love, ultimately displayed on the cross, commands our response of love to one another. Another well-known appeal is found in Colossians 3:1-3: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

When Christ died, we died to sin; when he rose, we rose to righteousness. We are one with Christ in his death and resurrection. So, those historic facts have moral implications. We should live in accord with the new life, given to us by God's grace when we rose with Christ. (See also Rom. 6:1-23; 13:11-12; 1 Cor. 6:20; 10:11; 15:58; Eph. 4:1-5, 25, 32; 5:25-33; Phil. 2:1-11; Heb. 12:1-28; 1 Peter 2:1-3; 4:1-6.)

The Heidelberg Catechism emphasizes that our good works come from gratitude. They are not attempts to gain God's favor but, rather, grateful responses to the favor he has already shown to us.<sup>4</sup> But our focus on the history of redemption is not limited to the past. It is also an anticipation of what God

will do for us in the future. God's promises of future blessing also motivate us to obey him. Jesus commands us to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33).<sup>5</sup>

This motivation emphasizes God's control, for history is the sphere of God's control, the outworking of his eternal plan.

The authority of God's commands. Scripture also motivates our good works by calling attention to God's commands. Jesus said that he did not come to abrogate the law but to fulfill it. "Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19).

So, in their preaching Jesus and the apostles often appeal to the commandments of the law and to their own commandments (as in Matt. 7:12; 12:5; 19:18-19; 22:36-40; 23:23; Luke 10:26; John 8:17; 13:34-35; 14:15, 21; Rom. 8:4; 12:19; 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 5:13; 9:8-9; 14:34, 37; 2 Cor. 8:15; 9:9; Gal. 4:21-22; Eph. 4:20-24; 6:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Titus 2:1; James 1:22-25-2:8-13; 1 Peter 1:16; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:24; 5:2).

God's commandment is sufficient to place an obligation upon us. We should need no other incentive. But God gives us other motivations as well, because we are fallen, and because he loves us as his redeemed children.

This motivation reflects God's lordship attribute of authority. We should obey him simply because he has the right

to absolute obedience.

The presence of the Spirit. Third, Scripture calls us to a godly life based on the activity of the Spirit within us. This motivation is based on God's lordship attribute of presence. Paul says, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:16-18).

God has placed his Spirit within us to give us new life and, therefore, new ethical inclinations. There is still conflict among our impulses, but we have the resources to follow the desires of the Spirit rather than those of the flesh. So, Paul appeals to the inner change God has worked in us by regeneration and sanctification. In Ephesians 5:8-11 he puts it this way: "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them." In the following verses Paul continues to expound on the ethical results of this transformation. Compare also Romans 8:1-17 and Galatians 5:22-26.

In summary, Scripture motivates us to do good works by the history of redemption, the commandments of God, and the work of the Spirit within us, corresponding to God's lordship attributes of control, authority, and presence, respectively.

## Types of Christian Ethics

These three motivations have led Christian thinkers to develop three main types of Christian ethics: command ethics, narrative ethics, and virtue ethics. Command ethics emphasizes the authority of God's moral law. Narrative ethics emphasizes the history of redemption; it teaches ethics by telling the story of salvation. Virtue ethics discusses the inner character of the regenerate person, focusing on virtues listed in passages like Romans 5:1-5, Galatians 5:22-23, and Colossians 3:12-17.

Sometimes a writer will pit these types of ethics against each other, designating one as superior to the others. I don't see any biblical justification for that kind of argument. As we saw, Scripture uses all of these methods to motivate righteous behavior, and it is hard to see how any of these could function without the others. It is God's commands that define the virtues and enable us to evaluate the behavior of characters in the narrative. It is the narrative that shows us how God saves us from sin and enables us to keep his law from the heart. The virtues define what the redeemed person looks like when he obeys God from the heart.

## What Really Matters

We can see the same triadic structure in the actual content of biblical ethics. Let us first note sayings of the apostle Paul that intend to show the highest priorities of the Christian life. In these passages he is opposing Judaizers, who think that one must be circumcised to enter the kingdom of God. He replies that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is important but,

rather, the following:

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. (1 Cor. 7:19)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love. (Gal. 5:6)

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Gal. 6:15)

As in our previous discussion, there is a reference in 1 Corinthians 7:19 to keeping the commandments of God. It corresponds to God's lordship attribute of authority. "Faith working through love" in Galatians 5:6 is the work of the Spirit within us and refers to God's covenant presence. A "new creation" in Galatians 6:15 is the great redemptive-historical change brought about by Jesus' death and resurrection, the powerful work of God's sovereign control over history.<sup>6</sup>

### Factors in Ethical Judgment

Imagine that you are a pastor or counselor, and someone comes to your office with an ethical problem. Basically, there are three things you will need to discuss: the situation, the Word of God, and the inquirer himself.

Normally, we ask first about the situation: "What's your problem? What brings you to see me?" This question is

ultimately about God's lordship attribute of control, for God is the one who brings situations about.

Then we ask, "What does God's Word say about the problem?" This discussion invokes God's lordship attribute of authority.

Third, we focus on the inquirer, asking how he or she needs to change in order to apply God's solution to the problem. At this point we are thinking especially about God's presence within the individual. If the person is a non-Christian, then evidently he needs to be born again by God's Spirit before he can apply the Word of God to his life. If the person is a believer, he may need to grow in certain ways before he will be able to deal with the issue before him.

We note in such conversations that each of these subjects influences the other two. We may start with a presentation problem: "My wife is angry all the time." But as we move to a focus on God's Word, gaining a better understanding of Scripture, we may gain a better understanding of the problem as well. For example, Scripture tells us to remove the log from our own eye before trying to get the speck out of another's eye (Matt. 7:3). The inquirer may come to see that his wife is angry because he has provoked her. So, the problem now is not only in her but in him as well. Reflection on God's Word has changed our understanding of the problem.

But this new understanding of the problem pushes us to look at more and different Scripture texts than we considered in the beginning. As we understand the problem better, we

understand better how Scripture relates to it. Scripture and the situation illumine one another.

When we move to the third question and ask the inquirer to look within, he may see even more things in himself that have provoked his wife's anger. So, the problem, the Word, and the inquirer have all illumined one another. Evidently, you cannot understand your problem or yourself adequately until you have seen it through what Calvin called the "spectacles of Scripture." And you can't understand the problem until you see yourself as a part of it.

And you can't understand God's Word rightly until you can use it, until you see how it applies to this situation and that. This is a more difficult point, but I think it is important. If someone says he understands "You shall not steal" but has no idea to what situations that commandment applies (such as embezzling, cheating on taxes, shoplifting), then he hasn't really understood the biblical command. Understanding Scripture, understanding its meaning, is applying it to situations. A person who understands the Bible is a person who is able to use the Bible to answer his questions, to guide his life. As I argued in chapter 6, theology is application.

### Perspectives on the Discipline of Ethics

In general, then, ethical judgment always involves the application of a norm to a situation by a person. These three factors can also be seen as overall perspectives on the study of ethics, just as in chapter 6, I argued that theology may be seen from three perspectives:

The situational perspective. In this perspective, we examine situations, problems. This study focuses on God's actions in creation and providence that have made the situations what they are, hence God's lordship attribute of control. The situational perspective asks, what are the best means of accomplishing God's purposes? That is, how can we take the present situation and change it so that more of God's purposes are achieved?

God's ultimate purpose is his own glory (1 Cor. 10:31). But God has more specific goals as well: the filling and subduing of the earth (Gen. 1:28); the evangelization and nurture of people of all nations (Matt. 28:19-20); the success of his kingdom (Matt. 6:33).

The situational perspective explores the consequences of our actions. Under the situational perspective, we ask, If we do x, will that enhance the glory of God and his blessing on his people? So, we seek the best means to the ends that please God. We might describe ethics from this perspective as a Christian teleological, or consequential, ethic.

The normative perspective. Under the normative perspective, we focus on Scripture more directly. Our purpose is to determine our duty, our ethical norm, our obligation. So, we bring our problem to the Bible and ask, What does Scripture say about this situation? At this point we invoke God's lordship attribute of authority. Since we are focusing on duties and obligations, we might call this perspective a Christian deontological ethic.

The existential perspective. The existential perspective focuses on the ethical agent, the person who is trying to find out what to do. Under this perspective, the ethical question becomes, How must I change if I am to do God's will? Here the focus is inward, examining our heart-relation to God. It deals with our regeneration, our sanctification, our inner character. These are all the product of God's lordship-presence within us.

### Interdependence of the Perspectives

We saw that knowledge of our situation, norm, and self are interdependent. You can't understand the situation fully until you know what Scripture says about it and until you understand your own role in the situation. You can't understand yourself fully apart from Scripture or apart from the situation that is your environment. And you can't understand Scripture unless you can apply it to situations and to yourself.

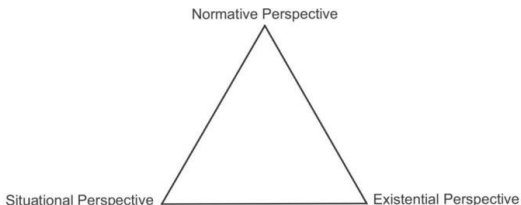
So, the situational perspective includes the other two. When we understand the situation rightly, we see that Scripture and the self are elements of that situation, facts to be taken account of. So, we can't rightly assess the situation unless we assess the other two factors.

Similarly, the normative perspective: to understand Scripture is to understand its applications to the situation and the self.

And similarly, the existential perspective: as we ask questions about our inner life, we find that the situation and God's revelation are both elements of our personal experience, apart from which we cannot make sense of ourselves.

Each perspective necessitates consideration of the others. Each includes the others. You can picture the content of ethics as a triangle (see fig. 2):

Figure 2



You can study the ethical triangle beginning at any of the three corners. But as you advance through the triangle, you will meet up with the other corners eventually. That is to say, if you start to study the situation, you will eventually find yourself studying the norm and the ethical agent. Same with the other corners.

That's why I describe these approaches as perspectives. I don't think of them as parts of ethics, as though you could divide the triangle into three distinct parts and then do one part first, another second, and another third. No, you can't really study the situation without the norm and so on.

The triangle represents the whole subject matter of ethics, and the corners represent different entrances to that subject matter, different emphases, different initial questions. But the

goal is always to cover the whole triangle with regard to any ethical question.

In the end, then, the three perspectives coincide. A true understanding of the situation will not contradict a true understanding of the Word or the self. And a true understanding of each will include true understandings of the others.

But if the three are ultimately identical, why do we need three? Why not just one? The reason has to do with our finitude and sin. God knows all truth simultaneously, from every possible perspective. He knows what the whole universe looks like to the eye of the snail on my window ledge. But you and I are finite, not omniscient. We can only see a portion of reality at a time. That is to say, we can only see the world from one perspective at a time. For that reason it is good for us to move from one perspective to another. Just as the blind man had to move from the elephant's leg to its trunk, to its torso, to its head, and to its tail in order to get an adequate picture of the elephant, so we need to move from one perspective to another to get a full understanding of God's world.

And we are sinners in Adam. According to Romans 1, that means that we have a tendency to suppress the truth, to exchange the truth for a lie, to try to push God out of our knowledge. Salvation turns us in a different direction, so that we are able to seek the truth. But the continued presence of sin in our minds and hearts means that we need to keep checking up on ourselves, and multiplying perspectives is one helpful way to do that.

In ethics the three perspectives I have mentioned are especially helpful. They serve as checks and balances on one another. The normative perspective can correct mistakes in my understanding of the situational. But the opposite is also true: my understanding of the norm can be improved when I better understand the situation to which the norm is to be applied. Same, *mutatis mutandis*, for the existential perspective.

Multiperspectivalism is not relativism. I am not saying that any viewpoint is a legitimate perspective. There is in ethics and in other disciplines an absolute right and wrong. The procedure I have outlined above is a means for us to discover that absolute right and wrong.

Scripture itself is absolutely right: inspired, infallible, inerrant. But we are fallible in our study of Scripture. To understand it rightly we need information outside the Bible, including knowledge of Hebrew and Greek grammar, knowledge of ancient history, and an understanding of those contemporary questions that people pose to Scripture.

## The Ethical Life

So far, we have discussed methodology, the means by which Christians make ethical decisions. But we should also think a bit about the actual content of biblical ethics. That is, what does the Bible teach about God's commands, our ethical situation, and the human being as an ethical agent?

We have already discussed many ethical implications of the Bible's theology. In chapters 4 and 5 we considered the

authority of Scripture, God's ultimate norm for all of human life. In chapter 7, I argued that the image of God is both a fact and a norm, and therefore our fundamental responsibility is to image God, to be like him (Lev. 19:2; Matt. 5:48). This means especially to be like Christ, to love one another as he loved us (John 13:34-35).

In chapters 8-17, I discussed sin and redemption. In ourselves, we cannot obey God. But because he has sent his Son to die for us and rise again, we too have died to sin and have been raised with him to newness of life (Rom. 6; Col. 3:1-3). So, we are able to say no to sin and to serve God, though imperfectly, in this life.

Through Christ, too, the kingdom of God has come, is coming, and will come (chap. 11). It is our job to "seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) here on earth.

In chapter 14, I emphasized that the Christian life is especially one of faith and repentance. It is believing God's promises and acting on them and turning more and more from sin, anticipating the glory to come. In chapters 18-21, I stressed that the Christian life is a life shared with others in the body of Christ. In chapter 19, especially, I emphasized the centrality of God's mandates: the cultural mandate and the Great Commission. In chapter 23, I stressed that biblical eschatology, the doctrine of the last days, is a purifying doctrine. We seek to be obedient when he comes, and we look forward to his rewards. So, Christian ethics is oriented toward the past (our creation in God's image and Jesus' work of redemption), the

present (seeking the kingdom of God in the present), and the future (looking forward to Jesus' return and the consummation of righteousness in the new heavens and new earth).

## The Lord's Commands

I should also briefly summarize what God commands us to do. For this purpose, the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:1-21), sometimes called the Decalogue, are especially useful. These commands are part of the document of the covenant that God made with Israel under Moses,' and other passages of Scripture refer to them. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) is largely an exposition of the deeper meanings of these commandments. In Matthew 19:17-20 Jesus tells a rich young man the essence of his obligation to God, using commandments from the Decalogue. (See also Rom. 13:8-10 and James 2:10-11.)

As Jesus says (Matt. 22:36-40), the greatest commandments are those to love God with all our heart (Deut. 6:4-5) and our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18). These sum up the law and the prophets, emphasizing the frequent theme of the New Testament that love fulfills the law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Col. 3:14). So, the Decalogue speaks of loving God (commandments 1-4) and loving our neighbors (commandments 5-10).

We love God by worshiping him alone and renouncing all other gods and lords (first commandment); by worshiping him as he desires and not according to our own idolatrous devices (second); by using his name only with a full understanding of its holiness (third); and by acknowledging the Sabbath as a

day to rest and worship him, not to carry on our own business (fourth).

We love our neighbors by honoring our parents and all others in authority over us (fifth) ;8 by revering human life as sacred in God's sight (sixth); by respecting the marriage bed (seventh), the property of others (eighth), and the truth (ninth); and by guarding our heart against desires that lead to breaking other commandments (tenth).

## *Chapter 25*

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

God's lordship is central to the entire message of Scripture and a helpful way of learning and appropriating that message. His lordship motivates us to know, teach, and internalize that message. May his Spirit continue to deal with us so that his Word will produce godliness in our hearts and the worldwide expansion of his kingdom to his glory.

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his book on systematic theology has been, in effect, a book on God's lordship, its outworkings, and its applications. As we come now to summarize what we have studied, I shall again focus on the lordship of God. We saw in chapter 1 that the word Lord connotes especially three ideas. There is his control, or power, over the whole universe, so great and comprehensive that he works "all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Then there is his authority, his right to be obeyed by all his creatures. Finally, there is his covenant presence, in which he takes creatures to be his own and promises to be with them; both geographically near to them and near to them as the one who cares enough about them to bless and, indeed, sometimes to curse.

In chapter 6, I generalized this pattern to say that anything in God or in the world can be viewed from three perspectives. To view it situationally is to view it in relation to God's controlling power, which brought the world into being and maintains it by his providence. Whenever we look at a situation, a fact, a state of affairs, we are focusing, in effect, on God's power, for it is God's power that brought that fact into being and made it what it is. The situational perspective includes everything. Everything is part of my situation, my environment. But the situational perspective focuses on the

world as a set of realities under the control of God's lordship.

But there are other perspectives, other ways to look at everything. One is the normative perspective, which is to view everything as an expression of God's lordship authority. Here we are asking what we can learn from everything in creation about God's will for us, his commands, his desires, his norms, his rules or laws. Just as everything is part of the situational perspective, so everything is part of the normative perspective. That is to say, everything reveals God's norms. We have an obligation to live in the world according to reality, according to truth, according to everything there is. That is why theologians distinguish between special revelation, general revelation, and what I call existential revelation but most theologians call illumination. Those three categories cover everything, so everything is normative. Of course, the Scriptures, the written Word of God, have a preeminent place among all the norms, for God has given them to us as the written constitution of the church and as the message of grace that corrects our repression of the truth we receive from other sources.

Then there is the existential perspective. In this perspective, we look at everything as an experience of the self. Everything we know, everything we encounter, is part of that experience. In this perspective, we consider everything especially in relation to God's lordship attribute of presence. For to think of ourselves rightly is always to think of ourselves in intimate relation to God.

But remember: each perspective on reality includes the whole of reality; and each perspective therefore includes the

other two. You cannot understand your situation without the right norms for thought and without your own mind working right. You can't understand God's norms without understanding how they apply to situations and to yourself. And you can't understand yourself without understanding your relationship to your situational environment and to God's normative revelation.

Though I think these three perspectives are useful in the study of systematic theology and of ethics (chap. 24), I don't want to condemn anyone who doesn't buy this idea. This is sort of a new way of doing things, and I don't expect everybody to follow this method. Different people organize the truth of Scripture in different ways, just like people cut cakes into pieces of different sizes and shapes. That variety is, in general, a good thing. Sometimes, in a moment of overweening pride, I think that my three perspectives are an incredibly deep insight into the fundamental structure of biblical truth. But most of the time I just think they are a good pedagogical device, a set of hooks on which to hang the doctrines of the faith. So, I'll use it in this chapter as a way of jogging your memory, as a way of helping you summarize and, I hope, assimilate what you have learned.

In chapter 2, I suggested that the Bible describes God in three ways: situationally, by describing his actions, his powerful works; normatively, by providing authoritative descriptions of him; and existentially, by giving us a glimpse (remember, a glimpse, not a treatise) into the intimate relations within the Trinity itself.

God's actions can be classified as redemption (existential), the acts by which he controls the world (situational), and his decrees (normative). Here we see triads within triads. The acts by which God controls the world are creation, providence, and miracle. I think of creation as normative, for it defines the nature of everything in the world. Providence is situational, because it includes everything that happens in the world. Miracle is existential, because it demonstrates in a vivid way the presence of God in his world. But each event in this whole group of divine acts, creation-providence-miracle, does three things: it reveals God's purpose and will (normative), expresses God's power (situational), and brings God near to us (presence). That is especially obvious with miracle, since the three major New Testament words for miracle are sign (normative revelation), wonder (evoking a personal, existential response), and power (situational efficacy).

Then we talked about the authoritative biblical descriptions of God. As a whole, I've assigned those to the normative perspective. But this group has subdivisions that divide out among the three perspectives. These descriptions include God's names (normative, because they are so fundamental), images of him (existential, because they show him in the most personal way), and attributes (situational, because these state concisely the facts about him).

When we focused on the attributes, I divided those, too, into three groups. There are attributes of love, knowledge, and power, which line up alongside the three perspectives in a fairly obvious way. Among these, God's love is allegiance, action, and affection. Do you see how that triad provides a

good balance in our thinking about love? Some put all the emphasis on feeling, some on actions, like taking out the garbage, some on the idea of vows and responsibilities. But love is all three of these. The three perspectives warn us against imbalance in our thinking and living.

God's knowledge, like our knowledge, involves a subject, an object, and a norm. The subject is the person who knows, the object is what he knows, and the norm is the rule or law that shows us when the subject understands the object. This ties in with the philosophical definition that knowledge is justified, true belief. The belief is existential, the truth situational, and the justification normative. But now the remarkable thing about God's knowledge is that the subject, object, and norm are all divine. God knows himself, the subject, perfectly. He knows the object (God and the world) perfectly, because he knows himself, and he knows the world by knowing himself. He knows the world because he knows his own plan for the world. And so there is no question but that he knows the future—every single moment of it. So, the subject is God, the object is God, and the norm is divine as well.

God's power, similarly, expresses his lordship. I won't break it into triads here, but I will only point out that God's power is the power of the Lord, who operates in full control and authority over his creation, and full presence in it. I have suggested that his attributes of transcendence, such as eternity, infinity, and invisibility, can be understood as powers: eternity is his lordship control of time, infinity of space, invisibility over light. We should never think of God as absent from the world or as transcendent in such a way that we cannot

know him. His transcendence is his kingship, his lordship, and therefore it implies an intimately close relationship between him and us.

Perhaps the ultimate source of these triads is the doctrine of the Trinity. By nature, God is three-in-one, three persons in one God. I tend to think of the Father as the normative person, since he is the one who formulates the eternal plan for the universe and sends his Son into the world. The Son is the one who enters our situation and accomplishes his Father's plan, so I associate him with God's control, or the situational perspective. The Spirit is the one who comes to be with us and in us, and so he fits what we've been calling the existential perspective. But these are at best rough-and-ready distinctions. Remember that the Trinity is perfectly one. The Father is in the Son, the Son in the Father. The Spirit is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. The three cooperate in everything. Whatever one person does, the others do along with him. So, God is perfectly one as well as perfectly three. Our understanding of this great mystery only goes so far. The creedal statement from Nicaea helps us: one God and three persons. Beyond this, we must bow before a God whose nature and wisdom is far above ours.

So, in chapters 4 and 5 we saw that God's Word is the Word of the Lord. When God speaks, he speaks with controlling power, supreme authority, and in such intimate presence with us that he dwells in and with his Word. This is true of all forms of divine revelation. His revelation in the world we usually call general revelation. That revelation, as Romans 1 indicates, sets forth clearly God's existence, his nature, his moral standards,

and his anger against us for violating those standards. Special revelation is God's revelation through prophets and apostles and through their writings. It tells us many of the same things that general revelation tells us and much more: it tells us about salvation through Jesus Christ. Then in existential revelation, sometimes called illumination, the Holy Spirit enters our hearts, enabling us to understand, believe, and obey the general and special revelation of God. General revelation is situational, special revelation normative, and existential revelation, of course, existential.

In this complex of revelation, of course, the most important word of God to us is the Bible, the written Word. It is God's intention to rule his church not by oral tradition but by a written document, of which he is the author. The Bible is our covenant document, the written constitution of the kingdom of God. Everything we think we know from any other source must be tested by the Bible.

Then in chapter 7 we asked what the Bible teaches about ourselves. We are, first of all, the image of God. So, we reflect what he is. As he is Lord, he has appointed us to be servant lords, to have dominion over the world under him. And we, too, are to control the earth, to develop an authoritative understanding of it, and to spread our presence throughout the world. Another way of looking at that is to say that we are to be kings, prophets, and priests under God. So, the image of God we bear is physical, imaging God's power; official, conveying God's authority; and ethical, reflecting God's presence in holiness, goodness, and righteousness.

Sin is a perversion of the image of God, but it doesn't completely erase it. It brings guilt from our violation of God's norm, punishment from the powerful hand of God, and pollution, a continuing moral defilement within our hearts. So, the three consequences of sin are normative, situational, and existential. The punishment is, ultimately, death. And death, too, has three dimensions. It is judicial (the normative condemnation), spiritual (existential pollution, loss of any ability to do good), and psycho-physical (situational, the death of the body and its separation from the spirit).

How can God allow sin and its consequences to enter the world? In chapter 8 we thought about the problem of evil. I think there are three biblical responses. First, normative: God sets the standards of what is good and what is evil, and no creature has the right to bring charges against him. Second, situational: he promises that he will always bring good out of evil to such an extent that we will recognize that even in permitting evil he was doing good. Third, an existential response: he removes our sorrows and tears so that one day we will stand around his throne, praising his righteousness. One day he will take away our sadness, our bad feelings, our anger at God. Our hearts will be changed, so that we will no longer complain.

In chapter 9 we focused on the covenant. We saw that Lord is the name that God bears as the head of his covenant relationship with us. The covenant is the means by which God intends to bring us out of sin to salvation. In the covenant he establishes a relationship with people, saying "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." And he proclaims, "I will be

with you," the Immanuel promise. He makes such covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and he makes a new covenant with his elect through Jesus.

That wonderful Immanuel, "I will be with you," is, of course, the defining example of the existential perspective. God's covenants also include law, the normative perspective, in which God tells us how to live in relationship to him. And they include the promise of grace, of salvation, to those who are in this relationship and who meet the conditions of the law. In the new covenant, Jesus meets those conditions for us.

So, it was important for us, in chapters 10 and 11, to take a closer look at Jesus. First, as the Chalcedonian Declaration puts it, Jesus is perfect God and perfect man, together in one person. We may think of his deity as normative, his humanity as the situation into which his divine person comes to us, and his person as the subjective intimacy of the two natures in one person.

His work fulfills his office, that of the Messiah, the Anointed One. Therefore, he holds all three of the anointed offices of the Old Testament: Prophet, Priest, and King. These are the offices given to Adam at creation, but which he failed to perform. As Prophet, the normative office, Jesus proclaims God's word perfectly, because he is God's Word. As Priest, the existential office, he gives himself as a sacrifice for the sins of his people, and he intercedes for us at the Father's right hand. As King, the situational office, he rises from the dead to receive all authority and power in heaven and on earth.

In chapter 12 we looked at the person and work of the Holy Spirit. We can summarize it, again, in a threefold way. The Spirit is a divine person whom Scripture associates especially with God's power (situational), his authoritative speech (normative), and his presence with God's people (existential).

In the first half of the book we focused for the most part, though not exclusively, on the objective facts Scripture teaches us, the realities that exist outside of us and events that are unrepeatable. God exists objectively in three persons. He made covenants once for all; these will not be made again. He sent his Son to die for us and rise again. That occurred outside of us, and it will never be repeated. In the second half of the book, however, we focused on those events that happen inside of us and that are repeated over and over again with every believer. These events are sometimes called the *ordo salutis*, or the order of salvation.

The external, once-for-all events serve here as the normative perspective, for they determine what God does inside us. God regenerates us because Christ has died for us. Another normative, once-for-all event, of course, is God's eternal decree concerning each of us. That decree is called election. Each of God's people is chosen, elected in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3-4).

Those whom he elects he effectually calls, and those he calls he regenerates, changing their hearts so that they can understand the truth and so that they have a new inclination to obey him. Calling may be situational and regeneration existential, or perhaps the reverse. It isn't always easy to say,

but it doesn't usually matter, since the three perspectives ultimately coincide.

Chapter 13 dealt with the initiation of individual salvation in our experience. Chapter 14 presents our response to these divine acts. That response is faith and repentance, sometimes described together as conversion. Faith is trusting Christ alone for our salvation. Repentance is turning from sin. You can't turn to Christ without turning from sin, so the two are really opposite sides of the same coin. In general, I think of faith as existential, because of the depth of that trust. Repentance is situational, faith saying no to the world's temptations. What is normative in relation to these? Perhaps the object of faith, the Lord Jesus himself.

Chapters 15 and 16 present three vital benefits that come to us by faith in Christ. These are justification, by which God declares us righteous in Christ; adoption, by which he makes us his sons and daughters; and sanctification, by which he takes us into the sphere of his holiness (that's definitive sanctification) and enables us to become more and more holy in Christ (that's progressive sanctification). Justification is normative, for it concerns our legal status. Adoption is situational, for it provides us with a new environment. Sanctification is existential, because it takes place within us.

Chapter 17 dealt with the consummation of salvation in perseverance and glorification. Everyone that God has chosen for salvation, everyone who has true faith in Christ, will certainly persevere to the end. What a wonderful assurance! Our destination is glory. But even now we are being

transformed, as Paul says, from glory to glory, as we look forward to that day. So, just to keep the pattern going, I say that perseverance is situational, glory now is existential, and glory in the end is normative. It is glory in the end that defines the process, that tells us what way we are going. It is often true in theology that we can understand our own time, our own situation, best by comparing it with the end times and seeing the direction in which God's purpose is moving.

Then in chapter 18 we turned the spotlight away from ourselves as individuals to the church corporate, the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the people of God. The church is God's elect (normative), God's people (existential), and God's visible kingdom (situational). In that chapter we discussed several distinctions concerning the church. It is visible and invisible; it is local, regional, and universal; it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; and it is marked by the true preaching of the Word, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. Its officers are apostles, elders, and deacons, which reflect the normative, situational, and existential perspectives, in turn. We also talked about the historic forms of church government: Episcopalian, in which a single bishop speaks for the whole church; Presbyterian, in which there is a plurality of elders elected by the people, organized into higher and lower courts; and Congregational, in which each congregation is independent of the others.

When we talked about church discipline, we saw three biblical reasons for it that also have a threefold perspectival structure. Discipline aims to instruct the church (normative), bring glory to Christ (situational), and restore the offender

(existential).

In chapter 19 we discussed the task of the church. Just as we discussed the person of Christ, then his work, and the person of the Spirit, then his work, so too, having discussed the nature of the church, we discussed its work. The task of the church is, in short, Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-21). This commission recalls the cultural mandate given to Adam in Genesis 1:28 and includes the same elements: filling the earth, subduing the earth to God's glory, and worshiping him in his omnipresence. Since the fall, we cannot carry out these tasks until people turn from sin to trust in Christ. God doesn't want the earth to be filled and subdued by people who hate him. So, Jesus tells his disciples to go to all the world (situational) and teach all nations everything that Jesus has taught them (normative). As the church carries out this commission (and only then!) it has the covenant promise of Jesus' presence, "Behold, I am with you always." So, we go (situational) and teach (normative) in the presence of Jesus (existential).

When we sense ourselves to be in the presence of Jesus, we can only worship. The presence of God is, by definition, a situation of worship. In one sense, as we have seen, God is always present, and so all of life is worship, as Romans 12:1-2 tells us. But Scripture also indicates that God wants us to gather at special times to worship him with other members of the body. The major things to remember about worship are that it should be biblical (normative), God-centered (situational), and edifying (existential).

Edification is teaching, instruction that helps people grow

in Christ. It should also take the nonbeliever into account, as we learn in 1 Corinthians 14:23-25. So, another broad way of looking at the church's work is through the threefold distinction of worship, edification, and witness. Here, worship is normative, edification existential, and witness situational.

Chapter 20 took up the means of grace, the means God has appointed to help us grow in the Lord. There are many of these, of course, but they can be summarized in a threefold way. The three broad categories are the Word (normative), fellowship (situational), and prayer (existential). The Word, of course, comes to us in many different ways, such as preaching, teaching, reading, small group studies, biblical scholarship, the work of translation, and so on. Children should receive the Word from their parents, churches, and teachers.

Fellowship includes worship, sharing goods, and that intimacy with one another in the Spirit that nurtures and edifies. In terms of our threefold pattern, we can think of worship as normative, sharing goods as situational, and nurture as existential.

When we considered prayer, I discussed three reasons to pray. First, because God commands it, normative; second, because prayer is a wonderful means of maintaining fellowship with God, existential; third, because prayer really does change things, situational. God has ordained prayer to be an important means, perhaps even the chief means, of carrying out his purposes in the world.

In chapter 21 we looked at the sacraments, baptism and the

Lord's Supper. There I argued that sacraments are signs, divine actions, and vehicles of God's presence: normative, situational, and existential, respectively. As signs, they are pictures of salvation, visible words of God. Baptism shows us vividly the power of God to cleanse and, even on some views, to save us from threatening waters. The Lord's Supper pictures the body and blood of Christ, given for us, for our salvation and for our nourishment. As divine actions, the sacraments seal the benefits of salvation to us. They are the official mark on us that says we belong to God. As vehicles of God's presence, the sacraments indicate our union with Christ. Baptism is into Christ: into his name, into his fellowship. The Lord's Supper is a fellowship, participation, or communion (the Greek word is *koinonia*) with the body and blood of Christ, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:16. It is table fellowship with God; what a precious privilege! In it we not only look backward to Jesus' death for us and present to our continuing fellowship with him but also future to the great marriage supper of the Lamb, of which our communion is only a foretaste.

In chapters 22 and 23 we looked at eschatology, the doctrine of the last days. First, we looked at individual eschatology, what happens when we die, and then the objective future-historical events by which God brings about his eternal kingdom.

When people die, they go on living in a different way. The righteous go to be with Jesus in a place called paradise, or heaven. This is called the intermediate state, which is not our final destination but a place of rest and peace and fellowship with God. We saw from the song of the martyrs in Revelation

6:10-11 that we will not be perfectly happy there, because God's purposes will still be unfinished, and we will long for them to be completed, consummated. Meanwhile, the wicked will be kept in another place, across an unbridgeable chasm from the righteous, with nothing to look forward to except final judgment.

When Jesus returns, he will bring his saints with him from heaven, and they will be reunited with their bodies. Then all the saints living on earth will be caught up together in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air-the rapture. Then comes the final judgment, the final separation between the righteous and the wicked, and the new heavens and the new earth. So, we shall pass from the intermediate state to the eternal state. In the eternal state there will be no temple, for God himself will dwell openly with us. Every tear will be wiped away, every doubt removed. We cannot begin to imagine now the blessings that God will bestow then on those who love him.

In chapter 23 we looked at eschatology from a more public, historical perspective. We spent a lot of time discussing the various theories of how the return of Jesus relates to the millennium-more time, I think, than these theories are worth. But one hears about them so much that even a survey book cannot avoid some discussion of them.

The millennium, of course, is the period of a thousand years mentioned several times in Revelation 20. Most everyone admits that that number represents a long period of time and need not be exactly a thousand years. On the amillennial view, the millennium represents the period we live in today, between

the ascension of Christ and his return. It is a period marked by spiritual victory in the midst of cultural defeat. It is a time when people from all nations come to Christ, but in the world there is unrelieved and constant persecution, suffering, and misery. Jesus comes at the end of this period and begins his final judgment.

The postmillennial view, as usually presented today, is a more optimistic version of amillennialism. It agrees that the millennium is now and that this is the time when the gospel message goes throughout the world. But it insists that as people come to a saving knowledge of Christ, they influence society, so that the benefits of evangelism are not only spiritual but cultural as well. As with amillennialism, Jesus comes at the end of this period, although before the end there is a brief time of apostasy and warfare between God's people and the wicked.

The classic premillennial view says that Jesus may come at any moment. When he comes, he will reign on the earth for a thousand years or some other long period of time. At the end of that period, there will be a brief rebellion by Satan and his cohorts. Jesus will win the war, and the world will pass into the eternal state.

Dispensational premillennialists have developed a more complicated scheme in which Jesus first comes secretly to rapture his saints. Then follow seven years of tribulation and warfare. Then Jesus comes still again, this time visibly, with his saints to establish his millennial kingdom on earth. At some point the final judgment occurs and the new creation.

We also talked a bit about preterism, the view that some or all of the last-days passages are dealing with a time that is past from our point of view. One might say that it combines premillennialism with the others in an odd way. It has Jesus coming in AD 70 in the judgment upon Jerusalem. Then comes the millennium, the period of the proclamation of the gospel. Then, according to moderate preterists, Jesus comes again at the end of this period. There are also extreme preterists, who say that there will be no coming of Christ future to us. That view, in my judgment, is nonbiblical, even heretical, because it denies what all branches of the church have seen as their blessed hope.

It is not perfectly easy to apply my threefold categories to eschatology, but, if pressed, I would do it this way. In the last day, God will give his final evaluations of angels and human beings, his final judgment. That is the normative perspective. Second, these events will mark the end and culmination of the history of redemption, situational. And the eternal state will mark the fulfillment of the covenant promise of God's presence, existential. Remember those wonderful passages I quoted from Revelation 21 and 22 about the dwelling of God coming to be with men. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

Then in chapter 24, I asked, "How then shall we live?" Ethics is theology viewed as a means of discovering what human persons, acts, and attitudes receive God's blessing and which do not. As with other aspects of theology, the threefold distinctions appear often in ethics. We saw that God governs our ethical life, as he governs all things, by his three lordship attributes. The three "necessary and sufficient criteria of good

works" are right goal (situational), right standard (normative), and right motive (existential). The Bible exhorts us to good works by referring to the history of redemption (situational), the commands of God (normative), and the presence of the Spirit's new life within us (existential). So, Christian ethics may take the form of command ethics (normative), narrative ethics (situational), or virtue ethics (existential). What matters most in the Christian life are "keeping the commandments of God" (normative), "faith working through love" (existential), and "a new creation" (situational).

So, when we counsel others about ethical problems, we ask about the situation, the Scriptures, and the person who must make the decision, going around and around through these three factors until each illumines the others fully. That is to say, ethical discussion is inevitably triperspectival.

## Application

How will you use your study from this book? Remember, theology is the application of the Word to all areas of life. God hasn't given us his precious Word so that we should just carry it around in our heads. And he certainly hasn't given it to us so that we can boast to others of how much we know and look down on them because they haven't had the opportunity God has given us.

Here are three suggestions. First, God wants you to know his Word. You know some of it already, and I hope that after reading this book you know more than you knew before. But you probably don't know nearly as much as you think you do.

Learning God's Word is a lifelong task, and God says that he wants us to live not by a survey book but by every word that comes from his mouth (Matt. 4:4). So, I hope that this book will whet your appetite for more. I have tried to give you some hooks, my three perspectives, to hang the biblical concepts on. I hope they are helpful to you as you study further. When you're studying a passage or a biblical idea and have found a normative and a situational perspective, look hard for the existential. Search for the missing perspective. I cannot guarantee that you'll find a third. God wrote the Bible, not me. My scheme may well break down at some point and probably does, but God's Word never fails. In any case, the three perspectives should encourage you to seek balance in your interpretation of Scripture.

So, first, God wants you to know his Word. Second, he wants you to preach it and teach it, to use it in evangelism, counseling, and childraising. Know it so well that it is at the tip of your tongue, so that you can use it to comfort or challenge somebody in need. This is the Great Commission, of course, and that is what we are about. That is why we are on earth. After all the elect are converted, Jesus will come again and begin his new world order.

Third, God wants his Word written on your heart. That is the heart of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31, that God will write his Word not on tables of stone but on the fleshy tables of our hearts. That means that the Word of God is so intimately fixed in our inmost being that God's desires are our desires, that his commands are our wishes, that we deeply want to be what he wants us to be. Don't be satisfied, then, with what seems to

be an adequate concept of a biblical doctrine. Keep asking how that doctrine should change you. Ask what sins of your heart God is rebuking, what righteous choices he wants you to embrace. Don't have the attitude of wanting to defend the status quo in your life or in the church. God gave us the Bible to bring changes in us, and he isn't finished doing that yet. Look closely at the Ten Commandments, as we began to look at them in chapter 24, and ask if that is where your heart is, if that is the way you really want to live.

Knowing, teaching, and being: normative, situational, and existential.

Your patience has brought you to the end of this book. I thank you for reading it and for your desire to grow in your knowledge of Scripture and to use that knowledge to God's glory. I pray that God will continue to lead you into all of his wonderful truth and empower you to follow Jesus' Great Commission, as you take his Word to "every nation and tribe and language and people" (Rev. 14:6).

# NOTES

## Chapter 1: God, the Lord

1. For my own efforts along these same lines, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R,

1987), *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), and *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, forthcoming).

2. The word theology literally means "study of God," so it is applied to this locus in a "proper" way. But, of course, the word is used more broadly to cover any exposition of the content of a religion, in this case the Christian faith.

## Chapter 2: Who God Is and What He Does

1. Some may have noted that "separating waters" is something God did also in his creation of the world (Gen. 1:6).

2. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), 171.

3. His righteousness is what saves us, according to, for example, Rom. 1:17 and 1 John 1:9.

4. These ways are sometimes called metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical concepts of truth, respectively.

5. For more on open theism, see my book *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

## Chapter 3: God, Three in One

1. These decisions were made at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381).

2. Other terms used as synonyms for substance: essence,

being, nature, and their various Greek and Latin equivalents.

## Chapter 4: The Word of God

1. Gen. 18:14 reads literally, "Is any word too wonderful for the LORD."

## Chapter 5: The Authority of the Bible

1. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

2. B. B. Warfield, "'It Says:' 'Scripture Says:' 'God says,'" in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 299-348.

3. In terms of our discussion of chap. 2, I am thinking here of epistemological truth, the truth that God speaks, as distinguished from the truth that he is (metaphysical truth) and does (ethical truth).

4. See Westminster Confession of Faith 1.7.

5. See WCF 1.6.

## Chapter 6: What Is Theology?

1. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 228-340.

2. Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931).

3. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928), 76.

4. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:19.

5. Full disclosure: since I am a systematic theologian, I may be suspected of imperialist aims when I bring historical and practical theology into systematics.

6. John Murray, "Systematic Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 1-21.

7. I develop these thoughts at greater length in "Sola Scriptura in Theological Method," appendix 2 of my *Contemporary Worship Music* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1997), 175-201; also in "Traditionalism," <http://www.frame-poythress.org>.

## Chapter 7: Man, the Image of God

1. Following Jonathan Edwards, John Piper has emphasized how important it is for Christians to delight in God. See his *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003).

2. Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991).

3. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

4. See, for example, the preface to J. Gresham Machen's *What Is Faith?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

## Chapter 8: Sin and Evil

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 491. I am indebted to Grudem for many of the formulations in this chapter.

2. *Ibid.*, 508.

3. My thanks to Robert B. Strimple for formulating these telling questions.

4. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 494 n. 1.

5. The most thorough and convincing exegesis of this passage is John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959).

6. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 498-509, esp. 504-6.

## Chapter 9: God's Covenants

1. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 131-53.

## Chapter 10: Who Is Jesus Christ?

1. Although we sometimes speak of sin as a "nature," it is not part of the basic essence of man. As we saw in chaps. 7 and 8, we do not need to be sinners in order to be human. Our

basic essence is the image of God.

2. Note also John 4:26; 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5-6, in which Jesus says, "I am he." The Greek omits "he," as is natural. But the event in 18:5-6 suggests that in these passages, as well, there may be allusion to Ex. 3:14.

3. Creation is an act of God alone, according to Isa. 40:26; 44:24; 45:7, 12.

4. Providence is also the distinctive work of God (Pss. 22:28; 36:6-9; 47:2).

5. David Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 64-65.

6. Cf. Westminster Larger Catechism 38.

7. Cf. LC 39.

8. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 539.

## Chapter 11: What Did Jesus Do?

1. There is some controversy over this assertion today in American Presbyterian theology. Norman Shepherd has questioned it, for example, in his "Justification by Works in Reformed Theology," in *Backbone of the Bible*, ed. Andrew Sandlin (Nacodoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 103-20. Despite my great respect for Shepherd, I cannot accept his argument, though I think his position (contrary to some) is

certainly within the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy. There are legitimate questions about whether the New Testament uses specific language of imputation in regard to Christ's active righteousness. But, however those questions come out, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us is certainly implicit in the imputation of our sin to him, which Shepherd accepts. If our sin is placed on Christ, so that we are thenceforth in Christ (as the New Testament pervasively emphasizes), then we are righteous for his sake. God holds nothing more against us. People not charged with sin are righteous people. There is no such thing as ethical neutrality. Every human act or attitude, every human person, is either righteous or unrighteous. In Christ, then, we are not ethically neutral but positively righteous and therefore fit for heaven. But we are righteous only in Christ, not in ourselves. That point is obviously biblical, and it seems to me that it is equivalent to a doctrine of imputed active righteousness.

2. Roger Nicole, lecture, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL, Spring 2004.

## Chapter 12: The Holy Spirit

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1016.

2. *Ibid.*, 1050-55. Important texts in this discussion are Acts 21:4, 10-11; 1 Cor. 14:29-38; 1 Thess. 5:19-21.

3. *Ibid.*, 1070.

4. Evidently, Enoch and Elijah did not experience death.

## Chapter 13: Election, Calling, and Regeneration

1. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

## Chapter 14: Faith and Repentance

1. John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003).

2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 713.

## Chapter 15: Justification and Adoption

1. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2: Selected Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 213-15.

## Chapter 18: The Nature of the Church

1. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 855.

2. John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); also at <http://www.frame-poythress.org>.

## Chapter 19: The Task of the Church

1. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 50.

2. I recommend Robert B. Strimple's argument in favor of women deacons in the appendix to Report of the Committee on Women in Church Office, Fifty-fifth General Assembly, Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1988), [http://opc.org/GA/women\\_in\\_office.html#APPENDIX](http://opc.org/GA/women_in_office.html#APPENDIX); also available in the minutes of that assembly.

## Chapter 20: The Means of Grace

1. Contentment is the marginal reading for sufficiency in 2 Cor. 9:8.

2. Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 376.

3. Ibid., 382-91.

4. Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages," 1776.

## Chapter 21: The Sacraments

1. Recall my frequent emphasis in this book on the importance of personality in God and of personal relationships between him and ourselves.

## Chapter 23: The Events of the Last Days

1. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, Left Behind (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), and many sequel volumes. I'm trying to avoid editorializing in this section, but given the shout and the trumpet of 1 Thess. 4:16, the rapture does not seem to be very secret.

2. Premils sometimes admit that the kingdom has come "in one sense."

## Chapter 24: How Then Shall We Live?

1. Much of the following material is taken from chap. 3 of my *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, forthcoming).

2. There is a sense, of course, in which even wicked acts bring glory to God, for God uses the wickedness of people to bring about his good purposes (Rom. 8:28). But the wicked person does not intend to glorify God by his actions. So, 1 Cor. 10:31 speaks of intent as well as action. Cf. Matt. 6:33.

3. Cornelius Van Til in his *Christian-Theistic Ethics* (n.p.: den Dulk Foundation, 1971) was the first to think through the significance of this confessional triad for ethical methodology. I gratefully acknowledge his influence upon my formulation here. In fact, Van Til's discussion was the seed thought behind all the triads in this book and in my *Theology of Lordship* series.

4. This motivation is not what John Piper calls the "debtors' ethic," in which we do good works in a vain attempt to pay God back for our redemption. We can, of course, never succeed at that, and we should not try to do it. See Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1995), and summary discussion in *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman, 2002), 33-38. But gratefulness, nonetheless, is the only legitimate response to the grace God has given us in Christ.

5. This is what Piper calls "future grace" in the works cited in the previous note.

6. Thanks to my colleague Prof. Reggie Kidd for bringing these texts to my attention.

7. See chap. 9 for an analysis of the literary structure of this covenant document and its importance as the written Word of the Lord, the fundamental constitution of the people of God.

8. I follow the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms in saying that although the fifth commandment refers specifically only to parents, its principles extend to all other relations of loyalty, love, and authority, such as the church (our extended family, according to Scripture) and the state. These catechisms similarly read the other commandments as containing principles that extend beyond the literal.

## FURTHER READINGS

S

alvation Belongs to the Lord is an introduction to systematic theology. I hope that many readers will want to get

much deeper into the discipline. The most important aid to theological maturity is, of course, God's Word itself. You should meditate deeply on the content of Scripture, memorizing key passages and seeking help to answer your questions. Many of those questions can be answered by study Bibles, commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and other works. The best knowledge of Scripture requires study in Greek and Hebrew, the original languages in which the Bible was written.

It is also important for students to learn something of the history of doctrine, the literature that has led to our present understandings (and misunderstandings) of Scripture. The student should not try to construct a systematic theology alone ("me, my Bible, and the Lord") but should carry on his studies within the church, within the community of those who are living by the Word. So, it is important to read works of church history and to study the great writers of the past (especially Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper) who have given us the theology we now recognize as orthodox. In that regard it is especially important to meditate on the creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the churches.

This book is a systematic theology, however, not a commentary and not a history of doctrine. So, I will not attempt the difficult task of suggesting readings in all these important disciplines, but I will suggest some further readings in the specific discipline of systematic theology.

Systematic Theology and Theological Method

In this bibliography I have included both complete systems of Reformed theology and writings about theology and theological method. You will find that many of the systematic theologies begin with discussions of theology and theological method. I have not included here references to liberal theologians or to non-Reformed evangelicals, though in the course of studying theology you ought to become familiar with those movements as well.

Bavinck, Herman. *Our Reasonable Faith*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956. This is his brief, 568-page (!) summary of his four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*.

. *Reformed Dogmatics: Prolegomena*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003. At last, Bavinck's four-volume *Dogmatics* is being translated into English. This is the first volume, dealing with theological method and Scripture.

Berkhof, Louis. *Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979. Deals with theological method and the doctrine of revelation Scripture.

*Systematic Theology*. London: Banner of Truth, 1939. A standard one-volume Reformed work offering a traditional orthodox Reformed approach. A good summary of systematics, based primarily on Hodge and Bavinck.

Boice, James M. *Foundations of the Christian Faith*. 2nd edition. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986-. A popular summary of Reformed doctrine.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by

John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960. A wonderful work-scriptural, devotional, powerful, practical the seedbed of all Reformed theology. Drink deeply from it.

Chafer, Lewis Sperry. Systematic Theology. Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary Press, 1947. This seven-volume work is the standard statement of "original dispensationalism." I have disagreed with dispensationalism in chapter 23 of my book.

Conn, Harvie. Contemporary World Theology. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973. A handy guidebook concerning some major theological schools of thought.

. Eternal Word and Changing Worlds. 1984. Reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992. Concerned with contextualization, the process of translating Scripture into the thought-forms of various cultures.

Davis, John Jefferson. Foundations of Evangelical Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984.

Elwell, Walter, ed. Evangelical Dictionary of Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984. Some useful articles here.

Erickson, Millard. Christian Theology. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983. Representative of broadly evangelical theology.

Ferguson, Sinclair, and David F. Wright, eds. New Dictionary of Theology. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988. Useful articles.

- Frame, John. Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995. Chapters 4-14 deal in various ways with Van Til's concept of theology.
- . Doctrine of the Knowledge of God. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. This is my main work on theological method.
- Grenz, Stanley. Theology for the Community of God. Nashville: Broadman, 1994. Generally evangelical.
- Grudem, Wayne. Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. The best one-volume systematic theology written in recent years. I have used it extensively in preparing the present volume. It is Reformed on the whole, though it differs from the Reformed consensus on the charismatic gifts, baptism, and the millennium.
- Hodge, A. A. Outlines of Theology. 1879. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972. A one-volume work by the son of Charles Hodge.
- Hodge, Charles. Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.. A three-volume work representing Old Princeton Presbyterian theology circa 1870. Still a standard work of American Reformed theology.
- Jewett, Paul K. God, Creation, and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991. "Neo-evangelical" these days tends to mean limited inerrancy and feminism, both of which Jewett endorses.

Kuyper, Abraham. *Principles of Sacred Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965. Part of his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (1894). Deals with the nature of theology and revelation. See especially pages 228-340, 565-636. Kuyper was a genius who mastered many fields, bringing the Scriptures to bear on many areas of life.

McKim, Donald K. *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*. Louisville: Westminster Press, 1992. A broad range of theological positions are represented here.

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